



U.S. Army 1st Sgt. Timothy Simmons, assigned to 2nd Cavalry Regiment, inspects a Soldier before starting a promotion board during Agile Spirit 19 at the Vaziani Military Base near Tbilisi, Georgia, Aug. 6, 2019. (U.S. Army photo by Pfc. Denice Lopez)

NCO History: A Prerequisite to Promotion

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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-



U.S. Army Sgt. Travis Bertovich, an intelligence analyst with 2nd Battalion, 44th Air Defense Artillery Regiment, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) Sustainment Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, walks through the NCO Arch during a non-commissioned officer induction ceremony at Fort Campbell, Ky., Feb. 2, 2017. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Neysa Canfield)

ics ranging from NCO care of Soldiers, training for battle, and the conduct and interaction of the NCO with Soldiers in garrison and in the field. *The Blue Book* also discussed infantry service and tactics and the evolution of NCOs as primary trainers, a role that once belonged exclusively to officers in the 18th century European era (Hogan et al., 2007).

The role of the NCO as a leader, and not just a war fighter, became increasingly important after the *War of 1812*. “The NCO and the Army accompanied the wave of settlers crossing the continent, surveying the land, building roads and stockades, and garrison posts along the routes the pioneers followed” (Hogan et al., 2007, p. 26).

An appreciation of the varying roles of the NCO of the past encourages a sense of pride in today’s NCO. While the technology and formations have evolved, these topics still hold as much significance for NCOs now as they did in the late 1700s.

Problem

Studying NCO history provides important insights of how the NCO Corps developed as well as the many difficult situations and brilliant solutions that have been displayed over the years. The current problem is Soldiers, generally, only have a surface knowledge of the corps’

evolution supplied from basic training (Cox, 2018). As a result, many NCOs are destined to make the same mistakes as their predecessors. The *NCO Creed* states, “I am a member of a time honored corps, known as the ‘Backbone of the Army’” (“NCO Creed,” n.d., para. 1). This begs the question: How does one pledge membership to a time-honored corps, yet not know the traditions or history of this corps?

Soldiers are required to demonstrate the Army’s values in everything they do: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity and Personal Courage (Department of the Army, 2018). NCO history, with its many accounts of courageous leadership, provides a roadmap for NCOs to follow.

“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)”



U.S. Army 1st Lt. Audie Leon Murphy, Company B, 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division, 7th United States Army, 1948. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army)

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. ■

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