

CHAPTER VI --- THE TOP HEAVY TOTEM POLE

Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed.

From William Shakespeare's
"Othello, the Moor of Venice"
Act III, Scene 3.

"One-two-three, git!"

Dan'l, the celebrated frog from Calaveras County, "give a heave, and hysted up his shoulders -- so -- like a Frenchman, but it warn't no use....he couldn't budge; he was planted solid as a church."

"I do wonder what in the nation that frog throwed off for," said Smiley. "I wonder if there ain't something the matter with him."¹

There was, of course. A scheming city slicker had filled Dan'l to the chin with quail shot.

The Army Non-Commissioned Officer Corps is an awful lot like Dan'l. It's mighty overweight. You can say "one-two-three, git!" all you want, but it can hardly get off the ground.

You see, nearly 20 years ago, bumbling benefactors with a cracked crystal ball upgraded most enlisted positions "to provide more attractive career incentives"² -- billets which in the recent past had been boosted at least one stripe before.

This gambit lost the game.

Sergeants Major, First Sergeants, Platoon Sergeants and principal staff NCO's all were authorized grade E-7. Master Sergeants supervised Master Sergeants who supervised other Master Sergeants. Numerous noncoms lacking that admirable, but elusive, balls-to-the-wall attitude gravitated toward the least demanding slots as naturally as water runs down hill -- after all, why knock yourself out in charge of a company when you can enjoy the same rights and privileges in Post Utilities, pounding 10-penny nails?³

Cordiner Committee crusaders crossed swords with this situation in 1956-57, finding to no one's special surprise that "far too many enlisted men are reaching the top rung of their ladder at a young age (after about 11 years service), with little opportunity for further advancement....The sheer weight of numbers acceding to this grade (E-7) has not only reduced its prestige, but has made it the natural and expected outcome of an enlisted career."⁴

What to do?

Certainly, Cordiner felt, "any significant reduction in the number of persons (at the E-7 level) would act as a profound and enduring depressant" to young hot-bloods entranced by Army life.⁵

To put a little swagger back in the NCO Corps, create room at the top and relieve compression down the line, the Committee recommended two new enlisted grades: E-8 and E-9. Keep it exclusive, they said -- maybe a half of one percent should be E-9 and three

times that E-8 -- roughly one fiftieth of the total enlisted strength. The mission was "to protect prestige."^{6*}

Seven hundred promotions to E-8 ushered in the Super Grade Era in July 1958, for Sergeants Major and First Sergeants only. Theodore M. Dobel, since retired, was the first to make E-9, as Battle Group Sergeant Major for the 1/26th Infantry's Blue Spaders.⁷

This was truly an aristocratic club. No riff-raff were allowed. Attempts to sneak in paper-shufflers who impersonated Top Kicks in transient officer and officer training companies were squelched with the admonition that "re-evaluation....will be necessary....Not all positions which are currently designated 'First Sergeant' and 'Sergeant Major' will meet the new criteria."⁸

Well said.

Yet this exciting re-entry of pride and prestige was doomed before it scarcely got started.

"Prior to implementation," DCSFER admits, "it became apparent that the Army E-8 and E-9 program would not yield an authorized strength....approximat(ing even) one half of the one percent and two percent statutory ceilings. It also became apparent that technological developments, particularly in the electronics area, were generating more highly demanding skill requirements for positions that could not qualify for up-grading to E-8 and E-9."⁹

* Public Law 85-422, 20 May 1958, limits the proportion of E-9's and E-8's to one and two percent respectively.

Cordiner had an answer for this, too: Proficiency Pay, which would jingle extra coins in the pocket to the tune of "one or two pay grade advancements, without accompanying NCO/Petty Officer rank." Normal promotions, he emphasized, must be "associated with full military qualifications in a higher grade."¹⁰

Alternatively, DCSPER might have authorized E-8/E-9 specialist ratings, but schizophrenically refused to do so.¹¹

Instead, Bleeding Hearts could hardly wait to share the wealth with additional Super Grade NCO's, who came on the run, like carpet baggers enroute to a fish fry.

Assorted instructors and advisors got the nod first, then technical supervisors in combined maintenance shops. Operations Sergeants (all the way down to battalion level), ROTC hacks, intelligence buffs, board members and office boys followed in fairly rapid succession.¹²⁻¹³

Department of the Army affirmed that E-8's and E-9's in headquarters staff sections should "represent a significant level of enlisted responsibility extending to subordinate echelons,"¹⁴ but field commanders turned deaf ears. Before the venture was six years old, half the chicken pluckers in the Army had at least one foot in the door. More than 75 MOS's rate an E-9 today; many more call for E-8's.¹⁵

Witness Nirvana with its pants down.

