THE HISTORY OF THE NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICER 1945-PRESENT

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March 18, 2008
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Introduction

The role of the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) in the U.S. Army has been recognized as an important one from the inception of the U. S. Continental Army. The army’s emphasis on the seven core values: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity and Personal Courage clearly define the NCO of today. The descriptions, training, and regulations that govern the NCO’s job have evolved throughout American history as a reflection of the industrial revolution and the conflicts our country has been involved in. This report will discuss standardization of the NCOs’ duties and responsibilities and when those standards were created. It will also discuss key contributors to creating those standards and some of the issues surrounding the training and focus of noncommissioned officers training system. The first steps to modernization began with the publication of the Noncommissioned Officers’ Manual of 1909. The establishment of training after World War I was influenced and directed by General John J. Pershing. These changes had a major impact on the role of the NCO in the army. The reorganization of the NCO ranks has influenced the present training programs for Noncommissioned Officers. The present philosophy surrounding the NCO training helps to maintain a strong NCO Corps.
The Beginning Phase of Modernization of the NCOs’ Role in the U.S. Army

With the increase of technology during the Industrial Revolution all aspects of American life changed greatly. This modernization of life affected many aspects of the army and the NCO Corps during the last half of the 19th century. One change was the delineation of rank on the uniform of soldiers. The chevron, a symbol of rank and badge of honor, was sewn on the sleeve of a military officer to denote the rank of officers and enlisted soldiers. The chevron first officially denoted rank in the U.S. military in 1817 at the West Point Academy. In 1902, the Army switched the chevron from the point down position to the present day points up configuration. Uniformity of wear was established in color and position of the chevrons through the War Department Circular 61 dated November 30, 1905. It stated that all points of the chevron be worn upwards. Many different configurations have been used over time to identify rank and job specialty, but the points down chevron configuration is still in effect today.

The NCO Manual

In the early days of the U.S. Army, the duties of the NCO (and other soldiers) were very clearly defined in five or six pages of instruction provided by Major General Freidrich von Stuben in the Regulation for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States. This document was written in 1778. The NCO had long been an important part of the military service, but his training and delineation of duties were constantly changing as the military became involved in training large numbers of soldiers during World War I.

The increase of NCO ranks and job descriptions also increased as a result of the creation and use of technology in the early 1900’s. In response to the changing military environment, The Noncommissioned Officers’ Manual published by James Moss in 1909 was the first known
handbook for NCOs’. It was a 417 page document that addressed the duties of the First Sergeant and the Sergeant Major. The manual included forms to be filled out and maintained and customs of service. It also addressed discipline as it related to what should and shouldn’t be done and the role of punishment in achieving discipline. In the 1916 edition of the manual, James Moss recognized the importance of the NCO by recognizing that the position of the NCO is one of honor and responsibility.

Establishment of Training after World War I

During World War I Noncommissioned Officers trained more than four million men for combat. This combat training was done with Corporals as the primary trainers. As the U. S. joined forces with the French and British in W.W. I with few guns, no planes and scanty organization, the allies wanted the American soldiers to serve under their command. The then Brigadier General John “Black Jack” Pershing commander of the American Expeditionary Force (A.E.F.) refused these demands and insisted on training for American officers and sergeants. General Pershing made sure physical fitness and warfare training was emphasized.

