



Sgt. Quintin Steeves addresses the 316th Sustainment Command (Expeditionary) promotion board in December 2014 at the Vernon T. McGarity Army Reserve Center in Coraopolis, Pa. (Photo by Master Sgt. D. Keith Johnson)

# Searching For The Secret To Promotion

*By Master Sgt. Jamie K. Price, Department of the Army Secretariat*

**W**hen it comes to military advancement, the questions abound — why wasn't I selected for promotion? What must I do to be competitive? Is it whom you know that will get you promoted? Why is my cutoff score so high? What makes them better than me?

These are common questions enlisted Soldiers ask their supervisors, organizational leadership and mentors to get a better understanding of how the promotion system works. Unfortunately, everyone will have a different perspective.

That's because the abundance of variables factoring into promotion can seemingly leave no clearly defined path for selection at certain levels. That complexity spurs conspiracy theorists, fiction writers and anyone else to voice their opinion on how the "system" works. Though the Army has changed the selection process for junior and senior NCOs in many ways during the past 15 years, transparency has always been a goal of the Army's senior leaders. The force has tried to give its No. 1 resource — the Soldier — a treasure map to success. However, poor dissemination and improper interpretations of the information consistently cloud Soldiers' view of this map.

## Junior NCOs

Enlisted cutoff scores are a mystery to many Soldiers. The confusion is evident on various social media websites. One will illustrate the Soldiers' frustration with how high one career field's score is while another site expresses joy with how low the score is. Do we as Human Resource professionals understand how the score is calculated? What avenues have been taken to educate our Soldiers?

Cutoff scores to sergeant or staff sergeant vary depending on the Army's readiness needs at the time the cutoff score is being published. Soldiers may look in their current command and realize their unit is short of people at certain grades, and they may not understand why the Army is choosing not to promote.

The basics of junior NCO promotions are:

1. A Soldier has to make the cutoff score.
2. Points are updated through the Promotion Point Worksheet (PPW).
3. A certain level of Structured Self Development (SSD) is required for each promotion.

4. A Soldier under a suspension of favorable actions or barred from reenlistment cannot be considered for promotion.
5. A Soldier must have at least 12 months in service remaining if being promoted to staff sergeant.

While most of this is accepted, Soldiers may not understand the intense level of detail that goes into establishing a cutoff score. It is a system designed to help the Army maintain balance within skill sets to carry out the Army's extremely diverse mission. Evaluation, Selections and Promotions Division (ESPD) is the face of promotions to Soldiers in the Army.

Soldiers may also not know that their career branch, enlisted Force Alignment Division (FAD), and the office of the Director of Military Personnel Management (DMPM) all play a role in how the Army promotion system works.

These departments receive input about the Army's current inventory, authorizations, projected gains and losses, Military Occupational Specialty conversions, force structure changes, DMPM allocations based on the Army's budget, etc. This input is used by U.S. Army Human Resources Command to set the cutoff score. HRC optimizes readiness by developing the force and promoting Soldiers to sergeant and staff sergeant in the fields in which they are needed.

Readiness dictates how high or low the sergeant or staff sergeant cutoff score is set but the Army doesn't prevent Soldiers from striving for promotion. If a Soldier puts in the hard work and dedication toward maxing out his or her MOS's cutoff score, the Army recognizes it by selecting the Soldier for promotion.

## Senior NCOs

Understanding junior level promotions is comparatively simple. The majority of confusion and questions enters at the senior level. Promotion paths to sergeant first class, master sergeant and sergeant major are not as clearly defined. Simple eligibility criteria such as time in service, time in grade and educational requirements are articulated in the message announcing a selection board. AR 600-8-19 gives a brief overview of how the selection board is set up, but the question now is: What's next? What information does the board consider in selection or non-selection? What is the gauge for measuring a record? Are Soldiers compared to one another?

Board members are selected because of their experience in their respective career fields as defined by the DMPM and divided into panels that cover those fields. Each panel has three or more members consisting of sergeants major, command sergeants major and a colonel in the same field. They're charged with selecting the best qualified Soldiers for promotion based on demonstrated leadership, effectiveness and potential.

During the board process, candidates are scored from 6 to 1 based on an evaluation of the Soldier's MyBoard File. A 6 represents superior performance with potential for promotion and continued service, and is a score usually assigned to a select few. A score of 1 shows unsatisfactory performance and little to no potential for continued service. The MyBoard File consists of board correspondence, the Soldier's DA photo, Enlisted Record Brief, performance, education and training, records and a commendatory section of the Soldier's Army Military Human Resource Record (AMHRR).

But what makes the board member give a certain score? This is where the selection process enters the "unknown zone."

