Year of the NCO



A DIVISION COMMANDER'S PERSPECTIVE

Major General Mark Hertling, U.S. Army

Y SHOES WERE SHINED, my greens had a razor crease in the trousers, and I believed I was looking pretty sharp as I reported to my battalion commander as a brand new second lieutenant. But my palms soon became sweaty after hearing what he had to say the first morning I arrived in Germany back in 1976.

"Hertling," said the young-looking, no-nonsense lieutenant colonel, "welcome to the Rogue Battalion. You have one day to meet your Soldiers, find your tanks, and issue an OPORDER. Tomorrow morning at 0400, you'll be in your assembly area in the GDP [General Defense Plan]—and I'll meet you there at 0600. While there, you can talk me through what you do as part of the battalion in the event the Soviet hordes come across the border."

An hour later, I was meeting my platoon sergeant and five tank commanders. Soon after, I realized all the things I had learned in the classroom and in officer basic training didn't even come close to describing the intricacies of my job, or how important the officer/noncommissioned officer (NCO) relationship is. This became even

more crystal clear as the group of NCOs and Soldiers pulled this new "shaved tail" through my first test as a leader. (By the way, the expression "shaved tail" is from the early days of the horse cavalry when the sergeants trimmed the tail of a newly commissioned lieutenant's horse to ensure others stayed away from that mount while the officer was learning equestrian skills. By the time the horse's tail had grown back, the lieutenant was probably ready to "earn his spurs.")

I have had a lot of tests since then, and I've learned a lot about our profession. Many of the more important lessons have come from those who bear the title of "sergeant." At every level where I have had the privilege of commanding and leading Soldiers, the NCOs who I've been associated with have shared the toughest of times and the hardest of missions, and they have upheld the most rigorous of standards. Together, we have watched in wonder as our Soldiers accomplished that which seemed impossible; we have laughed and then shook our heads at the crazy things that all young (and sometimes old) Soldiers do; we have struggled together to reach an objective, execute a plan, or accomplish a mission. And we've sometimes shed a tear together—in silence, and with self-imposed and needless embarrassment—at a memorial service for one of our own who has made the ultimate sacrifice.

And now, this year marks the second time we as an Army have dedicated a year's theme to the NCO Corps. The first was back in 1989 when I was

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PHOTO: CSM Roger P. Blackwood and MG Hertling on the top of the Sinjar Ridge in Northern Iraq, overlooking Syria, November 2007. (DOD)

a major, and we celebrated that year with the publication of what is now known as the NCO Creed. Since then, a lot of things have changed, but many things have stayed the same, and there are a few issues that rightfully need renewed dedication that we may want to take a close look at during this Year of the NCO.

What Has Stayed the Same

First, strong relationships between officers and NCOs—at various ranks—remain paramount. We all know that. This relationship—from that of platoon leader/platoon sergeant to that of division commander/command sergeant major (CSM) and echelons above—requires trust and support throughout the officer/NCO chain. This relationship is critical. We must discuss it, build upon it, and continue to improve it. Like a marriage, the officer/NCO relationship needs constant work. We ought to make this part of our discussion during this Year of the NCO.

My initial experience with great NCOs and Soldiers probably had much to do with the positive growth I experienced and the many things I learned in my first assignment, but that sort of constructive relationship is not always present. Not all NCOs are great mentors, and, candidly, not all officers are easily trained. However, that shouldn't prevent

us from understanding that the platoon leader/platoon sergeant relationship needs a team approach, probably with more caring and attention from the NCO, because the sergeant is usually much older and—due to now having multiple combat tours—much more experienced than the new lieutenant. At the company level, the commander/ first sergeant relationship needs a lot more communication behind the scenes from both sides, given that the company commander is now the "Old Man," and the first sergeant is managing and leading Soldiers and subordinate NCOs in a large organization for the first time and now both the captain and the first sergeant usually have multiple combat tours. The relationship between the battalion/brigade commander and command sergeant major is one of mutual support, with a give-and-take that

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requires continuous exchange and dialogue between two professionals at the peak of their careers.

Everyone has stories about what happens between officers and NCOs at these various levels of command. As a division commander, I sometimes felt like a referee, receiving new—and extremely interesting—stories from both sides of the chain about how we relate to each other. For the most part, our exchanges are healthy give-and-take, but there are times when both sides need to work through some friction.

