



# Continuing Progress DURING THE “YEAR OF THE NCO”

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PHOTO: SSG Demetreus Perez, left, and SPC Jackie Greenlee keep watch over a mountain pass following a mission near Forward Operating Base Lane in the Zabul province of Afghanistan, March 2009. (U.S. Army, SSG Adam Mancini)

**W**E HAVE HAD GREAT PROGRESS with the professional maturity of the noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps in the seven years since the War on Terrorism began. Our noncommissioned officers have evolved to a level of excellence unmatched by any other warfighting organization in the world. This evolution makes the Army theme “Year of the NCO” appropriate for 2009.

When the “Warrior Ethos” and “Soldiers’ Creed” were introduced, they provided the direction needed to help transform to a mind-set consistent with a more expeditious and modular approach in our warfighting units. The warrior-first mentality has had a profound impact on how we approach training and on the expectations we place on our noncommissioned officers. It has helped develop the confidence and spirit needed to face the enemy and endure the challenges of combat.

## **Focus on Warfighting Skills**

One of the most powerful evolutions derived from the warrior-first mentality is the universal focus on a common skill set. All Soldiers, regardless of military occupational specialty, must be able to perform the basic warfighting tasks required to fight and win on the battlefield. Today, we have Soldiers in low-density military occupational specialties that are as confident and competent in their warfighting skills as the combat arms Soldier. The days of “I only work in the motor pool” are done. Everyone is a warrior first. Today, there is nothing uncommon about seeing artillerymen entering buildings and clearing rooms, logisticians being responsible for commanders’ personal security details, food service specialists providing convoy security,

or armor crewmen conducting dismounted patrols in an urban environment.

This transformation is reflected throughout the structure of today's Army. We now can see the most diverse and flexible task forces ever assembled. Task Force Mountain has consisted of cavalry, armor, mechanized infantry, light infantry, and fires brigades; all performing as maneuver forces. Each brigade also continues to conduct operations unique to their traditional roles, and admirably so.

Noncommissioned officers are the force behind this transformation. They are responsible for the development of our Soldiers' individual-, crew-, and team-level tasks. They understand the importance of inspiring and motivating their Soldiers, even in tasks beyond their ordinary scope of expertise. I see the success of their actions every day during battle-field circulation. I have conducted dismounted and mounted patrols with every unit in our task force, and witnessed the level of professionalism we have in our Army—it is inspiring.

Our renewed focus and mentality has helped shape our core competencies as warfighters and strengthened our mental and physical toughness. It has developed the spiritual foundation needed to have the will to fight under the most adverse conditions. Soldiers are prepared for day-to-day patrols in 120-degree heat on the streets of Baghdad wearing full armor, or for patrolling in the mountains of Afghanistan at elevations where only animals should roam. This toughness, this drive, has been our way of life for the past seven years. Our noncommissioned officers have instilled these strengths in our Soldiers—confidence through competence.

## **Transformation to an Agile Force**

The last time the Army celebrated the “Year of the NCO” was in 1989. Much has changed since then, both in the Army and in the world. As our force has transformed into a more agile, modular force to respond to a wider variety of threats worldwide, our Soldiers and noncommissioned officers have rapidly adapted to those changes. The role of the noncommissioned officer, however, has not changed. They are still leaders who train, inspire, and motivate Soldiers. They enforce the highest standards to meet their commanders' vision. During the past 20 years, new challenges have both enhanced the noncommissioned officer's role and made his job more difficult.

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The Army Force Generation process increased our ability to attain proficiency in our warfighting requirements and develop a sophisticated mastery of them while deployed in theater. This is a significant change from what we used to experience with peaks and valleys in the band of excellence. The aggressive operational tempo we have endured the last six years has seasoned our NCOs and given them an exceptionally high level of understanding of the global situation. Today's Army maintains the highest degree of experience and toughness in its history.

Whether our Soldiers are heading to Iraq or Afghanistan, the training requirements are the same, and our current training cycle reflects the need for this kind of flexibility. This need was demonstrated recently when the 3d Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, was sent to Afghanistan after months of training for Iraq. They were able to deploy to an entirely different theater on short notice with little effect on their readiness. This adaptability has grown out of our new training requirements, which have become a lot more demanding and sophisticated as well.