When a selection board begins, the board recorders assigned to the DA Secretariat brief the board members on the requirements set by the Memorandum of Instruction (MOI). The MOI provides administrative instructions identifying zones of consideration, special skill requirements and board procedures, and outlines selection board authority. This is what's referred to as the "left limit" of the board members' voting philosophy. The "right limit" is the board members' leader experience.

Each board member is given information explaining the career paths of MOSs being considered in their particular panel, along with Army regulation updates for MOS changes provided by DMPM. Board members then evaluate candidates' MyBoard file and score them based on this information.

The board members receive candidate files in random order, limiting the number of voters evaluating the same record at any given time. Board members cannot discuss files as they evaluate candidates within their panel. Any questions about a candidate's file are addressed to and answered by the board recorders. There is no specific panel standard that states criteria for a certain score. A board member may use personal knowledge of the individual in scoring a candidate's file but may not share that information with the board.

After board members within a panel score all candidates in their panel, these scores are combined to give the candidate a total score. For example, if four panel members score a candidate with a 6, the candidate has a total score of 24.

All candidates of a particular MOS are rank-ordered, creating an order of merit list set by their total score. The best-qualified-for-promotion line is drawn based on the number of required promotions of an MOS and grade to meet the readiness needs of the Army.

But what earns Soldiers a certain score? Opinions vary. Army leadership maintains that certain assignments and experiences are necessary to be selected for promotion. As Soldiers reference their career maps and requirements outlined in Army regulations they need to understand that many Soldiers have achieved the same benchmarks.

What makes one Soldier better than another? Most believe that it is the individual's performance in key jobs. Soldiers are taught if they do what is required of them to the best of their ability, everything will work out. That may get them on target for the next rank, but it may not be enough. A Soldier's performance must be articulated through evaluations in such a way that it is evident or established that they are capable of serving at the next level. This is where the conspiracy theorists and fiction writers begin the tales of "whom you know" and many other falsehoods. Approximately 90 percent of all senior NCOs receive "Among the Best" and a 1/1 rating for promotion and potential in their evaluation reports. This is where the job of scoring a Soldier's record becomes difficult.

Our society is in the "Information Age," making it easier than ever to get information distributed to the masses. This is great in many respects; however, our wish to share information has led to a decrease in originality. When board members score records, they routinely view the same ratings or wording on multiple evaluations given — outstanding becomes average. The only thing a board member has to score your record is what is annotated in your AMHRR. This means the Soldier's entire record must contain information that clearly distinguishes him or her from anyone else within the career field. Evaluations that articulate the Soldier's importance to his or her assigned organizations and the Army, academic reports showing the Soldier is among the top few in his or her field, a DA photo showing your attention to detail and military bearing is the next hurdle in getting one closer to the coveted rank.

The last step is something over which Soldiers have no control — Army readiness. Readiness will dictate whether one or one thousand can be promoted. The Army's mission is: "to fight and win our Nation's wars by providing prompt, sustained land dominance across the full range of military operations and spectrum of conflict in support of combatant commanders." Soldiers' records may receive perfect scores from every board member, but if they are limited by

no requirements in their career field, the Army cannot promote them.

As the Army's force structure changes to adapt to the evolving battlefield, requirements are created in some specialty MOSs and cut in others to meet the Army's needs. New career fields were created, such as 25D (cyber network defender), 29E (electronic warfare specialist) and 51C (contracting NCO), where historically there was not a requirement. Other career fields were forced to release NCOs by using force alignment tools such as the Qualitative Service Program (QSP), which means that if the Army has no requirement for that MOS, then there is no opportunity for promotion.

The question of "what must I do to get promoted?" is different for every Soldier. The first step is the Soldiers' responsibility: They must be willing to accept challenging assignments, perform their duties to the best of their ability and ensure their exceptional performance is articulated specifically in their evaluations.

Next, they should make sure the rest of their records reflect their abilities. Their ERBs and DA photos must reflect the attention to detail that demonstrates the Soldiers' potential.

The final step to being selected is patience. Soldiers' careers are built over time. Selection for promotion to sergeant or staff sergeant may be credited to personal accomplishment, but promotions to senior grades are attributed to an overall view of Soldiers' careers as reflected in their AMHRR.

A career takes time to develop, just as the Army takes time to change. It's important to understand that many people have the same goals with similar paths. The number of candidates makes promotion extremely competitive. It takes hard work and timing. A Soldier's personal record is the tool used by the Army's leadership to select its future leaders. That record and the Army's readiness needs are the driving force to promotion.

Master Sgt. Price is the senior enlisted advisor for the Department of Army Secretariat, which conducts all centralized Army selection boards for promotion from sergeant first class to master sergeant in the Army. ■



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