

The Shaping of the NCO Corps: From the Draft to The Modern Volunteer Army

by

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I. Introduction

A. References.

1. Arms, Larry R. "A Short History of the NCO." 21 Jan 04.
<http://usasma.bliss.army.mil/NCOMuseum/history/ShortHistory10.html>
2. Collins, John M. "The Care and Cleaning of NCOs: Policies and Practices." Manuscript, 1992.
3. Center of Military History. Time Honored Professionals: The NCO Corps Since 1775. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1989.
4. Fisch Jr., Arnold G. and Robert K. Wright Jr. The Story of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1989.
5. Fisher Jr., Ernest F. Guardians of the Republic: A History of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps of the U.S. Army. New York: Ballantine Books, 1994.
6. Griffith Jr., Robert K. Men Wanted for the US Army: Americas Experience with an All Volunteer Army Between World Wars. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982.

B. My research targeted the NCO Corps duties, discipline, and training from pre-WWI through the transition to a volunteer army after Vietnam. Also, I concentrated on additional factors affecting the NCO Corps during this time period, such as legislative priorities, draft issues, and social attitudes. I reviewed many references including books, Internet articles, manuscripts, and pamphlets in order to authenticate the information presented in my work.

II. Body.

- A. Pre-WWI through the military buildup of WWII.
- B. Pre-WWII through the beginning of Vietnam.
- C. Vietnam era through the end of the draft in 1973.

III. Closing.

A. The duties, discipline, and training of NCOs adapted to new technologies and evolving doctrine during the period of pre-WWI through Vietnam. Draft policies and the transition to an all-volunteer force created new challenges, which needed to be addressed. Attitudes toward the military were a factor in molding and shaping the NCO Corps through one of the most progressive periods in American history.

B. Question and Answer Period.

C. The NCO Corps faced some turbulent and troubling times in recent history but prevailed in maintaining its strength and integrity. The NCO leadership during these times stayed focused on the soldier and the mission and tirelessly sought to make the NCO Corps a trusted and respected organization. We continue to embrace our mission of maintaining standards, leading, and training and use the lessons of the past to seek improvements for the NCOs of the future.

How many times have you heard it said that evolution and revolution are the only two catalysts of change that exist in the world? Nowhere is the statement more true than when speaking about the changes wrought in the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Corps during the 20th century. Lessons learned from each conflict fought, beginning with World War I, led to shifts in doctrine and training; this is the revolutionary catalyst. The development of technologically advanced weapons, political priorities, such as draft policies and legislation, and public sentiment drove the evolutionary changes.

Since the Revolutionary War, NCOs have had the tasks of maintaining standards, training their teams, and leading soldiers. These primary duties remain the same, but NCOs have had to adapt as progression necessitated changes.

The decades leading up to World War I saw new technologies become reality. New weapons, such as improved machine guns, forced changes in military tactics and in leadership roles. Open warfare replaced linear tactics in military warfighting doctrine. NCO duties and responsibilities became more complex and, as realignment increased squad size, they gained additional soldiers to train and lead, and new weapons to master. Formal NCO training did not exist; the primary tool used to train NCOs was on-the-job (OJT) training. New NCOs would learn their duties and responsibilities through observing and assisting more experienced NCOs. The training of NCOs remained basically an apprentice system (“Time Honored Professionals”).

The long-standing government policy was to maintain a small peacetime military force. In times of war, legislation allowed the government to mobilize citizens to augment the regular army. Unfortunately, a small peacetime military also meant a small military budget. This policy

affected, and would continue to affect, the ability of the NCO corps to adequately maintain their numbers and to carry out their training duties.

In 1917, the United States entered World War I. New tactics reinforced the importance of the NCO as a small unit leader. The role of the squad leader changed as a result of trench warfare tactics. Small unit leaders in World War I had two main battlefield duties: controlling fire from the trench line and leading patrols to scout enemy positions and capture prisoners (“Time Honored Professionals”).

Congress revived the draft by passing the Selective Service Act in 1917 and the army saw a huge influx of untrained citizen soldiers. In an effort to provide adequately qualified trainers the army took the good NCOs from units, resulting in holes in the leadership of deploying units. Additionally, combat attrition worked to further reduce the pool of qualified NCOs. Recalling retired NCOs to assist with training the draftees was a short-term fix.