Fort Bragg was home for over 150 star-studded chevrons in 1964. A cool third of these Sergeants Major flaunted the colors of

XVIII Airborne Corps, whose Command Section and General Staff Sections, save the G-5, displayed a pair each, just like the Bobbsey Twins -- one for Corps and one for Post. The mental gymnasts who justified this inverted pyramid could wow the masses from Ringling Brothers' center ring.¹⁶

Bragg wasn't unique, by a long shot.

At Fort Hood, home of two armored divisions and III Corps, roughly 40 percent of all E-9's in October 1966 were ensconced in brick foxholes, instead of out wrestling with troops;¹⁷ at Fort Lewis, before the 4th Infantry Division pulled out, the proportion was nearly half.¹⁸ The Walker Hill Rest and Recreation Center in Korea is graced with a full-fledged E-9, as is the Fort Bragg NCO Open Mess.¹⁹⁻²⁰ Such folly is like using Michaelangelo to paint a barn.

Pride and prestige?

Are you kidding?

Many Sergeants Major and First Sergeants were beginning to feel like the luckless Lothario, tarred, feathered and ridden on a rail, who 'lowed that if it hadn't been for the honor, he'd just as soon have walked.*

* * * * *

* The median active federal service of all E-9's promoted during FY 66 was just over 20 years. Seventy percent of the Sergeants Major retiring during that period quit by year 23, at the youthful age of 44. The attraction of a 30-year career seems less than irresistible to these titans.²⁶⁻²⁷

This gratuitous assault on non-commissioned esteem wasn't confined to the Brahmin Class. Far from it -- the whole NCO Corps was involved.

For, in canonizing the Super Grades, DA had uprooted established order, shuffling stripes like a stack of cards. The long-lamented Buck Sergeant returned from oblivion, modern specialists were born and enlisted middle management, E-5 through E-7, was callously unfrocked.²¹

To reserve Master Sergeant chevrons for Supermen at the top, it was necessary to remove one rocker each from the three succeeding lower non-commissioned grades (Figure 22).²²⁻²³ E-7's, for example, retained all of their former prerogatives and privileges, but when the whistle blew, were to switch to "Old Army" E-6 chevrons, and bear the title "Sergeant First Class."^{24*}

DA's wishful thinkers anticipated that "loss of a stripe will unquestionably create a....personal loss of prestige," but marched stoutly forward, secure in the belief that accompanying pay raises would cushion the blow sufficiently for "reason (to) prevail, and with it....acceptance on the part of all concerned."²⁵

Never happen. Pandemonium ensued.

Pentagon desks disappeared under stacks of outraged mail heaped axle-deep to a ferris wheel.

The upshot was a "wear-out" period from 31 May 1958 to 30 June 1962. NCO's in grades E-5 through E-7 prior to the switch were

* Or "Platoon Sergeant," if assigned to that billet.

authorized to retain their out-moded ensigns and appellations for those four years, unless sooner promoted or reduced.²⁸ The Army thus found itself playing an exasperating game of "Who's on First?", trying to sort out a ludicrous enlisted hierarchy stigmatized with interchangeable titles and insignia denoting different levels of leadership.

Consider three-striper Flaxenhair, a fine broth of a lad, who made Sergeant (E-5) in 1961. This kid was what he seemed. Staff Sergeant (E-5) Sneaky was not. To the untrained eye, this relic of the old regime appeared to be a carbon copy of Staff Sergeant (E-6) High'nmighty, but in fact, Sneaky and Flaxenhair drew the same pay. Bust Sneaky, and he'd slide all the way to Corporal. High'nmighty, who made it after the change, in turn found himself upstaged by Sergeant First Class (E-6) Underhand -- an anthropological remnant of 1958 -- who, if the truth were known, wasn't nearly the man that SFC (E-7) Bravobravissimo proved himself to be.

Ad nauseum. Suffice it to say, not even a genealogical survey could find out who was in charge.

This dog's breakfast pleased nobody, but as the day of reckoning drew nigh, the din grew ever more deafening; pulling a stripe from the Old Guard was like loosing Linus from his blanket. Eight months before the June '62 deadline, DA backed into its shell. The four-year wear-out period was scrapped.²⁹

However, refusal to face the issue head-on didn't accomplish the mission.

After prodding by Secretary of the Army Ailes and mounting derision from other factions in the field, DCSPER re-opened the search for a sensible solution, fuddy-duddy'n around like a befuddled physics professor seeking a mislaid formula.

