

EXPANDING ROLE OF THE NCO

The Expanding Role of the Noncommissioned Officer

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Abstract

Throughout history, Armies have used Noncommissioned Officers in critical roles. In some cases, the NCO role is limited, requiring the individual to enforce orders and carry out missions exactly as assigned with little encouragement or allowance for initiative. Unique among the Armies of the world, the NCOs of the U.S. Army have more training, authority, and responsibility. U.S. Army NCOs are expected and even required to act independently and decisively to accomplish missions and are empowered to do so. The evolution of this role can be traced back to the origins of our nation and its military, beginning with the formation of the Colonial Army and continuing through the present day. This paper will focus on how the experiences of the U.S. Army over time have contributed to the empowerment of the NCO and the decisive advantages it conveys, both past and present.

### The Expanding Role of the Noncommissioned Officer

The role of the Army Noncommissioned Officer can be traced to the formation of the Colonial Army and its basis on continental European and English traditions and practices. In this model, the officer corps came from the aristocratic class and there was a huge social distance between the officer corps and the men – both NCOs and private Soldiers (Fisch et al, 2003). In the European model, the NCO's responsibilities were limited to that of file closer and berating the private Soldiers to carry out their orders. The story may have ended there, but the colonials also brought with them a militia tradition dating back to the Anglo-Saxons. These traditions divided a company into squads each led by an NCO. These small squads often operated in heavily wooded country where larger units could not operate, thus giving the NCO in charge more freedom of movement and the opportunity to exercise initiative (Fisch et al, 2003). There was very little standardization or definition of the true role of the NCO until Baron von Steuben, under the direction of General Washington, published the *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States* (1779), commonly known as the Blue Book, that gave the fledgling American Army an armywide standard of training, organization, and tactics (Fisher, 34). Von Steuben wrote that: The choice of noncommissioned officers is an object of greatest importance: The order an[sic] discipline of a regiment depends so much on their behaviour, that too much care cannot be taken in preferring none to that trust but those who by their merit and good conduct are entitled to it.(34). In addition to the new definitions and expanded training responsibilities from Steuben's *Regulations*, technology contributed (as it would many times in the future) in adding responsibilities to NCOs. In this instance more accurate firepower meant that the NCO became the controller of aimed volley fire. During this period Color Sergeants replaced the role of Color Ensigns, increasing their importance in battle

lines as battlefield maneuvers were organized and executed around the colors. Experience in the War of 1812, the Mexican War (1846-1848), and the American Civil War (1861 – 1865) solidified the increased flexibility and importance of the NCO.

As the American Civil War progressed, advances in technology continued to make firepower more powerful and accurate and adherence to the linear tactics that dated back to the original Colonial Army generated losses too high to be sustainable. Moving away from a close packed linear model of deployment of infantry troops resulted in a more open order of battle preceded by lines of skirmishes. This change of tactics emphasized the role of the NCO in maintaining order on a more complex battlefield (Fisch et al, 30). As the 20<sup>th</sup> Century approached, America continued to grow and gain influence and interests outside it's own borders. This expanded global presence would see the beginning of overseas service for Army NCOs in conflicts such as the Philippine Insurrection, the Boxer Rebellion in China, and the Spanish-American War. The size of the Army increased during this period from approximately 29,000 in 1898 to a total force of 275,000 by the end of 1899 (Fisch et al, 2003). This rapid increase in size placed great demands on the experienced NCOs in acting as small unit leaders and trainers for the force. This continued the trend of placing increasing responsibility on the NCO for care of the Soldiers, training, and small unit leadership on the battlefield.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> Century found the United States joining World War I in support of the allies and introduced trench warfare. Tactics that evolved here brought increased responsibilities to Squad Leaders, specifically those of controlling fire from the trenchline and leading patrols to scout enemy positions and capture prisoners (Time Honored Professionals, 9). NCOs increasingly acted independently and were required to take initiative and make rapid decisions under fire. During World War I, NCOs were also called upon to replace both company grade

