

THE SERGEANTS MAJOR OF THE ARMY
AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE NCO CORP

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The U.S. Army's Center of Military History gives today's Soldiers a useful prospective from which to appreciate the past and shape the Army's future. The origin of the Sergeant Major dates back as early as the sixteenth century when the English Army had Sergeants Major in the regiments. The title of Sergeant Major disappeared for a short time, but was reintroduced around the eighteenth century. Upon its reestablishment, the position became associated with respect, power, discipline, and responsibility. The soldier that occupied the position of Sergeant Major served as the assistant to the regimental adjutant. He kept rosters, formed details, and was overall responsible for drill, discipline, and all matters concerning the management of the regiment. The Sergeant Major had an enormous influence over the soldiers under his charge (Elder, pg. 4)

The U. S. Army first introduced the position of Sergeant Major during the Revolutionary War. During this period, Baron Von Steuben wrote instructions on how the Sergeant Major would carry out his duties in the ***"Regulation for Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States."*** Based on this book, the Sergeant Major was superior to all Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs) and he was responsible for the care, discipline, and training of his troops both in garrison and in the field. For the next 150 years the position of Sergeant Major would remain in the various branches at battalion level and above. In June 1920, Congress made a decision to

group all enlisted soldiers into seven pay grades, E-1 through E-7. This restructuring eliminated the position of Sergeant Major and made Master Sergeant (E-7) the highest enlisted grade. Then in June 1958, Congress passed the Military Pay Act, which created two new ranks, the Master Sergeant/First Sergeant (E-8) and the Sergeant Major (E-9). This Pay Act reestablished the position of Sergeant Major as the highest enlisted level in addition; NCOs begin to see promotions to the new rank in April 1959 (Elder pg. 4, 13).

The Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army came into existence based on a recommendation made by SGM George E. Loikow, the Administration Sergeant Major to the Army Chief of Staff. SGM Loikow felt the need for the creation of this position because he noted that when he accompanied the Chief of Staff on visits to different Installations and organizations, the soldiers referred to him as the “The Army Sergeant Major.” SGM Loikow felt that each of these visits had a positive impact on the morale and pride of the enlisted soldiers. This proposal received great support from the Council of Sergeants Major during the Personnel Sergeants Major Conference in October 1965. Based on this support and a study conducted by the Office of Personnel Operations (OPO), Deputy Chief of Staff Personnel (DCSPER), General Harold K. Johnson, he sent out a letter of notification of his intent to establish the Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army (Elder pg. 5).

General Johnson’s letter to the field commanders stated he wanted their personal recommendation of the best senior NCO capable of performing this duty. His letter stated the individual selected would have specific duties and responsibilities to the Chief of Staff. These duties would include identifying and recommending solutions to problems that affect enlisted soldiers, educational growth and advancement of Noncommissioned Officers. He would also advise the Chief of Staff on enlisted matters such as training, welfare, morale, promotion,

discipline, and customs and courtesies. He executed his last duty through providing advice to any board, commission or congressional hearing on matters pertaining to enlisted soldiers. On July 4, 1966, General Order #29 formally established the Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army. On July 11, 1966, General Johnson administered the oath to Sergeant Major William O. Wooldridge, making him the first Sergeant Major of the Army (Wooldridge, Info. Papers).

The establishment of the SMA position reflected the importance of soldier-related issues in today's Army and the belief that having an accomplished senior enlisted man in the pentagon would facilitate communication and understanding between senior officials and soldiers in the field. The noncommissioned officers chosen to be Sergeants Major of the Army all have been individuals who not only have had extraordinary careers, but who have demonstrated exceptional welfare of their fellow soldiers. Many SMAs came from humble origins, joined the military to serve their country and see the world, and only gradually decided to make the Army their career. Some fought the Germans in World War II. Others saw combat in such diverse locations as Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf. All experienced the joys and heartaches of being an ordinary soldier, and all were deeply affected by the men and women with whom they served over the years. The Army created the Office of the Sergeant Major in part because of important changes in the nature, structure, and responsibilities of NCOs. During the past half century, the former Sergeants Major of the Army has made significant contributions to the Army and the Noncommissioned Officer Corp. While no individual's achievements were more significant than others, I will illustrate how two former SMAs contributions have shaped today's Army and made our NCO Corp the best ever (Elder, foreword iii – v).