The result -- effective 1 September 1965 -- was to be still another diastrophic upheaval (Figure 23).^{30*}

Writing to the Office of Legislative Liaison, DCSPER conceded that chevrons in being no longer were able to "properly identify non-commissioned officers in accord with their pay grades and position," even among E-9's, where already it was impossible to distinguish Sergeants Major from a gallemaufry of chief clerks.³¹

To rectify this situation, DA proposed a new badge for Sergeants Major -- three up and three down, "with a wreath around the star....symboliz(ing) superior achievement or attainment. All other personnel in grade E-9 will continue to wear their present insignia, but will have a new title of 'Chief Master Sergeant'." E-8's were to undergo no change, but Methuselah-type E-5's, 6's and 7's would finally, by God, lose a stripe.³²

For some strange reason, policy-makers were also perturbed that "the Army (was) the only Service (without) a chevron for grade E-2, thereby creating an unfavorable comparison," forgetting, perhaps, that this alleged benefit arbitrarily was discarded after World War II, when all hands moved up one notch. To make amends,

* Commissioned officer grade structure has remained essentially unchanged since Washington crossed the Delaware. Ranks and titles are still pretty much the same; there still is one Lieutenant per platoon, one Captain commands each company.

Privates First Class were to revert to their pre-World War II rank, being replaced by USMC-type Lance Corporals at E-3.³³

Strong medicine, but as General Johnson put it so well, the time was over-ripe for a change. In 1958 "more than a quarter of a million individuals in grade E-5 through E-7 could have been affected by these actions, (but) promotion and attrition have....reduced the number to approximately 55,000, of which 15,000 are Specialists whose status will not change."³⁴

Procurement schedules called for 49,000 new Sergeant Major chevrons and 7,000,000 Lance Corporal stripes to be ready for issue before September '65,³⁵ but at the Twelfth Hour, under pressure from the House Armed Services Committee and squeals of anguish from the field, the whole affair was called off.³⁶

While bales of badges molder on shelves, the Great Strips Hassle undergoes "finite examination,"³⁷ but policy-makers now approach the problem as gingerly as porcupines making love. The leisurely pace strongly suggests that this pungent issue, like old soldiers, will never die -- it will finally just fade away.

The irony of it all is that the right decision was made for the wrong reason. Political pressure killed the change, but outside influence aside, one look at the top-heavy totem pole in Figure 23 should have been enough to give Boris Karloff the horrors. Further escalation of NCO chevrons is the last thing the Army needs.

* * * * *

If Super Grade efforts to revive non-commissioned pride and prestige ended largely in farcical failure,* so too ended Secretary of the Army Wilbur Brucker's fond hope that they would "alleviate the compression of the (former) seven-grade structure."⁴⁰ Four years after the venture got well off the ground, E-7 requirements actually had increased by several thousands.^{41**}

This process was almost inevitable. DCSPER had sent a baby to buy the beer.

In explanation, the United States never has been decorated for moderation. It has the greatest lakes, the tallest buildings, the raciest women and, by far, the most beautiful horses. Like Paul Bunyon, everything exceeds life size. If one is good, the axiom goes, 26 must surely be better.

This trait spills over into military life, where it acts as

* Mercifully, some facets paid off. Neither E-8 nor E-9 is the honor it might be, but at least these elevations aren't attainable by every Tom, Dick and Harry, as grade E-7 once was. Better still, noncoms now have someone pullin' for 'em full time -- one-in-a-million William O. Wooldridge, selected from world-wide nominations to be the first Sergeant Major of the Army. As "senior enlisted advisor and consultant" to the Chief of Staff on "problems affecting enlisted personnel..., on professional education, growth and advancement of non-commissioned officers, and on morale, training, pay, promotions and other matters," his concerns parallel those of this paper. He forges an important new link between the Pentagon and the field.³⁸⁻³⁹ Editor's note: Wooldridge later was drummed

out of the service for malfeasance before he became Sergeant &
 ** Assigned enlisted strength increased moderately during the period, from 770,112 to 852,556.

Mayor of
The Army.

an uncontrolled cancer* -- not just in Tables of Distribution or locally-authorized augmentation, but in TOE's as well.

The Radio Telephone and Teletype Section of the Corps Signal Battalion's Command Operations Company is one grotesque example, where an E-7 and 14 Buck Sergeants oversee the machinations of 26 Speedy Fours, without a Private or PFC in sight. Each would-be leader is responsible for 1.73 subordinates!⁴² 43

Don't laugh, please. We find similar anomalies 'most everywhere.

