

Former SMAs Share Lessons with Sergeants Major Course Students

By Jonathan (Jay) Koester - NCO Journal

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Five former sergeants major of the Army joined the first senior enlisted advisor to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on April 12 to share lessons with Class 66 students of the Sergeants Major Course at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas.

Current Sgt. Maj. of the Army Daniel A. Dailey introduced the esteemed panel, telling the students, "This is your opportunity to tap into more than 250 years of military experience, spanning from prior to Vietnam all the way to present day."

After opening remarks focusing on the challenges the SMAs faced during their tenures, a student asked the panel, "As the Army is drawing down, the Army's vision is changing toward a younger, faster promotion process. What are your thoughts on sacrificing experience with selecting young Soldiers to fill those senior enlisted positions?"

Former SMA Raymond F. Chandler, who served as the 14th sergeant major of the Army from 2011 to 2015, took on the question first, and immediately dropped a truth bomb on the class.



Former Sergeant Major of the Army Gene C. McKinney (left) speaks while former SMA Jack L. Tilley looks on during a panel in front of Class 66 students of the Sergeants Major Course on April 12 at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas. (Photos by Meghan Portillo / NCO Journal)

“Just because someone is experienced doesn’t mean they’re worth a damn,” Chandler said. “It’s about what have you done for me lately and what do you bring to the table. If you can’t meet those basic standards that you expect your Soldiers to meet, then you, in fact, are no value added and probably ought to hit the door. Basic things: Do you actually go to the range? Do you pencil-whip your PT test? Do you meet the height and weight standards? Those are the criteria at any age that are important to those Soldiers who you’re going to lead.”

Former SMA Jack L. Tilley, who served as the 12th sergeant major of the Army from 2000 to 2004, had earlier talked about his efforts to increase NCO pay. He said promotions for young Soldiers are another important part of rewarding the best in the Army.

“I’m all for accelerated promotion,” Tilley said. “I think if you have some people who are really aggressive, want to get out there and do the job, then you need to pay them for it, and you

need to get them up that ladder.”

Former SMA Gene C. McKinney, who served as the 10th sergeant major of the Army from 1995 to 1997, advised the students to continually look for opportunities to serve the Army in ways that would help their advancement.

“You have to find the hard jobs. You have to go get them,” McKinney said. “Look at the difference between a pond in a forest and another pond that is being aerated. You don’t get mosquitoes in that aerated pond. But you get mosquitoes in that pond that just sits there still and stagnant. If you want to sit still and stagnate, you’re going to have mosquitoes all over you.”

Former SMA Julius W. Gates, who served as the eighth sergeant major of the Army from 1987 to 1991, continued on the theme of hard work being more important to promotion than experience. Gates often had the class laughing with his folksy humor.

“What you need to do is promote the NCOs who are qualified. If they are not qualified, they should not be promoted,” Gates said. “We have a society today that’s a, ‘What’s in it for me?’ society. ‘My name is Jimmy; I’ll take all you gimme. I don’t have to work for nothing.’ In the United States Army, you have to earn your promotion. You don’t just sit there and say, ‘Hey, promote me.’”

As the panel shifted to closing remarks, former Army Command Sgt. Maj. William J. Gainey, who served as the first senior enlisted advisor to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 2005 to 2008, told the students that, just that week, he had talked to a suicidal Soldier and helped him.

“Be involved,” Gainey said. “Don’t do like some and when you retire say, ‘Well, I’m disconnecting from the Army.’ Be involved. You are a Soldier for life. When you die, you should be a Soldier dressed in your uniform with a flag over your casket.”

In earlier remarks, McKinney made reference to the sexual harassment accusations that eventually led to the end of his tenure. McKinney was suspended from his duties as SMA in 1997. Though he was cleared of all harassment charges, he was found guilty of obstructing justice and demoted to the rank of master sergeant in 1998. In his closing remarks, McKinney said he had felt left behind by the Army since then.

“I served in the Army for 30 years,” McKinney said. “I gave everything I could give. For almost 20 years, I thought the Army had forgotten about me, until Sgt. Maj. Dailey invited me to this panel. I didn’t think I had anything to contribute to you. Now I know better. So I appreciate Sgt. Maj. Dailey inviting me here to participate in this panel. Thank you.”





Class 66 of the Sergeants Major Course listen to a panel that includes, from left, former Army Command Sgt. Maj. William J. Gainey, former SMA Julius W. Gates, former SMA Gene C. McKinney, former SMA Jack L. Tilley, former SMA Kenneth O. Preston and former SMA Raymond F. Chandler.

Tilley spoke of how much his years in the Army made him a better person, and he urged the students to remember their responsibilities.

“The Army really changed my life,” Tilley said. “I wasn’t a good kid when I was younger. In fact, I was a bad kid. I used to tell people that when I look back on my life I probably would have been dead by the time I was 25. The Army really changed my life. Any successes I’ve had in life, even after the Army, have been because of the Army.

“All I ever ask of anybody in this room is just do your job,” Tilley said. “Stay focused on your Soldiers. Understand what the commitment is. You have to understand, our job is to win wars for our country. You have a hell of a responsibility. Stay focused, and do what you’re supposed to do.”

Former SMA Kenneth O. Preston, who served as the 13th sergeant major of the Army from 2004 to 2011, urged Class 66 to use the knowledge they gain at the Sergeants Major Academy to become good teachers for the next generation of Soldiers.

“Everything that you gain here at this institution, as you go back out to the big Army or your respective services, take the knowledge you gained here and take it back and pass it on to

your troops,” Preston said. “It’s really the information that you take back that allows you to be a teacher.”