

Running head: HAS THE NCO CHANGED

Have Changes in Technology, Tactics and Society Caused the NCO to Change?

MSG Todd M. Tracy

USASMA Class 58

L10

CWO Burgess

18 March 2008

### Abstract

The Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) has evolved tremendously over the last two hundred years, none as much as the Squad Leader. The three most important factors that have led to the ever-increasing empowerment of the Non-Commissioned Officer are: Technology, tactics, and our society which has forced the evolution of the Squad Leader along a very steep learning curve. As we jump forward through history from the revolutionary war to present day, the Squad Leader's duties and responsibilities have increased a hundred times over. Today the Squad Leader is solely responsible for the individual training and some collective training of his squad. Due to the advancement of technology and tactics as well as society itself the NCO has been forced to evolve at a rapid rate. As technology advances it has shaped the way we apply tactics, that coupled with a modern society has placed a tremendous demand on NCOs. Our NCOs must be educated and able to think in the absence of "officer" supervision unlike the NCOs of yesterday. With our current Non-Commissioned Officer Education System coupled with our personnel management system we are able to produce a confident, competent, tactically sound and intelligent Squad Leader who is more capable of leading Soldiers than the NCOs of the past.

## Have Changes in Technology, Tactics and Society Caused the NCO to Change?

Noncommissioned Officers have evolved tremendously over the last 250 years; none as much as the Squad Leader, which is who I will focus on in the essay. No single leader in the Army has as much contact with the individual Soldier than the Squad leader or Section Sergeant. If we say the NCO is the “Backbone of the Army”, these Noncommissioned officers are the marrow, which makes the bone strong. The role, duties, and responsibilities of the Squad Leader change very little in regulation, dating back to the *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*, published by Baron Von Steuben in 1779. However, no other position has evolved more. The modern Squad/Section Leader possesses immense responsibilities and plays a huge role in the success of our modern army. The three most important factors that have led to the ever-increasing empowerment of the Non-Commissioned Officer are: Technology, tactics, and our society which has forced the evolution of the Squad Leader along a very steep learning curve.

I chose to use a position instead of a particular rank. The squad leader or section Sergeant is currently a Staff Sergeant or Sergeant, depending on Military Occupational Specialty (MOS). In the early days of our army, a Corporal held this same position. This alone, represents the Army’s understanding of the increased responsibility of the Squad Leader and Section Sergeant. The Combat Support and Combat Service Support Squad Leader’s and Section Sergeant’s evolution is parallel to that of the Combat Arms counterpart. It is obvious to most that when the scope of those receiving support increases, so does the scope of the supporter. Their basic duties are identical, as are the increased responsibilities throughout time.

If we look back at the ‘*Blue Book*’, my summaries of Von Steuben’s duties of a Squad

Leader are: Instruct recruits in all matters of military training; maintenance of personal hygiene and care of equipment; enforce discipline and report misbehavior; provide a personnel status report daily (Fisch and Wright 159-160). In 1967, *TC 22-6, The Noncommissioned Officers Guide*, and *AR 600-20, Army Command Policy*, outline the four basic responsibilities of the NCO as (again summarized): ensure your soldiers are trained in their primary mission; look out for the well-being of your soldiers; know and report the status of your soldiers; maintenance and accountability of assigned equipment (Fisch and Wright 163). The current *AR 600-20*, dated 13 May 2002, lists ten primary responsibilities of the NCO. The summary of the responsibilities that specifically apply to the Squad Leader are: teach and enforce the Army Ethic; Plan and conduct day-to-day unit operations; ensure your soldiers are trained in their primary mission role and individual tasks; look out for the well-being of your soldiers and their families; maintenance and accountability of assigned equipment (24). According to regulation, very little changes throughout our history on paper. A significant change is specifically addressing individual tasks.

As I outlined the duties of the Squad Leader over time, the concept that the squad leader is specifically responsible for individual training is something that has been slow on the uptake. This evolution really began in 1854 with *Rules for the Exercise and Maneuvers of the United States Infantry (Instructions of Sergeants and Corporals)* (Fisch and Wright 163). However, the progression is very slow. As early as 1814, the Infantry handbook was very clear that Officers were not to trust NCOs for any training; they were unable to comprehend and not to be trusted (FRISCH and Wright 162). By 1862, 'Intelligent' NCOs were allowed to teach individual tasks, but only when a shortage of Officers existed and then only with close supervision. In 1882 (over 100 years since the birth of the US Army NCO), this changes 180 degrees. The Sergeant now is responsible for training and drilling his squad. The lieutenants, however, provide close

supervision and are encouraged to intervene (FRISCH and Wright 162). By the time we entered WWII, our NCO duties digress. *AR 245-5* clearly outlines the responsibilities of the Squad Leader. The list has more than doubled, but not one list addresses training, let alone, individual training (Frisch and Wright 163). As we end WWII, battle-tested and experienced NCOs are encouraged to provide input in planning training, but are still not the sole individual trainer. By 1988 (200 years later), *AR 600-20* finally places individual training in the hands of the NCO. After this point, our FMs, such as, *FM 25-100, Training the Force* designates the NCO as the primary trainer of individual tasks. This role changes very little into our day. Of course, tactics and the individual tasks that support them have increased 10 fold since the revolutionary war.

