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Significant Contributions by Sergeant Majors of the Army

Non-Commissioned Officer's (NCOs) of all ranks made the Army successful. From the expedition of Lewis and Clark, the Civil War, World Wars, Vietnam, and the Middle East conflicts, they made their mark in military history with a can do attitude and training their Soldiers to take the lead. NCO's of such caliber and selfless service are commended and recognized for their deeds. However, behind the scenes in Army history, there's one Senior NCO that is the cornerstone of the NCO Corps. This is the Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA). He's historically the one who directly represents the enlisted ranks to the Army Chief of Staff and who improves Soldier quality of life and readiness.

As the military progressed in ranks, technology, and facilities, the SMA is the key senior representative and the one who sets the standards to live up to. Realizing the legacy nearly each of the SMA's left to date is commendable and each left significant contributions in their own way. Some of these contributions for example can be found by simply looking for the posters on our unit walls of Army Values, or having an Army Values card in our wallet, or the improved base infrastructure. The SMA reminds NCO's what we strive for in Soldier's care, discipline, training, and standards.

From the first appointed SMA in 1968 up through the current SMA Preston, each SMA distinguished himself and instituted actions in best interest of Soldiering. Each SMA left a legacy and provided some interesting insight on where their priorities were and the profound affect it had on today's Soldiers and the NCO Corps. Just to think if the

initial steps were not taken under their command where would Soldiers be at this point? There's no other position in the senior enlisted ranks that makes an impact at the top. The SMA is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) for the enlisted masses and a definite agent of change. With each SMA's contributions being extensive over a span of time, the first three were identified for setting the tempo with some of their milestones followed by a few honorable mentions. Giving credit where due, their significant others augmented the Soldier care transformation too.

The first SMA William O Woodridge (1966-1968) set the pace of Soldier care and fulfilled most of his goals. He was set on enhancing NCO education of all the NCO Corps but had contend with the Vietnam War. However, his plan established and gained momentum with several initiatives later revealed. SMA Woodridge laid the path to what it was to interface with the Soldiers. He spent half of his tenure visiting troops in Vietnam and abroad. His "ground truth" philosophy was important in gathering the real concerns of the Soldiers in the field that was relayed back to the Chief of Staff. This information served as a template of what NCO's needed to enhance performance and led by example. Moreover, he sought solutions to the issues facing Soldiers. From his multiple trips in country and observations of all Soldiers performing their duties accordingly, brought to light the old lesson that every Soldier must be able to fight. He rallied support for the troops and was the first to establish a public image for the Army's new top NCO position. He participated in several speaking engagements to include national television such as the Ed Sullivan Show, the Today Show, and Life Magazine. He was instrumental in changing the perception of the NCO at several levels

to include accompanying President of the United States Lyndon B. Johnson to Fort Campbell to enlighten him of the Soldier's way of life (Elder 2003).

SMA Woodridge's mark was left with three major notable accomplishments. He instituted the Command Sergeant Major's Conference, the Command Sergeant Major's Program, and the NCO Candidate Course. It was the CSM Conference that produced positive outcomes. It was hailed as "One of the finest initiatives approved on behalf of the NCO," It was a meeting of the minds that identified 21 recommendations of which 16 were approved immediately. One other merit achievement was his establishment of the Noncommissioned Officers Candidate Course (NOCC). The course reinforced that NCO's teach subordinates their basic Soldiering skills, enforcing standards, mentoring, and counseling. But it also addressed the issue of finding quality NCO's during the Vietnam Conflict. SMA George W. Dunaway was the catalyst of what was to follow (Elder 2003).

SMA George W. Dunaway (1968-1970) introduced an important figure that made a difference in a Soldier's life. He brought visibility to the Soldier's spouse by having his wife accompany him on worldly travels. With nearly half of the Army Soldiers married, it was important to have the families represented and know that the SMA cared enough to bring his spouse into the Army way of life. SMA Dunaway also acknowledged the contributions of the Army Reserve and National Guard by visiting their units and recognizing their sacrifices supporting Vietnam. Moreover, he instituted uniform changes of the special qualification identifiers (SQI) and improved the morale of the reserves by allowing them to wear the three year service stripe. Regardless of active duty or reserves, he also didn't forget the wounded hospitalized Soldiers and ensured those deserving were

promoted. SMA Dunaway further enhanced the NCO education process by producing the basic, advanced, and senior NCO courses. These courses raised the level of professionalism and allowed to Soldiers to enrich themselves (Elder 2003).

