

Running Head: Empowerment of the NCO

The Empowerment of the NCO

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## Thesis Statement

The evolution of war fighting capabilities and the increasing responsibilities of the American Noncommissioned Officer is one of the most important factors in studying the capabilities and limitations of our Soldiers and the enemies we face today and in the future. There have been several books written about NCOs and the history of the NCO that will support this view. In today's Army the training and education of our NCOs is a top priority compared to several years ago where it was mostly non-existent. NCOs are the foundation of our force, in the Army today they have more responsibilities and are more educated than they were in previous wars. I will define these responsibilities and compare it to the responsibilities of NCOs during previous wars.

Our great Army is dependent upon the Soldiers of today as it is these Soldiers who will become tomorrow's noncommissioned officers and our future leaders. The military as it existed for our forefathers and as remembered in history is significantly different than that which was in existence at that time. There are several factors that have led to the empowerment of the NCO the most significant are, leadership, education, and experience.

Upon examination of the role of the senior Non-Commissioned Officer you will find that the NCO corps has consistently exemplified strength. NCOs have always been, and will continue to be, essential to the effectiveness of the army. Many say that because of new technology and the projections of future warfare, the NCO corps may become obsolete. Technology may change the tools with which our army fights, but it will never change man's role in a conflict. Strikes by long range precision-guided missiles designed to limit collateral damage and minimize friendly casualties, are only effective if the damage is of significance to the recipient. Technology can assist and enhance the capabilities of fighting Soldiers, but in the end it will never be able to totally replace them.

The NCO Corps have several core responsibilities that will never change as changing them would jeopardize the effectiveness of the Army. The NCO provides a critical link between the Soldiers and the officer corps and vice versa. They are administrators, trainers, mentors and, at times, parents to those who are entrusted to their charge. They also take on the role of motivator and disciplinarian, as well as a combat leader and tactician. In 1942, General Bernard Law Montgomery described non commissioned officers as the backbone of any unit. Montgomery was not the first or the last commander to make such a claim. Why have leaders

called NCOs' the backbone of the Army? NCOs' conduct the daily business of the army; they are expected to carry out instructions in order to achieve the end result, while ensuring the well-being of the soldiers in their charge. It is the NCOs' responsibility to pass on and explain directives from superiors to subordinates, and ensure that all directions are efficiently and effectively executed and the mission is completed.

Today's NCO assists the commander in coordinating and supervising the execution of plans, operations, and activities. They are required to be skilled in their profession, technically and tactically proficient, trainers, standard bearers, ambassadors of peace, and the list goes on. With an increased responsibility in world military strategy, the Army has transferred some responsibilities from the commissioned officer to the noncommissioned officer. The officer concentrates on the required collective tasks. The NCO trains their Soldiers and subordinate leaders on necessary individual tasks.

The many roles of the NCO are important, but the role that plays the most instrumental role of the NCO is that of the trainer. Training is critical as it imparts the abilities and skills that may determine the survival of individuals in combat and the success of the Army on the battlefield. The performance of the Army rests largely on the skill and professionalism of its NCO corps. They teach young recruits the basics of Soldiering and military life, and later, in their respective units, they also teach Soldiers the advanced skills necessary to fulfill their ultimate role as combat troops.

The proficiency of the NCO is the foundation, if the NCO corps is deficient, the foundation of a unit and the Army in general will be weak. The NCOs' skill as a trainer is not limited to Soldiers. Many say that there is nothing more dangerous than a second lieutenant. This threat is lessened to a large extent by the senior NCO. The fact that a young officer of this rank is

