

Significant Contributions of Previous Sergeants Major of the Army
to the NCO Corps

by

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I. Introduction

- A. References used for research on this NCO briefing were taken from “Top Sergeant”, ©1995 by William G. Bainbridge; “Guardians of the Republic”, © 1994 by Ernest Faraday Fisher, Jr.; “The Story of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps”, ©2003 by David W. Hogan, Jr., Arnold G. Fisch, Jr., Robert K. Wright, Jr.; “The Sergeants Major of the Army”, ©2003 by Daniel K. Elder, Mark F. Gillespie, Glen R. Hawkins, Michael B. Kelly, Preston E. Pierce.
- B. Research for this briefing covers the establishment of The Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army, to include the first Sergeant Major of the Army; SMA William O. Wooldridge. The significant contributions of SMA Gates and SMA Tilley are also covered.

II. Body.

- A. Discuss the establishment of the Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army.
- B. Discuss the challenges and contributions set by the first Sergeant Major of the Army; SMA William O. Wooldridge.
- C. Discuss the significant contributions that SMA Julius W. Gates made to the NCO Corps.
- D. Discuss the significant contributions that SMA Jack L. Tilley made to the NCO Corps.

III. Closing.

- A. Summary. The intent of the this briefing was to provide an introduction into the establishment of the Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army, as well as the significant contributions that SMA Wooldridge, SMA Gates, and SMA Tilley had on the history of the NCO Corps.
- B. Question and Answer Period.
- C. Concluding Statement. Since the establishment of the Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army on 4 July 1966, the Sergeant Major of the Army still serves as the senior enlisted advisor and consultant to the Army Chief of Staff. The actions of previous Sergeants Major of the Army have contributed toward the professionalism of the NCO Corps and have represented the interests of the enlisted force.

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Significant Contributions of Previous Sergeants Major of the Army to the NCO Corps

The Sergeant Major of the Army represents the pinnacle of the hierarchy of rank; the noncommissioned rank structure to which each enlisted soldier may aspire. On July 11, 1966, the Chief of Staff, General Harold K. Johnson swore the first Sergeant Major of the Army into the unique position. Since that time, the Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army has evolved to become something more significant in function than any other enlisted appointment in the Army. To date, there have been thirteen Sergeants Major of the Army; all have made considerable contributions to the Noncommissioned Officer Corps. From the establishment of the Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army, to the significant contributions relating to duties, training, weapons and uniforms, SMA William O. Wooldridge, SMA Julius W. Gates, and SMA Jack L. Tilley, have upheld the premise that the noncommissioned officer is the “backbone of the Army”.

General Johnson was responsible for creating the Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army. He demanded that the Sergeant Major of the Army be a spokesman at the highest levels of the Army and provide an enlisted voice on all matters pertaining to the enlisted Soldiers. This objective was to boost the morale and professionalism of the enlisted force by having one of its own become the personal assistant to the Chief of Staff of the Army. The main reason for establishing the Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army was to form an official channel from the enlisted ranks to the highest military echelon on matters pertaining to training, pay, clothing, equipment, discipline, morale, welfare, enlistment, reenlistment, and promotion policies.

In 1966, there were over 4,700 Sergeants Major in twenty-one major commands, eligible for nomination to the position of Sergeant Major of the Army. Each major Army commander nominated one member from their command based on their ability as Soldiers, personality, military bearing, and skill in expressing themselves on Army matters. After weighing the strengths and weaknesses of all the nominees, just one was serving in Vietnam with the only unit (1st Infantry Division) with American Soldiers in combat; Sergeant Major William O. Wooldridge. He was forty-three years old and had twenty-five years of service, with sixteen of them served overseas. He was a veteran of both World War II and Vietnam, and had received the Silver Star with Oak Leaf cluster. Sergeant Major Wooldridge was selected.

Sergeant Major Wooldridge was notified of his selection by the 1st Infantry Division Commander, who flew in by helicopter, while he was on an operation near the Cambodian border. He reported to Washington immediately, still in his jungle fatigues. On July, 11 1966, at the Mall Entrance of the Pentagon, with a NCO-led ceremony, and a nineteen-gun salute, Sergeant Major Wooldridge was sworn in by General Johnson. Prior to the ceremony, General Johnson gave Wooldridge instructions that would lay the foundation for all successive Chiefs of Staff and their Sergeants Major. The guidance outlined the close relationship that the two would have to include the Sergeant Major of the Army reporting directly to the Chief of Staff. The Sergeant Major of the Army would also be a member of General Johnson's personal staff and be his principal enlisted assistant and advisor on all matters pertaining to enlisted members of the Army.

