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### Abstract

The American noncommissioned officer (NCO) is empowered in the contemporary force due to changes in operational necessity, advancements in technology, and pay and incentive enhancements. The responsibilities of the American NCO has gone from primarily a file-closer and color bearer in the Revolutionary War to a mission leader utilizing technology as a catalyst in our current counter-insurgency operations. This paper will show these changes by focusing on the role of the noncommissioned officer in every major campaign since the Revolutionary War. It will illustrate how the American NCO proved over time they are capable of leading operations, being on the forefront of technological advances and serving as career leaders in the American military.

### Empowerment through Operational Necessity

General Friedrich von Steuben wrote *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States* in 1778, which included the first standardization of American NCO duties. Although it emphasized the importance of selecting quality Soldiers for NCO positions, the duties set forth by this regulation demonstrated the lack of empowerment held by the NCO of the Revolutionary War era. The primary responsibilities of the NCO corps during the Revolutionary War included file-closing, color bearing, and maintaining discipline among troops (Steuben, 1779).

When the Revolutionary War began in 1775, the American Colonists did not have a regular army. Each colony provided its own defense through the use of local militia. In June 1775 the Continental Congress appointed George Washington as commander-in-chief and set to officially coordinate military efforts of the 13 colonies. After the selection of Washington, Congress authorized a variety of other senior officers for its new army (Wright, 1983). The rush to form an organized military effort did little to establish leadership in support of the commanding officers. “On the other hand, instructions to keep the army obedient, diligent, and disciplined were rather vague” (The Continental Army, 26). It is no surprise that Inspector General von Steuben felt compelled to establish the duties and responsibilities of noncommissioned officers just three years into the forming of the Continental Army.

The limited role of the noncommissioned officer continued through the Civil War in large part due to the linear tactics of regiments and company level confrontations. The battlefield began to expand in the 1870s through the 1890s with skirmishes over wide areas that led to the NCO serving as a small unit leader (Arms, 1989). “Often fighting in small detachments, troops

relied heavily on the knowledge and abilities of NCOs” (Arms, 1989, Indian Wars section, para. 1).

This trend of increased mission responsibility continued throughout every major campaign leading up to World War I. The Spanish American War of the late 1890s and the Philippine Insurrection from 1899 to 1901 required more than one-third of the U.S. Army to perform operations overseas (Arms, 1989). In addition to mission responsibility, the U.S. Army required noncommissioned officers to sustain their career leadership effort. During this period of time, the U.S. Army grew from approximately 26,000 Soldiers to over 275,000. This increase in force necessitated the need for more noncommissioned officers to train these new Soldiers for combat.

The next major change in the empowerment of the American NCO came while the U.S. Army prepared to enter WWI. “The dispirited battalions of the moribund Spanish empire...did not provide challenges suitable for training either officers or noncommissioned offers to meet the armies of the German Empire” (A History of the Noncommissioned Officer, 1994). The differences of American and foreign NCO prestige caused General Pershing to suggest specialized schools for sergeants (Arms, 1989). The increased training and war preparation responsibilities of noncommissioned officers allowed the U.S. Army to train four million Soldiers during the WWI era, one million of whom would be sent overseas (Arms, 1989).

The combat noncommissioned officer of WWI led scouting and reconnaissance missions behind enemy lines. This shift in tactics continued throughout WWII, which saw noncommissioned officers conducting long range patrols led by large squads. A Squad leader now had subordinate team leaders and platoons found themselves responsible for multiple

missions of their squads at once. This led to the increased importance of the platoon sergeant and the disparity between technical specialists and combat mission leaders.

The evolution of NCO leadership on the battlefield has continued to this day. In support of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, NCOs are the primary mission leader. In addition to leading Soldiers through combat missions, NCOs are responsible for multi-million dollar property sets, managing complex intelligence requirements and utilizing cultural sensitivity in order to accomplish their mission. This trend is only sustainable if the Army embraces NCOs as the primary leaders in combat and continues to provide the necessary tactical and leadership training.

#### Empowerment through Advancements in Technology

The next major fact that led to the empowerment of American noncommissioned officers was advancements in technology. With muzzle loaded rifles and cannons serving as the primary weapon from the Revolutionary War through the Civil War, NCOs were typically responsible for ensuring line Soldiers understood how the weapons worked and to follow orders on when to load and fire them (Steuben, 1779). The open warfare tactics of the post-Civil War era leading into trench warfare of WWI led to the development of long range rifles, machine guns, advanced artillery weapons, and communication techniques. After the Civil War, the U.S. Army decided that specialized technical training was required for noncommissioned officers. This era saw the re-opening of the Artillery School at Fort Monroe, VA and the Signal Corps School in 1870; both of which were opened for officers and NCOs. “These schools were the first to be established, because both the Artillery and the Signal Corps required men to possess advanced

technical knowledge in order to operate complex equipment and instruments” (Arms, 1989, Civil War section, para. 12).