The neglect of formal training, the budget policy prior to World War I, and the shortage of qualified NCOs reflected in the high casualty rate of World War I. Tactically, the lack of professional development prevented us from taking the early initiative. The French and the British armies suffered their own military setbacks in the early years of the war due to inability to adapt to new warfare tactics. They attempted to assist the U.S. Army in preparing NCOs to effectively apply their lessons learned. The allied training mission provided instruction by men experienced in trench warfare and this helped the U.S. Army to avoid the earlier tactical mistakes of our allies (Fisher 189).

World War I was also the first large scale, joint operation conducted with our allies. NCOs noticed that our foreign allies afforded their NCOs much greater privilege and status than they, themselves, enjoyed. This knowledge affected the morale of the NCO Corps.

The lessons learned from World War I caused the army to recognize the need for formalized NCO training. Unfortunately, the close of World War I saw a reversion back to a small peacetime army. Government policy prevailed and the military budget did not allow for establishing the needed training. OJT remained the primary avenue for training NCOs.

The army fell into neglect during the post war years. The toughest duty of the NCO was to maintain a professional, trained army with a large-scale reduction in budget and strength. Desertions increased and reenlistments decreased while morale fell. Life in the army between world wars was unexciting and tedious, but NCOs continued to train soldiers with the resources available in the art of map reading, marksmanship, and patrolling techniques. In addition to general budget reductions that affected equipment and training, military pay lagged behind the civilian sector. Many NCOs left the military for better opportunities.

In 1927, Congress reduced the amount authorized to pay the army and the cut forced the War Department to reduce the number of NCOs in the regular army by eliminating an additional 1,471 NCO positions (Griffith 77). These reductions further strained the NCO Corps.

The atrocities of World War I shocked the nation and the world. Pacifism and public apathy were at a peak and helped usher the passage of the Kellogg-Briand Pact, which outlawed war, in 1928. With its passage, the public had little interest in maintaining a standing army. The onset of the Great Depression in 1929, resulted in the public calling for further reductions as the economy collapsed. Military reductions continued and included an across the board pay cut in 1934. In spite of the hardships, John M. Collins defined the pre-World War II era as the golden age of the NCO in the areas of discipline, respect and ability. NCOs were exclusively troop leaders, whether line or staff, a hard core elite, set apart from their fellow man (Collins 7).

In 1938, the threat of Nazi Germany in Europe and Japan in the Far East brought the neglected state of the military to the attention of Congress and the public, and rearmament began.

The Selective Service Act, enacted in 1940, was the first peacetime draft legislation ever. During 270 days in 1942-1943, over 3.5 million civilians in uniform inundated the small professional regular army (Fisher 248). Again, as in World War I, the brunt of the training of the draftees became the responsibility of the prewar regular army NCOs. The quantity of NCOs needed to maintain a modern wartime army was difficult to sustain while simultaneously ensuring maximum leadership quality. The army struggled with the antiquated system it used to select and train NCOs.

At the onset of World War II there still was no provision for formalized NCO training. The War Department encouraged regiments and divisions to institute formal schools, but published no standardization guidance. As the war progressed, some regiments and divisions did put together hasty NCO schools.

The training of NCOs for combat service included making sure NCOs could take over leadership duties if something happened to the commander. Regulations outlining NCO duties were generic in their description of the duties and responsibilities of the NCO in training the mass influx of conscripted soldiers. The guidance did not adequately relate the squad leader's responsibility in training his men or his role in combat (Fisher 264).

The years following World War II brought dramatic changes in the attitudes toward the policy of reverting to a small peacetime army. Congress temporarily extended the Selective Service Act of 1940 due to the growing Soviet threat, but allowed it to expire in 1947. The Cold War and Soviet aggression in Central Europe caused Congress to restore the draft in June 1948.

Following the war, many NCOs experienced a lack of professional knowledge as the army transferred them around to different career fields. Also, due to the draft, many NCOs found themselves in charge of training men who had far more formal education than they did. Only an inclusive program of professional military training could enable NCOs to overcome these deficiencies (Fisher 287).