Today, 90 percent of battlefield casualties survive because of the force's level of disciplined proficiency and the competence and skill of our medics. Our noncommissioned officers use the Medical Simulations Training Center to train our first responders to a higher degree, and under more realistic conditions, than ever before. For instance, they replicate the point of injury at a remote mountainside in Afghanistan or a roadside in Iraq, with all of the sounds, smells, and confusion of battle. They perform tactical combat care on state-of-the-art mannequin casualties, gaining invaluable and realistic experience. In the second phase of training, they refresh their skills by performing life-saving emergency surgery procedures on cadavers. In the final phase, they culminate their training by practicing critical and essential life-saving tasks on living tissue.



U.S. Army, Doug Schraub

**A Soldier training at the Medical Simulations Training Center, Fort Campbell, Kentucky, in 2008.**

After receiving this training, many of our medics have the opportunity to test their skills in Afghanistan and Iraq. In one notable case, a forward operating base came under attack from ten 107-mm rockets. One rocket hit its intended target, instantly killing one Soldier and severely injuring two others. Medics on the scene responded without hesitation. The training they conducted prior to their deployment gave them the edge of steady confidence in their skills and a calm attitude in a time of chaos. The casualties were immediately evacuated and the medics credited with saving the Soldiers' lives. This methodology has allowed us to develop the most competent, confident, and capable medics possible to support Soldiers on the battlefield.

## New Skill Sets

As equipment and weapons become more advanced, NCOs are expected to master more complex systems and then train others to master them as well. In 1989, when I served in the 2d Ranger Battalion, we had the best equipment available at the time, which today would seem antiquated. We carried load-bearing equipment versus the improved outer tactical vest with modular components. We had first-generation Gortex and polypropylene as our cold- and wet-weather protection. Now, we have the seven-layer system that can allow our Soldiers to endure temperatures to minus 40 degrees below zero. Additionally, we now have a rapid fielding initiative program that provides all Soldiers state-

of-the-art personal protective equipment and clothing prior to their deployment. We have comfortable, convenient equipment, which can be tailored to the Soldier's individual needs and desires.

A Soldier's weapon is no longer just a rifle—it is a system. As the standard changed from an M-16 rifle zeroed with iron sights to the M-4 with close combat optics, the lethal capability of the Soldier was greatly enhanced. These new capabilities challenge noncommissioned officers, because they are expected to master all of these new components. To train their subordinates, NCOs must understand, become proficient with and master each task associated with these new systems.

Noncommissioned officers train their Soldiers to exploit their weapons systems regardless of job specialty. At the rifle range training has changed. Today, our Soldiers conduct reflexive firing drills as part of their short-range marksmanship. They conduct tactical rifle ranges instead of just the standard qualification tables of old. Our Soldiers are required to maintain proper situational awareness and proper weapons handling when conducting training. Leaders are responsible for the clearing procedures of their Soldiers' weapons.

This responsibility is consistent with the way we do business in combat and must be maintained when we conduct predeployment training. We must replicate the most realistic conditions to help prepare our Soldiers for what will be expected when they are deployed. The days of getting “rodded off the range” with clearing rods are over. When our Soldiers are deployed, they carry live ammunition everywhere. When they leave the wire, they lock and load their weapons. To help mitigate negligent ammunition discharges, weapons discipline is critical to sustain. The marksmanship training model we use today is strictly realistic and focused.

A very beneficial and critical position in every modern squad or section is the “designated marksman.” Many of our Soldiers receive this formal training at Fort Benning, and it has a significant impact on our ability to place accurate shots at longer distances.

Prior to our deployment to Afghanistan, one of our female noncommissioned officers from a forward support company attended the marksmen training and was the first female to graduate from the course. Truly inspirational to our Soldiers, she



exemplified the warrior-first mentality. All Soldiers need the skill set required to face the enemy in close combat, regardless of their gender or MOS. Our advanced training courses currently reflect this. Noncommissioned officers bear the responsibility of keeping all Soldiers' combat skills proficient. The level of confidence and competence of our Soldiers to employ their weapons systems today is unmatched in our history.

