

The Evolution of the American NCO 1939-1945

The Application of German Doctrine

by

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## Abstract

One of the acknowledged strengths of the United States Army is the NCO Corps. It is known as the “backbone” of the Army. Although this is a frequently used term, exactly when did such a notable feature of the US Army come into being? NCOs have been a part of all armies for hundreds of years and certainly part of the American army since its inception in 1775 (Arms 8). It will be shown that the United States Army NCO Corps came into prominence in the Second World War. However was a strong NCO Corps a uniquely American experience? It will also be shown that in the European Theater of Operations, the primary opponent of the Allied forces, the German Wehrmacht also had a strong NCO Corps; furthermore that combating this formidable adversary contributed to the rise in prominence of the American Army’s NCO Corps (Fisher 5). Through lessons learned and through the victors’ eyes the American Army enshrined the importance of the NCO and that ideal has sustained the Army through the following conflicts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Fisher 11).

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## **I. Introduction**

The American NCO is known as the “backbone” of the Army. This distinction arose from developments in the battlegrounds of the Second World War. One of the primary influences in the rise of the American NCO was the impact the German army NCO had in small unit actions. This research will show how the American army adopted characteristics of their adversary to create a notable leader that impacted the success of all future actions of the American army.

The primary resources supporting this research are military manuals, scholarly studies, and other research in published books. Some of the supporting works are from Internet resources.

## **II. Body**

### **A. Squad organization.**

1. Development of the German and American infantry squad.
  - a. Advantages and disadvantages of each.
2. Organization of the German and American infantry squad.
  - a. Advantages and disadvantages of each.
3. Weapons of the German and American infantry squad.
  - a. Advantages and disadvantages of each.

### **B. Responsibility, Authority, and Respect of the NCO.**

1. Historical perspective of the German and American military culture.
2. Senior and subordinate relationships.

### **C. Training of and by the NCO.**

1. Tactical and technical training.

### **D. Professional schooling of the NCO.**

1. Institutional training.

### **E. Legacy and Importance of the NCO.**

1. Impact of the German NCO on the American NCO.

## **III. Conclusion**

In summary, this research has shown how the American army adopted the positive aspects of the German army NCO corps. These adaptations strengthened the American NCO. Formation of the “backbone” was solidified in combat in Korea.

## **Questions and answers.**

In conclusion this research highlighted the rise of the “backbone” of the United States Army.

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#### Abstract

One of the acknowledged strengths of the United States Army is the NCO Corps. It is known as the “backbone” of the Army. Although this is a frequently used term, exactly when did such a notable feature of the US Army come into being? NCOs have been a part of all armies for hundreds of years and certainly part of the American Army since its inception in 1775 (Arms 8). It will be shown that the United States Army NCO Corps came into prominence in the Second World War. However was a strong NCO Corps a uniquely American experience? It will also be shown that in the European Theater of Operations, the primary opponent of the Allied forces, the German Wehrmacht also had a strong NCO Corps; furthermore that combating this formidable adversary contributed to the rise in prominence of the American Army’s NCO Corps (Fisher 5). Through lessons learned and through the victors’ eyes the American Army enshrined the importance of the NCO and that ideal has sustained the Army through the following conflicts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Fisher 11).

The concept of the American NCO as the “backbone” of the Army did not come into fruition during the Second World War. The evolution of the NCO as currently defined began on the battlefields of Europe. The NCO truly became the “backbone” in the hills and valleys of Korea in 1950 (Arms 17). How did the American army develop an NCO corps that has become a model for all modern armies? The strong and effective German NCO corps, although defeated in

May 1945, heavily influenced the developing American NCO corps.

Following the lessons learned on the battlefields where the opposing American and German forces met, the American army adopted many of the characteristics of German small unit leadership. One of the important realizations that became evident was that the German army had been refining techniques of small unit leadership since the 1930s. Juxtaposed to this refinement of military art was the complete neglect of the United States army during the 1930s. With the entry of the United States into the war, the massive mobilization and corresponding force structure had to be filled (Fisher 13). The immediate fix was to fill NCO billets with “promising” draftees. Simultaneously the officer corps was also being filled with civilians with “potential”. Naturally, the question followed who would train and perfect the skills necessary to combat an experienced and hardened enemy?

What were the features of the German system that influenced the American army? Three primary considerations made the German NCO so effective. The first was the decentralization of command. The second was the NCO education system. The final feature was the organization of the German infantry squad.

The German army was quite adept at small unit tactics. The primary reason the German infantry squad was successful was that German NCOs had the necessary tactical skills to take the initiative. This empowerment was a long-standing practice in the German military tradition. As the situation on the ground developed, the absence of an officer did not hinder the execution of the mission. German military doctrine emphasized the principle of exploitation and the leader on the ground was *expected* to act upon this. Frequently the leader on the ground was the trained and experienced NCO who recognized the situation and acted on his initiative to achieve success (Kennedy 27).