Not even the lowly Rifle Squad's immune. Its E-6 Den Mother shares his duties with two E-5 fire team leaders. Together, they honcho seven other harassed heroes. Irreverent as it may be for an ex-Dog Face to say, the Marine Corps makes much more sense:⁴⁴

	<u>E-6</u>	<u>E-5</u>	<u>E-4</u>	<u>E-3</u>	<u>E-2/E-1</u>	<u>Total</u>
Army	1	2	4	3	0	10
USMC	0	1	3	4	6	14

Thirty years ago, in the "Old Army", the entire squad, body and soul, belonged to a princely Corporal -- then an unassuming E-3 (Figure 2). Today, E-4 Corporals are sheltered by the Audubon Society

* The "Look a' me, ma!" complex is manifested in many other ways, of which three serve as convenient illustrations:

Pilots paper their walls with Air Medal oak leaf clusters, which once were tough to come by.

Every holder of a Combat Infantry or Medical Badge got a Bronze Star free in the days after World War II.⁴³ 44

Officer Efficiency Reports picture the Holy Trinity on a white horse, except for ostracized lepers.

as the rarest bird of all, virtually extinct, except for assistant field artillery gunners and former Sergeants nursing their wounds (Figure 24).⁴⁵

Denigration of non-commissioned rank produces some startling effects when the radical, erratic departures from once-honored principles and values are plotted on a graph (Figure 25).⁴⁶⁻⁴⁸

Despite the addition of two Super Grades, there still is a prominent hump.

Sergeants Major in 1966 occupied a position proportionately similar to their Master Sergeant (E-7) counterparts in 1939; First Sergeants balanced out with "Old Army" E-6 Top Kicks. But modern grades E-6 and E-7 are five to six times as populous percentage-wise as they were three decades ago.

Congestion at the summit has been relieved discernibly since 1958, yet note: the ratio of E-6 -- squad leader level -- to total enlisted strength still is nearly equal to E-3 or E-4 in the good old days.

For all practical purposes, young leaders now are forced to enter NCO ranks at grade E-5, mid-way up the EM stairs, two notches higher than their predecessors in 1939.

TOE/TD requirements for E-4 towered to 31 percent of active enlisted strength in 1965, almost a full quarter higher than the outlandish overload which staggered that grade during trying days in Korea.⁴⁹ The rapid influx of half a million recruits for the Vietnam war⁵⁰ cut this excess to more manageable size in 1966

(Figure 24), but even so, the proportion of E-4's through E-9 still was nearly 50 percent.

Nothing short of a major shakeup could loosen this log jam at the top.

Certainly, such measures worked wonders with Dan'l, the jumping frog. When Smiley "ketched Dan'l by the nap of the neck... and turned him upside down, he belched out a double handful of quail shot."⁵¹ Need it be said, that ole frog's performance improved immensely in the twinkling of an eye. Unfortunately, it was a mite too late.

It's not too late for the Army NCO Corps -- which still is waiting forlornly for a four-star Smiley.

FIGURE 22

NCO PRECEDENCE TODAY


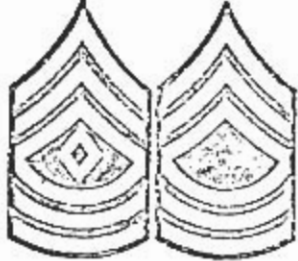








	Prior To 1 June 1958	After 1 June 1958
E-9 Sergeant Major		
E-8 First Sergeant Master Sergeant		
E-7 Master Sergeant Sergeant First Class Platoon Sergeant		
E-6 Sergeant First Class Staff Sergeant		
E-5 Staff Sergeant Sergeant		
E-4 Corporal		

FIGURE 23

PROPOSED ENLISTED INSIGNIA AND TITLES

(To Have Been Effective 1 September 1965)