in a superior position to senior NCOs does not make a difference in this case, in reality the education and training of majority of these officers are shaped to a large degree by their NCO subordinates. Senior NCOs "... have an important responsibility in teaching newly joined officers hands-on skills in the mechanics of Soldiering and leadership. First Sergeant Jeffrey J. Mellinger in an open letter to his NCO corps explained, "Training your platoon leader is not only your job but your responsibility. If he fails, the platoon fails, and so do you." He added, "As the senior and most experienced NCO in the platoon, you must pass on the benefit of that wisdom and experience to your platoon leader as well as to the soldiers." Tom Clancy, a recognized expert on military affairs, and American General Fredrick M. Franks, a former commander of Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) and the Commander of VII Corps during the Gulf War in 1990-91, provide a more contemporary view of the importance of the senior NCO corps as trainers. They wrote: The years of fighting in Vietnam had drawn Europe-based forces down to unacceptable strengths. Worse, the insatiable appetite for personnel had stripped our forces of officer leadership, and almost destroyed the Army's professional noncommissioned corps, long the backbone of the Army. A series of hasty training programs to fill depleted ranks had left the Army with NCOs who all too often were poorly trained in basic leadership techniques. Because the NCO is the first-line leader in the Army, the one person primarily responsible for the basic individual soldier skills on which every successful operation depends, training and discipline suffered. In some cases, it went to hell.

NCOs of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century had limited knowledge and skills and few opportunities to achieve them. Today's NCO are well educated and join the Army from varied backgrounds, are knowledgeable in many areas and have a wide range of skills showing the diversity of their backgrounds, from farming, craftsmen, technical, mechanical, teachers and

even scholars. Not to long ago, professional education and formal training for NCOs were nonexistent and it was very unusual to find NCOs with secondary schooling. Today this is not the case, we have an NCO Corps whose specialized experience and education is unparalleled and more than 50% of our Senior NCOs are college graduates with this number increasing steadily every year.

NCOs have been given higher level responsibilities and can be found in positions that affect the doctrinal readiness of the Army and sometimes planning military strategies. It is now required for all NCOs to have advanced technical training and knowledge in their specialty area in order to have the ability operate complex equipment and instruments. The NCOs' comprehensive knowledge of weapons and equipment as a result of his technical training and the instruction of others make him an invaluable advisor to officers and instructor/supervisor to soldiers. His ability to ensure the care, maintenance and first line repair of various equipment and material is instrumental to any unit's effectiveness, particularly during the immediacy and stresses of operations. The NCO is the key to the Army's ability to maintain a combat ready force, which is especially important during this time of war and as the Army continues to go through transformation.

The NCOs' role as combat leader is essential to the success of a unit engaged in combat. Prior to the Second World War, the concept of a senior NCO as a combat leader was unheard of. In the Second World war that concept became a reality. Corporal Dan Hartigan said "We lost over 50 percent of our officers on D-Day, 15 of the 27, I believe." He added, "The fighting in the weeks that followed turned from an officer's war to a senior NCOs' war." McManus's study supports this as well. "With surprising frequency, combat soldiers looked to their sergeants for leadership day in and day out in combat. A major reason for that was the turnover in officers."

The most brilliant plan devised by the most capable general depends on leaders at every leveling order to be executed. Poor leaders may ruin the best plans; and the best leaders can often save us from even the badly devised plans.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, Soldiers rode off to war on horses and their uniforms if they had any were made of wool. The battle dress uniform and the helmet (steel pot) have been replaced and are long gone. The times when equipment was limited and only the platoon leader had a radio and the training room had the only available typewriter are a distant memory. Today our Soldiers are equipped with Army Combat Uniforms, body armor, improved assault headgear, night vision devices, and radios are standard equipment for every squad. There have been many changes on the battlefield as well, while the sounds of gunfire will still be heard I am sure even the cannons used in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century cannot be compared to the sounds of an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) or the sound of the gun on our M1 Abrams Tank.

The technology of today dictates that NCOs be technically and tactically proficient to be able to operate and maintain the advanced digitized equipment now available. The battlefield has been redefined; we now fight the war on terrorism at multiple fronts and engage in peacekeeping and other operations throughout the world. NCOs are responsible for making many of the decisions required that will support the commander's intent as they operate in environments that are far from the flagpole.

