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Noncommissioned Officers Evolving Roles

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### **Abstract**

Situations that our noncommissioned officers have encountered over the past years have led to the ever-increasing empowerment of the NCOs' role. The noncommissioned officer corps has been around the military for hundreds of years. Over each year period there have been more demands placed upon them as far as expanding their role. The NCOs' of the United States Army have at each time passed the test and have evolved into an almost matchless machine. The Noncommissioned Officer corps has advanced so far to the point that there are several countries that we train their NCOs' at our outstanding leadership academy's each year.

Over past wars and throughout history there have been situations that our Noncommissioned Officers have encountered which have led to the ever-increasing empowerment of the NCOs' role. Our NCOs' in the military in today's Army face a far greater challenge than in the past. They have a far greater responsibility today than ever before. The responsibility roles can be traced as far back as the 1700's. The history of the United States Army Noncommissioned Officer began in 1775, with the birth of the Continental Army. During those times, there was not a lot of confidence placed in the NCO corps. Officers felt that they must take control and always assume all of the responsibility roles while the noncommissioned officer served as a regular Soldier ready to accept and take orders and execute without having any mind of individual thinking involved. There were many battles that occurred that slowly began to break the officers down due to the over workload. The officers were overstressed attempting to take on all duties and tasks.

Many responsibilities the officers were taking on were not completed and missions were suffering short falls. An individual by the name of Fabricus once stated, "Our biggest challenge is to convince officers to empower and trust NCOs, and also we need to change the mind-set of former conscript soldiers who have become professionals." This was one of the turning points that assisted in the change of the NCOs' role in the military and on the battlefield.

Noncommissioned Officer's duties at one point were doing what most today would call the dirty work where they would perform manual tasks and would not be training and leading soldiers.

Many of the officers slowly began to look at how the NCO could play a vital role in the training processes of the junior enlisted Soldiers. Later, a comment was made from an NCO that stated, we are not taking away the officers authority but we are only taking away some of the things

they do not need to think about any longer.” People began to realize that the NCO could prove more useful to take care of many different tasks that officers were initially trying to accomplish. The majority of the task were Soldier related issues and other items such as equipment maintenance tasks. One of the major obstacles in the NCOs’ transformation role was the issue of change. Like anything else, it is difficult to accept change by certain individuals. People do not like change and the change must stem and originate from the upper level down to the lowest level. With change always comes resistance. There was a lot of resistance to the fact that NCOs’ were about to have some power. Many officers felt threatened and felt that the NCOs’ may take it too far and they would lose their own power base but that was far from the case at hand. The NCO must always remember that planning takes place at a higher level, but implementation of orders is an NCOs’ responsibility. In 1778, during the long, hard winter at Valley Forge, Inspector General Friedrich von Steuben standardized NCO duties and responsibilities in his Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States (Armstrong, 1976).

Among other things, this work commonly called the Blue Book set down the duties and responsibilities for corporals, sergeants, first sergeants, quartermaster sergeants, and sergeants major, which were the NCO ranks of the period. It also emphasized the importance of selecting quality soldiers for NCO positions. Von Steuben’s work served for 30 Years as the primary regulations for the Army. (Armstrong, 1976).

During the periods of the 1900’s the role of the NCOs’ in the Army increased and later it was shown to have made several contributions in the success of battles by several of their heroic actions. To mention a few I will discuss SSG Adams, SSG Bender, and SSG Murphy’s actions

during World War II. SSG Adams to begin with received his Medal of Honor for actions taken on 28 October 1944, near St. Die, France. (Bye, 2005). Next, SSG Bender made heroic actions that took place on 17 August 1944, near LaLande, France. (Bye, 2005). Last but certainly not least was SSG Murphy, who killed over 240 enemy Soldiers and he captured and wounded many, many, more. SSG Murphy became a legend in both the 3rd Infantry Division and the United States Army. (Taylor, 1995). These are only a few of the noncommissioned officers of whom have led Soldiers and stepped up in their ever increasing and demanding role.

While serving in Iraq and Afghanistan there are more real world combat missions led by the Noncommissioned Officers than any other Soldiers. The NCO has truly evolved and continues to do so. Noncommissioned Officers are becoming smarter and a better force than that of the ones of the past. This is mainly due to the fact that missions have changed and so has the battlefield. Missions conducted today require many different routes and locations therefore, requiring more leaders to be out on the road at many given different times. In order for mission accomplishment and success, the officer and senior Noncommissioned Officer leadership must be at the heart and brain cells of the battle therefore, they must instill trust and confidence in the Junior Noncommissioned Officers to conduct the missions to standard while they in turn plan the battle.

Another responsibility that the Noncommissioned Officers and their troops have inherited is the role of being ambassadors of goodwill in these countries. The NCOs' are out in the towns and streets interacting with the local populace and their role must be to win the hearts, minds, and trust of the people. Earning the trust of the people is an essential element if any reconstructive efforts or peacekeeping missions are going to be successful. The NCO is responsible for teaching and training his or her subordinates, in not only war fighting techniques,

but also how to approach the populace, how to understand and appreciate their culture, and how to treat them, as they would want to be treated. Trying to understand the rules they live by is as foreign to our culture as ours is to theirs. A smile to civilians from one of our troops is a language that anyone can understand, and lays a foundation that reconstruction can build on. This concept has worked for many, many, years and will continue to do so.

In conclusion, situations that our noncommissioned officers have encountered over the past years have led to the ever-increasing empowerment of the NCOs' role. Successful professional armies are successful only because they have a well-trained and well-developed NCO corps. The sergeant is there for the role of placing the common sense look at how to make things work. Daily, Noncommissioned officers train and mold soldiers through expert action and by professional example. Within the military leading and training Soldiers along with various other responsibilities fall to Noncommissioned Officers, the group of men and women considered the Backbone of the force.

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