

# First Sergeant Major of the Army Reflects on 60 Years of Change

By Master Sgt. Lisa Hunter

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**O**n Nov. 11, 1940, the war in Europe filled the pages of the newspapers and 18-year-old William O. Wooldridge of Shawnee, Oklahoma, was one of the many young men lining up to join the Army.

Wooldridge didn't enlist for promises of the Army College Fund or technical training. The Army offered neither. Wooldridge joined with no expectations other than he would learn to fight and someday soon he would join the war in Europe.

"War was on the horizon when I came in," said Wooldridge, during an interview at his club, near his Santa Teresa, New Mexico, home. "Units like mine — a rifle company that was authorized 180 people — had 64. All those units were filled with draftees, who were given four weeks of basic training and assigned to a unit. War was looming, so we had to get ready and get ready fast."

Wooldridge, who will celebrate his 82nd birthday next month, talked about his Army career, a stark comparison to today's Army. He talked about how he and other NCOs worked to leave a legacy that has shaped today's NCO Corps. Although he now walks with a cane, it's his only concession to age. He still remembers with alacrity the units in which he served, the names of his first sergeants and commanders and the dates during which he served in each unit.

Young Wooldridge didn't spend time preparing for promotion boards. He didn't think of telling the board members of his long-term goal to become the Sergeant Major of the Army. His reasons were simple enough: The Army didn't host promotion boards and there was no such rank as Sergeant Major of the Army. Wooldridge would be the first in 1966. He would also become one of the key architects of the Noncommissioned Officer Education System and centralized promotion system for senior NCOs.

Wooldridge spent his first year in the Army training at Fort Bullis, Texas. All of his training was conducted on little local training areas where Wooldridge reflected on what it was like at his first live-fire exercise.

"We'd hike out there to do that. It was about 20 or 25 miles, as I recall. We'd hike out, pitch tents, do our training, and then hike back," he explained. It's very different

now. I think we have a much better Army now than we did then, because of better training, better technology and more qualified trainers."

In 1940, the Army only offered enlisted schools for cooks, bakers and administrative people, he explained. The combat arms units conducted all of their training in-house. If the division commander wanted an NCO school, he had to fund it out of his own training budget.

"The only school my first regiment had was a Regimental Squad Leaders' Course," Wooldridge said. "You stayed in your company, you stood all your formations. The only difference was when the company fell out for training, you marched over to the S3, because you were going to squad leader school for two weeks."

Wooldridge likened the course to today's Primary Leadership Development Course, with the exception that it wasn't as well-organized. The company first sergeant interviewed and selected privates and privates first class to attend the course. The course itself was designed to teach Soldiers all the components of a squad, Wooldridge explained. The Soldiers learned about the squad's weapons and formations. They learned basic map reading and land navigation skills and bayonet training. "The regimental commander did that because he wanted better squad leaders. It was up to him to decide if the regiment held the course, but he had to pay for it, too."

By the time Wooldridge had served four years in the Army, he was a seasoned combat veteran. Assigned to the 1st Infantry Division in Europe, Wooldridge participated in the division's invasion in North Africa, where he faced off against infamous German Field Marshall Erwin Rommel, known as the Desert Fox for his brilliant combat tactics in the North African desert.

Wooldridge was one of thousands of young American Soldiers who invaded North Africa. The troops landed in Algeria in November 1943 and fought their way across the desert terrain against the battle-hardened German-Italian forces. Not only were the Soldiers inexperienced, their commanders' tactics reflected their inexperience as well. The American forces had no combined arms training.

“We didn’t know how to use tanks,” Wooldridge said. “When the 1st Armored Division came on shore, [Tunis, Tunisia] fell the next morning. Then we assembled to move on towards Kasserine Pass. I remember leaving town and seeing all the tanks. They didn’t go with us. The tanks were sitting at crossroads as roadblocks, which was sort of dumb, but we didn’t know how to use them.”

The American forces moved on toward Oran. “Oran was defended by French and Italians, so there wasn’t much opposition. We just surrounded the town and everybody quit,” Wooldridge explained. But Kasserine Pass turned out to be a different story.

“When we got to Kasserine, we got hit by German tank/infantry teams, Rommel’s Afrika Corps. They just ruined us. They hit us in the high ridge,” he explained. “We got knocked back several miles before we could even understand what was going on. But the withdrawal was very well done because of the discipline of the unit. We fell back as we were trained to do. Fall back on the left; take positions. Fall back on the right. We just walked right out of there.”

