

Running head: THE TRANSFORMING ROLE OF THE U. S. ARMY NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICER

The Transforming role of the U.S. Army Non-commissioned Officer

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Sherman Roberts

Student # 531

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Abstract

The Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) corps has endured many transformations throughout its history. All of these changes had a direct impact on the NCOs of that time, but had a greater impact for those NCOs that would follow. The transformations have built on themselves to create what we know as the NCO corps of today. Changes must continue to take place or we may start regressing. The old saying “if you are standing still, you are going backwards” is true. We must continue to seek out ways to improve the NCO corps. This change is not only for the NCOs of today, but for those NCOs that will follow.

The Transforming Role of the American Non-Commissioned Officer

The role of the US Army Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) started with the birth of the United States Army in 1775. The NCO Corps has grown to become what is known today as the Army's "backbone". Many senior NCOs believe that the NCO Corps is better than it has ever been. The NCO of today is the small unit leader and trainer. They must maintain the standards and be professional at all times. The NCOs role has expanded due to the increased education received that allows them to perform at a much higher level. NCOs measure themselves by the powerful words of the NCO Creed.

Many discussions have often been about the progressing role of the noncommissioned officers in today's Army. Will we continue to grow with taking on increased responsibility and furthering our education or is the growth of the noncommissioned officers coming to a halt. I would have to say that our noncommissioned officers corps progression is coming to an end. How can we expect them to grow when they are not afforded the opportunity to continue their military education? The opportunities of commissioned officer Education of that to the noncommissioned officers is incomparable. Commissioned officers are sent to the appropriate leadership school prior to taking their leadership job and noncommissioned officers are not. The noncommissioned officers of today are being educated on the battlefields and are lacking academic knowledge. I see the impact in the areas of discipline, military history, and administration.

The first noncommissioned officers were those outstanding legionaries serving Rome's empire. They led 10 Soldiers while assisting the commander in handling his 100. The evolution of our noncommissioned officers corps started with the birth of the Continental Army in 1776. Baron Von Stueben was appointed as our first Inspector General in 1778, by General George

Washington. He started working with soldiers and noncommissioned officers at Valley Forge. Stueben wrote “Regulations for the Order and Discipline for Troops of the United States”, which was known as the “Blue Book”. The “Blue Book” outlined the NCOs responsibilities and duties. NCOs were selected by the commander based on their performance. This was the first time NCOs performed duties as the standard bearers for their units. Today noncommissioned officers enforce the standards and remain the key component for good discipline and order.

From the inception of the U S Army noncommissioned officers corps, until the early 1800; noncommissioned officers received no professional training unlike the commissioned officers. They learned from on the job training in garrison and on the battlefield. The training of the senior noncommissioned officers was conducted by the officers in the unit and in turn the seniors trained the junior noncommissioned officers. Today we know this type of training as Non-Commissioned Officer Development Program (NCODP). Although this training is effective, it was not uniform across the Army and some noncommissioned officers were better trained than others. One thought for this is that the noncommissioned officer rank stayed in the units. When soldiers moved to a different unit they were no longer noncommissioned officers.

While fighting the civil war, the death of noncommissioned officers was extremely high and this forced units to promote soldiers before they were ready. The decline in experience caused major problems in the ranks. Following the war the United States Army recognized the need for professional technical training for the noncommissioned officers. This started need for technical training for noncommissioned office in the fields for artillery and signal noncommissioned officers. The consensus then was that other jobs only required internal training and experience.

Post World War II error posed a new problem for the noncommissioned officer ranks. Noncommissioned officers were ending their tour of duty and the promotion of new leaders

accelerated. Technology was growing fast and to keep up, the Army would have to develop a plan to train these noncommissioned officers. In 1957 the Army published the regulation that outlined standards for professional noncommissioned officers academies. Attendance at this time was not mandatory and was pushed to the side to accomplish other priorities. Another break through was the acknowledgement that noncommissioned officers should be provided the opportunity to further their civilian education.

Again, the Vietnam War proved that with war the need for trained noncommissioned officer increases. The Army has repeated this same mistake time and time again. If you were an above average performer in basic training, you would be provided ten additional weeks of training and promoted to sergeant. The top five percent of these trainees would be promoted to staff sergeant. Unlike previous wars, Vietnam was fought at the decentralized squad level. Experience played a major role in your survival and the survival of your squads.

In the early 1970s, as the war in Vietnam was coming to an end and the beginning of an all volunteer military, the Army realized that providing education to noncommissioned officer would play a large roll in retention of qualified leaders. Like the commissioned officer, noncommissioned officers corps developed an education system. It would take almost a decade to standard the noncommissioned officer education system (NCOES). The NCOES attendance being voluntary was not widely accepted by all senior leaders. Most thought that these leadership schools should be mandatory as with the commissioned officers schools. In the early 1980s, NCOES was correlated to noncommissioned officers promotion. This established for the first time that you would have to graduate from the appropriate level of NCOES to get promoted to the next rank. For the next two decades the Army enforced the train then promotes mentality.

After the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, the Army's operational tempo has forced the Army to re-look the NCOES requirements. The attendance at the appropriate NCOES is no

longer tied to getting promoted. Noncommissioned officers today can get promoted and not attend NCOES for several years. By exception, leaders may even be promoted to the next higher rank prior to attending NCOES. Example, a staff sergeant can lead a squad on the battlefield prior to attending any professional military leadership course. For the most part, NCOES schools have been shortened to meet the operation tempo of the Army. The commissioned officers education system attendance requirements still remains the same and their course lengths are the same or have grown in length. Another issue is the qualification of instructors. The Army has lessened the required qualifications for noncommissioned officers education system instructors. The commissioned officer courses have raised the qualification requirements for their instructors, ensuring they have the most qualified instructors.

Today's Army is considered one of the best in the world, due to our exceptional noncommissioned officer corps. The small group leaders of today operate at fast paced, decentralized operations. The evolution of our noncommissioned officers has slowed dramatically, due to the lack of formal military education. Although the NCO of today is very capable of fighting our nation's wars, they lack the knowledge of how to care for Soldiers outside the combat arena. As we promote Soldiers to leaders at an accelerated rate, we must ensure these noncommissioned officers get the required training they deserve to care for our most precious resource, the Soldier. Our history shows that the impact of this may not be seen for several more years. The commissioned officers understand the importance of education and refuse to relax the standard of their military education. We should take the same stand with NCOES.

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