



U.S. Army Soldiers helping an injured Soldier in France, 1944. (Photo courtesy of National Archives Catalog: # 535973)

The Bottom Line

NCO Peacetime Role Preserves Combat Readiness

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Combat is the bottom line. It is the ultimate test of our professionalism — a literal "do or die" test; possibly a "do *and* die" test.

This issue is devoted to your role in combat. Many Journal readers relate to that role through the Persian Gulf war of the past year, which added a half million GIs to our nation's long roster of combat veterans. But veterans of other wars recall combat as a long and exhausting ordeal made up of many small battles — battles that cost the lives of many buddies, that destroyed most of this or

that unit and seemed, at that moment, to make little or no contribution to the overall war effort.

World War II battles provide a variety of lessons that can be applied to combat. And the observance of the 50th anniversary of America's entry in that war coincides with the publication of this winter issue. But World War II was not fought by an all-volunteer Army, with Soldiers who wore Kevlar helmets and with missiles that blasted other missiles from the sky.

The point is: Combat is diverse and technology is

changing many aspects of battle; even the term battlefield is not appropriate to many combat scenarios.

Combat is often addressed in the context of the heroes it produces. But "heroes" from these pages are the corporals and sergeants who are the NCO Corps. They have been the glue that has held our Army together between wars. They have been charged with taking raw recruits and draftees and whipping them into mental and physical shape. They have been the Reserve components that were often understrength and undermined on often outdated equipment. They have endured low pay during the eras when America's working class prospered. They have steeled themselves against American and foreign protesters of policies that professional Soldiers do not allow to become their political concern. They have fought a long Cold War with tremendous forbearance and keen awareness of their hair-trigger weapons. They have trained officers, subordinate NCOs, and junior Soldiers to work as teams that are the heart of an organized, successful fighting force; they have been the hearts and heads of those smaller elements.

But they cannot dictate the rules of engagement. In the past 10 years alone, American Soldiers have been the victims of political killings in Germany, Turkey, the Middle East, the Philippines, and Central America. They have been killed during "peacetime" by military forces from North Korea, the former East Germany, and Central America. They have died en masse in tragedies such as the Gander, Newfoundland crash that killed Soldiers returning from peacekeeping duty in Sinai — a crash that some theories blame on terrorists.

Combat is a relative definition, and Soldiers face death on undefined battlefields and in undeclared battles that can manifest at any hour of any day.

The NCO has had to adapt to constant change. The horse was replaced by motorized vehicles; weeks of marching were replaced by train deployments and day or weeks of sailing on troop ships were shortened to hours by airlift. Communications and mobility created a complex and rapidly changing battlefield. More accurate and destructive weapons demanded better offensive and defensive training.

Despite change, NCOs have been the guardians of Army traditions. While "duty, honor and country" are among the proud traditions of our Army, it has bid good-riddance to practices that were not pillars of professionalism. The stereotypical NCO was an overweight drunkard who earned and kept his stripes by being the biggest and strongest Soldier in a unit. He could outfight, outdrink, and outwit

any man in the outfit. He used brute strength to beat discipline into Soldiers. And high desertion rates often reflected Soldiers' contempt of their NCOs. They have often been the stumbling blocks towards progress, such as racial integration and merging the Women's Army Corps into the regular Army.

But change was inevitable, and the NCO ultimately made it possible. While rank-and-file Soldiers are exposed to officers much more today than in the past, the NCO still sets the tone for Soldiers' attitudes. Soldiers are influenced more — positively or negatively — by the examples of their NCO supervisors than by all other Army influences combined. That's a powerful tool that carries equally powerful authority and responsibility.

NCO authority has taken twists and turns in our Army's history. The corporal once wielded God-like authority over his Soldiers. In contrast, technicians and specialists in senior NCO grades lacked authority to supervise or command anyone.

While the Army stepped out ahead of the civilian sector to provide equal opportunities for Soldiers, it also improved upward mobility for the NCO Corps, which was usually limited to earning battlefield commissions that were often temporary. In combat, units often paid the price of losing experienced NCOs when they were most needed for grassroots leadership. Today's NCOs can more easily attend West Point or OCS. Those who become warrant officers can now be commissioned, whereas the first warrant officers were thought of as "supergrade" enlisted Soldiers. And, for those who stay in the enlisted ranks, being an American Army NCO is respected around the world.



U.S. Army Soldiers operate the small lightweight GPS receivers during Operation Desert Storm in 1991. The receiver, which facilitated GPS navigation in the open desert, along with other space-based capabilities such as missile warning, space-based imagery and satellite communications played a major role in enabling the success of U.S. and coalition forces during 100 hours of sustained combat. (U.S. Army photo by Jason Cutshaw)

The NCO has changed, and so has the quality of Soldiers he leads. Historically, when patriotism was not a motive for enlisting, recruits were often poor slob who could mark time in the Army in lieu of living aimlessly. Or they "volunteered" to join the Army because a judge's alternative was prison. Our NCO Corps has been forced to keep up with the better and brighter recruits.

Soldiers' lifestyles have also changed. Sixty years ago, enlisted Soldiers were not allowed to marry. Today's NCO is likely to be married, and he has greater responsibilities to care for his Soldiers' families. Great attention was paid to the families of Soldiers deployed to the Persian Gulf.

In peacetime, when promotions can seem impossible, and in wartime, when wet-behind-the-ear "kids" pin on chevrons, one constant is coping with the transition from being "one of the guys" to learning how to handle the weight of being an NCO. With varying success, NCOs mentor our newest members.

Those newest members will be the NCO leaders of tomorrow. They will be charged to lead, train, care, and maintain, as NCOS have always been. They will experience the ups and down of Army life. What we do for them and for our units comes down to that bottom line: how our Soldiers fare in the next round of combat. ■



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