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Abstract

From 1775 to present, the noncommissioned officers roles and responsibilities have made a transformation that you would probably disagree with me on. We know noncommissioned officers lead, train and mentor, but over two hundred years ago, noncommissioned officers were not engaged with Soldiers in the way we see them today. Throughout this paper, there will be a slow change and view on how far the noncommissioned officer has come.

The Army noncommissioned officer corps has undergone considerable and effective changes since the birth of the Continental Army in 1775. While the core reason for a NCO's existence remains intact, noted changes in their function, and a marked increase in their roles and responsibilities have continued to evolve.

Rudyard Kipling once said “noncommissioned officers are the backbone of the Army,” a statement supported time and again throughout the Army's history, whether engaged in war or at peacetime. Today's noncommissioned officer is and must be multi-faceted. NCOs have progressed from being liaisons and “keepers of the camp” to becoming educators, trainers and mentors of Soldiers. The noncommissioned officer transformation, while more evident upon historical reflection, was not necessarily as obvious when those changes actually occurred.

A quick history lesson on the noncommissioned officer reveals the conversion in more detail. In 1775, the noncommissioned officer emerged within the Continental Army as a blend of traditions within the British, French and Prussian armies. The U.S. Army took basic components and concepts of the noncommissioned officers from their European counterparts and conceived its own version of an NCO.

At the beginning of the American Revolution, the NCO had very few standard roles and responsibilities. In 1778, Inspector General Friedrich von Steuben had standardized the roles and responsibilities of the NCO. In order to do this, he published his regulations, referred to as “The Blue Book.” This book outlined the roles and responsibilities of the NCO ranks, from the corporals to the sergeants major. For 30 years “The Blue Book” served as the principle regulation for the Army.

We always view noncommissioned officers as leaders who take care of their

Soldiers. While true, von Steuben introduced them to yet another role and responsibility in the late 1700s – teaching Soldiers how to aim and fire their weapon. During this era, the French merely pointed and shot, without actually aiming. This proved to be an effective leader’s tool, and NCOs now are charged with training their Soldiers how to fire a weapon and how to administer that on the battlefield.

Besides focusing on those young NCOs who directed their Soldiers as squad leaders on the battlefield, von Steuben passionately promoted the importance of the sergeant major.

The sergeant major handled a lot of the administrative duties that were required to run a productive unit. They considered him an expert Soldier who enforced the officers’ orders. In modern times, more specifically beginning in the 1960s, the sergeant major became the highest-ranking noncommissioned officer in the Army while inheriting oversight of a wide range of Army operations.

The duties, that von Steuben established, for the noncommissioned officer were as follows:

Sergeant Major: he was considered the assistant to the regimental adjutant. Rosters, details, and the disciplinarian of the regiment were his primary responsibilities.

Quartermaster Sergeant: in the absence of the quartermaster, he would assume his duties and responsibility. When the regiment was on a march, the Quartermaster Sergeant would oversee the loading and transporting of the baggage.

First Sergeant: he encouraged the troops to carry out their duties. Among other jobs, he kept the duty roster, he would give the morning status report to the Company Commander, and would keep what we call today “the leaders book”.

Sergeants and Corporals: they would take new Soldiers and instruct them in all military training. This particular noncommissioned officer would make sure his recruits maintained good personal hygiene, neatness and kept their behavior in order. Any disturbances would be punished by this rank and they would report any sick calls to the 1SG.

During the Civil War, the noncommissioned officer inherited yet another role in American history. As we all know, officers normally lead their troops into battle and the NCO would carry out the officer's orders and direct them when on the battlefield. During the Civil War, Army officials didn't comprehend the impact casualties would have on their forces. This is where noncommissioned officers adopted the role of giving orders and taking command in the absence of officers. The regimental colors were also carried by noncommissioned officers during the Civil War. This would be so the commanders could establish their location on the battlefield.

As the war continued, tactical and organizational changes led the Army to utilize more open battle formations. The combat leadership role was clearly developed for the noncommissioned officer.

As we get into the 19th Century we start to see technology and modernization begin to make an impact on the NCO Corp. The duties of responsibilities became more defined during this period. The few pages from von Steuben's regulations became about 417 pages in 1909, which the "Noncommissioned Officer's Manual" was written.

When World War I hit the United States needed a massive amount of men trained. This was another key role that NCO's had as they trained over 4 million men and about 1 million of them served over seas. Corporals became primary trainers throughout this part of history.

Moving into Vietnam, noncommissioned officers absorbed the large burden of combat leadership. Vietnam produced a number of unexpected NCO casualties. The Army new that many NCOs were needed, thus developing the Noncommissioned Officer Candidate Course.

The noncommissioned officers primary role while the army becomes more flexible, responsive and a deployable force will be smaller unit training and molding the foundation of the Army's force. As the units learn up-to-date tactics and receive new equipment, NCO's will inherit the new technology that will help them with their situational awareness. The NCO realizes that the complexities of the tasks are going to require small group leaders to communicate and train the Soldiers in a degree never seen before.

Throughout the next century, the modernization of the Army would continue as noncommissioned officers assumed a more leadership role. Noncommissioned officers, before 1865, primary responsibility was to watch over the Soldiers activities and pass on orders to them.

Once the Civil War ended, noncommissioned would start leading squads with special missions. We now see that the focal point has shifted from the larger elements like a regiment and a company, to smaller elements like platoons and squads. There are five key roles that today's noncommissioned officer plays:

1) ***Decentralize authority***

The NCO has been charged with the authority of the Commanding Officer/Platoon Leader. NCOs must make sure that the Officer's commands are carried out.

2) ***Provide connection between officers and enlisted men***

To fulfill the Platoon Leaders plans, the Platoon Sergeant allocates different tasks of the mission to junior NCOs. NCOs must talk with enlisted personnel.

3) ***Provide a senior enlisted consultant for the commander***

- a. Platoon level-Platoon Sergeant
- b. Company level-First Sergeant
- c. Battalion level-Sergeant Major

4) *Afford means for development*

NCO ranks offer enlisted personnel with the possibility for advancement.

5) *Identify and reward excellent skills*

NCO ranks recognize and honor enlisted personnel for notable military skills. The role of an NCO is a consultant to an officer.

In closing, noncommissioned officers have always been well known as the “*back bone of the Army*”. When Rudyard Kipling said this, he was adamant about saying that the Army could not function without NCOs. From the keeper of the camp to leading Soldiers into battle, noncommissioned officers have gained more leadership ability, mentorship and leverage with today’s modern Soldier. The purpose of a noncommissioned officer has not changed, but the roles and responsibilities have transformed these great Americans into what they are today.

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