



(Graphic by NCO Journal)

# Location of the Command Sergeant Major

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**I**n honor of the 50th anniversary of command sergeant major pioneers, I would like to share my perspective of this prestigious position in the U.S. Army.

In July 1967, under the direction of the 24th Chief of Staff of the Army, General Harold K. Johnson, the Command Sergeants Major Program was established. In December 1967, the first 192 sergeants major were selected for all major commands of the Army. The following year, a new rank insignia was authorized for sergeants major assigned as the principal noncommissioned officer of battalions, and higher, known as the command sergeant major.<sup>1</sup>

## Responsibilities of the Command Sergeant Major

"Trooping the lines," is the easiest answer to the hardest question, where is the command sergeant major?

[AR 600-20](#) states:

The command sergeant major is a positional title that designates the senior noncommissioned officer of the command at battalion or higher levels. He or she carries out policies and standards, advises the commander on the performance, training, appearance, and conduct of enlisted Soldiers. The command sergeant major administers the unit noncommissioned officer's development program.<sup>2</sup>

That is the doctrinal answer to what a command sergeant major's core tasks are. However, what is not specified is the command sergeant major's role during unified land operations.

The *Approved Order of Martial Discipline*, written in 1591, states that the "sergeant major ought to be a man of great courage, for that his office is always to be in the face of the enemy. In time of battle, he ought to be a man of singular invention, at a sudden to perceive and prevent the situation, terror, and presence of the enemy."<sup>3</sup>

Retired Lt. Gen. Robert A. Wetzel, former battalion commander of the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, gave a fantastic description of the command sergeant major's importance in *The Sergeant Major's Role: Leadership to Show the Way*.<sup>4</sup> At crucial moments, Wetzel says, the command sergeant major must provide the shot of confidence, discipline, and backbone that make bone-weary Soldiers and overtaxed units get up and go. By so doing, the command sergeant major assumes a larger-than-life role that influences the individual Soldier and inspires him or her to do things they thought were beyond their ability.

This influential role, however, is not something that simply occurs magically when that first bullet is fired. It is a perception that grows during those daily visits in peacetime, on the firing range, in the barracks, in private counseling sessions, and in the professionalism of the command sergeant major's every word and action.

There is no substitute for the influence that a command sergeant major can exert; it is as much of a combat multiplier as a minefield or a good intelligence network.

## Presence Matters

The common sense answer to where the command sergeant major should be is, at or near the point of friction during critical moments in order to provide the commander with an unbiased assessment.

The command sergeant major shares the commander's mission by interacting with Soldiers by eliminating friction, sharing information, and providing feedback to the commander while leveraging organizational processes to facilitate control of the unit.

The command sergeant major must also understand the operations process and the commander's and staff's capabilities in order to confirm that the commander's intent for mission accomplishment is delivered and understood.



The Sergeants Major Course, Class 69, students gathered January 10, 2019, and participated in a leadership panel to discuss the Command Sgt. Major and Sgt. Major roles and responsibilities in the U.S. Army. Using the six Leader Core Competencies of readiness, communication, leadership, training management, operations and program management, the speakers were able to give guidance to the students through their education, training and experience. Story and photo by Danielle O'Donnell, Public Affairs.

The command sergeant major needs to be present during mission analysis, providing input and feedback to the staff, which has been filtered through his or her combined experience, knowledge, and understanding of the commander's intent. It is here that the command sergeant major can have a positive effect on a mission's outcome.

Communication between staff primaries and the command sergeant major is essential. Obvious topics for discussion are personnel strength and requisitions with the S-1 (personnel), sustainment and battlefield replacement with the S-4 (logistics), medical evacuation and casualty assessments with the medical planner, and religious support with the chaplain. Equally important is communication and planning with the operations officer, sustainment with the headquarters and headquarters company first sergeant, and general staff operations and timeline enforcement with the executive officer.