He continued the carry over of SMA Woodridge's Command Sergeant Major's program and distinguished the difference between the Staff Sergeant Major, Command Sergeant Major, and SMA respectively. He took the need of Soldier care to a higher level and was the first to testify before Congress on military enlisted matters. He gave them a perspective on issues affecting Soldiers. He facilitated the Major Command Sergeant Major Conference (MACOM) and solicited ideas and recommendations from the enlisted ranks. To reduce complacency, he allowed other CSM's the opportunity to serve as SMA, and bring new ideas to the position; SMA Dunaway recommended his position be two years rather than four. The position would later changed by Army Chief of Staff General Frederick C. Weyand to three years followed by an additional year for SMA Connelly Bainbridge (1975-1979). His tour set a precedence to jointly follow the Chief of Staff's four year tour (Elder 2003)

It was SMA Leon L. Van Austere (1973-1975) that raised the NCO bar even higher. He took the SMA reigns and made it his highest priority to elevate the NCO standards and to diminish favoritism. Regarding NCO standards, he had twenty Command Sergeant Major files purged and was appalled to find them with Article 15's and court martials. He literally threw the files into a Senior NCO audience and demanded reform. He followed this by establishing the Qualitative Management Program and removed marginal NCO's. SMA Van Austere brought back credibility and discipline to the NCO chain of command. His wife Rita, a polished speaker, appealed to Soldier's

spouses and could relate to their experiences living the military life. During his tenure in 1972, the Chief of Staff General Abrams made it mandatory that every SMA be married.

Transitioning forward about a decade, SMA Julius W. Gates (1987-1991) and his wife Margaret proved to be a dynamic team. While he influenced 150 minor uniform changes such as desert boots and improved meals ready to eat (MRE's), his wife worked representing his office in a unique way by improving child care facilities, hospitals, support centers, schools, and even starting the Fisher House where families could stay while Soldiers were hospitalized (USASMA 2008). Training was a critical issue to SMA Gates and among some of his agenda items in this area he introduced the field manual FM 21-101 "The Training Role of the Noncommissioned Officer" and "the NCO Journal" that today is one of the Army's most professional publications. The journal keeps the NCO Corps on the cutting edge of striving to be the best (Elder 2003).

With success there is strife and the need for rejuvenation. SMA Robert E. Hall (1997-2000) had to resurrect the image of the Army's NCO Corps. This was a result of a short period of negative publicity and a tarnished image of his predecessor and inappropriate conduct training recruits. His challenge was put to credibility back into the SMA billet and as he spoke at a CSM Conference he conveyed to keep the faith, faith in the Army, faith in leadership, and faith in you. He was noted for being the first to set the example of communicating with Soldiers by using his laptop on the road and submitting articles to "Soldiers Magazine." During his SMA tenure, the Army conducted a survey that prompted the use of values and beliefs. Seven were identified of being loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage and SMA Hall had the task to somehow implement these in a remindful manner. His answer was a tag and card

that was distributed Army wide and became a basic of a Soldier's uniform. He was a strong advocate for improving the Soldier's quality of life. In conveying his message to Capital Hill, he narrowed his four main concerns to pay and entitlements, housing, medical care, and retirement benefits. The outcome was Congress reinstated 50 percent pay benefits for military retiring with twenty years. SMA Hall was a true Patriot for the Soldier by restoring the NCO Corps and SMA office's reputation (Elders 2003).

The Army was in the midst of a major transformation when SMA Jack Tilley (2000-2004) became the twelfth SMA ready for the job. It was during this period that the Chief of Staff General Shinseki wanted to change the most well known Army into a rapid deployment force capable to address a multitude of operations. His concept enabled specially formulated brigade combat teams the ability to move faster and ready to fight. This process kept SMA Tilley on the go with 500,000 miles around the globe and interfacing with 200,000 Soldiers. However, he never stepped aside from the home front and voicing his testimony on behalf of Soldiers with the Senate Arms Services Committee with pay increases and continued room for improvement in future funding. (Elder 2003). He restructured part of the NCOES system by allowing non-promotable Master Sergeants to attend the Sergeant Majors Course. The advantage to this was enabling Senior NCO's to receive additional training beyond the Advance Noncommissioned Officer Course. The tragedy of September 11, 2001 struck a cord with SMA Tilley's and he shed light on bringing back the basics during uncertain times. SMA Tilley appeared to have gone above and beyond setting another example of a dynamic Senior NCO putting the enlisted Soldier in the forefront.

Studying the contributions of the Sergeant Majors of the Army stimulates ways in which Senior NCO's can make a difference to our Soldiers. In conjunction with the history of the NCO Corps, our roots of tradition and lessons learned have no bounds. Our predecessors were innovative and we're now receptive to the importance of addressing our Soldier's needs, training them, areas of improvement, instilling accountability, and basically preparing them to be our successors. It's important that all NCO's aspire to carry on the SMA's guidance.

NCO's are the back bone and the twelve Sergeant Majors of the Army since 1968 collectively led the way to a better tomorrow for the Soldier. Their tenures honed the edge of NCO leadership and mentored others to led NCO's into the Army's future. They sought support for us and kept abreast of the changes. Our way of business under them has changed of no longer draftees but an intelligent volunteer force commensurate with the evolution of technology, tactics, and missions. The SMA's leadership transformation paralleled the sophisticated Soldier with advanced individual weaponry, patriot missiles, digital communications, and other force multipliers. The Army has a partnership that our destiny is weighed on by NCO's making it happen at the top while the others focus on the mission and seeing to the needs of the Soldier. Lastly, the previous SMA's kept us at our best and continues to do so. Without their significant contributions and a legacy to emulate, the NCO Corps would have suffered many losses and the consistency of today's Soldier compromised (Fisher, 1994).

References

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