

Running Head: Noncommissioned Officer Role

Evolving role of the Noncommissioned Officer

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As the test of time prevails, so does the role of the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) in the United States Army. The evolving role of the NCO Corps is a testament to their will and intestinal fortitude to progress and make positive impacts on the day to day activities in the organization in garrison, and during combat operations in the contemporary operating environment. The journey of the NCO encompasses a gradual progress in learning by doing, leading from the front, adaptation to situational awareness, and advising from experience.

The NCO in the United States Army today can find his heritage embedded in the Continental Army. The American NCO and the Army compiled ideas from the British, Prussian, and English armies and formulated their own identity. However, a big social divide still existed between the aristocracy of the officers, and the NCOs and Soldiers. Many agreed that the American Officers of the time emulated such aristocratic demeanor from their European counterpart. In the early formation of the Continental Army and before and during the American Revolution, the NCOs did not have a standardized list of duties and responsibilities. Unfortunately, back in those days the NCOs did not hold any leadership position. They performed minimal yet critical roles. For instance, the NCOs then were fifers and drummers in the formation. They also, in part, filled the holes in the columns and files as the privates fell due to gun fire in battle. The aforementioned NCOs were hand picked and groomed by their Officers. Most of the Officers at the time were West Point graduates. This did not make any room for capable hard working NCOs to move up into the commissioned ranks. Many NCOs back then did not have any choice but to remain an NCO if they desired to make the military a career. The NCO of the time made just a little more than the privates they supervised. At the onset the wage of the Sergeant was 48 shillings a month, and the corporals received 44 shillings a month compared to 40 shillings for the privates they oversaw on a daily basis. General George Washington sought the expertise from a Prussian Inspector General, Friedrich von Steuben. Von Steuben wrote the Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States. This publication is commonly known as the Blue Book due to its exterior color. It outlined the duties and responsibilities of NCOs from corporals to sergeants major. The Blue Book truly established the blueprint for the NCO duties and responsibilities from the period to now.

Unfortunately, back then most NCOs spent their whole military careers in a single regiment. As stated previously, NCOs were selected by their company commanders and their regimental commanders promoted them. Back then if an NCO wanted to leave his regiment and go to another, his rank stayed within his losing regiment. NCOs could not take their rank into the gaining regiment without special permission from the General in Chief of the Army. In most cases, transfer with rank was denied; this hindered the NCOs promotion and progress up the ranks. There are three major important factors that led to the ever-increasing empowerment of the United States NCO over time. These factors are; technology and tactics, formal schooling (Noncommissioned Officer Education System - NCOES), and promotions and assignments.

Technology and Tactics

The NCOs were key assets in the linear tactics of warfare from the birth of the Continental Army up to the Civil War. Prior to the Civil War, the men were armed with smoothbore muskets, which provided lesser accuracy and lethality. During the onset of the Civil War they had rifled muskets which provided increased accuracy. However, toward the end of the war the men now had breech-loading rifles, Gatling guns, and cavalry carbines. These newly introduced weapons provided extreme lethality and accuracy thus changing the battlefield formations from linear to open. The open tactical formation required dispersion of men in squad-like element all over the battlefield. This new way of fighting increased the NCOs battlefield responsibilities. NCOs were no longer limited to back-up roles or duties as “covering sergeant”. As the azimuth in the fight pointed westward, experienced NCOs operated as small unit leaders. They were very proficient and skilled at their ever growing tactical responsibility. Post Civil War technological advancements truly redefined the NCOs leadership role during combat. The men now had trust and confidence in their NCOs. The vital role of the NCOs

continues today as we fight the global war on terrorism. Since 911, the NCOs are leading squad/platoon sized missions in Afghanistan, and in the street of Baghdad and all over Iraq. The NCOs' talent in today's fight stem from his ever increasing and earned role over time. Sergeants lead teams; Staff Sergeants lead squads; and Sergeants First Class lead platoons in our conventional force structure. The NCOs in our special operations forces has unparalleled duties and responsibilities. Historically they only operate in small teams, making all decisions on the spot. They are the best of the best and are envied by most armies around the world. They, like conventional NCOs, have the ability to make critical decisions on the battlefield that can determine the success or failure of the missions that they carry out. Some may argue that the officers continue to plan and leave the execution to the noncommissioned officers, thus leaving them responsible for the outcome of combat. That argument will not stand because NCOs are now involved in the planning process at all levels. Their input is solicited because they are the boots on the ground with experience and they can provide essential detailed data pertaining to the troops and the mission analysis that will shape the mission's success.