For example, when I was a new brigade commander I did not feel I was receiving the support I required from our brigade combat team command sergeant major, who had been in the job too long and had his own thoughts on how I should run the brigade. We often—and wrongly—allowed our "agree to disagree" conclusions to end our discussions.

When he left the unit, I began interviewing new CSMs. The one I eventually picked answered my



CSM Roger P. Blackwood, 1st Armored Division command sergeant, talks to assistant division commanders BG James C. Boozer and BG Raymond A. Thomas at a memorial service for a 1st Armored Division Soldier near Baquba, Diyala Province, Iraq, May 2008.

one key interview question perfectly. "CSM," I asked, "in the future, if I'm thinking about establishing a policy that you don't support, how will you address it with me." Having just experienced the actions of my old CSM, who sometimes unprofessionally verbalized his disagreements with me in open forums, I couldn't wait to hear his answer.

"Well, sir, if I strongly disagree with it, I'll come into your office; we'll close the door and discuss it. If I can change your mind, that will be great. I'll then be able to support the policy 100 percent."

"Yeah, CSM, but what if I don't change my mind?"

"Oh, that's too easy, sir. Given that it's a legal, moral, and ethical policy, I'll still close the door; I'll do my best to present an opposing view. But then, if you really want to make it the policy, then I'll salute, open the door, and go out and support it 150 percent!" We had an extremely close professional and personal relationship the rest of the time we served together—and we still have that relationship today.

Secondly, an area that has "stayed the same," but one we don't pay too much attention to, is a simple requirement imposed on every leader, officer or NCO: mentor one level down, train two levels down. That is part of Army training doctrine, and



COL Michael Bills and CSM William Burns, commander and command sergeant major of the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment, discuss the situation on the ground during a battlefield circulation in Mosul. The 3d ACR leaders were surveying the progress of an Iraqi-led joint operation in the city.

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from my experience, it is the only way to go. As a division commander, I mentored brigade commanders and trained battalion commanders. As a brigade commander, I hopefully gave advice that helped prepare my battalion commanders—if chosen—to eventually be successful brigade commanders, but I also spent significant time in the field and on the ranges with my company commanders showing them how to prepare their forces for the eventualities of combat and how to meet my commander's intent. And I also know that our great 1st Armored Division command sergeant major spent a lot of time sharing professional opinions and advice with the subordinate brigade CSMs, but he spent a lot more time discussing training, how to care for Soldiers, and the intricacies of supply accountability and sustainment with battalion CSMs—and I know this because I saw him do it.

However, the lower you go in the chain of command, the more you see the same people both "mentor" and "train" the same individuals. How

do we address that? Can a battalion commander and CSM really focus on mentoring commanders and first sergeants while emphasizing the training of platoon leaders and platoon sergeants? I believe they can.

There is a great scene in the movie We Were Soldiers Once and Young. Mel Gibson, playing Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore, and Sam Elliott, playing Command Sergeant Major Basil Plumley, are together with all the unit's officers conducting tough and very realistic combat training in preparation for combat. It's obvious that the battalion commander is training two levels down, but he and the CSM—together—are showing the leaders their own unique perspective of taking care of Soldiers on the battlefield.

As a division commander, I saw some great and innovative professional development in several battalions, but the best was when a battalion CSM trained second

lieutenant platoon leaders. Another time, the battalion commander conducted a training session on command maintenance and supply discipline with all the platoon sergeants in the unit. During these two sessions, I observed some of the best professional dialogue and command interaction I've ever seen during a training session. And I must admit, the battalion in which this occurred was one of our best. They got it.

This brings me to the last point. There is an expression and a philosophy we must work together to eliminate. There is the feeling by some—on both the officer and the NCO side—that some things are only done by officers and other things only done by sergeants, what we sometimes refer to as officer or NCO "business," as if there was some imaginary boundary line imposed due to the rank we wear.

When I hear someone use this phrase, I get suspicious because I feel it is an inappropriate and unprofessional attempt at creating a divide, or worse, a desire to protect a turf. This is not appropriate, because in our profession, we are all in this together, and there should not be any gaps. During this Year of the NCO, as our Army continues to fight an entrenched global foe and we need the best team we've ever put together; we don't have time for such arbitrary and capricious statements.

