

SMA's Role Evolves, Grows

By SSG David Abrams

On July 11, 1966, Noncommissioned officers finally got an official voice among the Army's senior leadership in Washington, DC. When SGM William O. Wooldridge was sworn in as the Army's first sergeant major, he was stepping into a role which would give enlisted soldiers a direct pipeline of communication to the Army chief of staff's office for the first time.

Unofficially, the SMA's role has been to be the voice of the enlisted soldier; on paper (General Orders Number 29), his job is to serve as the senior enlisted assistant and advisor to the chief of staff. At the time, the tenure of the office was set at two years (later, it would change to three years).

The SMA was originally part of the CSA's personal staff, not the Army staff. In his instructions to Wooldridge, GEN Harold K. Johnson said, "You will report directly to me and there will be no one between your desk and mine. When you need to see me, you will use the private entrance to my office. The only other person who uses that entrance is the Secretary of the Army."

That hip-pocket relationship would later change during the second SMA's term when the office was placed directly under the supervision of the secretary of the general staff. Though some members of the staff never wholeheartedly approved the idea of an NCO near the top of the Pentagon pyramid, the Office of the CSA continued to support the position, which continued to give increased status and prestige to NCOs around the world.

In a letter to the 1st Infantry Division, Johnson wrote, "The newly designated position of SMA has no precedent in the Army. It marks a new high in recognizing the importance of our NCOs."

The Army was not the first of the services to create a top enlisted position. The Marine Corps had had its sergeant major for nine years before Wooldridge assumed his Pentagon desk. The Navy and Air Force followed with their senior enlisted men within one year after the Army.

To select the first SMA, Johnson solicited nominations from each of the Army's major commands, describing the position and asking commanders to send him the names of who they considered the best qualified command sergeant major under their command. Of all the names that crossed Johnson's desk, only one was then on duty in Vietnam, a 25-year Army veteran named William O. Wooldridge, serving in the jungles with the 1st ID.

Soon after taking office, Wooldridge was called into Johnson's office, where he received a set of instructions which said, in part, the SMA would advise the CSA on all matters pertaining primarily to enlisted personnel: including, but not limited to, morale, welfare, training, clothing, insignia, equipment, pay and allowances, customs and courtesies of service,

enlistment and reenlistment, discipline and promotion policies.

Starting with Wooldridge, each of the SMAs accompanied the CSA on official command visits, as well as traveling thousands of miles on their own to meet with everyone from privates to command sergeants major, giving ear to the voice of the NCO at the lowest level possible. In his first year, Wooldridge logged more than 142,000 miles, visiting 19 installations and making three separate trips to Vietnam. His office averaged 300 letters, 50 visitors and 250 phone calls per month.

A typical day may have included an appearance before the House Armed Services Committee, an office ceremony, a local trip to address an organization or troop unit and by the end of the day be en route to Vietnam or Europe, Wooldridge later reflected.

Each of the NCOs approaching the Army's top NCO position have done so with a mixture of optimism and enthusiasm.

"Now I would have the opportunity to do more for the soldiers than I had ever been able to do before," said George Dunaway, the second SMA, soon after arriving in Washington, D.C., from the 101st Airborne Division in Vietnam. "Now I would be in a position to change some of the things I had disliked and had heard so many complaints about. This was an honor and I vowed not to let the soldiers down."

During Dunaway's term, the SMA selection process changed to a screening board which reviewed nominations from the MACOMs. Final selection was based on a clean record—no letters of reprimand, Article 15s or summary courts-martial—and a personal interview with the CSA.

"Over the years, the prestige of the SMA has grown in the eyes of enlisted soldiers. After being selected as SMA, I returned to Vietnam to complete my tour prior to taking office," said Silas L. Copeland, the third SMA. "As I visited with troops throughout Vietnam, I became increasingly aware of the importance, the admiration and trust that troops especially there in the field, placed on the individual occupying the position of SMA. To me, this was gratifying, and it also energized me to represent them more effectively."

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the job has been to have direct access to top level Pentagon officials. William Bainbridge, the fifth SMA, recalled he often used the open-door policy. "While I was SMA, I always spoke my piece, and I think that they (the chiefs of staff with whom he served) not only respected me for that, they expected me to speak up. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have been doing my job as their chief adviser on enlisted affairs and I'd have been letting the troop down.

"I believed in visiting troop units all over the globe," Bainbridge continued, "particularly small units in remote locations, to let them know somebody back at the Pentagon care about them."

