

Noncommissioned officers...

Technicians and Leaders

By Dr. John Wands Sacca

What will the future bring in military technology? And how will this new technology affect technical and leadership training in the Army? Pundits predict "dune buggies" armed with "smart" weapons; "fire-and-forget" anti-armor and anti-personnel weapons; and space-based, guaranteed squad- and soldier-level communications.

Due to the disparity between the projected labor pool and such sophisticated technology, it's been suggested that the challenge of the future will be to prevent "technological illiteracy." That Noncommissioned officers are not mere technicians, but *leaders*, is often overlooked in such an analysis. A strong NCO Corps will both train and lead the soldiers who deal with these new and complex technologies.

For years the Army sponsored NCO service schools to train specialists and NCO academies organized to instill traditional military and leadership skills. The first professional instruction for NCOs came in 1889 with the creation of company- and troop-level schools. The next serious attempt came in 1949 when the U.S. Army Constabulary Brigade opened an NCO Academy in Germany. By 1963, 11 academies were operating in the U.S. and several more overseas.

With the all-volunteer Army came the Enlisted Personnel

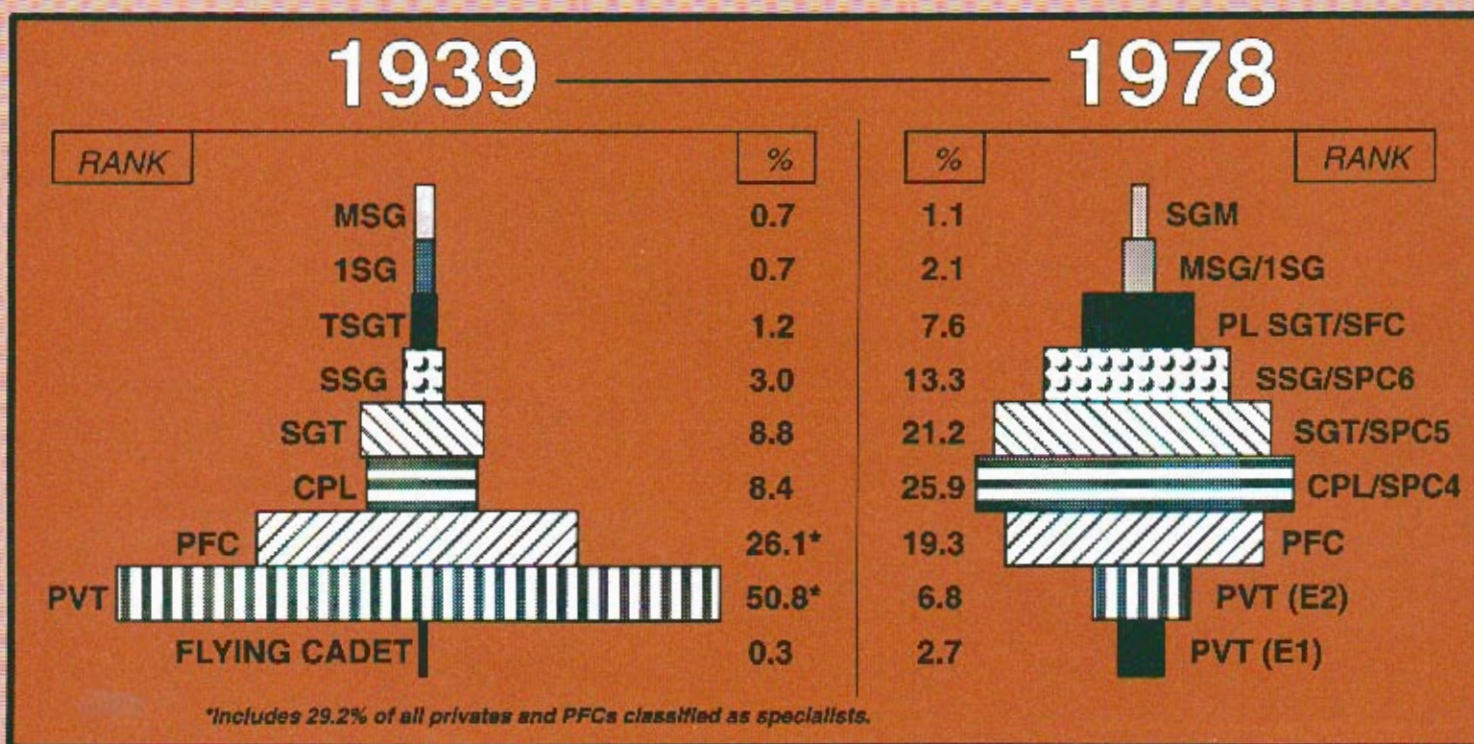
Management System (EPMS), and an increasingly professional system of NCO education, culminating in the Sergeants Major Academy. Prerequisites for promotion today aim at a balance between military occupational specialty (MOS) and professional military training.