E-9
SERGEANT MAJOR



E-9
CHIEF
MASTER SERGEANT



E-8
FIRST SERGEANT



E-8
MASTER SERGEANT



E-7
SERGEANT
FIRST CLASS



E-6
STAFF SERGEANT



E-5
SERGEANT



E-4
CORPORAL



E-3
LANCE CORPORAL



E-2
PRIVATE
FIRST CLASS

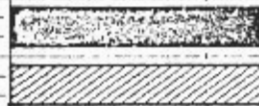
FIGURE 24

ENLISTED GRADE STRUCTURE

30 JUNE 1966

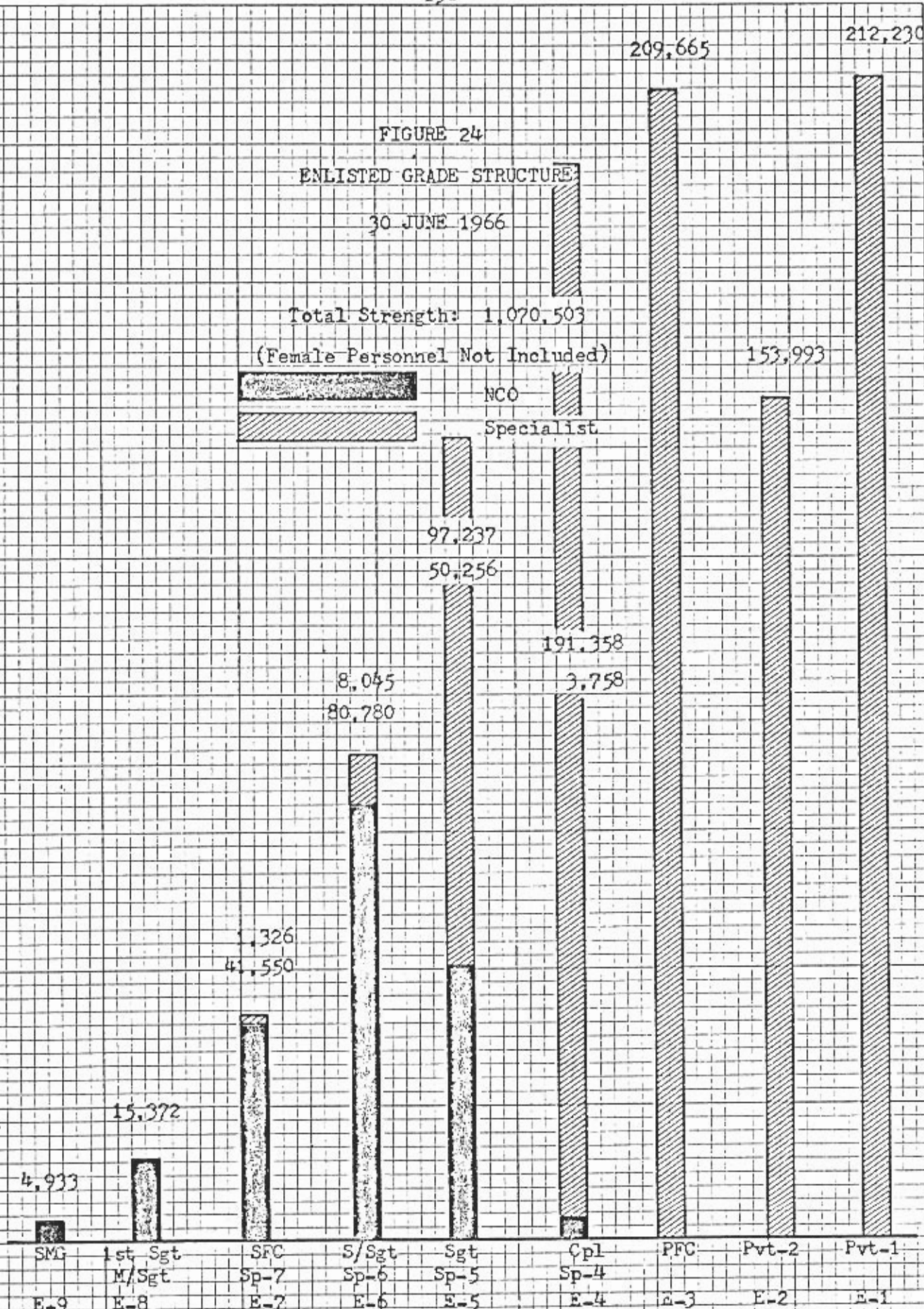
Total Strength: 1,070,503

(Female Personnel Not Included)



NCO

Specialist



SMG

1st Sgt
M/Sgt

SFC

Sp-7

S/Sgt

Sp-6

Sgt

Sp-5

Cpl

Sp-4

PFC

E-3

Pvt-2

E-2

Pvt-1

E-1

4,933

15,372

41,550
1,326

80,780
8,045

97,237
50,256

191,358
3,758

209,665

153,993

212,230

FIGURE 25

PERCENTAGE COMPARISON, NCO GRADE STRUCTURE

(Specialists Omitted)

June 1939	("Old Army")
June 1952	- . - . - . - . - . - . - . - . - .	(Pre-Specialist Era)
February 1958	- - - - -	(Pre-Super Grade Era)
June 1966	—————	(Present)

E-9 E-8 E-7 E-6 E-5 E-4 E-3

