

“SMA Bainbridge”

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Group Room M06

10 December 2004

SMA WILLIAM G. BAINBRIDGE

Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA) Bainbridge learned strong values and leadership through early experiences enabling him to make many great contributions to the Non-commissioned Officer (NCO) Corps.

William G. Bainbridge was born in 1925 on a farm in a small west central Illinois town called Galesburg. His parents were sharecroppers and raised him on a one-hundred-sixty acre farm. He and his older brother woke up every morning, did chores and walked two miles every day to a one-room schoolhouse of about 15 students. After school, they followed strict instructions by their parents to come home immediately and complete all chores. The family moved around several times over the next ten years with each move improving the size of the farm or the cost of rent. Eventually by 1937, they were able to buy their grandfathers' farm near Dahinda, Illinois so grandfather could move to a farm in Iowa.

SMA Bainbridge met his future wife Hazel in Dahinda and he worked as the janitor after school for fifty cents a week cleaning up the school and banking the fireplace in the winter. He worked the 160-acre farm with his dad while he was in high school and the last two years he ran the farm by himself after his brother got a job and his dad worked a milk route. He fished and hunted rabbits and squirrels for the family stewpot. He read many books and national geographic magazines in high school while participating in track, boxing, and all school plays. The local families rotated get-togethers with potluck suppers, coffee, tea and card parties. Since there was no electricity on the farm until after World War II, for entertainment SMA Bainbridge would listen to a ball game on a radio that ran off a six volt wet car battery. Sometimes for a special treat, he would go down town and see movie for 15 cents.

By the time SMA Bainbridge graduated from high school in May of 1943, World War II had been going strong for over a year. He volunteered for the draft since it allowed him to accelerate his call up from 6 months to one week. SMA Bainbridge took a train to Chicago for his induction and then in processed on 7 June 1943 at Camp Grant near Rockford, Illinois. Two days later, he traveled to Camp Wallace, Texas for seventeen weeks of basic antiaircraft artillery training. Everyone wanted to be a hotshot pilot in those days, so he volunteered to be an Army Air Corps cadet and went to Sheppard Field, Texas for processing after 12 days of leave at home. SMA Bainbridge was sent to Grand Forks North Dakota to attend an accelerated pilot course at the University of North Dakota. They learned an equivalent of year of college in three months and then went to preflight training at Santa Ana Army Air Base in California. By March 1944, the situation for ground force replacement in WWII was getting worse. All soldiers that had previous ground force training received assignments to ground force units. Initially sent to the 10th Technical School Squadron in Lowry Field Colorado to be an aircraft gunner, he ended up just doing kitchen police (KP) duties for six weeks. From there he was assigned to the 106th Infantry Division at Camp Atterbury Indiana as an infantryman. Soon after eight weeks of training, he received a promotion to private first class and assumed duties of squad leader for twelve men. A Staff Sergeant normally held the position of squad leader at the time. Four months later, he and the other squad leaders received a promotion to Sergeant earning \$78 a month. In September 1944, the 106th Infantry Division went to Camp Miles Standish outside Boston for three weeks prior to boarding the Queen Elizabeth ocean liner bound for England.

After two weeks in a temporary camp at Cheltenham, England, the 106th crossed the very rough high seas of the English Channel to Le Havre France on LSTs. From there they were taken by truck to the front lines known as the Siegfried Line to relieve the 28th Infantry Division.

According to SMA Bainbridge “In those days, infantry doctrine dictated that a company front be 250 yards long. In our sector the front was 1,100 yards, because we were in what was considered a quiet sector.” (Bainbridge 31). On December 16, 1944 at 0400 in the morning a terrible artillery barrage began the start of the German offensive know as the Battle of the Bulge. After four days of fierce fighting, SMA Bainbridge and many others were captured. Marching for five days with no food or water to a POW processing point at Bad Orb, they then moved by German railroad cars to a POW camp in Siegenheim. SMA Bainbridge and other POWs were only fed a light vegetable soup once a day. For the next three months, he lost 51 pounds weighing only 89 pounds by the time he was liberated by the 6th Armored Division on Good Friday in March 1945. The Army sent SMA Bainbridge back to the states for recuperation and he was discharged at Camp Roberts in December of 1945 just after receiving a promotion to Staff Sergeant. During leave, SMA Bainbridge went home and married his Hazel his high school sweetheart.

Back home in Illinois, SMA Bainbridge worked on a farm while attending agricultural school at night. He and his wife Hazel had two daughters born while farming corn, oats, soybeans and raising hogs. They continued to farm barely making ends meet by the time the Korean War started in 1950. SMA Bainbridge went down the Recruiting office and joined the Army Reserve. Because he spent so much time farming, he had little time to make the monthly training and the Army activated individuals that did not attend the monthly meetings. He was able to sell his crop, livestock, equipment and put a down payment on a house trailer before he reported to Camp Atterbury, Indiana on 4 January 1951. He was called back to duty in his previous WWII grade of SSG, E6. As an Infantryman he was assigned as the information and education (I&E) NCO at a Army/Air Force food service school that trained cooks, bakers,

butchers and mess sergeants. SMA Bainbridge was also the Platoon Sergeant and responsible for 60 men. He did such a good job maintaining the cleanliness in his barracks during inspections; he received a promotion to SFC (pay grade E6) and the position as the first sergeant for three hundred men. After two years of running the school, SMA Bainbridge and the school moved to Ft. Sheridan. He decided to re-enlist for the Regular Army since it was so costly to start up a farm. He was able to keep the same grade of SFC, (E-6) making \$268 a month. The food service school moved to Ft. Riley in August of 1953. SMA Bainbridge states, "We had 24 master sergeants (pay grade E7) on the staff as instructors, and I was the only sergeant first class (pay grade E6). All those sergeants were cooks, bakers and butchers, etc., and they didn't want the first sergeant's job" (71-72). As the 1SG, it was his job to know about how his soldiers felt. If there were morale or disciplinary problems, he was first to know and keep bad situations from getting worse. "I tried to fix things at the source, before the company commander had to take action. This is what any good NCO does" (68). There were no allocations for promotion to Master Sergeant, because the Korean War was ending and there were already too many Master Sergeants in the Army. SMA Bainbridge became the school SGM as a SFC (pay grade E6) in 1956 after the school SGM transferred. In 1958, the school transferred as a company size element to a battalion at Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri where SMA Bainbridge became the operations NCO for the Battalion. He received orders for Germany in 1959.

