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# The Trials & Tribulations Of Korean War NCOs



*We was rotten 'fore we started—we was never disciplined;  
We made it out a favor if an order was obeyed.  
Yes, every little drummer 'ad 'is rights an' wrongs to mind,  
So we 'ad to pay for teachin'—an' we paid.*

Rudyard Kipling  
"That Day"

Noncommissioned officers really are the backbone of the U.S. Army. Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, who whipped Gen. George Washington's rag-tag mob into shape at Valley Forge in 1778, got it right when he wrote *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*: "The choice of noncommissioned officers is the object of greatest importance." Superlative plans and technological superiority indeed confer scant advantage unless competent NCOs ensure smooth performance by every rank and file soldiers in units of every kind.

Personnel policy makers who ignored von Steuben's wise words before the Korean War and shaped the noncommissioned officer corps for more than a decade thereafter did grievous damage when they junked strait-laced Articles of War in favor of a less stringent Uniform Code of Military Justice,



sheared unit commanders of promotion and reduction authorities, turned enlisted grade structures inside out, and dulled distinctions between enlisted leaders and their subordinates. Professional standards and combat capabilities predictably slipped. Commanders, who lost faith and trust in confused NCOs, assumed responsibilities and authorities that noncoms rightfully enjoyed, "So we 'ad to pay for teachin'—an' we paid" until shrewder policies righted most wrongs.

Reenlistment rates sank out of sight after citizen soldiers shed military uniforms en masse in the autumn of 1945. Many of those who joined the Regular Army did so reluctantly and picked cushy spots. Well over a quarter of them signed up for one year, half of them for no more than two. Something like 92,000 joined the Army Air Forces, whereas infantry, armor and artillery gained 39,000 combined. Three-fourths were privates and PFCs, which was not surprising because that was where a passel of temporary master sergeants and other senior NCOs landed when they reverted to permanent grades. Those hard core soldiers nevertheless comprised a solid professional base with a wealth of practical experience.

Those who left in a rush were a different ilk. A vocal minority of former enlisted men with real or imagined grievances and distaste for military discipline almost immediately engaged in emotional enemas. Banner headlines and nationwide radio broadcasts blared:

**"PUTTING UP WITH OFFICERS WAS THE WORST THING IN THE WAR"**

**"GIs SKIP CHURCH TO AVOID BRASS"**

**"NYLON SALES TO OFFICERS ONLY"**

**"MILITARY CASTE SYSTEM DIVIDES OFFICERS AND GIs EVEN IN DEATH"**

Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson, beset by news media condemnation, congressional complaints, and attacks by other powerful critics, convened two investigative bodies in March 1946. One explored officer-enlisted relationships, while the other examined military justice. Army regulations stripped promotion and reduction authorities from unit commanders before either board completed its tasks. Outcomes inadvertently undermined the ability of noncoms to control troops and the ability of unit commanders



Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson



Brig. Gen. James H. Doolittle

to reward or punish their own NCOs.

Retired Gen. Jimmy Doolittle, whose audacious air raid on Tokyo in April 1942 reinvigorated the United States and its allies, chaired the much maligned, yet little understood board that bore his name. Five of its six members had impeccable combat records. Two, including Doolittle himself, wore the Medal of Honor. Four were, or had been, enlisted men.

Doolittle's group interviewed 42 witnesses, studied more than 1,000 letters and published its final report in two months. Most recommendations based on that slender sample were unassailable, like being for motherhood and against sin. The crustiest reactionaries approved steps to "improve leadership in the officer corps." They further agreed that "the higher the rank, the more severe be the punishment," that commissioned officers and enlisted men should receive awards and decorations "on the basis of merit" rather than rank, that official publications should eliminate discriminatory references, such as "officers and their ladies; enlisted men and their wives," and that the U.S. Army should establish and maintain "close contact and association with civilians...since a mutual exchange of information will enhance the military organization." Few foot draggers resisted the right of enlisted personnel to sit on military courts, although GI scoundrels belatedly discovered how pitiless their peers can be.

Traditionalists nevertheless foamed at the mouth over several seemingly innocuous, but explosively controversial recommendations that they believed would unjustifiably lower "old Army" standards:

- Allow all military personnel, "when off duty, to pursue social patterns comparable to our democratic way of life."