The U.S. Army saw major advancements in transportation technology during the WWI era to include wide usage of wheeled vehicles and tanks for the first time. These advancements in technology continued with the development of mass production techniques of transportation assets in WWII. Going from rail, foot and horse transportation of the pre-WWI era to the wheeled vehicles and tanks of WWI and WWII, the battlefield dramatically expanded. Small units of platoons and squads were spread out from their unit headquarters often for days at a time. This resulted in the need for NCOs to lead while disconnected from their officer leadership.

In the post-WWII era the U.S. Army developed two programs that helped empower the corps of noncommissioned officers: a Career Guidance Plan and professional schools for NCOs (Fisher, 1994). “As a result of the continued growth of technology, a new emphasis on education began in the post-World War II era. This emphasis encouraged the young soldier to become better educated in order to advance” (Arms, 1989, Post-World War II section, para. 2). The 1952 Army Education Plan encouraged enlisted Soldiers to advance their education beyond NCO schools. Clearly the Army realized that only a well trained and technically savvy NCO corps would meet the battlefield requirements of the Cold-War era.

The technological advancements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century led to the modern NCO that is the primary operator and trainer of long-range ballistics, computer systems, and secure communications systems. These systems require extensive and expensive training. In addition, these skills are extremely valuable in the civilian market. According to the Cost and Economic section of the Army Financial Management website, the cost to replace a fully-trained Soldier

that decides to end their military career is more than \$250K (Assistant Secretary of the Army for Financial Management and Comptroller, nd). These advancements in technology and increased training requirements have empowered the American NCO as the primary trainer and operator, and an asset the U.S. Army cannot afford to lose. Perhaps this is why the Department of Defense currently requires at least 90% of new recruits to be high-school graduates and why the percentage of enlisted Soldiers with college degrees is at an all-time high.

#### Empowerment through Pay and Incentive Enhancements

Due to the industrial revolution of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the U.S. Army was faced with a desperate situation. “By 1900...almost every service and industrial condition had changed. Opportunities for able-bodied and trained men had vastly increased, while inducements to enter the Army remained the same or had relatively decreased. A fall off in recruitment, retention, and efficiency was the result” (Guardians of the Republic, 156). In short, the Army was not able to keep well-trained NCOs due to an unlivable pay structure. From 1870 until Congress authorized the first Army-wide pay reform in 1908, there had been no significant change in Army enlisted pay. In a 1907 report to Congress, Secretary of War William Howard Taft stated that the retention of those few able men whom the Army managed to recruit is the key to the selection and training of first-rate noncommissioned officers.

The pay reforms of 1908 led to technically skilled NCOs receiving compensation that was equitable to their civilian counterparts, but the combat-arms NCOs were not so fortunate (Fisher, 1994). “A Master Electrician in the Coast Artillery made \$75-84 per month, while an Infantry Battalion Sergeant Major lived on \$25-34 per month” (Arms, 1989, Modernization

section, para. 1). Although pay and incentives would typically increase during times of conflict, the problem of retaining noncommissioned officers long term continued until after WWII.

In 1948, the Hook Commission conducted the first extensive study on the comparability of enlisted pay versus their civilian counterparts (Helms, 1993). “It was a comprehensive study of jobs in over 100 industries and jobs in the military using Industrial Analysis techniques” (Military Pay Comparability, 4). This study led to Congress approving the Career Compensation Act of 1949 and to later establish an every four-year review of military pay and compensation. These pay and compensation enhancements finally enabled the well-trained noncommissioned officer to make a career out of the military.

Financial and other incentives have also empowered the modern NCO. The Army did not encourage the NCO of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century to maintain a family. Today’s NCO has many long-term incentives to remain in the Army, which include assistance in raising their family. These incentives include housing allowances, education benefits that can be transferred to family members, increased pay for overseas or combat assignments and military sponsored programs that support and encourage family members. Without these incentives and comparable pay, as soon as an NCO started a family they would not be able to afford to stay in the military.

### Conclusion

It can be argued that the American NCO is empowered in the contemporary force due to battlefield commanders delegating their authority over time. That the American military would be in the same condition whether or not NCOs took over small unit operations, became technical experts, or received increased pay and incentives. Without more responsibility, advancements in technology, and increased pay and incentives, however, the NCO would have little reason to

make a career out of the military. This would result in very few experienced NCOs. Without experienced NCOs leading the next generation, the modern military would have to continuously refresh the force with new privates. These privates would have to rely solely on the Officer Corps for their training and guidance.

The contemporary American military is extremely adaptive and capable of responding to any situation. It has transformed over time from the linear battle-front of the Revolutionary War to the dynamic and front-less battles of OIF/OEF. The noncommissioned officer has served as a catalyst for these changes. Army leaders allowed the NCO to transform over time due to operational necessity, advancements in technology and increased pay and incentives. Today's noncommissioned officers will continue this trend as long as we strive for operational responsibility and embrace cutting-edge technology.

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