

History of the First Sergeant

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Over the course of my career I have had the opportunity to speak with a number of senior NCOs regarding their careers. All have told me that their time spent as the first sergeant of a company or troop had been the most challenging, yet the most rewarding positions they had ever held. This held true no matter what branch they were serving in, infantry, transportation, aviation, armor, etc. Even General John W. Vessey, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was a first sergeant and stated in a 1983 interview with Soldiers Magazine, “the toughest job I had, and the one I remember as having more personal responsibility than any other, was being a first sergeant in combat. This was a good job also”(Vessey). After five years as a first sergeant, I have come to understand just what they all meant by their comments. Being a first sergeant has been, without a doubt, the most challenging, thankless and yet most rewarding position of my career so far. To better understand why most first sergeants feel that way we need to take a look at just what it is a first sergeant does and how their role has evolved over the years.

The position of first sergeant can be traced back to the 17th century Prussian Army’s Feldwebel or Company Sergeant. He was like a father to all enlisted soldiers in the company and was responsible solely for accountability and discipline.

In those days, and right up through the mid-1950’s, the first sergeant had been hand-picked by the company commander. Not only could the commander appoint his first sergeant at will, he could also dismiss him whenever he desired. It wasn’t until around

1956 that promotions were recognized Army-wide and, at that time, the commander lost his ability to appoint or dismiss his first sergeant.

During the Revolution, General George Washington enlisted the help of Baron Frederick von Steuben, a veteran of the Prussian Army, to organize and discipline the Continental Army. In 1779 von Steuben wrote the Regulations for the Order and Discipline of Troops of the United States in which he states, “The soldier having acquired that degree of confidence of his officers as to be appointed first sergeant of the company, should consider the importance of his office; that the discipline of the company, the conduct of the men, their exactness in obeying orders, and the regularity of their manners, will be in a great measure depend on his vigilance.”(von Steuben) This manual outlined the first sergeant’s responsibilities to be keeping a company descriptive book, which listed the personal information of every soldier in the company. This included the soldiers name, age, height, place of birth and prior occupation. It also included where, when and for how long the soldier had enlisted. In addition, the first sergeant’s book kept track of leaves and passes, casualties and what equipment had been issued to each soldier. He also needed to be “intimately acquainted with the character of every soldier in the company.”(von Steuben) Each morning, he was responsible for reporting the status of the company to the commander. Von Steuben did not assign any responsibility for training to the first sergeant. In essence, the first sergeant was only an administrator and a disciplinarian.

This philosophy remained largely in place until around 1830 when the first mention of first sergeants being involved in training are found. In the “Abstract of Infantry Tactics”, first sergeants are now required to instruct newly promoted sergeants and corporals. They are still primarily administrators and disciplinarians.

In 1852, 1SG Percival Lowe, the first sergeant of Company B, 2d Dragoons took enforcing discipline a step further. He established a “Company Court-Martial” which allowed the NCOs to enforce discipline for minor infractions of regulations without the lengthy process of formal proceedings at the regimental level.(Arms) This appears to be a precursor to the modern day Article 15.

The Noncommissioned Officer Manual of 1909 outlines 14 duties of the first sergeant. Among them are conducting reveille, roll call, sick call, guard mounts, maintaining duty rosters and holding formations.

From World War I through World War II, first sergeants’ responsibilities still remain primarily administrative. According to L.R. Arms in his paper “A Short History of the NCO”, the typical first sergeant carried all of his administrative files in his pocket: a black book. This book, like the company descriptive book of the Revolution and the leader book of today, contained the names of every soldier in the company as well as all sorts of information on each soldier such as personal information, work habits etc. This book stayed with the company and became the historical document for the unit. First sergeants of this time were expected to be at the forefront of everything that the company

did, whether it be physical fitness training, road marches, field exercises or the rifle range.

Post World War II and through the 1960's, the first sergeants' role changed somewhat. Up until this point the first sergeant, while charged with enforcing discipline, was still 'one of the guys' and expected to have daily interaction with the soldiers of his company. During this time the first sergeant was expected to issue all of his orders through the platoon sergeants and others in the chain of command and not have a direct involvement with the soldiers. In 1967, AR600-20, Army Command Policies and Procedures stated that the first sergeant responsibilities were to "conduct routine company administrative and company operations as directed by the commander. The functions of the first sergeant do not include responsibilities that cannot be delegated by the commander or should belong to the executive officer or the platoon leaders."

In 1988, AR600-20 was revised and listed the first sergeant as the senior NCO at the company level. His principal duty is individual training of the enlisted. His role has now gone from being primarily an administrator to that of training soldiers.

Today's first sergeants have a multitude of responsibilities. They are still the enforcers of discipline, the chief administrator and they foster loyalty and unity within the unit but they are so much more. They are the primary trainers and mentors for all levels of soldiers within the company. They need to ensure that they have daily interaction with their soldiers; that they coach and counsel.

They are also heavily involved in the soldiers' lives, both on-duty and off and their responsibilities don't end with the soldiers' health and well-being; it extends to their families as well. The first sergeant needs to play an active role in the units' family support group. They need to be able to guide the soldiers and their families through the minefield we call life. They need to be the expert in all things and be able to spot a troubled soldier from across the hanger floor.

First sergeants need to work closely with both the commander and the Command Sergeant Major in setting the METL. They need to understand, and play a key role in implementing, individual and collective task training to support the organization. They also need to advise the commander and keep him informed on everything that happens in the company. They are the commander's eyes and ears.

General Omar N. Bradley once said, "When soldiers know their jobs, the first sergeant knows he's done his." MG Jacob Brown, in an 1825 letter to the Secretary of War said, "There is no individual of a company, scarcely excepting the captain himself, on whom more depends for its' discipline, police, instruction and general well being, than on the first sergeant....and all experience demonstrates that the condition of every company will improve or deteriorate nearly in proportion to the ability and worth of its' first sergeant."

Throughout history, the first sergeant has been a key figure in the company. Whether they were appointed, selected or earned the position, they have had a significant impact

on the units' ability to perform its' mission. Their role has evolved from being solely an administrator and disciplinarian to that of a trainer, mentor and coach. Is it a challenging job; Yes! Is it a thankless job; sometimes. Is it a rewarding job; absolutely!

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