- Erase "all statutes, regulations, customs and traditions which discourage or forbid social association of soldiers of similar likes and tastes because of military rank."

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■ Abandon the hand salute "off Army installations and off duty, except in occupied territories and under conditions ... necessary to properly convey military dignity to local populations."

■ Transmit Inspector General findings "to the War Department outside regular command channels in addition to normal procedures in order to eliminate political aspects of control."

Most fears about those Doolittle Board findings proved ill-founded, but a few were valid. Noncoms who fraternize with subordinates, for example, still find it difficult to chew out close friends for substandard performance during duty hours. Additional dilemmas currently arise in units where women and men work side-by-side, a complication that Doolittle Board members never contemplated in 1946.

The Advisory Committee on Military Justice, appalled that sentences imposed during World War II "were frequently excessively severe, and sometimes fantastically so," recommended reforms that have fundamentally influenced military law and order ever since. Secretary of Defense James Forrestal, as a direct result, in February 1949 replaced the time-tested Articles of War with the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ).

Changes that diluted company punishment affected noncoms more than any other emendation. Article of War 104, in effect since 1920, gave unit commanders authority to slap transgressors with loss of privileges, extra fatigue, including kitchen police, restriction and hard labor without confinement for periods not to exceed one week (many hours a day, if commanding officers and accusing noncoms wished). That practice deterred all but the densest observers and discouraged repeat offenders.

UCMJ Article 15, in contrast, permitted nonjudicial punishment for two weeks in lieu of one but, except for admonitions and reprimands, allowed one penalty instead of a string and forbade extra duty beyond two hours per day. Legal beagles who framed the UCMJ slipped in the right to bust wrong-doers "to the next inferior grade, if the grade from which demoted was established by the command [concerned] or an equivalent or lower command." That stipulation, however, was meaningless because by 1949, unit commanders could neither promote nor pull stripes from NCOs.

Company, battery and cavalry troop commanders who wanted to unseat noncoms for misconduct or inefficiency in the "old Army" had perfunctory chats with appointing authorities. Those dignitaries almost always gave permission because, as former Army Chief of Staff Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway tersely pointed out, "If an officer is fit to lead men in combat, he surely must be assumed to have the character and judgment to discipline them in time of peace."

Post-World War II reforms revoked that privilege on March 22, 1946. A minimum of three disinterested officers thereafter reviewed such requests. Army Regulation 615-5 initially decreed that either the requesting commander or the offensive NCO had to transfer to another unit if investigators disallowed reduction. An amendment two months later more sensibly unloaded miscreant noncoms, but let commanders stay.

Reduction in any case was extremely painful after local commissioned leaders lost control because noncoms were excessively overstrength. Centrally controlled promotion ceilings and minimum time-in-grade restrictions froze E-4s through E-6s in place like mammoths in glacial ice (E-7 was then the pinnacle). It took a Solomon's judgment to make punishments fit the crime when first three graders substantially outnumbered privates. Borderline offenders often got off scot-free because the loss of even one chevron encouraged unpayable debts, moonlighting to defray them and absences without leave. The pecuniary equivalent of massive retaliation in short was an unsatisfactory substitute for flexible response.

Readers nevertheless should lay to rest the myth that the Doolittle Board report, Uniform Code of Military Justice, and centralized promotion/reduction regulations unduly degraded discipline. It was not so much what those documents said as the way browbeaten recipients viewed them. Commanders, fearful of unfavorable repercussions from the Pentagon and Congress, constantly walked on eggs.

Leery noncoms, the backbone of the U.S. Army, suffered from slipped discs.

Goofy pay grades, which elevated E-6 rifle squad leaders to the same glorified level that "old Army" first sergeants enjoyed in the peacetime Army before World War II, instigated the enlisted logjam. Every enlisted man above PFC was a bona fide NCO after technicians disappeared in 1948, but no pride accompanied promotion to corporal E-4 because those once cocky



Secretary of Defense James Forrestal meets with Gen. of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower. Forrestal replaced the Articles of War with the Uniform Code of Military Justice.



noncoms became riflemen, gunners and second cooks with no authoritative position in the chain of command. Regulations introduced dime-store geegaws to differentiate leaders from the led: NCOs in tactical organizations sported little green tabs on epaulets; those in combat career fields everywhere wore blue on gold chevrons; all others wore gold on blue for three years, until Department of the Army rescinded those rules.

