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NCO Road to Advancement

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Abstract

The Army's technological advances and transformation demands that action be taken in order to enhance the promotion system of its future NCO Corps to operate effectively in an Asymmetric warfare environment. Irregular warfare promises to increase over the next 10 years with threats that are more spread out and more difficult to overcome than any other conflicts in past history. Based on these new emerging threats, we must modernize our promotion system to select future NCOs who are better prepared to deal with both conventional and irregular warfare. It's critical that the Army selects and promotes a balance future NCO Corps with a culture that is capable and prepared to conduct full spectrum of operations into the 21st Century.

The United States Army is the best in the world when it comes to equipped and trained Soldiers. These Soldiers stand ready to defend its nation at a moment's notice. The ending of the Cold War caused the national security strategy to change. These changes call for a power projection that must be ready to deploy to any part of the world at a moment's notice with sufficient forces to establish control and sustain themselves for an indefinite period. In order for the Army to carry out its mission, it must advance technologically. During the past several years, the Army has improved its power projection capabilities and intends to continue these improvements into the 21st century.

To defeat the enemy, the Army must be able to employ decisive operations to force the enemy to surrender. The Army must also prepare to shape the battlefield and set the tone for success. Superiority in these areas will defeat the enemy and possibly deter any future conflicts. Modernization of the battlefield is imperative. We accomplished this successfully during Operation Desert Storm, but the battlefield of the future will be different. The United States Army must adapt to these differences.

Today's Army is the smallest since World War II. The future Army is being molded every day with reductions being made to cut costs and to push the Army into the 21st century. The draw-down of forces, redistribution of forces, closing and realigning of bases, integration of Reserve and Active forces, and the positioning of equipment is building a leaner and more diversified force. Modernization is the way of the future and the forces must keep pace with the technological world if we are to be effective. The Army must have the most advanced equipment available for its soldiers. The Army has introduced the Future Combat Systems (FCS). These systems are programs of the Army's modernization that consist of manned and unmanned

equipment. The Army's modernization and transformation programs enable the Soldiers and leaders to have the leading-edge in technology and capabilities to dominate the modern and future battlefields. The Infantry Carrier Vehicle is a future combat system. Currently, the Army has made improvements to the Infantry Carrier Vehicle and launch capabilities that are in the early development stages. The development of Soldier Systems will enable the soldier to carry into combat everything the Soldier needs to survive. New research on Improvised Explosive Devices capabilities, as well as detection capabilities, to name just a few are in progress now. The Army is constantly seeking ways to improve its aviation, signal, armor, and other combat arm operations in order to keep the pace with modern battlefields.

Is the Army heading in the right direction? Some will tell you that the answer is yes. With all these advances there is one area that must keep pace with this technology, promotions within the future NCO Corps. Equipment advances is an effective step toward molding the future Army. To keep the pace with the modern Soldier and battlefield technology, the Army must also consider promotion opportunities for the future NCO Corps.

In WWI, General John (Black Jack) Pershing learned about unskilled Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs) the hard way. The pool of skilled Noncommissioned Officers didn't exist, so the positions were filled from within the ranks. The only training these NCOs had was a little more than recruit training prior to joining their units. These Noncommissioned Officers were considered inexperienced, unsophisticated and suffered high casualties.

After World War II, the forces that were left behind in Europe had the same problems. As units were demobilizing and redeploying back home, our forces in Europe were receiving Soldiers with limited training or no combat experience. NCO positions were filled from within

the ranks. The Soldiers that filled these NCO positions were put in charge to perform the extraordinary duties of an occupying Army.

In Vietnam, it was the erosion of combat, the length of a tour and the discharge of NCOs that had a profound impact on the NCO Corps promotion. The Army was confronted with a dilemma to send career NCOs back into action much sooner or fill the NCO ranks with a Senior Soldier from the junior ranks.

If you fast forward to the present day and the current promotion system, leaders and the Department of the Army are pressured to hurry up and get Junior Soldiers promoted into the NCO ranks and NCOs promoted to the next rank. The current NCO Promotion System has semi-centralized and centralized promotion boards. The semi-centralized promotion system consists of promotions in the ranks of Sergeant and Staff Sergeant. The centralized promotion system consists of promotions in the ranks of Sergeant First Class, Master Sergeant, and Sergeant Major. There have been numerous changes to the semi-centralized promotion procedure in the last few years. One of these changes was the way the Army promoted its Specialist to Sergeant. In the past, a Soldier wasn't recommended for promotion to Sergeant unless his or her chain of command deemed that the Soldier was ready to assume the responsibility of an NCO. Once a Soldier was recommended for promotion, they were eligible and scheduled to attend the proper level of the NCO Education System (NCOES). After completion of the required NCOES, they were eligible to be promoted to the next rank. In other words, you recommend a Soldier for integration on the promotion standing list, train them, and then promote them.