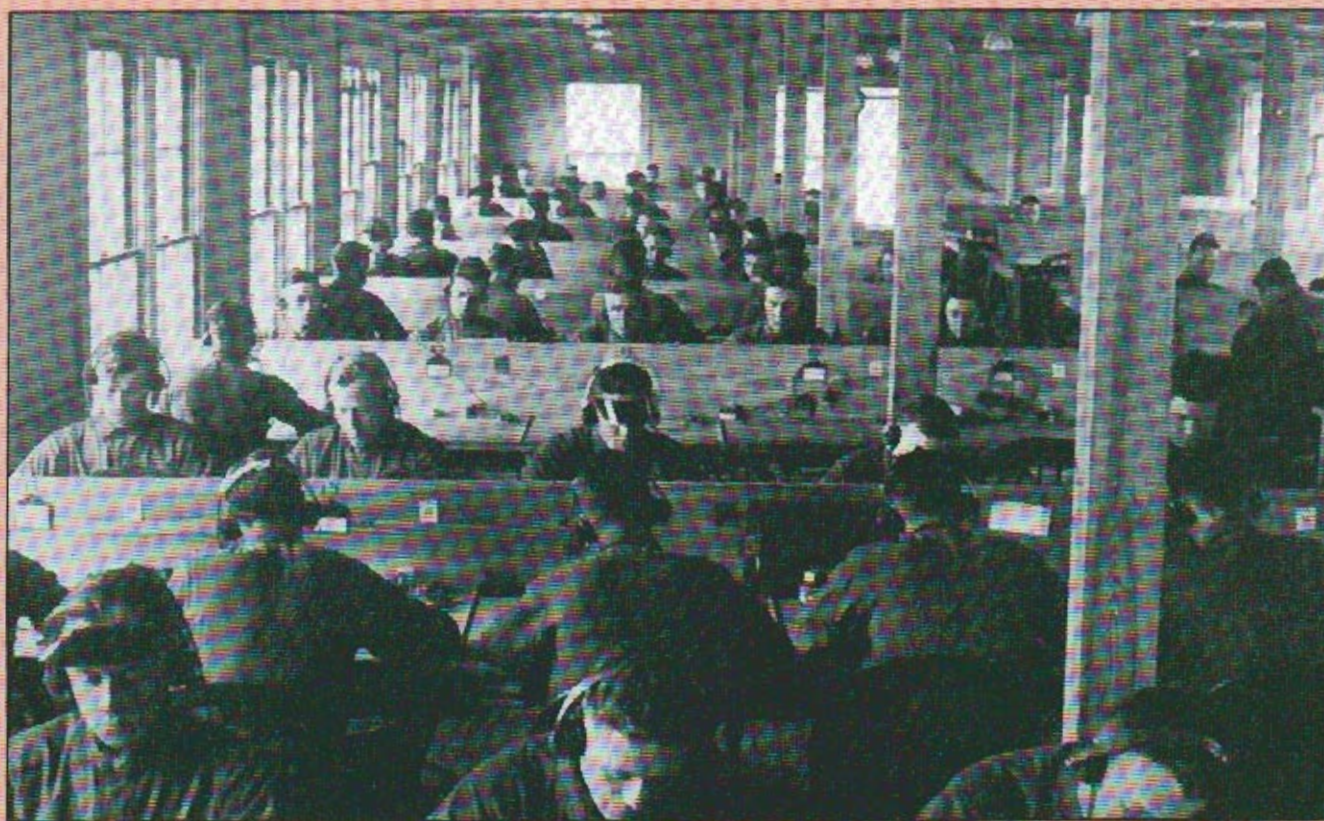
The Noncommissioned Officer Education System (NCOES) provides both technical and leadership skills. But, NCOES doesn't provide both leadership and technical training at all levels. The technical training comes in the basic and advanced courses. The top-level Sergeants Major Course, however, reflects the Army's subordination of technical skills to lower ranks by ignoring technical skill development.