As the first Sergeant Major of the Army, SMA Wooldridge's greatest challenge was the establishment of the position itself. There were no precedents regarding the

scope of his job, its focus, or its specific responsibilities. He would face setting the ground rules and precedents for future Sergeants Major of the Army. Since he had no example to use for guidance, he would have to use his experience and the confidence that General Johnson had in him. At the end of SMA Wooldridge's tenure, his major accomplishments included the first Command Sergeants Major Conference, the establishment of the Command Sergeant Major Program, and the organization of the Noncommissioned Officer Candidate Course in the midst of the Vietnam War. One of his last major accomplishments in improving the enlisted corps was the creation of the new rank and insignia of Command Sergeant Major.

SMA Wooldridge had fulfilled the single mission that General Johnson had given him; to establish the Office of Sergeant Major of the Army. The foundation for how future SMAs would work with their Chiefs of Staff had been laid. He had provided the eyes and ears, the informal, direct communication link to the soldiers in the field; just as General Johnson had envisioned. He had gained the trust and confidence of the enlisted ranks.

Julius W. Gates was selected as the eighth Sergeant Major of the Army. SMA Gates implemented and educated Army leaders on the new Noncommissioned Officer Evaluation Report (NCOER), which replaced the Enlisted Evaluation Report (EER). The NCOER was designed by noncommissioned officers, and employed performance counseling and bullet comments to measure standards and objectives. He recommended that the successful completion of an NCOES course be a requirement for promotion for all NCOs. This policy would identify the best qualified Soldiers and ensure that they received the training that they needed.

SMA Gates suggested that 1989 be designated the Year of the Noncommissioned Officer. He spearheaded the establishment of the Command Sergeant Major (Designee) course, designed to prepare newly designated command sergeants major for their new duties. He replaced the MOS-based Skill Qualifications Test (SQT) with the new Self-Development Test (SDT). The SDT tested MOS-specific and more general training and leadership skills. Another change to the NCO education and training system was the establishment of the Noncommissioned Officer Battle Staff Course at the Sergeant Major Academy.

SMA Gates' attention to training paid off during combat operations in Operation Just Cause, which restored a democratic government to Panama, and Operation Desert Shield / Desert Storm, a short but sharp war to liberate Kuwait.

As a member of the Uniform Board, SMA Gates influenced more than 150 minor uniform changes including the desert boot and a belted overcoat.

On May 18, 2000, Jack L. Tilley was selected as the twelfth Sergeant Major of the Army. SMA Tilley was immersed in an Army of change, and the transformation initiatives would occupy much of his attention. In April 2000, the transformation process began by converting two brigades at Fort Lewis, Washington, into Initial Brigade Combat Teams (IBCTs). The IBCTs were designed to enable the Army to deploy faster and to be ready to fight upon arrival. The ultimate objective was to transition the entire Army to a new generation of combat systems that were more mobile, more deployable, and more lethal than those of the past.

Another more outward symbol of the transformation process was the decision to adapt the black beret. General Shinseki directed that the entire Army switch to the black

beret as the standard headgear in October 2000. The decision was unpopular, but SMA Tilley was directed to lead the effort to implement the change. The beret would become a symbol of unity, a symbol of Army excellence, and a symbol of the Army Values.

SMA Tilley supported General Shinseki's decision and announced that when the Chief of Staff makes a decision, it's not time to start debating, and the NCOs need to get behind the effort. The transformation, marked by ceremonies across the Army, took place on 14 June 2001; the Army's 226th Birthday.

SMA Tilley believed that the NCOES would have to be restructured as part of the transformation. He held the first Sergeant Major of the Army's Nominative Command Sergeant Major Conference in January 2001 at Fort Bliss, Texas. The conference lasted a week long and identified subject areas for the Noncommissioned Officer Corps to focus on, and made recommendations to the Chief of Staff on Soldier-related issues. He proposed to include more nonpromotable Master Sergeants in the Sergeants Major Course. This action would help ensure that NCOs received training earlier in their career.

Since the establishment of the Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army in 1966, the Sergeant Major still serves as the senior enlisted advisor and consultant to the Army Chief of Staff. The original goals for creating the Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army was to foster direct communication between the enlisted ranks and the Chief of Staff, to promote confidence, to increase NCO prestige, and broaden NCO career incentives. Through the accomplishments of the SMA Wooldridge, SMA Gates, and SMA Tilley, these goals are still being met. They have helped professionalize the Noncommissioned Officer Corp and have represented the interests of the enlisted ranks. They have helped to bring many positive changes to policy and have raised the morale of

Soldiers. Their strength, insight, determination, and devotion to duty greatly contributed to forming the Army today.