NCO History: A Prerequisite to Promotion

Master Sgt. Dilworth A. Braithwaite
U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy

Noncommissioned officer (NCO) history is rich with accounts of valor, determination, and resilience. The NCO Corps and its Medal of Honor-charged past is a storied legacy of leadership from its inception to present day. From Sgt. Audie Murphy to Master Sgt. Roy Benavidez, or even recently Staff Sgt. David Bellavia, these NCOs embodied the essence of the NCO Creed through their unwavering leadership while under enemy fire. But what is lacking in today’s NCO promotion system is a professional study of the history of the NCO Corps. Becoming an NCO should require a knowledge of the corps’ past and its evolution into today’s “Backbone of the Army.” This should occur before selection to Soldier of the Month boards, promotion boards, and placement on Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development System (NCOPDS) Order of Merit Lists (OML). Soldiers eligible for promotion should know NCO history, to include the responsibilities and expectations inherent with the position in order to continue its longstanding traditions of excellence.

Background

According to the Story of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps: The Backbone of the Army, the investment in NCO discipline and professional development began in 1778 when Baron Frederick Wilhelm von Steuben, who became Gen. George Washington’s chief of staff, wrote and enforced Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States, also known as “The Blue Book” (Hogan, Wright, & Arnold, 2007). It covered top-
Leaders who foster tradition and an awareness of history build camaraderie and unit cohesion, becoming esprit de corps. Army members draw strength from knowing they are part of long-standing tradition. Tradition plays an important role in molding leaders who learn the value of the team. (Department of the Army, 2019, p. 6-7)
Solution

A solution to the lack of historical knowledge could be the mandate that semi-centralized promotions require that Soldier and NCO of the Month, as well as promotion boards, include NCO history as a mandatory topic of study. Or, to take it a step further, an online NCO history course could be a prerequisite for inclusion to NCOPDS OMLs prior to attendance at professional development schools. Distance learning methods are already integrated into modern Army training so the infrastructure needed to achieve this method is already in place (Department of the Army, 2017). A distance learning course would be a more cost effective way to teach this information than a traditional residential or locational model which would require the extension of professional military education courses (Judy, 2016; Winkler, Leonard, & Shanley, 2002). These solutions would provide, at a minimum, familiarity with the bold leadership of those that came before.

Conclusion

The NCO of today can draw on the experiences, challenges, and successes of the past. To steward the profession, NCOs should know the scope of the corps and its rich history. This learning can be done using the format and teaching tools already in place and used by the U.S. Army. This will deepen the legacy and pass the torch from past NCOs to today’s Soldiers.

References


Master Sgt. Dilworth A. Braithwaite is a senior human resource sergeant. He is currently a student at the Noncommissioned Officer Leadership Center of Excellence at Fort Bliss, Texas. His previous assignments include personnel manpower NCOIC of Eighth Army and first sergeant of Bravo Company, Allied Forces North Battalion, Belgium. He holds an associate degree in general business administration from Upper Iowa University, and is currently completing a bachelor’s degree in leadership and workforce development from the Command and General Staff College and a bachelor’s degree in human resource management from Upper Iowa University.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.