

**Significant Contributions of Previous Sergeants Major of the Army on the
NCO Corps**

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L579
28 February 2005

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R02

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The US Army has a unique leader, the Sergeant Major of the Army, that acts as the spokesperson for the enlisted Soldier and recommends solutions to Soldier problems to the Army's Chief of Staff(Bainbridge, 258). The responsibility inherent with the position of Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA) provides Sergeants Major with the enviable opportunity of doing something good for all Soldiers on a grand scale. The task of representing so many fine Soldiers may seem daunting to some leaders, but each SMA has welcomed the challenge, spearheaded positive change, and through their relationship with the Army's Chief of Staff, raised the level of professionalism of the noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps.

The Sergeant Major of the Army position was established on July 4, 1966. The only frame of reference for this position was the Sergeant Major of the United States Marine Corps, as they installed their most senior enlisted position on 23 May, 1957(Fisher, 343). The Sergeant Major of the Army position evolved because of the foresight of two people; General Johnson and SGM George E. Loikow. The Army Chief of Staff thought having a most senior enlisted person with direct access to him, would finally put the backbone in the long held belief that the NCO was 'the backbone of the Army'. Although the new position was open to interpretation by the first office holder, the same duties applied to this job as they applied to all Sergeants Major; take care of Soldiers.

The first Sergeant Major of the Army was selected by the Army Chief of Staff(Elder, 6). This position was new and the criteria and selection phase were developed as the idea grew. Sergeant Major (SGM) William O. Woolridge was one of twenty-one nominees and the only SGM

servicing in combat at that time. Based upon the information gathered by General Johnson's staff and a short interview, SGM Woolridge's selection was confirmed by Special Order No. 142(Elder, 63). His only formal guidance from General Johnson was to identify problems affecting enlisted personnel and recommend appropriate solutions, he will advise on the initiation of and content of plans for the professional education, growth, and advancement of noncommissioned officers, individually and collectively, advise the Chief of Staff on all matters pertaining primarily to enlisted personnel, including but not limited to morale, welfare, training, clothing, insignia, equipment, pay and allowances, customs and courtesies of the service, enlistment and reenlistment, discipline and promotion policies(Elder, 63). The SMA will be available to provide advice to any board or commission dealing with enlisted personnel matters. This guidance formed the basis of the position of the SMA and continues to serve as the basis for all actions of the SMA.

As the Sergeant Major of the Army position became more seasoned with time, it also became more legitimate, as intended by General Johnson. The Secretary of the Army, during SMA Bainbridge's tenure, directed the SMA to become a member of the general staff council and no longer under the control of the secretary of the general staff(Bainbridge, 260). The Chief of Staff enforced this move which elevated the SMA to become a member of the staff principals. This move indirectly contributed to the prestige of the sergeants majors in the field and helped bolster the importance of the NCO corps in the daily affairs of the Army and the relationship of the NCOs with their respective counterpart officer. The role of the NCO was becoming more important to the Army and the duties were now being more definitive because of the direction and example from the top, the Sergeant Major of the Army.

During SMA Wooldridge's tenure, the noncommissioned officer candidate course was implemented so that Soldiers identified for promotion to Sergeant would receive the proper training to assist them in their leadership roles (Fisher, 326). This was the forerunner for today's Primary Leadership Development Course. The development of a thoroughly professional corps of noncommissioned officers began during SMA Van Autreve's tenure (Elder, 105). The Army had just finished fighting an unpopular war and was transitioning to an all volunteer force. In order to create an Army that would sustain itself under this condition, the training of the NCO corps needed revision. SMA Van Autreve was instrumental in the overhauling of the Enlisted Personnel Management System (EPMS) and the revitalization of the NCO corps through the design of the career path of all Military Occupational Skills (MOS) (Elder, 107). SMA Van Autreve also stressed the importance of sending the best NCOs to the Non Commissioned Officer Education System (NCOES) courses to commanders rather than keeping them in the unit because they were so critical to unit success. One of the most significant educational developments that took place during SMA Van Autreve's time as the SMA was the implementation of the Sergeants Major Academy. The Sergeants Major Academy has directly provided the NCOES system with a top down reinforcement of the importance of quality leadership schools for NCOs of all pay grades. After the Vietnam War, NCOES was struggling to get a foothold in the Army. SMA Bainbridge was able to convince General Thurman to 'fence' the funding used for NCOES rather than allowing Commanders to use portions of this funding for other projects. This action resulted in more NCO training and the preservation of the NCOES system.

SMA Copeland was faced with the task of integrating an Army of conscripts to a force of volunteers (Elder, 91). The transition was full of many challenges but the backbone of any unit, discipline, was an area that needed immediate attention. Often SMA Copeland made on-the-spot corrections in order to reinforce the importance of NCO driven standards. Many leaders thought relaxing standards would help draw civilians into the Army, but the effect was disastrous. Restoring the standards of the NCOs was one problem that was dealt with promptly. During this time of transition, SMA Copland's wife traveled with him and met with many wife's groups and families. The effects of the changes were well received and Mrs. Copeland was often able to relay information to her husband that he would not under normal conditions be privy to. The uncertainty that NCOs and Soldier's families were feeling because of the transition and drawdown was the beginning of a concerted change in Army policy toward Army families and their welfare.

SMA Bainbridge did many great things for the noncommissioned officer. Two initiatives that he was involved in were directed at officers and had positive long range effects. SMA Bainbridge was the first SMA to speak to the Cadets at West Point. He gave a candid speech to them, but more importantly, the cadets were exposed to a senior NCO that gave them great insight about the Officer/NCO relationship. This was unique because at that time, West Point cadets were not exposed to senior NCOs. SMA Bainbridge fully supported General Roger's plan to place a CSM into each of the cadet brigades at West Point. This program was an excellent one and exposed cadets to senior NCOs on a regular basis, but the program only lasted eighteen months as many officers were reluctant to have senior NCOs involved in cadet training (Bainbridge, 298). Both of these programs took effect years later and the resultant effects

would increase the stature of the NCO in the eye of the officer and improve the level of professionalism for the NCO (Bainbridge, 308).

SMA Morrell was a Sergeant Major that believed in constant challenges. From the time he entered the Army until he became a sergeant major, he chose the life of adventure and danger. SMA Morrell was a Green Beret in Vietnam and as a SGM, he entered Ranger school and graduated at the age of forty-one as the distinguished honor graduate. All of his field troop time helped prepare him for the position of SMA. He gave credible testimony to Congress and fought for a better quality of life for the enlisted families(Elder, 145). He was a relentless advocate of the NCOES and saw its development progress to a higher level of professionalism, thus securing the future of NCO leadership training for the Army's future.

SMA Tilley was selected as the twelfth Sergeant Major of the Army on June 23, 2000. SMA Tilley traveled extensively throughout the Army and attempted to visit as many troops as possible. SMA Tilley had the ability to inspire a group of Soldiers by reflecting on his love of the service and the United States of America. His dedication to his duty was never questioned and the troops knew that their best interests were always on his agenda. One of his greatest accomplishments was the incremental pay raises that were achieved for the NCO corps. This great accomplishment made SMA Tilley a hero to all NCOs as their standard of living increased dramatically during the four years that he was the SMA(Elder, 216).

The Sergeant Major of the Army has made a profound impact on the NCO corps over the last 38 years. Many initiatives have been become policy and the quality of life of the enlisted ranks has improved dramatically. NCOs are now better trained and are in turn providing a better

trained Soldier than before the position of the SMA was established. The SMA continues to serve the Army's needs by ensuring that Soldiers and NCOs always come first.

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