By understanding and being present when the commander issues planning guidance, chairing the targeting board, issuing subordinate commander's guidance, and interacting with staff primaries to cultivate a shared understanding of current and future plans, a command sergeant major helps accomplish mission goals by pointing out potential pitfalls and removing areas of friction. These proactive actions will result in a command sergeant major never having to ask a commander what the focus area for the day should be.

Finally, a command sergeant major is distinguished by his or her attitude, mission dedication and desire to win in combat.



## The Pulse of the Organization

Commanders routinely make assessments and issue guidance to their staffs and subordinates with the intent to share necessary information between echelons. This information flow can sometimes become convoluted or adversely changed. It is the command sergeant major's duty to ensure that the commanders' intent reaches Soldiers at the most basic level, to include companies, batteries, and troops.

The command sergeant major's role is to listen and understand the commander's words and ensure those words are understood, while providing feedback and perspective in the form of issues and concerns to the commander.

Since the command sergeant major is in a unique position to observe the morale and fighting spirit of the Soldiers, no one else is better able to report to the commander on the status of the troops. The weight of that opinion will depend on the relationship, but it is always an opinion that the commander will consider.

## Getting to the Why

The most common question for a command sergeant major should be whether or not to accompany the commander or work alone in order to cover more terrain? The answer is complex, situationally independent and based on experience.

Inseparable command teams may appear unified, but could create a barrier which prevents Soldiers from candidly speaking with the command sergeant major.

Conversely, when the members of the command team are not seen together enough, there may be a perception of friction in the command structure that may be difficult to overcome.

Finding the right balance in the command team's relationship is no easy undertaking and should not be taken lightly. "Finding the right balance," means that the command team effectively leads the organization using orders, policies, and guidelines while striving to create a learning environment that allows noncommissioned officers and Soldiers to make sound decisions in the absence of orders.

The commander and command sergeant major operate as a team, but the expectation should be that both

can go their own way to ensure mission accomplishment only to link up at a later time to exchange information on the health and performance of the organization.

## Roles & Relationships

We can use operational experience and leadership development to understand the relationship between the commander and the command sergeant major. This relationship can be traced back to the first time an NCO takes on responsibilities solely as a member of the NCO support channel.

As NCOs progress from platoon sergeant to command sergeant major, their mentorship responsibilities grow. Platoon sergeants not only teach, coach and mentor their platoon NCOs but also have an inherent responsibility to do the same with their platoon leader. First sergeants have a larger responsibility, as they are responsible for the development of the company NCOs, platoon leaders, executive officers, and company commanders. A command sergeant major is responsible for the development of NCOs, junior officers, company command teams, and staff.

The command team must function as a cohesive whole, with their personal relationships grounded in trust, experience, and knowledge to which the command sergeant major contributes.

## Conclusion

In the end, leadership through presence matters. Presence reaffirms standards, discipline, and develops organizational culture.

As the senior enlisted advisor, a command sergeant major is responsible for providing the direction and support Soldiers need to succeed on a daily basis. This is essential for overall organizational success in any endeavor. As such, a command sergeant major's influence and presence must be timely and effectively conveyed throughout the organization by showing that he or she shares the same burden as the Soldiers, regardless of the time of day, weather, or conditions. More importantly, since a command sergeant major is seen as a role model, his or her presence should always be a source of inspiration.■

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## Notes

1. "Department of the Army Message 865848," *Pentagon.mil*, <http://www.tioh.hqda.pentagon.mil/Catalog/Heraldry-Multi.aspx?CategoryId=9168>.

2. *Army Regulation 600-20*, Army Command Policy, (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters Departments of the Army, Nov 2014), para. 2-18 (b) (2).

3. Giles Clayton, *Approved Order of Martial Discipline*, London: I.C. for Abraham Kitsonne, 1591, as cited in *The Officer/NCO Relationship*, (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters Departments of the Army, 1997) 17.

4. Lieutenant General Robert L., "The Sergeant Major's Role - Leadership 'to Show the Way,'" *ARMY*, May 1986, pp. 71-72, as cited in *The Officer/NCO Relationship*, (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters Departments of the Army, 1997).



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