As is often the case, the past plays prologue to the present and future. Between the Civil War and the Spanish-American War, the number of soldiers engaged in a technical occupational specialty increased only from about six to 13 percent. The coast artillery, engineer and signal corps introduced most of these specialties. By 1908, electrician sergeants in these corps were the highest paid NCOs in the Army.

The modern military specialist system as we know it originated during World War I. Its unprecedented mobilization and the requirements for overseas deployment created a military "market" for new technologies. The internal combustion engine replaced the sturdy Army mule, ushering in mechanized warfare. A fledgling Army Air Corps took flight and the tank corps supplemented the horse cavalry. The military radio revolutionized communications. Chemical warfare began with the introduction of poison gas. Older branches, such as quartermaster and ordnance, mushroomed.

In contrast to earlier mobilizations, the combat soldier of WWI was in a numerical minority. Only about 40 percent of enlisted soldiers were in line-combat positions, compared to 93 percent during the Civil War. And behind the "man with the gun," were new support units of all types, manned by sol-





diers performing duties which paralleled 700-plus occupations found in the civilian economy.

The Army responded to the increased need for technically trained personnel by recognizing technical specialists in two different ways. The first was to pay specialists more money—a tacit recognition that the Army competes with the civilian economy for labor and must provide competitive rates of pay to do so. The second form of recognition was to bestow higher rank on personnel with special skills, technical or otherwise.

In earlier, less specialized days, there was a close correlation between skills, pay and rank. The trouble came when the increasing number of technical personnel required payment beyond what the Army was willing to pay for leadership skills. The Army balked at providing these technicians with rank commensurate with their pay. Pay and rank increasingly became separated.

In 1920, the Army agreed to pay technicians more than it would pay NCOs in leadership positions but gave the NCOs in leadership positions higher rank. In WWII the Army further elaborated the technical rank structure by adopting a system of occupational classification of jobs. Each classification covered soldiers who would perform a specific MOS. In this classification system, the Army classified about 26 percent of all enlisted personnel skills as technical, scientific or mechanical, while administrative/clerical occupations jumped to almost 15 percent—up 10 percent from the previous world war.

Before WWII the military hierarchy by rank resembled a pyramid, with the most predominant rank being that of private. [See table]. The number of enlisted personnel dropped

off progressively at each higher rank in the pyramid. By 1939, almost 77 percent of all enlisted soldiers were privates or privates first class, while NCOs comprised only 22 percent of the enlisted ranks.

When the Army reestablished the separate specialist-NCO rank structures in 1955 it again subordinated the technical rank structure to the leadership rank structure—much as it had done in 1920. A specialist could obtain a specialist-7 ranking at best. This was nominally equivalent to an E-7 rank, but a lowly E-4 corporal could command the specialist-7.

Between 1965 and 1978, the Army reversed itself and placed “hard” stripes back on the sleeves of senior NCOs, but retained specialist ranks from grades four through six. The rank structure now came to resemble a diamond, widening in the middle as a plurality of enlisted soldiers moved to the ranks of corporal/specialist fourth class and sergeant/specialist fifth class. In 1978 the Army lowered the top obtainable technical rank to specialist-6 and further lowered it in 1985 to the single specialist rank of specialist-4.

The rapid increase in technical skills continues to present both NCOs and the Army with a dilemma as to the relative importance of occupational versus leadership values. Is the NCO a technician or a leader? In today’s Army, NCOs must remain flexible enough to assume both roles. ■

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