What Is Different

Just before the Year of the NCO began, we fielded brand new operational and training manuals (FM 3-0, *Operations*, in February 2008, and FM 7-0, *Training for Full Spectrum Operations*, in December 2008). This is significant not only because it is the first time in our Army's history that our operational and our training doctrines have been so linked, but also because it is the first time that the two key manuals have—simultaneously—incorporated recent combat and operational experiences and the results of Army and joint transformation efforts.

FM 3-0 requires us to analyze and adjust the way we do things as leaders and as officer/NCO teams. We must address a newly defined spectrum of conflict in training and deployments, a new construct of stability and information operations, new warfighting functions, the effects of modular forces on leader development, and demands of a complex security environment. If that isn't enough, the new FM 7-0 requires us to change

from "training the force" to "training for full spectrum operations" with the entire training construct shaped by the Army force-generation model. All of this really presses home the point that "this ain't your father's Oldsmobile!"

One part of the new operational doctrine specifically grabbed my attention. It states: "Army forces *combine* offensive, defensive, and stability or civil support operations simultaneously as part of an interdependent joint force to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative, accepting prudent risks to create opportunities to achieve decisive results." Whew! Just reading that sentence—and thinking about the specified and implied tasks it entails—tells me we must do a lot of analysis to ensure all Soldiers, platoon through corps leaders, and all professionals in our ranks realize the responsibility we have on our shoulders. And it tells me our Nation expects a lot from its Soldiers—more so than ever before.

As battlefield conditions continuously change and we apply our operational and training doctrine to them, we see all kinds of new and unusual requirements. For example, when 1st Armored Division's headquarters returned from a 15-month deployment to Iraq in late 2008, we experienced the mass exodus of most of the trained leaders and teams that contributed to our successes, and a new group of leaders and teams that will deploy with the division in the future gradually replaced them.

New Soldiers slowly arrived, but most of the key primary staff officers and "iron majors" who hold a division headquarters together in combat wouldn't arrive until the summer of 2009. But we had an advantage. The newly assigned staff sergeants major stepped up to bridge the gap between the early departures and the late arrivals. With the great experiences and knowledge that comes from battle staff training, these senior NCOs provided the needed expertise. That's an issue that we had to address at the division level, but I can think of myriad things which need addressing at the various levels where officers and NCOs share a view of the

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battlefield, and they are only limited by imagination and the state of teaming in the unit.

During this time of high operational combat tempo, the officer/NCO team is—and should be—more focused on family than ever before. We are a professional force, and a more "married" force than we've ever been before, and the support of those families is extremely critical to mission accomplishment, the retention of our quality Soldiers, and the sustainment of our professional values.

When our oldest son reported to his first Army posting a few years ago, his welcome was very different from the one I received those years ago during the Cold War that I described in the first paragraph of this article. His unit was training hard and preparing for their eventual deployment as part of the first phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom. However, imagine my surprise when we talked on the phone and he told me about his first day with his team.

"It was amazing, Dad," he told me over the phone. "I arrived at 1500 at the orderly room, and my platoon sergeant told me to meet him at the company at 1800. We then spent the next several hours driving around to every married Soldier's house where he introduced me to my Soldiers and my Soldier's families. When we returned, he sat me down and told me how important it was for me to know the families of those we would be taking to war—and how much they depended on the platoon leadership team to bring them all back home. I've never felt such responsibility in my life; it certainly told me how important it was to train these Soldiers and make sure they're taken care of."

What a simple act, and what a great lesson passed on by a great NCO to his new lieutenant. That platoon sergeant—who now serves as a first sergeant—defined "caring for Soldiers" to this new officer better than any PowerPoint slide or classroom presentation ever could! We need that kind of leadership training throughout our Army.

Finally, there's something I would ask our terrific NCOs to help us eliminate. While a division commander, I noticed an increase in the use of the derogatory term, "L.T." ("el-tee"), coming from the mouths of Soldiers, and even some NCOs, when they addressed their youngest officers. When I mentioned this to my wingman—the 1st Armored Division CSM—he smiled and said, "Sir, I've noticed that too; and I think I've found a way to eliminate it."