and junior grade officers. To replace these depleted ranks, the Army recognized outstanding NCOs with battlefield commissions. While battlefield commissions did not increase the responsibility of the NCO, it did demonstrate that the Army recognized the increasing technical and tactical skills of the NCO Corps and its ability to perform in expanded roles up to and including commissioning. On the downside, it was becoming apparent that NCOs were not receiving training that would prepare them for the increasing demands of the leadership roles they were being placed in, and no formal education system existed to provide the training. General Pershing directed in 1918 that NCO training in leadership skills be upgraded at once (Fisch et al, 37). While the training was demonstrably effective, it was not institutionalized armywide and was ended upon demobilization at the end of WWI. This incident illustrates the need for continuous, formal leadership training, both technical and tactical for Noncommissioned Officers in order for them to excel in the roles they are required to fulfil.

World War II expanded the NCO role again for two major reasons. One major reason was the rapid increase in the size of the force to meet wartime requirements. Just as at the turn of the century, NCOs trained larger numbers of Soldiers for the rigors of combat. Also during this time, the increasing technical complexity of NCO roles brought about the MOS structure in the Army as well as the grade designations of “Technician” and subsequently “Specialist”, differentiating between technical specialties and tactical leadership. General Pershing's NCO training model was not used during WWII, but a wartime posture once again brought to the front that there was no formal system to provide leadership training to NCOs. As a result, in 1947, the NCO academy system was created (Fisch et al, 40). This system has continued to evolve until in 1971 the Army implemented the NCO Education System or NCOES (History of the NCO, 1). Also during this period, NCO influence and responsibility continued to expand as the Army

recognized a need to formally create the position of Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA). The SMA serves as the senior NCO and advisor to the Army Chief of Staff on enlisted matters (History of the NCO, 1).

Even though a formal NCO education system now exists; the need for revision and updating is constant. According to the Year of the NCO website, in 2002 the Army Training and Leader Development Panel released findings that included a need for revision of NCOES to reflect changes in the post Cold-War environment.

Today, the NCO stands at the heart of the ongoing Global War on Terrorism, on the complex and asymmetric battlefield that characterize current combat actions. NCOs must be part warrior, diplomat, peacekeeper, and negotiator, sometimes more than one of these at the same time. The recently released *Horse Soldiers* (Stanton, D., 2009) details the actions of Special Forces Officers and NCOs acting as trainers and liaisons with local military forces, deep behind enemy lines and illustrates the many roles that NCOs are involved in and their value as independent leaders, able to think and act tactically as well as strategically. In this increasingly complex environment, the need to adequately prepare NCOs for the challenges they will face is more important than ever. The incorporation of rapid revisions to Programs Of Instruction (POI) and updating of Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs) into training must remain of critical importance in order to ensure the relevance of NCOES and individual training.

In today's 21<sup>st</sup> century environment which has moved beyond Superpowers and the Cold War, the role of the NCO is even more critical due to the complexities of both kinetic and non-kinetic operations in which the Army participates. The requirement to influence events or people across a country or more widespread area is perfectly suited to small units led by highly trained, experienced, and confident NCOs. I have shown that while technology, global influence, and

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demonstrating flexibility and initiative among other factors have led to the increasing empowerment of NCOs, leadership and technical training to adequately prepare NCOs for their increased responsibilities too often has lagged behind the need. As the Army continues the fight on terrorism, great potential exists for NCOs to continue to take on positions of increasing leadership and responsibility; however, a curriculum of both tactical leadership training as well as training to improve their skills in providing care for Soldiers must be kept up to date and NCOs must be given the time and opportunity to attend the training. A failure to do so could leave NCOs unprepared for additional challenges and could certainly lead to a reversal of the trend to push responsibility and authority down the NCO channel. A weak NCO corps is undesirable as our strengths help set the U.S. Army apart among the world's military forces and could result in an Army less flexible and less able to adapt quickly to the changing battlefield we find ourselves fighting on today.

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