Worse yet, personnel policy makers with good intentions but bad judgment introduced warrant officers as "unit administrators" to relieve company commanders of onerous paperwork. That act, which imposed a barrier between the old man and his top kick, gummed troop-level gears through the mid-1950s.

Laxity invaded troop units in the late 1940s, partly because most "new Army" noncoms were family men who no longer lived in barracks. Early retirement was the main aim of many, who looked on military service as little more than a meal ticket. Hardly any were in for the full 30-year ride. Sergeants, once chosen to sit at the right hand of God because of singular abilities to make bone-headed privates see things the Army way, shrank from shouting at psychoneurotic yardbirds because doing so might get them in deep trouble. Weak NCOs who hoped to wheedle cooperation by winning popularity contests fell in at the tail end of chow lines, hustled for seats in mess halls, hobnobbed with the boys, and turned the other cheek when hotheaded subordinates told them to "stick their orders where the sun don't shine."

Company-level and battalion training became perfunctory after the budget-starved Army lost more than 15 percent of its enlisted men in fiscal year 1948. Revolving door personnel policies further reduced opportunities to develop close-knit teams.

Brig. Gen. S.L.A. Marshall, an experienced combat historian, summed up results with these words: "[Instruction] was not in the main calculated to give the soldier a better chance for survival and fighting efficiency on the battlefield." Noncoms forged in the crucible of World War II lost competence and confidence.

"Nothing's too good for the troops," and next to nothing is what the troops got in the late 1940s because potentates in the Pentagon remained far removed from reality. Secretary of the Army Kenneth C. Royall, in a supplement to the annual report he issued just one year before war erupted in Korea, pictured "quite possibly the best peacetime Army ever seen in history." Louis Johnson, the economy-minded Secretary of Defense at decade's end, accordingly believed he could safely pare "fat" from the Ar-

my's already austere budget, and thereby save \$1.7 billion.

"New Army" legions still bore "old Army" names and displayed long-revered colors on the eve of the first full-scale combat any of them had experienced since World War II. Proud mottos boasted "Always Forward" and "Can Do," but first contact with tough North Korean assault forces exposed the poorly armed, egalitarian U.S. Army as a hollow shell with gaping holes in understrength combat regiments and battalions.

Gen. Douglas MacArthur deployed tiny Task Force (TF) Smith as "an arrogant display of strength" that he and his commanders believed would make contemptible peasant invaders turn tail as soon as they faced American military might on July 5, 1950. They were wrong. Two shorthanded rifle companies, a battery of 105 mm howitzers, and a couple of weapon platoons that totaled 540 men (mostly unmotivated teenagers) scarcely slowed Kim Il Sung's armored columns, which continued south at a rapid clip after a seven-hour delay. Senior noncoms with TF Smith did the best they could under desperate conditions but, when the going got tough, many apprentices melted away with their panicky men, who abandoned dead comrades, nonwalking wounded, crew-served weapons, even rifles in the scramble for safety. Company A, 34th Infantry fared less well the following day. Its soldiers bore Regular Army serial numbers, but lacked old Army style. Only platoon sergeants and squad leaders pulled triggers when the first collision occurred. Fewer than half of their subordinates subsequently squeezed off rounds. "Bug outs" (double-speak for unruly retreats) became common before long. "Quite possibly the best peacetime Army ever seen in history" fell far short of that mark.

The legacy of permissiveness was hard to shed, but top noncoms, repressed for half a decade, soon bounced back. Nearly all were mature combat veterans who, like their forebears in Gen. John (Blackjack) Pershing's American Ex-



Secretary of the Army Kenneth C. Royall



Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson

Photographs: U.S. Army



peditionary Forces during World War I, developed close personal relationships with company officers—not palsy-walsy, buddy stuff, but camaraderie based on mutual respect. Dour 1st Sgt. Roberts, for example, disapproved of unit commanding officers who did not wear captain's bars until he met hard-nosed Lt. Rudolph M. Tamez, holder of a Distinguished Service Cross. "I command this company," snapped the newcomer the day he took charge, "but I damn well expect you to run it." Less than a month later, Roberts publicly told close friends that if he had to choose between Rudy and his loving bride he'd take the "Loot" every time. "You can always get another woman," he quipped, "but a good company commander is hard to find."

