

## The History of the Noncommissioned Officer Promotion System

As a group of Noncommissioned Officers relaxed during a lull in training, the subject of the recent Department of the Army (DA) promotion board results surfaced as it does so often in many such settings throughout the Army. They had mixed feelings about the effectiveness of the system in promoting the best-qualified NCOs. They made suggestions, agreed upon the good ideas or rejected others. The NCOs departed, going back to training their soldiers, leaving the issue for another day.

How often have you heard conversations like this? How many NCOs believe the promotion system is unfair or misses the mark? Knowing the history of the NCO promotion system enables us to understand why the promotion system is what it is today. It lets us know what was attempted in the past and why. Moreover, it gives us insight to adapt the system for the future. After looking at the history of the promotion system, you may come away, as I did, being confident that we have a great system that is ready for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

The traditions of European armies were in the minds of General Washington, General von Steuben, and others who were responsible for forming the Continental Army. In conflict were different beliefs about whether enlisted soldiers should be able to rise through the ranks and become commissioned officers. The decision boiled down to which best represented the newly formed republic (equal opportunity to achieve commissions) or which one allowed for the formation of a professional NCO Corps. General Washington, having been in the British Colonial Militia, believed in the separation of the enlisted and officer corps. He also had to deal with a shortage of personnel. Keeping NCOs from moving into the officer corps would help manage the

shortage and create a nucleus of professional NCOs. These major factors led to the separation of the officer and enlisted ranks. There have been exceptions, of course, where outstanding NCOs received battlefield or other promotions to the officer ranks, but for the most part this tradition remains with us today and has led to the professionalism of the Corps.

General von Steuben, as Inspector General of the Army, published in his regulations that the company commanders were to select the NCOs for his unit. The selections would be under the supervision of the Inspector General's office. However, for the most part, the decision was final at the company commander's level. This system placed the quality of the NCO Corps totally in the hands of the company commander. While many commanders selected the best qualified to fill the NCO ranks it also left the system open to favoritism and politics. This practice remained mostly unchanged until the appearance of the first promotion boards.

The first promotion boards started appearing in 1906 to fill vacancies in the company sergeant positions. The practice was not an Army wide initiative but rather an idea that started at the company level and spread from there. The board consisted of company officers who reviewed the service records of the attendees and administered a written and hands on evaluation. The corporals of the company would appear before the board to compete for any available sergeant positions. This was a good start to a formal promotion system; however, it lacked set standards and was subject to the whim of the company commander.

Since promotions were under the control of the company commander, when an NCO was transferred, either voluntary or by selection, they were reduced to private. That

left it up to the new commander to decide whether to promote him back to the NCO ranks. This had a negative effect on the morale of good soldiers and NCOs who could not move up the ranks and would leave the service. Two world wars would pass before substantial improvements to the promotion system occurred.

In 1948, the Department of the Army adopted a Career Guidance Plan to develop Army wide standards for the selection and training of NCOs. The new promotion system, based upon written examination, intended to increase the competency of the NCO Corps. The Army wide standardized examinations covered general soldier skills and Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) tasks. In order to be eligible for promotion, a soldier had to pass the examination. Reduction in rank would also occur if an NCO failed the exam. Promotion recommendation for most grades occurred at the company level and the first commanding general in the NCOs chain of command made senior grade recommendations. The Career Guidance Plan lasted for only two years. The buildup for the war in Korea caused the suspension of the plan and units went back to filling vacancies from within.

Centralized promotions first appeared after the creation of two new pay grades. The Military Pay Bill of 1958 created E-8 and E-9. Units' submitted recommendations for these grades to the major command (MACOM) level. MACOM then forwarded consolidated rosters to the adjutant general for consideration. DA reviewed the qualification records on file in order to select the best-qualified individual and placed those selected on assignment instructions to fill unit vacancies.

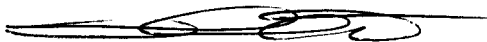
Throughout the 1960's and early 1970's minor attempts were made to improve the promotion system. Real change did not come until the implementation of the Enlisted

Personnel Management System (EPMS) in 1977. Something we take for granted today, was, in the mid 1970's, a massive restructuring of how enlisted and Noncommissioned Officer's careers would be managed. A board studied the promotion systems of the Navy, Air Force, and the British and Canadian armies to find new ways to manage enlisted promotions. Under the new system, promotions would be divided into three categories; decentralized (E-1 to E-4), semi-centralized (E-5 to E-6), and centralized (E-7 to E-9). Recommendations for promotion required every soldier to have a passing score on the Skill Qualification Test (SQT) and to have attended the appropriate level within the Noncommissioned Officer Education System (NCOES). Also initiated was an Army wide system of promotion points and monthly cut-off scores, along with promotion standing lists. Since 1977, changes within EPMS such as the elimination of the SQT/SDT caused occasional modifications of the promotion system but it has retained its basic structure until today.

Throughout history, we can see the evolution of many different concepts that culminated in today's system. The influence of company commanders envisioned by General Washington and von Steuben are visible in the promotion of soldiers from Private to Specialist as well as in the recommendation for soldiers to appear before local promotion boards. The semi-centralized and centralized system arose out of the need for a standardized method of promoting the best-qualified NCOs to ensure a strong and professional NCO Corps across the entire Army.

Will we ever have a perfect promotion system? No, but we can strive to have the best system that meets the needs of the Army and its soldiers. The most important part of the system is, and will always be, as it was back in 1775, at the company level. We must

counsel, mentor and develop our soldiers to meet the standards and recommend only those who demonstrate the potential for promotion. DA promotion boards can only select the best NCOs if we write Noncommissioned Officer Evaluation Reports that paint an accurate picture of performance and potential. Raters and Senior Raters must have the courage to call it as it is. To do otherwise gives the mediocre or substandard performer equal consideration before the promotion board. All the systems throughout the years have had the intent of promoting the best. To ensure a quality Army, it is up to all of us to make it happen.



THEODORE R. SUTTON  
MSG, USA  
Student #379

## Works Cited

Fisher, Ernest F. Jr. Guardians of the Republic. New York, NY; Ballantine, 1994

Bouilly, Robert H. Dr. "Establishing the NCO Tradition." The NCO Journal Summer 95.

Coakley, Robert W. Evolution of the Enlisted Grade Structure of the U.S. Army, 1775-1959. Office of the Chief of Military History, Histories Division, Dept. of the Army, [1967].

I. Introduction

A. Fisher, Ernest F. Guardians of the Republic. Ballantine, 1994.

Bouilly, Robert H. Dr. "Establishing the NCO Tradition." The NCO Journal Summer 1995.

Coakley, Robert W. Evolution of the Enlisted Grade Structure of the U.S. Army, 1775-1959. Office of the Chief of Military History, Histories Division, Dept. of the Army, [1967].

B. I thoroughly conducted my research. I used the most comprehensive books and magazine articles to draw my conclusions.

II. The History of the Noncommissioned Officer Promotion System.

A. Foundation.

1. European traditions.
2. General Washington's decision.

B. Evolution.

1. Major events causing change.
2. Changes in the promotion system.
3. Effects of the changes.

C. Modern NCO Promotion System.

1. Recent changes.
2. Proposals.

III. Closing.

- A. Question and answer period.
- B. Summary and concluding statement.