Another variable having a profound impact is the Army's emphasis on "combatives training." All Soldiers train on these critical tasks as part of their common warrior skill set. Fort Benning is the proponent for the modern Army combatives system, which consists of four levels from beginning to advanced. Today, our Soldiers leave basic training with level-one certification. This focus has sparked such significant interest in our Soldiers, that it is common to see some form of combatives training being conducted in all units. In the past, there may have been martial arts or bayonet training, but never with the level of interest as in today's combatives programs.

Noncommissioned officers understand the importance of combatives training to enhance their warfighting capability and build confidence and aggressiveness within their Soldiers. There are formal competitive events planned at the unit level as well as intensive individual training in preparation for competing in professional tournaments. It's equally important to maintain this emphasis while deployed. At our invitation, professional martial arts instructors came to Iraq and Afghanistan to help sustain this skill set by conducting seminars. They were always well received by our Soldiers and definitely added value to the units' existing combatives programs and Soldiers' technical abilities. This paradigm change associated with combatives has had a huge impact on our entire Army. All of our Soldiers now have the ability and spirit to "close with" the enemy and destroy him, bearing both the confidence and discipline of a true professional.

## Responsibility and Growth

Another profound consequence of the warrior-first mentality is how much more we expect of our noncommissioned officers. Given the magnitude of responsibility noncommissioned officers have at

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squad and platoon levels, in two separate theaters of conflict, every noncommissioned officer is critical to achieving success and saving lives. This requires them to perform at the highest level imaginable, with no micromanaging or suppression of initiative from superiors. They are required to make decisions that can determine the life or death of the Soldiers they lead. They are doing things that far exceed what was required of them in the past. They must "leave the wire" prepared to face the enemy with courage and confidence in their ability. Their subordinates look up to them with trust and respect, knowing that their sergeant is going to take care of them.

Noncommissioned officers are thus required to have a thorough understanding of their surroundings in combat. They must be intimately aware of the potential threat and the actions required to mitigate risk. They must be able to manage their emotions and the actions and emotions of their subordinates to ensure force escalation is proportionate with the perceived threat. They must have the visceral fortitude to lead their Soldiers during the most chaotic and violent engagements and achieve success professionally—with honor.

During our tour in Iraq, one of our mounted patrols hit a command-detonated improvised



The author (left) with coalition leaders on Forward Operating Base Delta in Wasit Province, Iraq, 18 July 2008.

U.S. Army, SSG Michel Sauret

explosive device. After the blast, the patrol executed its battle drill and identified what appeared to be three individuals responsible for initiating the IED. The Soldiers pursued these three until they found them hiding in the reeds of a ravine. They could have easily made the choice to kill the suspects on sight. Their buddies—in the vehicle hit by the IED—were injured, one severely. During the pursuit, the Soldiers maintained the moral discipline of restraint. They ultimately detained the suspects and turned them over to the proper authorities.

In another case, while in town during a security halt, a patrol noticed a disturbance among a group of local Iraqis. When the patrol intervened to mollify them, a teenager threw a piece of brick at one of our gunners who was standing in the turret of his vehicle. He was struck in the face, and his jaw was broken. The gunner could easily have shot at the teenager, but he chose to respond with nothing more than a stern look. This is the level of discipline and professionalism that the Army expects, and it prevails within our ranks due to the leadership of our NCOs.

As operations in Iraq and Afghanistan shift increasingly from conducting lethal and kinetic operations to building civil capacity and assisting those countries' security forces, our NCOs are called on to perform tasks they never would have been required to do 20 years ago. Today's NCO understands governance, economic development, the importance of reconstruction, and the nuances of reconciliation. They associate with provincial leaders, sheiks, village elders, and school principals. They get to know them personally and talk to them professionally. In this situation, NCOs' leadership and values are as important as their warfighting skills.

Today's NCOs are required to be both warriors fighting insurgents and civic leaders building relationships with the local townsmen. No training can adequately prepare them for this complexity, yet they continuously demonstrate their ability to adapt and lead. The maturity and resourcefulness of modern NCOs is visible in their ability to rapidly change modes from warrior to nation builder as the situation changes. They are credible in the eyes of local leaders, and that fact speaks volumes.