**D**iscipline improved as the war wore on. Junior enlisted men sharpened skills under the tutelage of seasoned noncoms, until the Army's rapid expansion prompted Pentagon personnel managers to authorize temporary promotions "without regard to local grade vacancies or major command promotion ceilings," provided aspirants met minimum time-in-grade or in-service restrictions. They also encouraged infantry regiments and separate battalions to fill NCO vacancies after 60 days "regardless of major command ceilings or major unit tables of organization and equipment [TO&E]." Presto! The Peter Principle, which postulates that "employees in any organization tend to reach their level of incompetence, then remain there," predictably took effect. Soft shoe dancers who could not tell an aiming stake from a rusty field range soon sported stripes. Professionalism plainly faded after many sly dogs pulled that stunt twice.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff, belatedly aware of those disturbing trends, began to worry about "the growing lack of confidence ... in military service as a worthwhile and respected career." Newly elected President Eisenhower expressed similar concerns on April 30, 1953, shortly before armed conflict in Korea wound down. Consternation at such lofty levels soon thereafter spawned the so-called Womble Committee, chaired by a retired U.S. Navy admiral.

The Womble Committee findings on October 30, 1953, isolated causes of discontent that centered on unsatisfactory leadership. Its recommendations to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower made solid sense:

- Restore the authority of commissioned and noncommissioned troop leaders.
- Emphasize command and control, as opposed to technical skills.
- Eliminate oversupervision.
- Revise the Uniform Code of Military Justice.
- Lighten discipline.
- Drastically reduce the number of military specialties.

Responses within the Pentagon, which were rapid and precise, caused at least as many problems as they corrected. The poorly conceived separation of noncoms from enlisted specialists and the large-scale infusion of unfrocked commissioned officers into the NCO corps had debilitating effects.

The main mission was to separate sheep from goats, not just in the ground-gaining arms but Army-wide. Personnel managers in 1954 therefore reincarnated and recast four technical grades that previous policy makers discarded a few years earlier. Kickers of asses and takers of names won coveted noncommissioned officer insignia, while specialists got the bird:

Noncommissioned Officer Rank	Pay Grade	Specialist Equivalent
Master Sergeant	E-7	Master Specialist
1st Sergeant		
Sergeant First Class	E-6	Specialist First Class
Sergeant	E-5	Specialist Second Class
Corporal	E-4	Specialist Third Class

Architects of the renovated system screened tables of organization and equipment to determine which billets deserved the axe, an excruciating process because noncoms were to outrank all other enlisted men, regardless of pay grade. Regulations exempted master specialists and specialists first class from guard duty and fatigue "except in unusual circumstances," but that loophole raised the specter of senior specialists policing up cigarette butts under the baleful eye of some corporal with less time in chow lines than they had in pay lines. Much jostling for position ensued when former noncoms trapped in specialist slots screamed for reconsideration.

Decision makers, who incorrectly concluded that the top two enlisted grades require noncoms regardless of responsibilities, made few master specialists and specialists first class, but corporals nearly evaporated. Rifle company TO&Es lost all but three machine gunners, who doubled as assistant squad leaders in each of the weapons squads. That thoughtless action stunted the development of junior enlisted leaders because it lopped off the lowest rung on the promotion ladder where apprentice NCOs formerly acquired fundamental skills.

Reduction in force programs in fiscal year 1955 alone released more than 5,000 Reserve officers on extended active duty after they were passed over a second time for temporary promotion to captain, major or lieutenant colonel. Compassionate policy makers offered automatic appointments as master sergeants to those whose service began before March 22, 1948, and as sergeants first class to rejects with less active duty. Riffes who hoped to protect retirement equities thereupon infiltrated top slots in the NCO corps until April 1957, after which ousted officers were lucky to retread as E-5s. Many remained for several years.

Improvements proceeded slowly for more than a decade after shooting stopped in Korea. Personnel policy makers in the Pentagon took two steps forward, then one back (sometimes more than one) before they finally got their act together. Progress started to accelerate in the mid-1970s with regard to the selection, development and retention of high-caliber enlisted leaders. Seven league strides followed until NCO responsibilities and authority now match beautifully.