The entire realm of individual tasks in the revolutionary war scarcely fills one section in a current common tasks manual. The '*Blue Book*' was the entire army regulation, FM, Manual for Courts-Martial, etc. Although the Squad Leader was not responsible for individual training at that time, currently we could equate the entire scope of training required as Drill and ceremonies and Basic Rifle Marksmanship. If we jump forward all the way to WWII, the scope of tasks begins to increase. This increase centers on the machine gun and motorized transportation. Even with this significant technology, our army is very specialized with very few tasks overlapping among different specialties, only ten at this time. Our current Soldier's Manual for Common Tasks for skill level one is several hundred pages long, with an additional book for skill levels two through four. Each specialty has its own two to four hundred page manual. Each Squad Leader is responsible for training his or her squad on each task and maintaining a constant level of proficiency. This seems a fairly easy concept, but it requires a detailed understanding of tactics.

1882 was the first time NCOs were required to learn and understand tactics. Prior to this,

tactics were only an Officer responsibility. Additionally, our army used primarily linear tactics until after the Civil war. The Civil War added Color Sergeant to our list of duties. This was the first important expansion of duties not related to technology, as the colors were a critical piece in maintaining tactical formations. This is not to say that the Squad Leader was not busy; his primary job of taking care of soldiers consumed his time, more than two thirds of all casualties were the victims of non-battle injuries such as dysentery up through WW II. During the Korean conflict and even more so in Viet Nam, we saw the emergence of decentralized operations. The Squad Leader was expected to operate independently against a concealed enemy. In order to do this, he had to understand tactics. This is important in the evolution of the NCO. The Squad Leader now must have a complete command of tactics. If we look back at the tactical role of the Squad Leader, we see his function as filling in holes in the line and keeping the skirmish line generally straight. Today, our approach to tactics is very synergistic; many small parts working together to complete the mission. These small parts are the Squad or section. The proficiency of a Squad leader training his squad on Battle drills and crew drills determines success. This is the same for the Infantry Squad, as it is for the logistical Section Sergeant.

We simply couldn't increase squad leaders' responsibilities with out the overall quality increasing. The corporals during the revolutionary war were most certainly brave, but they weren't equipped to handle the responsibilities of the current squad leader. The NCO selection process consisted of experience and attrition. Many times, up through the Civil War, NCOs were selected in a manner similar to officers, local popularity and position. To further dilute the quality of the NCO corps, our regimental system 'owned' a sergeant's stripes. If he transferred, he reported as a private to his new unit. We did not learn the importance of professional NCO corps until WWII.

After every conflict, we have gutted our army down to a fairly incapable force. The smaller size leads to a shortage of trained and experienced leaders. Although our NCOs proved themselves in WWI, there was a general low regard for the enlisted man, including the NCO. In fact, in numerous states, the enlisted man was not allowed to vote. As we ended WWII, we didn't have enough professional NCOs to lead the occupation force. Coupled with a need to raise the overall confidence and opinion of the NCO, this situation forced the beginning of the Noncommissioned Officer Education System (NCOES). The NCOES system, in infancy, was geared toward garrison issues. The Noncommissioned Officer Candidate Course (NCOCC) was moderately successful, but caused huge conflicts among the ranks. This system was adequate only because of the large number of combat veterans. Normal attrition and years between conflicts significantly dilute the tactical experience. During and after the Korean Conflict, the army understood the need for tactical job specific training in NCOES. At the cost of numerous lives, we realized that our NCOs were capable of conducting room inspections, but did not understand how to fight.

Our current NCOES produces a squad leader capable in garrison as well as tactically. At the Primary Leadership Development course (PLDC), we teach our young sergeants how to lead and train. At the Basic Noncommissioned Officers Course (BNCOC), we teach our squad leaders how to fight and reinforce leadership skills. Far from perfect, our personnel system and NCOES produce a mature and professional squad leader capable of leading his or her squad in garrison and the field.

The modern NCO and specifically the squad leader still maintain the good order and discipline in our army. This, along with conducting day-to-day business, makes the NCO the Backbone of the Army. The ability of our junior leaders, the Squad and Section Leader, to train

our soldiers, lead them in combat, and make appropriate decisions make our NCO corps the envy of all other forces.

References

Fisch, Arnold G. and Wright, Robert K. The Story of the Noncommissioned Officer

Corps. Washington DC: Center of Military History 1989.

Fisher, Ernest F. Guardians of the Republic: A History of the Noncommissioned

Officer Corps in the United States Army. New York: Ballantine 1994.

Rush, Robert. The Evolution of NCOs in Training Soldiers, NCO Journal Summer 95.

1995: 30-33.