

History, Role, and Achievements of The Sergeants Major of the Army

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“He 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 NCOs, individually and collectively. He will 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, customs and courtesies, enlistments and reenlistments, discipline, and promotion policies. He will be available to provide advice to any board or commission dealing with enlisted personnel matters”. Though never formally published this was the job description that Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson handed to the first Sergeant Major of the Army on a three by five card. Sergeant Major of the Army William O. Wooldridge folded up the three by five card and put it in his wallet. He didn’t need a job description, he knew what needed to happen.

To even get to this point was a monumental task for the Noncommissioned Officers Corps. Two years prior at the annual SGM’s Conference the motion was made to establish the position. The Macom SGM’s needed a direct line to the Chief of Staff to address enlisted issues. The fear of DA staffers was that establishment of the position would create a second chain of command and that the office would be used for the assignments of enlisted personnel. Despite any shortcomings the position might create the need far outweighed them. On 4 July 1966 General Orders #29 solidified the Sergeant Major of the Army position. MACOMS were asked to submit biographies of their top NCOs for consideration. The Chief of Staff chose SGM Wooldridge, the only

SGM serving in Vietnam.

The first job for SMA Wooldridge was to establish the position. Initiating a position of this stature was difficult due to it not carrying any legal responsibilities, therefore a defacto responsibility was created. SMA Wooldridge had to network and validate the position to numerous staff agencies in the Army. The Chief of Staff's open door policy with the SMA allowed him to take enlisted issues quickly to the top. Initially, the SMA and the Chief of Staff traveled together, but it was determined that they could get more bang for the buck by having different itineraries. During his tenure SMA Wooldridridge spent half of his time visiting troops and gathering information. The other half of his time was spent in the Pentagon working on his four priorities as the SMA.

First, he wanted to create and implement an annual MACOM Command Sergeants Major Conference. He would use this as a tool to enhance issues in promotions, assignments, training, readiness, proficiency, and morale of soldiers. The first conference was held in 1966 and is still being held under the name of "The Nominative Command Sergeants Major Conference". His second initiative was to revamp the enlisted insignia. Going into the SMA office he had to design his own insignia and have it adopted by the Army as the official insignia of the SMA. His third priority was helping enlisted personnel and their families with personal problems. He accomplished this by developing close bonds with organizations such as the Red Cross and Army Emergency Relief. His last priority was to posture the SMA position as enlisted advisor to all DA boards and commissions which had implications to the enlisted force.

All of the twelve Sergeants Major of the Army and their Reserve and National Guard equivalents had their own unique initiatives. Many times one's initiative would carry into another SMA's tenure until adoption. We continue to fine tune and improve initiatives started by past SMAs. The one initiative started by an SMA to truly professionalize the US Army's enlisted force was the establishment of the Noncommissioned Officers Education System. This has made the US Army's NCO unique when compared to those in foreign armies. In 1969, SMA Dunaway had his NCOES initiative approved. During SMA Dunaway's tenure, the Chief of Staff approved the Noncommissioned Officer Education System (NCOES), a three-tiered system that trained NCOs in basic, advanced, and senior courses. The capstone was the Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas, which trained master sergeants for duty as sergeants major at battalion level and above.

Though not a formal part of NCOES, SMA William A. Connely instituted the Noncommissioned Officers Development Program. NCOES and NCODP developed the enlisted force into professional career soldiers, subsequent SMAs worked hard to get them the pay they deserved.

The person holding the SMA position routinely goes before congress to testify. Three SMAs have gone before congress specifically on pay increase issues for enlisted personnel. SMAs Glen Morrel and Gene McKinney both were advocates for pay reform for the enlisted force. Their lobbying resulted in numerous pay raises. No previous SMA has fought harder for Senior NCO pay adjustments than SMA Jack Tilley, the current SMA. Pay is important but soldiers also deserve a good quality of life.

The soldiers' families have become integrated and are a part of the Army we know today. A well cared for family resulted in a less stressed soldier with a greater chance of retaining. SMA Richard A Kidd and his wife were responsible for developing Army Family Team Building. SMA Connelly was instrumental in turning Ft Irwin from a base camp to a place suitable for families to live. Housing for families and single soldiers has always been an area of concentration for SMA. The Single Soldier Initiative and Better Opportunity for Single Soldiers (BOSS) programs were both developments by SMA Julius W. Gates. He was also responsible for initiatives concerning female soldiers. Enlisted personnel upholding the duties and responsibilities expected by today's Army deserve the quality of life our past SMAs worked hard to get.

The duties and responsibilities of NCOs have always been a part of the Corps. The establishment of the SMA was pivotal in energizing and focusing the Corps to their duties and responsibilities. SMA Leon Van Autreve once commented that his greatest obstacle as the SMA was "reincarnation of the NCO corps." The post Vietnam NCO corps was downsizing and moral was low. SMA Van Autreve demanded adherence to the standards from those that remained. Those not meeting the standard were eliminated through the Qualitative Management Process. He developed and enforced multi-echelon and hip pocket training. This forced NCOs to learn and become the primary trainers. Their training resulted in respect from above and below. During his tenure he did away with numerous councils and reinstated the use of the chain of command to deal with the issues of soldiers.

The position of the SMA is that of the eyes and ears for the Chief of Staff in

matters pertaining to enlisted issues. The SMA isn't a figurehead with close ties to the top, he has developed a defacto power that has come with the position. He or she has and will continue as our lobbyist, advocate, and mentor.

In many ways the role of the SMA and the NCO corps will stay the same but in many ways it will change greatly. Core values and leadership won't change for the NCO corps. The Army is experiencing a technical revolution. The revolution is already challenging NCOs in their role as trainers. To "train as we fight" is difficult when warfare is evolving so rapidly. NCOs must train soldiers to fight and survive the first day of the next war, not the last day of the previous war.

The impact on the United States Army since the establishment of the Sergeant Major of the Army position has been significant. The Sergeants Major of the Army have reestablished our Noncommissioned Officers Corps prestige and responsibility. Our voice at the top has enlightened senior Army officials of our capabilities and strengths. As a direct result of this we have become an immeasurable asset, capable of staying on the forefront of technology in addition to leading our soldiers on the modern battlefield.

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