Moving his family to Stuttgart Germany at VII Corps, SMA Bainbridge became the NCOIC of Classified Documents for one year and then the operations G-3 Air NCO. In 1960, after appearing before his first promotion board he earned the rank of SFC (E7) paying \$285 monthly. A year later, he was promoted to MSG earning \$330 a month. By 1962, he and his family moved to Ft. Riley where he was assigned as the S-3 and later the Battle Group SGM for

the 1st Battle Group of the 28th Infantry Division. One year later while on 6th month rotation to Europe, SMA Bainbridge was promoted to SGM over other senior 1SGs and MSGs due to his previous leadership positions held as 1SG and SGM. SGM was assigned as the 1st Battalion SGM, after the 1st Battle Group was split into two Battalions in 1964.

As the Battalion SGM, SGM Bainbridge reorganized the promotion board immediately after the Commander appointed him president. He placed the S2, S3, and S4 NCOs on the board with the PSNCO as the recorder while rotating one company 1SG every month. They evaluated soldiers on how they expressed themselves and how they could communicate what they knew to their soldiers, job knowledge, troop knowledge, and what they knew about the organization. All of their soldiers went on to win the Brigade boards and most of the promotions because the other battalions did not do anything similar. In 1965, SMA Bainbridge and his Battalion deployed to Vietnam via troopship. He was the only SGM to travel with his soldiers instead of flying with the advance party. He carried the heaviest pack and walked the line daily to inspect his troops. He dug his own foxhole for himself and the Battalion Commander every time they stayed at a position overnight. He never allowed any Vietnamese locals on base, no bartenders etc., only an interpreter that was escorted everywhere. When they went to the field more than other Battalions because it kept the men busy doing what they liked and were trained to do. He had less problems and all of his soldiers wore their headgear all of the time and he never allowed any stay behinds while they were in the field. When he went all of the 1SGs and NCOs went too. He established great esprit among his troops.

The Commanding General of the 2nd Field Force Vietnam (IIFV) requested him by name to be his SGM because he said he was the only SGM stayed with his troops in the field every time he visited them. SMA Bainbridge immediately raised the morale by fixing mail

problems and stocking all exchanges with needed items after talking to soldiers and listening to their concerns. He learned in this assignment the importance of having Senior NCOs at that level to provide the necessary support to the Commander that they might not otherwise get. In 1966, SMA Bainbridge was assigned to Ft. Benning Georgia.

At Ft. Benning, SMA Bainbridge was responsible for the training of over 15,000 men as the SGM for the Infantry Training Center. He believed “Regardless of the unit your in, it ought to be an elite unit because its NCOs can make it one by ensuring every soldier understands their job and how to do it right”. SMA Bainbridge fixed the post detail after he was told to send a hundred men to do make-work (made up work) daily. He said, “Make-work doesn’t make sense – especially for new soldiers who are learning to be soldiers”. He convinced the post SGM of this wasted work force and reduced his required detail to 25 men. SMA Bainbridge started NCO calls once a month and put into effect some of his ideas on training. “You have to start a soldier out right. You have to listen to those young folks, because they may have the ideas you have never considered. Most people realize to late in life that you learn a hell of a lot more by being a good listener than you do by talking”(166). In 1967, SGM Bainbridge was selected to be the SGM of the 1st Army at Ft. Meade Maryland.

As the SGM for 1st Army, SMA Bainbridge received the CSM rank after it was introduced in 1968. SMA Bainbridge stated, “CSMs are not commanders, they are Sergeants Major of the Command. This program is very effective when Commanders give the CSM guidelines and let them use their own channels of communication” (183). This position rounded SMA Bainbridge out and taught him how the Army gets where it is going who gets it there. After two years, SMA Bainbridge was chosen to the Pacific Command Sergeant Major and became well known for visiting all of the troops in field and during Christmas and the small detachments

in out of the way locations. After a successful tour as the USAPAC CSM, SMA Bainbridge was chosen to be the CSM of the newly developed United States Sergeants Major Academy (USASMA) for Senior NCOs.

As the first CSM for USASMA, he established and implemented the academy's mission to prepare senior NCOs to assist future commanders at Division level and higher. He was pivotal in interviewing and selecting future staff members. He organized a superb NCO staff to handle functions that were assumed only could be filled by officers. SMA Bainbridge realized the curriculum of world affairs and non-MOS related general subjects would help CSMs and SGMs support commanders.

After being selected as the 5th SMA, SMA Bainbridge went right to work talking to soldiers around the world and listening to their concerns. He established permanent funding for all NCOES, and started One Station Unit Training and the Drill Sergeant Program. SMA Bainbridge was so successful and well liked among the troops that the new CSA had legislation change the SMAs contract from two to three years and he was asked to extend one additionally year so they could finish their tour together. In 1978 SMA Bainbridge developed the new SMA Chevrons.

Sergeant Major of the Army Bainbridge learned strong values and character early in his childhood and leadership through experiences as a junior NCO in Senior Positions enabling him to make many great contributions to the Non-commissioned Officer (NCO) Corps throughout his career.

Works Cited

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