Sergeant Major Morrell was seventh Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA). He was born in Wick, West Virginia, and the son of a former WWI Veteran. Early in life he was influenced

by his brothers who had all served the military. Morrell loved a challenge and adventure and knew that the mountains of West Virginia were not the adventure he was searching. On Jan 1954, Morrell joined the Army to jump out of airplanes. He initially joined the Army as an airborne artilleryman and initially worked on the "split-trailed" 105-mm howitzer. Although assigned as an artilleryman, he spent much of his first enlistment working as a forward observer. He served in this occupational specialty until deciding to reenlist as a squad leader of a 4.2 mortar section and secondly with a Special Forces unit. His tour as a Special Forces soldier would take him many places including tours in Vietnam, Panama, and Germany. In 1960, new tensions and discipline problems began to arise. Unit leadership was inexperienced, and some NCOs were former officers in order to stay on active duty during previous reductions force structure. Morrell remembered that such men often lacked skills and motivation required of good NCOs. He served in every key leadership position from squad leader to MACOM level Command Sergeant Major (Elder pgs. 137 – 140).

SMA Morrell made significant contributions to the NCO Corp. He was directly responsible for the realignment of the over strength military occupational specialties causing over 12,000 soldiers to reclassify into shortage MOS's which would align the force structure and create better opportunities for promotion Army wide. He revamped the NCOES standardizing all level of the educational system. More importantly, SMA Morrell required the Army to start sending the best qualified soldiers to schools, instead of sending excess personnel that units could afford to do without. SMA Morrell was strict on soldiers meeting army standards. He mandated the stricter enforcement of the weight control, physical fitness, and substance abuse policies to rid the army of the substandard soldiers. Finally, he convinced the Army to reduce the time a soldier could stay on active duty after refusing the Sergeants Major Academy and or

assignment. All of these significant contributions are still relevant today and continue to play a vital role in the development of the Noncommissioned Officer (Elder pg 145, 146).

SMA Julius W. Gates was the eighth SMA. He was born and educated in Piedmont, North Carolina. He, as other former SMAs, was influenced by his brothers and other relatives to join the military. On 12 August 1958, SMA Gates joined the military as an infantryman at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. Upon completion of training, he was sent to his initial assignment in Berlin, Germany. While stationed in Berlin, Gates served as a sniper, senior rifleman, and fire-team leader. He would remain in the Army until the end of his initial enlistment. He returned to his hometown to work, and noticed that his old friends had moved on, so he decided to reenlist to be an airborne paratrooper in the 101ST Airborne Division. In the division, SGM Gates would receive outstanding training and assignments such as a jumpmaster, pathfinder, and ranger. Gates served as an instructor for the Recondo School and as an instructor in the Ranger Training Command. His responsibilities including teaching basic subjects like hand-to-hand combat like bayonet training, and patrolling techniques. He would also serve numerous overseas tours in Vietnam, Germany, and Korea. Sergeant Major Gates was a trendsetter for the American soldier. He was the first enlisted soldier to attend British Tactics Training as an exchange student. He was also the first to establish and run the 24th Infantry Division NCO academy (Elder pg. 157)

SMA Gates had a stellar career as a field soldier, but his significant contributions were as CSM USASMA, CSM USFK/EUSA, and SMA. During these assignments, he singularly did more for the NCO Corp than his predecessors. The establishment of additional housing and recreational facilities for SMC students is still in use today. Additionally, further development of the common core curriculum for basic and advanced NCOES has allowed the system to be more

efficient. Realizing the need for unity-duty-oriented NCO training, Gates assisted his commander in producing a NCO development program that would later become the Army's model.

In Korea, Sergeant Major Gates saw the need for programs to assist the single soldiers and obtain better facilities for soldiers to work, play, and live. As SMA, the contributions Sergeant Major Gates made were seen immediately. His soldier development priorities focused on training and building a quality force. He is responsible for implementing the new NCOER, the establishment of the Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers (BOSS), Army Community of Excellence (ACOE) programs, Command Sergeants Major Designee (CSMD) program, and the replacement of the Soldier Qualification Test (SQT) for the Soldier Development Test (SDT) (Elder pg 161).

I have summarized the origin of the Sergeant Major and the background and establishment of the SMA position. Finally, I have illustrated the significant achievements and contributions of three former SMA's that in my opinion have made the greatest contributions to the NCO CORP. These individuals have set the bar for the growth, development and professionalism of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps known as the “ **Backbone of the Army.**”

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