When I told him I was very interested in what that method was, he explained to me that he heard this once and asked the individual what he thought would happen if his Soldiers used the term "Sarge" to address him. That immediately made the point, and the offending individual understood that we all need to eliminate any disrespectful term leveled toward junior officers—whether it's meant as one or not. If I find a lieutenant who allows Soldiers to use this slang title of "el-tee," that officer will quickly get counseling from me—and so will the NCO who used the term!

NCO Mentorship

During this Year of the NCO, there will be many opportunities for NCOs to take care of our Soldiers who will fight our next great battles, and there will be many opportunities for our officers to grow from NCO mentorship. All of this is important as we—together—lead the next greatest generation of warriors. Take this as sound advice from a guy who has had the opportunity to serve with the most professional noncommissioned officers in the most respected and most accomplished Army the world has ever seen.

Naming 2009 the Year of the NCO is both timely and appropriate. We need to keep reminding ourselves that in a profession that is based on great relationships, paying attention to the details is the way we continue to improve. **MR**

The NCO Creed

No one is more professional than I.

I am a Noncommissioned Officer, a leader of soldiers. As a Noncommissioned Officer, I realize that I am a member of a time honored corps, which is known as "The Backbone of the Army". I am proud of the Corps of Noncommissioned Officers and will at all times conduct myself so as to bring credit upon the Corps, the Military Service and my country regardless of the situation in which I find myself. I will not use my grade or position to attain pleasure, profit, or personal safety.

Competence is my watchword.

My two basic responsibilities will always be uppermost in my mind -- accomplishment of my mission and the welfare of my soldiers. I will strive to remain tactically and technically proficient. I am aware of my role as a Noncommissioned Officer. I will fulfill my responsibilities inherent in that role. All soldiers are entitled to outstanding leadership; I will provide that leadership. I know my soldiers and I will always place their needs above my own.

I will communicate consistently with my soldiers and never leave them uninformed. I will be fair and impartial when recommending both

rewards and punishment.

Officers of my unit will have maximum time to accomplish their duties; they will not have to accomplish mine. I will earn their respect and confidence as well as that of my soldiers. I will be loyal to those with whom I serve; seniors, peers, and subordinates alike. I will exercise initiative by taking appropriate action in the absence of orders. I will not compromise my integrity, nor my moral courage. I will not forget, nor will I allow my

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This INSCOM G3 Soldier has deployed twice to lraq and is scheduled for hier third deployment to Afghanistan. She is currently pursuing a Bachelors Degree and has served as a Division Intelligence Operations NCOIC, Team Leader and Intelligence Analyst.

I am the NCO!



leaders!



comrades to forget that we are

professionals, Noncommissioned Officers,

Army NCO | No One is More Professional than I



















2009 General William E. DePuy Combined Arms Center Writing Competition "Leadership Development from Initial Entry Training to the Battlefield"

* RESULTS *

The Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, is pleased to announce the winners of the 2009 General William E. DePuy Writing Competition.

1st Place Kevin D. Stringer, Ph.D., "Educating the Strategic Corporal:

A Paradigm Shift"

2nd Place LTC Richard G. Malish, "Tactical Combat Casualty Care: A Case Study of

Technical Professionalism in the NCO Corps"

3rd Place MSG John W. Proctor, "Developing NCO Leaders for the 21st Century"

4th Place MAJ Kenneth R. Williams, "The Noncommissioned Officer as

Moral Exemplar"

Honorable Mention

Mr. Jose L. Delgado, "The Role of the NCO in Motivating and Training the Next Generation of Soldiers"

Mr. William B. King, "Military Education During Wartime – Fundamentals are Key to Versatility on the Battlefield"

Ms. Krista L. Selph, "Virtual Environments and the Army: Army Learning from Prospect to Leader"

SGT Jared M. Tracy, "Making Modernity Happen: NCO and Technology in Historical and Contemporary Perspectives"

MAJ (Retired) Donald E. Vandergriff, "A Journey from Wyoming to Kansas:

The Revolution in Noncommissioned Leader Development has Already Begun"

Members of the panel who reviewed this year's contest submissions are:

General Martin E. Dempsey, Commander, Training and Doctrine Command Command Sergeant Major Kenneth O. Preston, Sergeant Major of the Army Brigadier General (Retired) Huba Wass de Czege Dr. Leonard Wong, Research Professor of Military Strategy, U.S. Army War College