Another major change has been the unity of command in urban areas. A prime example of this was the war in 1812 and the U.S. Army's inability to coordinate with other government agencies against the hostilities of the Indian tribes. One company would be negotiating a treaty, while another may have been conducting combat operations and in the meantime a group of renegade Indians would return to the previous area to ask for peace and protection because they



lost a skirmish. Maintaining situational awareness that coordinates realistic and consistent Rules of Engagement (ROE) within our government and with the host nation country is imperative. NCOs on the ground must have a clear understanding of the ROE if not there is no way to know the neutrality of the noncombatant populace and we would be unable to prevent unnecessary casualties and damage to the infrastructure.

These new complexities in conflict, combined with the CNN effect, dictate that greater emphasis be placed on the education of NCOs' compared to the previous focus on specific specialty training only. "The large formation closely controlled and highly supervised troops in the warfare models of the Cold War era have given way to scattered small units in distant countries who have reduced support readily available in ambiguous and high intensity ethical situations. A wrong decision in the glare of the media can have far reaching consequences that can affect peacekeeping mandates and strategic and national security" said Colonel Paul Maillet, the DND director of Defense Ethics. This realization has brought to focus the importance of the traditional roles and responsibilities of the NCO corps as well as the need to educate and empower the individual NCO.

NCOs must be taught how to think and use theoretical concepts to assist in the resolution of problems they may face just as officers have been taught to do since the beginning. Critical thinking and innovation is encouraged and must be used as many situations cannot be resolved using the traditional written procedures given in technical publications and one dimensional experience. The requirement for greater education has also evolved out of the necessity of dealing with the Soldiers of today, the average recruit entering the Army must have the minimum of a high school education but many have some college and/or a college degree. Senior NCOs must continually advance his own base of knowledge so that he can not only deal with the

complexity of operations, but also so that he can continue to teach, train, motivate and lead better educated subordinates. NCOs must understand and be capable of motivating their new Soldiers, despite generational differences and new societal expectations, norms and values. Once again, education is the key.

To further show the empowerment and evolution of NCOs over the last century we should look at the practice of filling organizational positions. Previously positions were filled using rank as the only identifier. Now, the system focuses on several factors. For example, staff positions in various level headquarters or schools, some UN staff positions, and even operational positions that were typically filled by junior officers are now filled by qualified senior NCOs. This is a major change that happened for several reasons. First, it has helped to alleviate organizational shortfalls that stem from the current recruiting and retention crisis. Secondly, it fulfills the Army's goal to recognize individuals for their abilities, and rewards those who have increased their education and skill sets. Thirdly, it allows for personal and professional development which is necessary to attract and retain individuals in the force.

The U.S. Army is the most powerful and well trained Army in the world and is used as the model and looked to for training advice by Army's from all over the world. Our NCOs know how to take orders and when necessary to say "But Sir". They are proud of who they are and what they have accomplished whether they are airborne, infantry, special forces, or a ranger and always place the mission first. NCOs' are charged with living the Army values and do so to the best of their ability regardless of their personal beliefs. They work smarter not harder and don't try to reinvent the wheel when the previous NCO did such a good job the first time. NCOs know that no matter how they feel about going to war that preparing for war is a necessary evil in order to obtain and sometimes maintain peace. The NCO no longer carries the regimental colors into

battle, but instead is charged with the sometimes deadly task of maintaining their position, keeping their Soldiers morale up when there is nothing to be optimistic about and always maintaining situational awareness of civilians and friendly forces on the battlefield.

The increasing responsibilities of NCOs coupled with the hardships of multiple combat tours, deaths and retirements have taken a toll on the NCO corps. Despite these adversities the NCO Corps continues to lead the way, evolve into a force that guarantees strength and unity in our war fighting efforts, and anticipate the needs of our future to make the Army the premiere fighting force in the world. We have proven that we can adapt to the most austere conditions and win against an elusive and deadly enemy. NCOs' exemplify the highest standards, values, and traits; they live the warrior ethos everyday and will continue set the example for the next generation of Soldiers to follow.

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