

What Got Us Here and Why- Today's NCO

SGM J.A.Gliedman

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

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SGM Greg Taylor

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### Abstract

American Non-Commissioned Officer roles and responsibilities have changed greatly since the Continental Army of 1775. Evolving doctrine and weaponry, and advances in technology throughout America's past were primary factors that resulted in empowered NCOs we know today. Equally important American officer leadership also contributed to, and at times limited, NCO empowerment. Shifting of responsibility down the chain of command, resulted in NCO empowerment, and enabled the American Army to be successful on a continually evolving battlefield. Today's battlefield relies heavily on NCOs. Following a chronological timeline of U.S. Army history, this paper focus's on important events which effected empowerment of NCOs who fill our ranks today.

The Revolutionary War established many NCO duties and responsibilities which remain unchanged today. Basic care, welfare, accountability, and individual Soldier training are examples of responsibilities which endured the tests of war and time. Expanding NCO duties and responsibilities depended upon American officers, advancing technology, and evolving battlefield doctrine.

General Washington's decision in 1778 to appoint Fredrick Wilhelm Von Steuben resulted in an important change in the use of NCOs. Von Steuben, a well respected military man, wrote the Revolutionary War Drill Manual, or "Blue Book", which outlined guidance for selection and use of NCOs. Training responsibilities were specifically addressed by Von Steuben, stating the "Company commander as the initial figures in imparting these teachings (training) to the Army; thereafter the noncommissioned officers took over" (Fischer, 2001, p. 34). This thinking was a departure from past practice of officers being the primary trainer, to making NCOs primary trainers- a practice which endures today.

The Revolutionary War further established NCO battlefield duties. NCOs focused on unit formations, and Von Steuben spoke very specifically of NCOs duties. "He (The NCO) must take great care to keep the rank and file closed, and when too much crowded, make them incline from the centre" sic (Von Steuben, 1985, p. 147). Additionally, "The NCO's primary responsibility was to maintain the linear fighting lines of the day in the face of appalling casualties" (Bouilly, 1991, ¶ 20). NCOs were not expected to take initiative, or execute decisive decision making on the battlefield. NCOs performed important supporting duties, leaving officers to direct the battle.

NCO education and training after the Civil War was limited or non-existent. If NCOs did receive training, it was from officers from within the unit. According to William Duane, author

of the Handbook for Infantry, a manual used during the Civil War, “Tactical training, according to Duane, should be in the hands of the commissioned officer” (Fischer, 2001, p. 56). There were, however, officers who championed NCO empowerment.

“MG Silas Casey foresaw the heavy battlefield losses war would bring... His manual envisioned situations that senior sergeants would have to take command of units on the spot when officers became casualties. He insisted therefore that all NCOs receive training in giving commands” (Hogan, Fisch, & Arnold, 2003, p. 28-29).

MG Casey’s focus helped re-enforce the importance of NCOs, which would continually be needed through our military history.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century brought changes in war-fighting doctrine due to increased use and improvements in artillery, and introduction of the breach-loaded rifle. Small fighting teams were used more as fighting in mass formation fronts with more accurate rifles and artillery resulted in massive casualties. Civil War NCOs often found themselves leading small groups without an officer. “These changes further enhanced the combat leadership role of the noncommissioned officer” (Arms, 1991, p. 9).

Early technological advances prompted NCO training and education resulting in greater empowerment of NCOs to perform critical functions. “The first school for instruction was opened at Fort Monroe in 1824. This school instructed entire units, instead of individuals, in the use of artillery.” (Arms, 1991, p. 5). “As the 19<sup>th</sup> century passed, additional specialized schools for Hospital Stewards, and signalmen were established” (Fischer, 2001, p. 143).

As American emerged from the Civil War and committed to WWI, the Army found itself short of officers to train recruits. With no other choice, NCOs were chosen to be primary

trainers. “NCOs trained four million men, one million of whom would be sent overseas” (Arms, 1991, p. 17). From WWI on, NCOs would be primary trainers for Soldiers.