Noncommissioned Officer Education System (NCOES)

Prior to the establishment of formalized NCOES in 1971 the Army did not have a standardized institutional training for all NCOs. Initially, NCOs gained their technical and tactical skills, knowledge, and attributes from their commanders and junior officers with minimal input from their sergeants major in the regiment. Certain career fields (Medical, Engineer, Infantry, Signal, and Cavalry) provided some technical training for their NCOs at various locations throughout the Continental United States (CONUS). These efforts were note-worthy but their curriculums did not keep up with the increasing progress in the respective career fields. The need for an educationally trained NCO continued to grow during World War I and World

War II. General John J. Pershing, in his time, recommended the establishment of special schools for NCOs to improve their leadership skills. Such schooling was available for the Expeditionary Force NCOs only, and was not institutionalized throughout the Army. General Pershing's initiative did not last past demobilization, however, the quality of performance from the NCOs that went through showed added value to the Army. The first Army-wide NCO academy was established on 30 June 1947 in Munich, Germany; it was called the 2d Constabulary Brigade NCO School. After a couple of years Seventh Army assumed the functions of the Academy and the school was renamed as Seventh Army Noncommissioned Officers Academy. Despite minor problems, the academy concept became popular throughout the Army. Eight years later, Army Regulation (AR) 350-90 standardized the academies operational functions throughout CONUS. Additionally, the Army encouraged it enlisted men to continue other avenues to better their education. In 1952 the Army instituted the Army Education Program which enabled Soldiers to acquire credits for their academia subsequently allowing Soldiers to their high school diplomas and college degrees. After the Vietnam conflict it was evident that the NCOs require sustainment training throughout their military careers. NCOES became formal and expanded its functions to various installations in CONUS; Primary Leadership Development Course (PLDC); Basic Noncommissioned Officers Course (BNCOC); and Advanced Noncommissioned Officers Course (ANCOC) to name a few. The capstone of the NCOES for senior NCOs is the Sergeants Major Course (SMC). The resident version of the SMC is taught at the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy (USASMA) located at Fort Bliss, Texas. USASMA also teaches other functional courses to facilitate duty specific learning for NCOs; these courses are the First Sergeant Course (FSC), Battle Staff Noncommissioned Officer Course (BSNCOC), and the

Command Sergeants Major Course. Critics may argue that the NCOES took too long to get formalized and it is not current with the need of today's NCOs.

That argument does not hold up. The NCOES in the United States is the benchmark for NCOs education world wide. USASMA is the premier NCO academy. Sister services send their qualifying NCOs to attend the SMC at USASMA. Our allies send their finest NCOs to attend our courses. Currently, there are 48 foreign students attending the SMC, class 58 at USASMA. They come from all over the world and are gaining an enormous wealth of knowledge. They will go back to their respective countries well equipped to better their own NCOs. Currently, the Chief of Staff of the Army directed an accelerated NCOES transformation initiative. This process will ensure that the NCOs receive relevant and current training that supports current and future operational requirements. It will also incorporate lessons learned from full spectrum operations in our contemporary operating environment (COE). In all, the restructured NCOES will ensure a ready and relevant NCO upon graduation at all levels.

Promotions and Assignments

NCOs are no longer short changed by their respective regiments holding on to their rank upon transfers from one unit to another. Those days are long gone. Today's NCO earns his rank and is identified by such rank throughout his military career regardless of how often they change duty stations. The promotion system is standardized throughout the Army and is based on ones performance and potential to operate at increased level of responsibility. The Army instituted three categories of promotion for the enlisted Soldier. They are "decentralized" (PVT to SPC), "semi-centralized" (SGT to SSG), and "centralized" for the senior grades (SFC to SGM). Regardless of the category, each NCO has a fair and equal opportunity to attain the highest rank. For the NCOs, promotion comes with assignments with greater responsibility.

Fortunately, the Army opened areas of opportunities for NCOs at all echelon's command, and staff especially at the senior level. NCOs from the company to the Department of the Army (DA) and Joint, act as direct advisors to their Officer counterpart. The commanding and staff officers at each level depend on the advice and experience of their NCOs to make critical decision for both Soldier and operational requirements. During deployment in Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) III, I recall the battalion commander making his final decisions only after consult with his Command Sergeant Major and First Sergeants under his command. He, then LTC Landry, stated that he honored the experience and wisdom of his NCOs and moreover, his father was a retired NCO that served honorably for 22 years. The NCOs of today made historical breakthroughs in leadership opportunities. With the establishment of the following appointed positions: Command Sergeants Major, Sergeant Major of the Army, and Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff, our NCOs are now operating extremely well at the tip of the spear in all military operations. Some critics challenge the competencies of senior NCOs operating in aforementioned positions. Again, these criticisms are bogus because today's NCOs are highly educated. They have bachelors and masters degrees just like their Officer counterpart. The NCOs are receiving quality training through NCOES, attending the Command course with their counterpart, and in some cases attending the army War College at Carlisle Barracks in Pennsylvania. NCOs are battle tested, well educated, and prepared to perform and excel at any level.

Conclusion

Although the road to NCOs evolution was not easy, however, it was through their hard-work, commitment, and ability to adapt that persevered over time. The NCOs are truly the back bone of the Army as proven over their historic journey. There are four templates that will continue to inspire NCOs to lean forward and take on every challenge they face; the Army values, the NCO Creed, the NCO Charge, and the NCO Vision. The Army is in good hands with NCOs.

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