Perhaps one reason for this higher level of maturity in our noncommissioned officer corps is that

they are generally smarter and better educated today than they once were. Twenty years ago, a Soldier with a high school diploma was considered the norm. Now, it is not unique for an enlisted Soldier to have a master's degree. With older men and women entering the service, they bring a new level of maturity as well. They understand how to rise to the level of their potential based on past challenges and experiences. They also bring leadership and management skills with them, adding value to the corps as a whole. Those who have served back-to-back deployments also bring a level of experience to the force not seen in a long time.

With this success, however, there has been sacrifice. Our operational tempo has required many of our Soldiers to deploy multiple times in the past few years, which puts a significant strain on their families. They miss the birth of their children, the first baseball and soccer seasons for their sons and daughters, and the school plays that are so important for families to experience together. Their absence during holidays, when life-long family memories are made, is also challenging to accept for our Soldiers and Army families. These types of experiences can never be recovered.

Our NCOs not only deal with these stressful events personally, but they help their subordinates overcome them as well. One of the ways our noncommissioned officers help connect our Soldiers with their families during these very important times is with the use of modern technology. We have witnessed high school graduations, promotions, birthdays, and even an attempt to show the birth of a child through video-television conference. This has had a profound impact on the morale of our Soldiers, and clearly shows our Army families that we try to do everything we can to take care of them.

Another cost associated with our operational tempo is the day-to-day stress inherent with facing the enemy in combat. Our NCOs are required to recognize the symptoms and understand the proper

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**SGT Cory Culpepper, right, and SGT Thomas Marstin, Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment, U.S. Army Europe, work on communication issues during precombat checks near Forward Operating Base Lane, Zabul, Afghanistan, 11 March 2009, before a humanitarian aid mission near the base.**

actions to take for post-traumatic stress. Depending on the level of trauma experienced and the available coping mechanisms, some Soldiers may have a hard time acclimating to regular life upon redeployment. They bring the stress home and then are challenged with responding to family issues. Unfortunately, there is still a certain degree of stigma attached to seeking help. Not only do our NCOs need to have the courage and self-confidence to receive the appropriate care, but they must be advocates for their Soldiers to do the same. We have seen an increase in the number of referrals to our behavioral health specialists upon redeployment. This is largely due to NCO involvement in Soldiers' well-being and efforts to ensure that they receive the required assistance. To learn how to identify Soldiers with post-traumatic stress, our junior NCOs need mentorship and coaching from more experienced leaders.

## Mentoring our Subordinates

Finding time to mentor our junior NCOs is challenging. Generally, units have a 12-month period to reset, train, and deploy. During this period, the focus is on training the specific tasks needed to set the conditions for success during the deployment. When not training these tasks, NCOs are helping prepare their families for separation. NCOs do not

have the time to socialize with their unit members. This has affected junior NCO development. Noncommissioned officers need time other than training to talk with their subordinates to better understand our Soldiers' strengths and weaknesses and learn what motivates them, both personally and professionally. Furthermore, social time with unit members builds cohesiveness and esprit de corps. We used to have scheduled events during off-duty time to help with team building processes and to get to know our Soldiers better. Now, all available time is spent on much-needed family maintenance.

The fundamentals required to help shape a junior noncommissioned officer's leadership foundation also do not get the focus they once did. Before

the requirement to have forces deployed to both Afghanistan and Iraq, our training cycle permitted more time to focus on this area. Our NCOs' understanding of the basic reception and integration processes for their Soldiers was thorough. Their ability to conduct personal and professional counseling for performance improvement of their Soldiers is why we have the best NCOs in the world today. Our junior NCOs have not had the opportunity to learn these techniques. Our Army is developing new programs and revising our NCO education system to assist in this area. This will certainly help, but the real benefit will come when our senior NCOs have the time needed to coach subordinates.

## We've Come a Long Way

The level of personal and professional maturity of our noncommissioned officer corps is nothing short of remarkable. We have come a long way in the last seven years during the War on Terrorism and the transformation of our Army. We recognize the challenges we face with an aggressive operational tempo and need to take advantage of the most innovative ways to overcome them. We have the best NCOs of any warfighting organization in the world. They are the backbone of our Army, and it's clearly appropriate to make this year the "Year of the NCO." **MR**