“We lost quite a few people. We lost our entire artillery battalion because it was overrun. But then Gen. Harmon, who was a tanker, brought some tanks up and put a stop to that and drove the Germans back into the pass. We went back to take it a few days later, the tanks went with us. And they went with us during the rest of the war. That was the first experience of combined arms. Now it’s all part of our basic doctrine. It’s not a matter of getting up here and saying, ‘send me some tanks;’ they are already with you.”

As soon as the 1st Infantry Division finished their missions in North Africa, they moved onto their next objective: the invasion of Sicily.

On July 10, 1943, Wooldridge and his fellow Soldiers took part in the second largest invasion of the war, the largest being the D-Day invasion at Normandy, France. During their campaign in Sicily, the American forces took many Italian prisoners of war. The invasion was the precursor to the fall of Italy’s leader, Benito Mussolini, on July 23, 1943.

Wooldridge knew that he would not return home until the war was over. On June 6, 1944, he waded ashore on Omaha Beach as a member of the 26th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, the only combat-experienced unit that landed at Normandy that day. Wooldridge attributes his survival to his experience and training.

“We’d invaded North Africa in ’42 and Sicily in ’43. We still had about 40% of the Soldiers at Normandy,” the SMA explained. Wooldridge said the seasoned platoon sergeants and squad leaders provided sound leadership that was vital to their success, along with the fact that his unit hit the beach about two hours after the invasion began, so they faced lighter opposition.

He explained that during the invasion, each Soldier

carried a 64-pound pack of equipment tied into a horseshoe shape in addition to his weapon and basic load of ammunition. The Soldiers had learned from the North Africa invasion that the pack was a hindrance, making it more difficult for the Soldiers to run, maneuver, fall down out of the line of fire and get up quickly.

“The orders from the regiment was when the front of your landing craft drops, throw your horseshoe pack overboard,” he explained. “We never took it with us, so we weren’t burdened with the extra weight.”

The D-Day invasion was only the first of many battles to come. Wooldridge earned two silver stars for gallantry in action in 1944. The first he received for combat in Aachen, Germa-

ny, where he was wounded. The second he earned during the Battle of the Bulge Campaign later that year.

Wooldridge finally left the European theater in May 1945. He continued his career, getting promoted if he happened to be in the right place at the right time. At the time, promotions were decided at the unit level. If a Soldier happened to be in a unit when a promotion became available, he would be considered for the promotion.

As an E-6 platoon sergeant, Wooldridge PCS’d to Germany to serve with the same company with which he had served during World War II, Co. K, 26th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, but he was not assigned



As the first Sergeant Major of the Army, Sgt. Maj. William O. Wooldridge began instituting many changes that affected the NCO Corps, including the establishment of the NCOES systems and centralized promotion boards. (U.S. Army photo)

as a platoon sergeant. Instead, he was assigned as the platoon guide, subordinate to the platoon sergeant, even though he was the senior NCO.

“Even though I was senior to the guy running the platoon, I became his assistant because he was there before me. Fortunately, it didn’t last long; the first sergeant moved him. So, I moved right back in as platoon sergeant and then three or four years later, I became a first sergeant,” he explained. Wooldridge remained in Germany throughout the Korean War and returned to the United States in 1954. In 1965, he was appointed division sergeant major of the 1st Infantry Division and deployed to Vietnam with the division in August 1965. A year later, in June 1966, Wooldridge was appointed to a new position the Army had just established: Sergeant Major of the Army.

Wooldridge hosted the first Sergeants Major Conference at the Pentagon in November. The Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Harold K. Johnson, issued his guidance to improve the NCO Corps and left it in the sergeants’ major hands to make it happen.

“He said we need to improve the Noncommissioned Officer Corps. We’ve got to make it better educated, more functional, and give it more responsibility,” Wooldridge said. “He wanted it to work. He knew what he wanted, and he was going to kill everybody to get it.”

From that sergeants major conference, the top recommendation was the need for an NCO education system.

“I told the Chief of Staff that we had been wanting that all of our careers; the Army just never saw a need for it. They thought we learned everything we needed to learn in the unit.

“He said, ‘You’re going to get your education system. Not immediately, because all of the monies are going to Vietnam.’” The funding for NCOES was approved in 1969. The system was set up much as it is today. NCOs went to school to prepare them for the next level of responsibility, squad leader, platoon sergeant, first sergeant, and sergeant major. The first class of NCOs graduated the Sergeants Major Course in 1972, the year Wooldridge retired.



