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History Essay: Evolution of the United States Army's NCO -

SGM Bryan K. Fragas -

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy -

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Course Facilitator: SGM Greg Taylor -

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*“Ultimately, a real understanding of history means,  
that we face NOTHING new under the sun!”*

Major General James N. Mattis, Commanding General, 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Div.

What is this generation of warriors most important responsibility: to establish an effective, mission oriented, present day war fighting force that has taken the lessons of previous battles, regardless of time in history, regardless who fought the battle, and clearly study not only the outcome of such warfare, but to glean those attributes that caused a successful and advantages outcome that can be formulated into a training doctrine, and it's the modern day NCO who must carry on this legacy of successful warfare to the next generation.

The evolution of today's NCO take their place in history as professional soldiers that come from a past filled with references to those NCO's who have already passed through the portals of war, and remaining teachable so as to learn the necessary attributes of such historical and truthful accounts of these seasoned warriors.

## **The NCO of World War Two**

Even though it has been some 64 years (1941-1945) since the end of World War Two, today's NCO still has the opportunity to take those aforementioned attributes of the NCO's of such units as the “Big Red One”, “The Screaming Eagles”, and even those of unconventional warfare units like the “First Special Services Forces” and implement doctrine created through

accurate battle assessments, and by historical documentation of the NCO's role in the creation of the largest gathering of warriors known to modern warfare. It was the NCO who trained the new recruits that entered into the war effort against both Japan and Germany, and it was the NCO again who accepted the responsibility of carry on those traditions that helped the new recruits be transformed into the fighting force needed to accomplish such ambitious missions like "Operation Overlord", better known by the average American citizen as "D-Day", the assault on Normandy Beach, France, and another such mission, the largest Airborne assault ever, "Operation Market Garden". The lessons learned by the NCO cadre of such missions many times formulated future battle doctrine, that had only one way to be proven as effective war fighting techniques, by reinforcing this new doctrine with courage and proven leadership attributes of their predecessors of previous generations. Even though previous military actions, those wars that were fought decades before: The Civil War, the Indian Wars, and the Spanish American War, had long since passed, traditions of military value were carried forth into battle again and again by the next generation of NCO's.

### **The Transformation of the Modern Day NCO**

By 1949, the United States Army began a campaign to enhance the role of the modern day NCO as a better trained professional warrior. With the need for highly trained officers being prepared for their military careers, and eventual command responsibilities, they had educational resources that had not been offered to the ranks of NCO's previously, and this included such established academies as West Point Military Academy and The Virginia Military Institute, the college entry program known as The Reserve Officer Training Corps, and the various branches individual

Officer Candidate Schools (with only one OCS course that continues to train future officers that is located at Fort Benning, GA), but the NCO had no professional academic schooling to better prepare them for their rapidly unfolding, and ever increasing need, to be better trained for the forthcoming battles (Ref: 2).

The first “higher” educational academy was that of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Constabulary Brigade’s Non-Commissioned Officers School established in West Germany. It was some eight years later that the United States Army would establish Army-wide NCO development academies mandated by Army Regulation 350-90. A short decade later there had been some hundred thousand plus Soldiers that had attended an NCO academy, either within their Divisional Command, or through such academies like that of the 7<sup>th</sup> United States Army’s Non-Commissioned Officers’ Academy that once was operated at Flint Kassern, Bad Tolz, West Germany. With the NCO cadre becoming a better trained force, it wouldn’t be long before the next conflict would arise: The Vietnam War (Ref: 2).

### **Lessons Yet to Be Learned**

There are many truths that can be gleaned from previous conflicts, and the most important one is understanding that the battlefield is a fluid volatile environment that is not predictable. With that noted, it should be then understood that it is the role of an NCO to be aware of the transformation of the manifesting battle, and not only utilizing leadership attributes that have been imparted to them through the established NCOES courses that are now afforded them, but to act on these traits, and incorporated with experienced gained through their own personal growth as a modern war fighter, to provide not only the expected leadership role for

their subordinates, but provide also clarity for Commanders seeking their expertise that has been enhanced by their exposure to the ever changing needs of the US Army.

One such NCO is that of Master Sergeant Roy Benavidez, a Special Forces NCO, whom bravely not only encountered a mounting force of North Vietnamese Regular Army forces, but assisted in the evacuation of his Detachment while being devastated by the onslaught of enemy combatants that were overcoming his efforts, which eventually was responsible for the 32 individual wounds that MSG Benavidez incurred during this well documented exploit (Brian O'Conner, Detachment Radio Operator, wrote a 10 page account of this action), that had been enhanced by his training not only as a Special Operations warrior, but because of his dedication to the principles and traditions he embraced as an NCO of the United States Army. On February 24, 1981, Master Sergeant Raul (Roy) Benavidez was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, by President Ronald Reagan (Ref: 3: Wikipedia-Roy Benavidez).

Another example would be my own personal encounter with Specialist Fifth Class Carlton K. Bernwall, who was my Battalion "Mess Sergeant", a man who was dedicated to the principles of leadership that he had gained during his career up to this time in history, with us being assigned together with Alpha Battery, of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 2<sup>nd</sup> Air Defense Artillery, of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Army Air Defense Command, located in Giessen, West Germany. And, It was not only "Sergeant" Bernwall's dedication to serve his country, but his desire to be the best NCO possible, that he endeavored to pursue whatever training he could to enhance his value to the mission at hand, and those to come, and that remained with me. It was through his leadership and dedication, which gave me a foundation I needed to embark on my own career. When I was

just enjoying my new role as a freshly pinned Sergeant First Class, the now civilian “Sergeant” Bernwall, continued to be there as a positive influence in my life and my military career, and while congratulating me on my promotion said off handedly, “Bryan, one day you’ll be a Sergeant Major!” Of course, I’m thinking, “Let me get used to the overwhelming duties I now have, before I must think about the expectations of being a Sergeant Major.” But, he was right...and in some way, when the day came for me to be known as Sergeant Major Fragas, those words comforted me, because I guess this old Army mentor saw in me the capabilities to become what I’m today...and that is an amazing example to me about the dedication I must have for my subordinates (Ref: 4).

### **The Future of the Corps of Non-Commissioned Officers**

To conclude, it is my belief, and understanding, that my role as a Senior NCO will affect the future of the Corps of Non-Commissioned Officers, and because of this understanding, I do not take lightly the legacy that I too will one day leave behind.

## References

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3. Roy Benavidez: [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)
4. Specialist Fifth Class Carlton K. Bernwall: 2/2 ADA 1978-1979