WWI also brought with it fully automatic machine guns, which caused a complete departure from mass front, forward advancing formations of the Revolutionary and Civil Wars. With combined use of automatic weapons, artillery, employment of motorized vehicles to include tanks, war-fighting doctrine was completely changed. Trench warfare was predominant throughout WWI, and caused countless casualties. “But as the war dragged on, it (the Army) also discovered that the problem of heavy losses among the junior officers could be met by able noncommissioned officers stepping in to replace the fallen” (Hogan et al, 2003, p. 36-37). Casualties of war forced the NCO to step up, take charge, and continue on with the mission. WWII further built the trust and confidence of NCOs in the officer leadership.

American WWI NCOs fought along side French and British units who noticed that the American Army did not put as much confidence and authority in the NCO as in the French and British Armies. Gen Pershing recommended “that NCO training in leadership skills be upgraded at once” (Hogan et al, 2003, p. 37). Gen Pershing’s recommendations were acted on, “but only for noncommissioned officers in the American Expeditionary Forces” (Hogan et al, 2003, p. 37). Gen Pershing’s officer leadership re-enforced the importance of NCOs.

“With the increasing technology, the Army was forced to compete with industry” (Arms, 1991, p. 16). “(President) Taft argued that to recruit and hold skilled workman... the Army had to compete with industry” (Hogan et al, 2003, p. 36). The Commander-in-Chief, as the highest person in the chain of command, focused on NCO pay which sent a message to the Army, that NCOs required support commensurate with expected levels of performance.

As our Army came out of WWII and passed through Vietnam, the importance of NCOs was re-enforced. Army Chief of Staff, Gen Johnson appointed the first Sergeant Major of the Army. “This action had, it will be recalled, marked an increased awareness on the part of the (Army) staff of the noncommissioned officer’s importance to the Army” (Fischer, 2001, p. 318). In the early 1970s we find beginnings of today’s noncommissioned officer education system (NCOES). From this point, up to present day, the NCOES evolved to meet the needs of the Army. No more would NCO education fade away as during the Civil War. NCO education was now as permanent as officer education.

Today’s Global War on Terrorism highlights NCO empowerment, where operations are routinely NCO led at platoon or squad level. NCO education continues to keep pace with the evolving tactical environment, thereby keeping NCOs relevant. CSM Ray Chandler, from the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy, stated, “We have a very large gap between what CGSC teaches its majors and what we’ve been teaching sergeants major. We want to marry those two skill sets together to capitalize on both their experiences to better support the commander” (Gray-Garcia, 2008, ¶ 13). The marrying of the two skill sets to better support the commander, as stated by CSM Chandler, is a clear statement that NCOs are as important as officers. As a result of NCO empowerment, the U.S. Army must rely on the NCO to accomplish unit missions. Officers cannot accomplish unit missions with only junior enlisted Soldiers.

NCOs have had a great deal of direct impact on the development of NCO roles and responsibilities. Initiative, drive, creativity, and self-improvement in education of NCOs have been a driving force behind this growth, to the point that one may argue that it was NCOs who affected NCO empowerment.

In battles during the Civil War through the Global War on Terrorism, NCOs stepped forward taking on responsibilities which resulted in successes on the battlefield. Looking back through history, although, it has been officers who have determined whether NCOs permanently assumed greater responsibilities, and officers also decided what permanent professional education NCOs were to receive. Officer impact in the NCO empowerment is no better stated than through the words of CSM Nathaniel McElroy, “The Non Commissioned Officer Corps as a whole is what the Officer Corps wants it to be” (Fisher, 2001, p. 414).

Unlike officers, NCOs could not transfer between units and retain the NCO rank achieved in their old unit. This practice went unchanged until overseas service in the Philippines revealed that NCO would have had to stay their entire career overseas or they would lose their rank upon return to America. In 1914, the Army adopted a partial solution to this problem for senior NCOs selected for overseas duty, thereby allowing senior NCO to serve in the Philippines and return to America with their rank (Fischer, 2001). Clearly NCOs did not have control over themselves and what was decided for them, re-enforcing the argument that development and empowerment of NCOs was due to change in war-fighting doctrine, technological advances, and decisions by officers.

NCO empowerment will likely remain strong given our current Global War on Terrorism fight. Continued advances in equipment and evolution in war-fighting doctrine will require continued training of NCOs. Given the existing focus on training and educational improvement, I believe the Army can count on NCOs to be trained, and able to accomplish missions, in today's fights which have potential strategic and political impacts. Unless there is a significant change in our war fighting doctrine, or we encounter enemies who employ new or evolved type of warfare, NCOs will continue to be key to mission success.

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