Sgt. Maj. of the Army William O. Wooldridge talks to Soldiers of the 9th Infantry Division after awarding them the Combat Infantry Badge for their service in 1967 in Vietnam. (U.S. Army photo)

“We knew this was just the beginning; we knew there would have to be changes along the way,” he said. “NCOES has changed the NCO Corps 100 percent. It has changed the

noncommissioned officers’ training, thinking, and abilities 100 percent.

It’s made us what we are today.” Not only has NCOES provided NCOs with standardized training, it has improved the NCO/officer relationship, Wooldridge said. “In my time, officers never considered you as part of decision-making. They made the decisions and

they issued the orders. It was very rare to find an officer who would consult a noncommissioned officer on those decisions before he made them.”

Out of that same conference came the recommendation and decision to centralize promotions for senior NCOs.

“In my time, you just shipped out and went to a unit and that unit did with you what they wanted to. If they didn’t have a slot for your MOS, they put you doing something else,” he explained. At the time, Department of the Army would issue allocations to the units and the unit leadership selected whom they wanted. At the conference, the sergeants major proposed establishing an office that would control assignments, promotions, and training for E-8s and 9s.

“It just changed the whole world for us. It got us out of the old business that you got promoted if you were lucky enough to be in a unit that had an allocation. Otherwise, you didn’t get anything. A lot of people would lose when allocations were issued because they were enroute to a new duty station, because they weren’t considered,” he said.

“If we changed the system, then we would promote the best, not just those who happened to be in place. I think it was one of the best things we did for the senior NCOs.”

“Anything you do is temporary. Changes are necessary. The Army’s mission is to be ready to fight wars; it doesn’t have any other mission. It does a lot of things between wars, but its mission is to be ready to fight. When you have to go to fight, it changes everything, particularly all of the administrative procedures that are in effect.”

During his tenure as SMA, Wooldridge helped build an NCO Education System, centralized promotion system, and witnessed the establishment of yet another new rank: command sergeant major. Wooldridge left the Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army in August 1968. He again returned to Vietnam as the Sergeant Major of the Military



Pvt. Wooldridge



Assistance Command-Vietnam. He returned to the United States a year later and retired on Feb. 1, 1972.

More than 30 years after his retirement, Wooldridge still plays an active role in the NCO Corps as an unofficial mentor to sergeants major of the Army and Sergeants Major Course students. He frequently visits the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, where he has become something of a grassroots celebrity. Sometimes a faculty advisor will invite him to be a guest in one of the student group rooms; other times he just stops by to get a haircut and visit with today's noncommissioned officers.

Ironically, he doesn't live in the past. He is up-to-date on policies, regulations, and anything that impacts the NCO Corps. His pride in how the NCO Corps has evolved is evident. He has been happy to watch the seeds he planted nearly 40 years ago grow. He seldom gives advice, unsolicited or otherwise. When he does offer his opinion, it's often based off of his personal experience and yet what he says seems to hold true today as much as it did 60 years ago, because while training and doctrine may change, the means to motivate Soldiers and lead them successfully in combat has not changed over the years.

"It's very different now. I think we have a much better Army now than we did then, because of better training, better technology and more qualified trainers," he said. "Amer-

ican GIs are very independent. They're sort of rascals in that way. They make very good Soldiers if they have the proper leadership and training. You have to teach them what their mission is and how they're going to accomplish that.

"You are dealing with people. We give units numbers and talk about how great they are, but numbers don't mean anything. People make a unit. If a unit is worth a damn, it's because it has good people. If it's not very good, it's because it doesn't have good people."

Wooldridge travels to Fort Bliss occasionally. He may pause to watch a company formation or change of command along the way. He often remarks on how proud he is of today's NCO Corps, but he's concerned that today's NCO Corps is getting away from some of the basics that have made them so successful in past wars. And, while he's happy to see the NCO Corps evolve and grow in their leadership and training responsibilities, he still believes in the basic tenets that make it possible for America to win wars, particularly leadership and discipline.

"If you can't lead them, you can't fight them. Discipline makes a great difference when you've got nothing between you and an enemy but your rifle; it takes discipline to manage that," he explained. "The discipline is necessary to determine whether they are going to lean forward in the foxhole or if they are going to follow you over the edge." ■



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