After training under General Pershing the A.E. F. was successful in open warfare by eliminating the German line against the Saint Miheil salient on September 12, 1918. This successful action by the troops reinforced how the training programs of General Pershing were important to the creation of a strong NCO Corps. General Jack Pershing returned to the U.S. as an American hero. He was promoted to the rank of General of the Armies. During his early military career General Pershing, a graduate of West Point academy was posted to command the Buffalo Soldiers of the Tenth Cavalry. He was often referred to as “Black Jack”, a nickname that came from either his cadet days in reference to his mean spirit or his days with the Tenth Cavalry. As a Quartermaster with the Tenth Cavalry in 1898, he and his soldiers excelled in an
attack to gain access to Santiago, Cuba. For his performance General Pershing received a Silver Star. General Pershing exceptional leadership and organizational skills throughout his career was exhibited during his tenure in the Philippines and later as he ended his military career. After 1919, he led a reorganization of the Army and created the new General Staff. Under this reorganization he started professional schools for officers, updated military techniques and emphasized physical training. General Pershing retired in 1924 as General of the Armies. When General Pershing died on July 15, 1948 Captain Liddell Hart spoke of the great influence General Pershing had on the U. S. military by stating “There was perhaps no other man who would, or could have built the American Army on the scale he planned, and without that army the war could hardly have been saved and could not have been won” General Pershing’s influence set the stage for many changes post- World War II.

Reorganization of the NCO Ranks

The organization of the NCO ranks evolved much during the early part of the 20th century. The structure of the rank system began to reflect the jobs needed in response to the use and growth of technology in the military. By May of 1916 there were 60 different ranks and titles. They included specialists from the technical, administrative, scientist craftsmen and laborer field jobs. After World War I, the Congress tried to improve the structure of the enlisted grade structure by creating seven standard grades. Enlisted men were placed in groups and large numbers of specialist positions were established. This caused some difficulty in identifying NCOs who were leaders and those who were senior specialists. It also caused concern as there were inconsistencies with the pay between privates with specialties and noncommissioned officers. Changes were made to better organize the structure, recognize combat leaders and improve the morale of combat NCOs. Many of these changes made the system confusing even
though its goal was to keep up with the changing technology of the times.

In 1951, all enlisted insignia were standardized to one color and policies were put in place to restore the “prestige of the NCO and to “place a premium on leadership and command responsibilities”. In 1958, two grades were added to the NCOs ranks. The grades of E-8 and E-9 were added to better define the responsibilities in the enlisted ranks and help in the retention of well qualified Noncommissioned Officers. In 1968 the army added the rank of Command Sergeant Major. The army in the early 1980’s reorganized the rank system for enlisted soldiers. As a result, it eliminated the “specialist” rank above the E-4 pay grade. This was the army’s approach to create “first line” leader/supervisors with the grade of E-5 sergeant and above. Over time, the leadership capabilities of the enlisted force improved, but the technical capabilities of the enlisted ranks suffered. Increased education was one way the army worked to correct the short fall. The ranks of today include Sergeant Major of the Army, Command Sergeant Major, Sergeant Major, First Sergeant/ Master Sergeant, Platoon Sergeant, Sergeant First Class, Staff Sergeant, and Sergeant. Corporals are normally squad, section and team leaders. Although these are the lowest ranking NCOs, they are very important as they live and work with the soldiers and are responsible for their health, welfare and safety. In all areas of training and unit missions the NCO is a very important part of every command.

The Noncommissioned Officer Education System

Without change, there is no growth. The failure to perceive the need for change leads to a force incapable of meeting the multiple demands required for mission success. The current noncommissioned officers education system is over 30 years old and dates back to the creation of the all-volunteer army of the 1970’s. There are four progressive training tiers within the NCOES: The Warrior Leader Course (formerly the Primary Leadership Development
Course), the Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course, the Advance Noncommissioned Officer
Course, and the United States Army Sergeants Major Course. Of the four courses only the Basic
NCO Course and the Advance NCO Course provide technical Military Occupational Specialty
training. In response to recent mission demands, leaders are re-evaluating the current
noncommissioned officer training education system (NCOES). They are evaluating how courses
might be redesigned to better train the NCOs; better prepare them for ongoing combat and
sustainment missions with deployment and redeployment of units in multiple theatres.

Considering the advancement of today’s technology and the rapid rate at which it
changes, transformation of the current NCO education system is necessary. In re-evaluating the
NCO training it is my opinion that training and courses need to be more closely aligned with
civilian jobs. An army career-oriented incentive training program aligned with civilian jobs will
lead to a greater retention of NCOs as they see a clear way to transition into the civilian work
force when their retirement time arises.
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