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Lesson # L579
History of The NCO

NCOs in The American Army

1945-Present

1ST SMA William O. Wooldridge

1. Introduction:

- a. Greeting. Good _____ SMSgt Herrick and classmate of R04,
My name is SGM Kevin A. Engel.
- b. Type and Classification of Briefing. Today I will present a history briefing on
NCOs in The American Army from 1945 – Present, specifically the 1st SMA William
O. Wooldridge. This briefing is Un-Classified.
- c. Purpose and Scope. The intended audience for this briefing is Warrior Leader
Course Graduates. During this briefing I will discuss what I believe these new
leaders are responsible for.
- d. Outline or Procedure:
 - (1). Awards and decorations.
 - (2). Selection as the first SMA.
 - (3). His feelings about the job.
 - (4). Establishing the office.
 - (5). Recommendations.
 - (6). CSM conference.
 - (7). Promotion recommendations

2. Main Body:

- a. SMA Wooldridge's military history from 11 Nov 1940 until his retirement at
White Sands Missile Range.
- b. SMA Wooldridge's awards and decorations.
- c. SMA Wooldridge's selection as the first SMA.
- d. SMA Wooldridge's feelings about the job and initial requirements from the Chief
of Staff.

- e. Establishing the Office
- f. Recommendation for NCOES
- g. 1st CSM conference
- h. Senior enlisted promotion recommendations

3. Closing:

a. SMA Wooldridge contributed a great amount to the U.S. Army and had a lasting effect on the way we do business today. He established the office of SMA, recommended the structure for our NCOES system, recommended changes to the enlisted promotion system, and started the yearly CSM conference to review the way things are done and the needs for change.

b. Question and answer period.

c. I hope that I have helped to show you the impact that SMA Wooldridge has had on the U.S. Army. Impacts that continue to shape the army and develop the leaders of our future.

d. I will be followed by _____.

There were many NCOs in The American Army from 1945 – present that have had a lasting effect on our Army. Only a few however have had such a large and lasting impact as the first Sergeant Major of The Army William O. Wooldridge. The creation of the position of Sergeant Major of The Army (SMA) gave the NCOs and Soldiers a voice directly to the Secretary of The Army. This voice has become very effective over the years, bringing positive change to the Army. The establishment of the position and its continued effectiveness is a product of SMA Wooldridge's efforts and experience. Some of the areas that the SMA has had the greatest impact on are the moral, welfare, training, and pay and allowances of the NCOs and Soldiers in today's Army.

The 1st SMA William O. Wooldridge enlisted in the U.S. Army on 11 November 1940 at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. SMA Wooldridge served in many different positions from 1940 to 1954, when he became the First Sergeant for Company G, 3rd Infantry, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C. SMA Wooldridge then moved to Fort Riley, Kansas where he served as a First Sergeant and Sergeant Major from 1955 to 1958. In 1958 he moved to Germany, serving as the Sergeant Major for 2d Battle Group, 28th Infantry, 24th Infantry Division until 1963. He then served as the Sergeant Major of the 24th Infantry Division until 1965. SMA Wooldridge then returned once again to Fort Riley, Kansas serving as a Brigade Sergeant Major and Division Sergeant Major for the 1st Infantry Division until July of 1966. In 1966 the Army Chief of Staff, General Harold K. Johnson, appointed SMA Wooldridge to the position of Sergeant Major of The Army. SMA Wooldridge continued to serve after his time as Sergeant Major of The Army with an assignment as Sergeant Major, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam from 1968 to 1969. SMA Wooldridge's final assignment was as Sergeant Major, Range Command, White

Sands Missile Range, White Sands, New Mexico (1st SMA). SMA Wooldridge participated in several combat actions and was highly decorated.

SMA Wooldridge, while “assigned to the 1st Infantry Division...participated in the North Africa and Sicily Campaigns and the D-Day landings on June 6th, 1944. In October 1944 he was wounded during the battle for the fortress city of Aachen and was awarded the Silver Star for gallantry in action” (William). He also received a second silver star for his actions in December 1944 at the Battle of The Bulge Campaign. SMA Wooldridge was highly decorated while on active duty; the list of his awards is long. He received the Silver Star w/OLC, Legion of Merit w/OLC, Bronze Star Medal, Purple Heart, Air Medal w/OLCs, Army Commendation Medal w/OLCs, Army Good Conduct Medal (6th Award), American Defense Service Medal, European – African – Middle Eastern Campaign Medal, World War II Victory Medal, Army Occupation Medal (Germany and Japan), Asiatic Pacific Campaign Medal, Armed Forces Expeditionary Service Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal, and Combat Infantry Badge with Star. SMA Wooldridge is also authorized unit decorations from several other countries including the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, and Vietnam (William). SMA Wooldridge’s experience and duty positions put him in a good position to be the best candidate to be the first SMA.

Army Chief of Staff, General Harold K. Johnson decided to fill the position of Sergeant Major of The Army with a nominee from the major commands throughout the Army. The list that General Johnson received contained twenty-one nominees, with only one currently serving in Vietnam. General Johnson had “on some of his visits...seen Sergeant Major William O. Wooldridge of the 1st Infantry Division and considered him ‘a fine figure of a man’” (Elder 7). General Johnson knew that Sergeant Major Wooldridge was 43 years old with 25 years active

duty. Sergeant Major Wooldridge was a veteran of both World War II and Vietnam, and he was highly decorated. General Johnson was aware that Sergeant Major Wooldridge had several brushes with authorities but “attributed them to the ‘exuberance of youth’...an experience factor not necessarily incompatible with the responsibilities of the new position” (Elder 7). General Johnson was a firm believer “that ‘once a man had paid the price you don’t forever hold him to account’” (Elder 7). General Johnson also believed that SMA Wooldridge’s service after the fact was exceptional. General Johnson made his choice; SMA Wooldridge would be the man for the job. General Johnson made this choice despite SMA Wooldridge’s reservations about the position.

