

# NCOs

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**T**he 1989 Army theme, "The Year of the NCO," gives us a chance to tell the world where we came from, what we are and where we are going.

If generals provide the brain power and enlisted men provide the muscle, the noncommissioned officer must surely be the backbone. For it is the NCO who links policy decisions from the top with their ultimate execution at the lowest levels. The NCO has served proudly and effectively throughout the history of the United States Army. His distinctive rank insignia — the chevron — is as well known to the average American as the general's star.

The history of the United States Army and that of the noncommissioned officer began with the birth of the continental Army in 1775. The American NCO was not just a carbon copy of the British NCO. He, like the American Army itself, was a blend of traditions of the French, British and Prussian armies mixed with American ingenuity and know-how into a uniquely American institution. As the years progressed, the American political system, social attitudes and the westward expansion further removed the U.S. NCO from his European counterparts and created a truly American noncommissioned officer.

General Friedrich von Steuben, in 1779, standardized NCO duties and responsibilities in his book titled *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*. Among other things this work (most commonly called the "Blue Book") set down the duties and responsibilities for corporals, sergeants, first sergeants, quartermaster sergeants and sergeants major, which were the NCO ranks of the period. The

Blue Book also emphasized the importance of selecting quality soldiers for NCO positions. The Blue Book served for 30 years as the primary regulations for the Army.

From the beginning it was necessary for NCOs to have some identifying insignia. NCOs at the time of the American Revolution wore a single epaulet to signify their rank; corporals wore green and sergeants wore red epaulets. After 1779 sergeants wore two epaulets. It was von Steuben who called the NCO the "backbone of the Army."

The American noncommissioned officer rank insignia has evolved over the past 150 years from a hodgepodge of sashes, epaulets, cockades and other displays to today's limited set of standardized, stylized chevrons.

In 1840, an effort was made to give the NCO Corps greater prestige by adopting a distinctive sword. The model 1840 NCO sword remains the sword of the NCO Corps and is still used in special ceremonial occasions.

New forms of technology shaped the Army during the Civil War: railroad, telegraph communications, steamships, balloons and other innovations. These innovations impacted on noncommissioned officer rank structure and pay.

Pay for U.S. troops during the Civil War varied according to branch and rank: from \$34 a month for master armorer, master carriage-maker and master blacksmith through \$21 a month for sergeant major to \$12 a month for musician.

Chevrons pointed up and down but basically remained pointed down from the Civil War until the regulation of 1902. The change in



NCO to NCO

direction also brought a reduction in the size of the 10-inch chevron.

The *Noncommissioned Officer Manual* written in 1909 took 417 pages to define the duties and responsibilities of NCOs; von Steuben had required only six in 1779.

World War I required the first massive training of men that the United States had seen. NCOs trained four million men, one million of whom would be sent overseas.

After viewing the difference in American and foreign NCO prestige, Gen. John Pershing suggested that special schools for sergeants and separate NCO messes be established. The performance of noncommissioned officers in the American Expeditionary Force seemed to validate these changes.

Prior to 1920 Congress had created each rank within the Army in such a way as to give each job a distinctive title and pay, and the Army then issued a unique chevron for each rank. The 1920 congressional overhaul of this cumbersome system created seven pay grades. Five NCO ranks were established: master sergeant, technical sergeant, staff sergeant, sergeant and corporal. First sergeant became a position comparable in rank to the technical sergeant. There were 231 vocational skills that could add \$3 to \$35 to a soldier's monthly pay.

During the late 1930s technicians were created in grades 3, 4 and 5 (staff sergeant, sergeant and corporal) with chevrons marked with a "T." This led to an increase in promotions among technical personnel. In 1948 the technical ranks were discontinued; they were replaced by specialist rating in 1955. It wasn't until 1940 that enlisted men could be transferred from one unit to another and retain their stripes.

Mobilization of the Army during World War II increased the numbers of Army noncommissioned officers from 20 percent of the enlisted ranks in 1941 to nearly 50 percent in 1945.

Coupled with this growth in numbers, there was a change from

an eight-man infantry squad to the 12-man squad, with the sergeant replacing the corporal as its leader. Thus the rank of corporal came to mean very little even though he was, in theory and by tradition, a combat leader.

Basic training in World War II centered on hands-on experience instead of the classroom. All training was conducted by NCOs. After basic training, a soldier was sent to his unit where training continued. The major problem was that the rapid expansion of the Army led to a decrease in experienced men in the noncommissioned officer ranks. If a man showed potential he was promoted, with privates becoming corporals, and corporals, sergeants.

In the post-World War II era there were two programs which affected NCOs: a Career Guidance Plan and professional schools for NCOs. The technical ratings were dropped and emphasis was placed on service-wide standards for NCO selection and training.

On December 17, 1949, the first class enrolled in the 2nd Constabulary Brigade's NCO school, located at Munich, Germany. Two years later, the U.S. Seventh Army took over the 2nd Constabulary functions and the school became the Seventh Army Noncommissioned Officers Academy. Eight years later AR 350-90 established Armywide standards for NCO academies. Emphasis on NCO education increased to the point that by 1959 more than 180,000 soldiers attended NCO academies in the United States.

In addition to NCO academies, the Army encouraged enlisted men to advance their education by other means. By 1952 the Army had developed the Army Education Program to allow soldiers to attain credits for academic education. This program provided a number of ways for the enlisted man to attain a high school or college diploma.

In 1958 two grades were added to the NCO ranks. It was stated that these grades, E-8 and E-9, would "provide for a better delineation of responsibilities in the enlisted structure." It was also hoped

that additional grades would help in obtaining and retaining good NCOs.

In 1966, Army Chief of Staff Harold K. Johnson chose SGM William D. Wooldridge as the first Sergeant Major of the Army. The SMA was to be an advisor and consultant to the Chief of Staff on enlisted matters. He would identify problems affecting enlisted personnel and recommend appropriate solutions.

During the following year, Johnson decided to establish the position of command sergeant major. This position served as the commander's enlisted assistant to commanders at and above the battalion level.

Vietnam proved to be a junior leader's war, with decentralized control. Much of the burden of combat leadership fell on the NCO. Needing large numbers of NCOs for combat, the Army created the Noncommissioned Officers Candidate Course. Three branches were established at Fort Benning, Fort Knox and Fort Sill. After a 10-week course, graduates were promoted to E-5; the top five percent to E-6. An additional 10 weeks of practice followed and then the NCO was sent to Vietnam for combat. This program was received with mixed feelings from senior NCOs, many of whom felt it undermined the prestige of the NCO Corps. Few of these senior NCOs, however, could say they actually knew an unqualified NCO from the NCO Candidate Course.

In 1971 the Army implemented the Noncommissioned Officer Education System (NCOES). This progressive system was designed to educate NCOs on subjects and skills needed by them to enhance their performance and abilities. The NCOES now consists of four levels of training: Primary Leadership Development Course, Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course, Advanced Noncommissioned Officer Course and the Sergeants Major Academy.

As the NCOES continues to grow, the NCO of today combines history and tradition with skill and ability to prepare for combat.