While Bainbridge was in office, the status of the office once again changed. As Ernest F. Fisher Jr. notes in his NCO history, *Guardians of the Republic*, "The SMA, no longer under the supervision of the SGS, became a full-fledged member of the CSA's staff... This made it certain that any action or development that impacted on enlisted personnel from a policy standpoint would be routinely coordinated with the SMA. His opinion is now considered essential before an action is sent on to the CSA...."

Over the years, the SMAs have directly influenced decisions on a number of enlisted issues. A partial list includes: creating and hosting the first Command Sergeants Major Conference in Washington, D.C., in 1966; making a relatively bump-free transition to an all-volunteer force in the early 1970s; enforcing draft registration; establishing the first

sergeant and sergeants major courses at Ft. Bliss, TX; linking NCO school attendance to promotion; and fine-tuning the former Skills Qualification Test as an evaluation tool.

Though SMAs have had to deal with the big picture to get enlisted issues resolved, none of them ever forgot the reason they were in Washington, D.C., in the first place: looking out for the individual NCO. In an interview with *Soldiers* soon after he became the fourth SMA, Leon Van Autreve said, "As for the nuts and bolts operation, we're doing the same thing as NCOs that we've done most of our lives—dealing with people. The only difference is there are so many more people involved." ■

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CSMs — They must be much more than figureheads...

From the day in 1967 when the rank of command sergeant major was established to provide an additional career goal for the Army's most experienced service Non-commissioned officers, the search was on for top sergeants who stood head and shoulders above their peers.

In a letter to major command commanders, Army Chief of Staff GEN Harold K. Johnson wrote:

"If we are to have a strong CSM chain, individuals selected for these key positions must be much more than mere figureheads and administrative specialists. They must be vigorous, broadly experienced and dedicated professionals who are more at home in the field with troops than at a desk in a major headquarters. They should be people who seek opportunities to get out among the troop units and who can see the problems that exist at the grass roots. Their selflessness, personal integrity and moral courage must be unassailable."

Fortunately, there were plenty of good candidates. A Department of the Army level selection board screened hundreds of names submitted by MACOM commanders in three different iterations during 1967 and 1968.

One of the first CSMs to be selected was SGM Theodore Dobil, a World War II veteran of the 1st Infantry Division.

Within its first year of creation, a new insignia was approved for the rank—a chevron with a wreath surrounding the sergeant major star.

While the NCO Corps continued to redefine itself in the

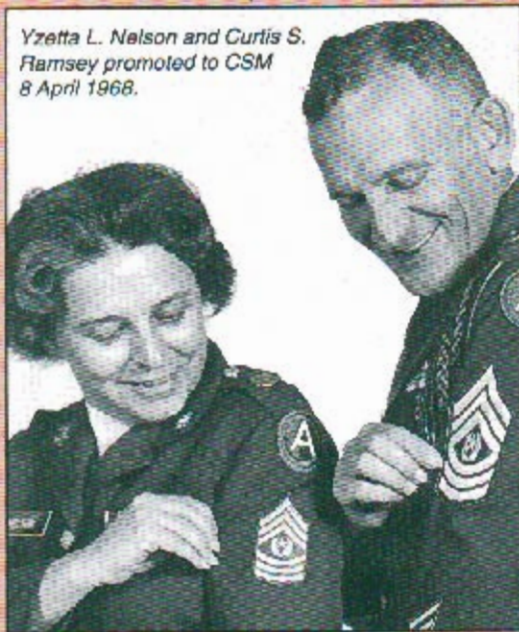
years following the Vietnam conflict, the CSM program expanded to include Reserve Component sergeants major in 1974.

As with most new programs, it took a while to get everyone throughout the Army on an equal footing when it came to knowing how to use CSMs. In his book, *Guardians of the Republic*, Ernest F. Fisher writes: "The duties of the CSM had often been determined more by the perception of individual commanders than by approved and widely understood Army doctrine... Lines of authority between CSMs and first sergeants were variously understood and practiced from unit to unit."

One thing everyone agreed on was that the CSM should be the epitome of the Corps. At a 1975 Training and Doctrine Command conference, U.S. Commander-in-Chief GEN George S. Blanchard said, "The CSM must reflect the image of the NCO Corps and demand that his fellow NCOs do the same."

A 1976 letter from the academic faculty of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point stated that the "...CSM should be regarded as a role model and goal for NCOs...As a coding and filtering agent, acting almost as a translator between the officer and enlisted soldier...he filters, interprets and passes on information from the commander along a path parallel to the channels of command." ■

Yzetta L. Nelson and Curtis S. Ramsey promoted to CSM
8 April 1968.



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