A recent alignment as part of the Change in NCO Structure (CINCOS) created a shortage in the NCO Corps. In January 2006, the Army changed the criteria for promotion to Sergeant.

Soldiers in the rank of Specialist, who had 46 months time-in-service and 10 months-time-in grade, would be automatically integrated onto the recommended list for promotion to Sergeant, provided they are otherwise qualified, without promotion board appearance. An obstacle that the Army has created is the completion of the proper NCO Education prior to promotion. In the past, a Soldier couldn't be promoted to the next rank without the completion of the required NCOES level. The Global War on Terrorism and the demand of filling vacant NCO positions caused the Army to conditionally promote Soldiers throughout the NCO ranks without the proper NCOES level. The question that comes to everyone's mind is, "Are we filling the NCO ranks with unskilled Soldiers?" If the Army will allow young Soldiers to be promoted within the NCO ranks who are not skilled or mature enough to handle the responsibility, we will pay for it in future conflicts as we did in Europe and post-Vietnam days.

The Army has taken major steps within creating a promotion model for the future of the NCO Corps to meet the full range of operational environments and technological challenges of the 21st century with its most senior NCOs promotion system.

This promotion model is the CSM and SGM Utilization and Management Modernization. It's how the Army selects and manages its most senior NCOs. Modernizing the way the Army selects and manages its most senior NCOs will further facilitate the development of these NCOs to be flexible, adaptive and competent leaders who support our Soldiers and our expeditionary Army at war.

The United States Army studied how Sergeants Major and Command Sergeants Major were selected for promotion and how this process might better serve an expeditionary Army at war. What they found was a promotion system and existing policies that was more supportive of

a peacetime Army.

The Army recommended specific changes to the CSM and SGM promotion selection process that would improve leader development for the Army's most senior NCOs, expand Command Sergeant Major opportunities in all Military Occupation Specialties, ensure unit manning and readiness, retain the best NCOs, and enhance the quality of support to Soldiers – the most important asset of the Army.

The Army has developed a new policy that was approved by the Chief of Staff of the Army that will initially change how Master Sergeants are selected for promotion to Sergeant Major, and in time, Command Sergeant Major appointment rules will change, as well as how the Army's most senior NCOs are trained for their leadership positions. The Fiscal Year 2008 Sergeant Major Selection Board, and all boards thereafter, will directly tie selection for promotion to selection for school. Those who are selected will be promoted upon graduation of the Sergeants Major Course, or be frocked if necessary.

This is important to the Army because improving leader development is essential to an Army engaged in a strategic environment of uncertainty and persistent conflict. In order to gain control of the complex ground environment, the United States needs an adaptive Army capable of providing a continuous supply of ready forces to meet the full range of threats and challenges in the 21st century. How the Army selects and promotes its most senior enlisted leaders will provide for more flexible, adaptive and competent leaders with a broader leadership experience to draw upon while mentoring Soldiers and meeting the varied challenges of the future.

If this newest modernization effort is successful with the Army's most senior level of noncommissioned officer, this could be the benchmark on how the remainder of the NCO Corps

will be promoted in the future. By incorporating this management system into the promotion system of the future NCO Corps, we are enhancing our capabilities of placing the right leader into the right position with the right experience and skill sets. This will benefit the Army and the United States by having NCOs with a diverse background of operational and leadership experience to support the Global War on Terrorism and all future conflicts.

Conclusion

The United States Army and our NCO Corps will be much smaller in the future, yet the world will still be a dangerous place. This environment, information explosion, changing characteristics of military personnel, and significant technological advances will require a much more multi-skilled, adaptive, and successful NCO Corps if America is to remain a military superpower in the 21st Century. While development of technology will determine how the future NCO Corps will get promoted, we need to take steps now to prepare for the technological advances of the modern battlefield in order to conduct a wide spectrum of operations. By doing so, this will allow us the opportunity to enter future conflicts more prepared and at a higher state of readiness.

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