In comparison, the American army had no such tradition. The cultural values of German militarism were an integral part of the psyche of the men serving the Fatherland. The American values simply were not the same. The over reliance on the officer corps in directing combat operations, invariably left a void as officers became casualties. American NCOs had not been trained in the small unit tactics to effectively take over operations. However, with experience the NCO corps would begin to fill the void (Thomas 12). A notable feature of the American army was its ability to apply lessons learned. The more the American army confronted the German army on the battlefield, gaining both experience and confidence, the better the NCO corps became at filling the leadership void (Kennedy 32).

The German army had an effective NCO education system. There was no comparable system in the United States/army. More troubling was that no such education system would be established until 1949. What were the features of the German NCO education system? Early in the war, the German NCO attended NCO schools centrally located in Germany (HGMF 5). This would later change, as NCOs would attend schools in the different field armies. Prior to February 1944, the selected NCOs received 10 months of training. After February 1944, this was reduced to 6 months of training. It is noteworthy that this training was from initial entry into service and included basic training. In March of 1945, there were about 22 Army non commissioned officer academies in the German army (HGMF 9).

The training of NCOs in the German army was directly tied to the type of enlistment the soldier had contracted to. The primary difference was the 12 or 4 ½ year enlistments, each providing different accession paths to the noncommissioned officer ranks. Soldiers already in service could apply to be a NCO provided they had a good combat record as leaders (Feldgrau). A critical point to note is that virtually all new recruits already had a foundation of military

training. This was a direct result of the indoctrination of German youth during the Nazi era. Every youth in Germany had been involved in some form of paramilitary training prior to reaching eligibility age for regular army enlistment (Feldgrau).

In contrast, the American army initially relied upon the small cadre of Regular army NCOs in service at the start of the war. The small size of the pre-war army could not support the need for NCOs in the rapidly expanding army. Without any formalized education system, soldiers with potential were selected to fill NCO billets. These NCOs would gain experience through limited training and trial and error. The training was decentralized and as had been the tradition was conducted by experienced officers within the unit (Time Honored Professionals). The War Department recognized this issue, but could not address fixing this as the Army expanded. The simple fact that the cadre of experienced personnel, in the numbers required, did not exist yet. This ineffective informal system was the seed for the eventual rise of the formal NCO education system in the post war Army. The resilience and adaptability of the American soldier compensated for the lack of a formal education system (English 15). However, the lack of initiative of American NCOs can be contributed to the lack of training in small unit operations and the over reliance on officer's providing direction. This was not the case in the German squads (English 18).

Upon entry into the war, the United States army made a significant change in its organization. The move from an eight-man infantry squad to a twelve-man squad was significant as it opened up more NCO positions. With the sergeant as squad leader and a corporal as team leader, the problem of training these leaders was further compounded (McManus 41-42). The German army had been utilizing the larger squads for several years. The availability of more NCOs was a notable feature in the process of empowering the NCO. In addition, the larger squad

increased available firepower in the squad. This indirectly influenced the ability of the squad to operate independently (McManus 45).

The 1944 type German Infantry division organization reduced the size of the squad to 1 NCO and 9 soldiers. The squad was equipped with 6 rifles or carbines (GE 39 or 43), 2 submachine guns (MP40) and 1 light machine gun (MG34). The standard American Infantry division organization during 1944 called for a 12-man squad, consisting of 1 to 2 NCOs and 10 soldiers. The squad was equipped with 9 rifles (M1), 1 submachine gun (Thompson), 1 rifle grenadier, and 1 automatic rifleman (BAR). The American squads often re-equipped themselves with the addition of an additional automatic rifleman or a bazooka man. Although the German squad was reduced in size, it retained its lethality with the standard equipment, especially the capable light machinegun the MG34 (Subcourse FAP401).

The leadership of American units was officer intensive by doctrine. The unit's NCOs did not find themselves as decision makers unless necessity, the loss of an officer, dictated the need. The span of control for the officers in the American army was tested during the war. The increased size of the squad and the growing complexity of combined arms warfare directly contributed to the growth of NCO involvement in leading the unit. Later on the battlefields of Korea the American NCOs role as leader vastly increased due mainly to the nature of the terrain and the lack of fluidity in the Korean War. During the Korean War American NCOs displayed the traits first noted in the capabilities of the German NCO in the Second World War. This is where the "backbone" truly took shape and began to support the Army (English 73-76).

The victory achieved by the American army in Europe was remarkable in many respects. Although the American soldier found the German army tenacious and experienced, well led by competent leaders, the bravery and determination of a young American army overcame the odds.



In large part, this is due to the cultural values of American society. The righteousness of the American cause and the work ethic of Americans minimized the lack of experience and the strengths of a militaristic society. German militarism created conditions that enhanced the capabilities of the German soldier, yet in the end, the overwhelming materiel and manpower of the Allied forces overcame these capabilities (Handbook GMF 138-141).

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