Technology finally gave formal NCO education an emphasis. The first NCO academy opened in Germany in 1947. The curriculum included map reading, small unit leader ideology, and training in other basic duties. As more academies opened the need for standardized instruction became evident.

The army established an enlisted career guidance plan in response to the lessons learned from World War II. This was the first step in creating a service-wide, standardized educational system and also, competitive career progression opportunities.

As the post war years progressed, the army became a more tolerant, less stringent organization in accordance with public demand. In the Korean War, battlefield confidence suffered due to the neglected training and lax discipline but the NCO Corps quickly fell back to the experiences of World War II and battlefield leadership improved. The terrain forced units to advance as squads and the tactics again redefined the duties of NCOs. Stronger, more clearly defined squad actions, individual initiative, and active small unit leadership were necessary for unit advancement.

The lack of a conclusive outcome to the Korean War led to a lack of respect for the military. Soldiers and the public did not view the military as a worthwhile career. NCOs, dissatisfied with the military, left the army and a shortage of NCOs resulted. This shortage led to a deterioration in discipline and professional standards.

The global challenges of the Cold War finally led the army to recognize the need to attract career soldiers. Improvements in pay, living conditions, and dependent benefits were necessary along with reviving professional standards. The army recognized success depended on improving the role and status of the NCO. The army and the NCO Corps had some success in regaining military professionalism. The army quickly lost the gains due to the political climate, public mood, and changing military culture of Vietnam.

Vietnam was unpopular in virtually every segment of society and public support for the army and the soldiers waned. The diminished image and credibility of the army created a lack of professionalism in the draftees, which caused strained relations with career NCOs. Both college educated draftees and poor, disadvantaged draftees despised the authoritarian military system.

Units experienced shortages of NCOs due to the protracted duration of the war, combat attrition, and the one-year rotation policy. In addition, the political decision to not call up and use the reserve components strained diminished NCO resources (Fisher 235).

The short-term fix developed by the army was the noncommissioned officer candidate course (NCOCC). This course had two 10-week phases and after completion the army shipped the soldier to Vietnam where he applied his leadership training. The implementation of NCOCC proved to be a success for NCO education although problems did exist. The biggest was the inability of senior NCOs to fully accept the program. They believed the new generation of soldiers were too tolerant of misconduct. Also, they resented the fact that these young soldiers advanced so quickly when they, themselves, spent much more time earning their rank.

In 1966, Sergeant Major William O. Woolridge became the first Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA). The SMA was to be an advisor and consultant to the Chief of Staff on enlisted matters (Arms). This marked the beginning of a real effort to restore status to the NCO Corps.

The nature of the guerrilla tactics in Vietnam made it truly a junior leader's war. Counterinsurgency doctrine gave NCOs a prominent role in army operations. Terrain, enemy methods, and political reality caused NCOs to carry a large portion of the leadership burden (Fisch 126-127).

In 1971, the public was demanding withdrawal from Vietnam and debate on ending the draft was in full swing. These changes forced the army to focus on revising personnel management policies and to implement the noncommissioned officer education system (NCOES). The intent of NCOES was to provide capable, trained NCOs for units, and later, to give NCOs career advancement opportunities.

The modern volunteer army (MVA) became reality with the termination of the draft in 1973. The army previously had a ready pool of enlistees and expended minimal effort in trying to attract and keep skilled, career-minded soldiers. The MVA brought about new changes including adding new levels to NCOES and better monetary incentives.

NCO duties expanded and they became more technical and complex. NCOs had to learn new things and new ways of teaching (Fisch 133). The return of professionalism became a priority of senior army leadership.

The NCO Corps faced some turbulent and troubling times in recent history, but still prevailed to serve with distinction. Every conflict produced heroes, from SGT Alvin C. York in World War I to MSG (Ret.) Roy Benavidez in Vietnam. They, and others, are examples of the professionalism and sense of mission the NCO Corps possesses. The 20th century proved to be a period of dynamic advancement and change. NCOs adapted their duties, discipline and training to new technologies and evolving doctrine. Draft policies, before and after periods of war, and the transition to an all-volunteer army created unique challenges. In addition, social attitudes and

government policies were key factors in molding and shaping the NCO Corps through one of the most progressive periods in American history.

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