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**Class 34**  
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**History of the NCO Briefing**  
**SGM Silas L. Copeland**

According to retired CSM Robert S. Rush, “throughout our Army’s 200+ year history, NCOs have performed vital functions as small unit leaders, technical experts, trainers and perhaps more important, guardians of the Army’s standards. The history of the U.S. Army and of the noncommissioned officer began in 1775 with the Continental Army. The men who face the opening round of the American Revolution exemplified the ideal of Citizen-Soldiers. However, patriotism alone was not sufficient to ensure victory in an age where linear tactics dominated the battlefield.” It holds true today, that the effective and efficient noncommissioned officer must possess an arsenal of skills, abilities and knowledge and the subject of my briefing, SGM Copeland exemplified this truth.

SGM Silas L. Copeland, born in Emburyfield, Texas on April 2, 1920 was the third Sergeant Major of the Army. He was sworn in on October 1, 1970 and served until June, 1973. He died on December 4, 2001.

After serving at various posts in CONUS, he was sent overseas in January 1945 and assigned to Company E, 66<sup>th</sup> Armored Regiment, 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division, as a tank commander and later a tank platoon sergeant. In late 1945, he returned from Germany and was stationed at Fort Hood Texas, where he became Operations and Intelligence

Sergeant of the 67th Tank Battalion and 82d Reconnaissance Battalion. In 1950 he joined the 2d Battalion, 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, then located in Japan. From there, his unit was moved into Korea on July 18, 1950, making the landing by assault boats. He served as the Reconnaissance and Intelligence Platoon Sergeant and Battalion Operations Sergeant.

From 1951-1953, he was assigned to Senior ROTC duty at Texas A&M University. In 1953 was assigned to the 2d Battalion, 22<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment, Germany, as a first sergeant. He remained with that unit until November 1954 when he was reassigned to the 1st Armored Division at Fort Hood, Texas as Operations Sergeant and Sergeant Major of the 4th Tank Battalion. In 1957 he was selected as an instructor, Senior ROTC, Centenary College of Louisiana at Shreveport, Louisiana. Upon completion of his tour of duty at Centenary, he was assigned to the 3d Reconnaissance Squadron, 8th Cavalry, 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in Germany as Sergeant Major and remained until he was reassigned to the 2d Armored Division, Fort Hood, Texas in October 1962.

Selected to be the division sergeant major in June 1963, he remained in that position until December 1966 when he was transferred to the 4th Armored Division in Germany. He was chosen to be the division Command Sergeant Major in April 1968 and served in that capacity until July 1969 when he was assigned to the Republic of Vietnam as the division Command Sergeant major of the 1st Infantry Division (Big Red One). For seven and a half months he performed duties as the division CSM when the 1st Infantry Division re-deployed from Vietnam, he accompanied the division colors to Fort Riley,

Kansas. He returned to Vietnam to complete his tour as division CSM of the 4th Infantry Division located in the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

His received a multitude of prestigious decorations to include: the Legion of Merit, the Distinguished Flying Cross and a Bronze Star with the V device and four oak leaf clusters, the Republic of Korea Presidential Unit Citation and the Vietnam Service Medal with two campaign stars..

Though SGM Copeland was known as a man of few words, he was considered to be profoundly influential in quest to support the American Soldier. As stated by SGM Copeland, “the American soldier best performs his mission if he is well informed and knows the purpose of that mission. The soldier wants to know *why*. Credible answers often require reevaluation of traditional ways of doing things to make sure that they are based on sound logic and judgment. If so, they should be explainable. If not, they should be changed. The burden of establishing communication with the soldier rests upon the NCO. Senior NCOs must listen more to their men, to their ideas, their hopes and fears. These veteran leaders must not let this vast source of education and know-how go untapped. It is not always necessary that the subordinate’s position be adopted. What is important to him is that he has been allowed to express his view and to participate. On visits you should ask: Are the soldiers properly fed? Do they have the equipment? Do they have ammunition? Do they have weapons? Are they operable? How’s their morale? How can I support you?”

In looking at the historical landscape of the NCO, it is interesting to review some of

the quotes of past SGMs who were influential in their contributions to the NCO Corp specifically and the Army in general. It is often stated that NCOs are the backbone of the Army. While this is certainly true, I submit that senior NCOs represent the “cartilage, discs, nerves, muscles and every other intricate inner workings responsible for supporting the backbone’s operation. There is no substitute for experience. While educational pursuits provide the academic foundation for any given subject matter, the practical, real-time experience solidifies the knowledge. As such, it is interesting and encouraging to review some of the quotes of past SGMs on Leadership.

**SMA Robert E. Hall on Loyalty** (*Bear true faith and allegiance to the U.S. Constitution, the Army, your unit and other Soldiers*)

“If I could tell soldiers one thing, it would be: have faith. Faith in the Army, the leadership, and their own ability”

**SMA William A. Connelly on Duty** (*Fulfill your obligations*)

”You're not being paid by how hard you work, but by what you accomplish. If you can't hack it, pack it. Our challenge today is to look forward, to write our own history”

**SGM Copeland on Respect** (*Treat People as They Should Be Treated*)

“Take care of each man as though he were your own brother. He is.”

**SMA Glen E. Morrell on Selfless Service** (*Put the Welfare of the Nation, the Army and Your Subordinates Before Your Own*)

”Soldiers are members of a profession of arms which has existed virtually unchanged for thousands of years- far longer than most other human institutions have existed. The Army has done so because of its unique character- a uniqueness based primarily upon intangibles that cannot be "costed.””

**SMA Robert E. Hall on Honor** (*Live Up To All the Army Values*)

”An African proverb states: "If you don't know who you are, anyone can name you. And, if anyone can name you, you'll answer to anything." I believe these words are applicable to General Dennis Reimer's message about the importance of NCOs to the Army. If you do not know who you are, how can you know your soldiers? If you do not know your

soldiers- which includes your NCOs- how can you perform the mission properly? In my opinion, you cannot and you will not, or you will be unsuccessful because you will answer to what you think should be said or done and not to what is right. We must show soldiers what "right looks like." Remember- managers do things right, and leaders do the right thing.”

**SMA Silas L. Copeland on Integrity** (*Do What’s Right, Legally and Morally*)

“We can't all do everything; we can't all have every badge, every medal, or every award. But that's okay. As long as you do what you're supposed to do and you do it well, you're going to be okay. If soldiers do the right thing every day because it is the right thing to do, treat other soldiers with dignity and respect, and follow the golden rule, they will succeed as soldiers and the Army will succeed as a whole.”

**SMA Robert E. Hall on Personal Courage** (*Face Fear, Danger or Adversity; Physical or Moral*)

”You must tell your commander the truth: the good, the bad, and the ugly. The good NCO who is listened to will always level with the commander, and then it is up to the commander to take heed or ignore it, remembering that he or she has to live with the outcome. There is a lot of material on what should be done regarding leadership, but it takes intestinal fortitude to do what is right. It takes guts for an NCO to use inherent authority and responsibility in training, maintaining, leading, and caring for soldiers. Young noncommissioned officers are the ones who call the shots; it is on their knowledge, initiative, and courage that our success in battle rests.”

Conclusion:

Take of your Soldiers, take care of yourself...mission first, Soldiers always. HOOAH!

References:

Rush, R. S. (2006). *NCO Guide* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.). Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books

*Sergeant Major Quotes*. Retrieved January 17, 2008 from [www.http://www.medtrng.com/janldrshipquotes.htm](http://www.medtrng.com/janldrshipquotes.htm)