SMA Wooldridge was not comfortable with the idea of having a Sergeant Major of The Army. He believed that the senior commanders would not properly back the job and that the position would have no real authority (Wooldridge). SMA Wooldridge did however travel to the Pentagon to meet with General Johnson and interview for the position. General Johnson gave SMA Wooldridge the job and only limited guidance. SMA Wooldridge received an informal note card listing the tasks he would be expected to perform; the card read, “will 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. He will advise the Chief of Staff on all matters pertaining primarily to enlisted personnel, including but not limited to moral, welfare, training, insignia, equipment, pay and allowances, customs and courtesies of the service, enlistment and reenlistment, discipline and promotion policies. He will be available to provide advice to any board or commission dealing with enlisted personnel matters” (Elder 9). This

guidance was all SMA Wooldridge had to work with, one informal note card that he carried with him for his entire time as Sergeant Major of The Army. A small note card with limited guidance gave him the freedom to do it his way.

SMA Wooldridge worked hard to establish the office of the Sergeant Major of The Army, he spent fifty percent of his time traveling and meeting soldiers. During his travels he stressed that he worked for the soldiers, and that he was their voice to the Army at DA level. While he traveled he asked soldiers for their input on what they needed in the field. He solicited input on all subjects to include, weapons, discipline, training, and duties. From the information that SMA Wooldridge gathered he formulated thirty-one recommendations to submit to his boss. General Johnson approved sixteen of the thirty-one recommendations outright, sending the rest out to be staffed. All thirty-one recommendations were eventually approved having a large impact on the soldiers across the Army (Ball). SMA Wooldridge called upon the experts within the Army to gather additional information.

SMA Wooldridge called together five senior Command Sergeant Majors for a conference. Together the six Sergeant Majors formed a recommendation to submit to General Johnson. The recommendation was for a Noncommissioned Officers Education System (NCOES) intended to better develop the future leadership of the Army. General Johnson accepted this recommendation with enthusiasm. The main problem at the time was funding the system with the current war and need for other expenditures. General Johnson did however promise his support for the NCOES system that SMA Wooldridge recommended. Today we have that system, and the best trained noncommissioned officers in history. SMA Wooldridge feels that his greatest accomplishment was establishing the position of Sergeant Major of The Army (Ball). Truly with the limited guidance that he received the task was formidable. SMA

Wooldridge achieved his first goal in a very professional manner, bringing credibility to the position and raising the esteem of the NCO Corp. He connected with the soldiers, having come from the ranks and enduring the same issues they had. He also connected with the NCOs, by calling them in and asking how they felt and what they thought needed to be fixed. He did more than listen to their recommendations however; he acted on them by making recommendations for changes directly to the Chief of Staff.

SMA Wooldridge stated that his second most important accomplishment "was the major commands Command Sergeant Major conference" (Ball). The first conference took place in conjunction with the annual Army Commanders' Conference in Washington, D.C. in December 1966. The Sergeants Major conferences in 1966 and 1967 produced "proposals to change virtually every area affecting enlisted soldiers, especially specific recommendations to improve professionalism and career opportunities within the enlisted force" (Elder 12). Those recommendations accomplished major improvements in the moral, discipline, training, and duties of the soldiers and NCOs of the U.S. Army. These changes are still being felt today by the constant improvements in the training provided the soldiers and the NCOES designed to grow dependable quality NCOs.

SMA Wooldridge also deserves a great deal of credit for the current enlisted promotion system that we now have. He considers it another major accomplishment of his service as the Sergeant Major of The Army. SMA Wooldridge made recommendations to the Chief of Staff to move Master Sergeant and Sergeant Major promotions to the Department of The Army level. He believed that this would insure the best Soldiers would move forward to lead the Soldiers forward. He also helped to establish the point based promotion system for Sergeant and Staff Sergeant, again insuring that quality Soldiers moved up. These accomplishments also

contributed to the improvements in the moral, discipline, training, and duties of the soldiers and NCOs of the U.S. Army. SMA Wooldridge had a lasting and positive effect on what we now take for granted.

Army Chief of Staff, General Harold K. Johnson awarded the position of the 1st Sergeant Major of The Army to SMA William O. Wooldridge. General Johnson could not have hoped for a more successful outcome of that decision. SMA Wooldridge was truly a Soldiers Soldier, always striving for the betterment of the Army and the Noncommissioned Officers Corps. The recommendations made by him, and the relationships he created while serving as the Sergeant Major of The Army are still alive today. The reputation enjoyed by Noncommissioned Officers today had the groundwork placed almost forty years ago. The quality of our NCO Corps was established and the framework to maintain it was established by SMA Wooldridge, although it did take some years to implement it completely.

Of all the NCOs in The American Army from 1945-Present, the 1ST SMA William O. Wooldridge is one of the few that have a lasting and profound effect on our NCO Corps. Changes that were recommended by him and eventually implemented continue today to make us better. Improvements to the NCO Corp and our education system have brought up the level of of competence within our ranks and solidified our position as competent leaders.

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