



Soldier-students enter the field amid colored smoke during the 7th Army NCO Academy graduation ceremony in Grafenwoehr, Germany, June 15, 2018.

# Competitive Advantage

## Increased Responsibility of Noncommissioned Officers

*By U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Bonnie Rushing*

U.S. Air Force Academy

**T**he Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Corps has evolved significantly since its inception 246 years ago. NCOs have transformed from supporting figures to truly skilled and educated military leaders who deliver a competitive advantage to the U.S. military. NCOs now perform duties once reserved only for commissioned officers. The U.S. military has demonstrated historical successes with its enlisted force and by continuously expanding the role of NCOs, it continues to create a competitive advantage against current or future threats.

### Humble Beginnings

In 1957, political scientist Samuel P. Huntington (1985) and author of *The Soldier and the State* wrote, “The enlisted personnel have neither the intellectual skills nor the professional responsibility of the officer. They are specialists in the application of violence, not the management of violence. Their vocation is a trade not a profession” (p. 17). Clearly, the NCO Corps has evolved in the past 65 years, successfully growing from its humble beginnings.

Historically, enlisted service members were considered the blue-collar “workforce” for each branch of the military and were trained to accomplish skilled labor,

personnel functions, and technical support. As a result, the NCO Corps was branded the “backbone” of the Armed Forces for decades, serving as enlisted leaders who maintain and strengthen U.S. military might.

Over time, duties evolved as technology became the primary driver for many menial and redundant tasks, which freed NCOs to learn higher-level skills and earn valuable college degrees. The implementation and improvements of tuition assistance and the Post-9/11 GI Bill further allowed military personnel to pursue undergraduate and masters’ degrees. Airmen also began earning college credits from Basic Military Training through the Community College of the Air Force. These educational assistance programs and benefits drew a newly motivated crowd to recruiting offices nationwide, increasing the rates of educated and talented service members over time.

### Modern Day Enlisted Corps

Through their predecessors’ remarkable investment and historical successes, today’s NCOs serve the country in both traditional capacities and in ways that would have been unimaginable in the past. The Department of Defense (DOD) has continuously re-evaluated NCO skills, education, and other abilities and accelerated their evolution to meet future requirements. Through increased reliance and added responsibility, enlisted leaders take on roles and responsibilities such as critical decision-making, leading missions, and managing troop training, morale, and welfare (Crisp, 2021).

Air Force Senior NCOs lead the charge for advanced education among enlisted members. Among them, more than 34.5% hold bachelor’s degrees, 12.7% hold master’s degrees, and 0.13% have earned doctoral degrees (Air Force Personnel Center, 2021). In addition, the U.S. Air Force made recent advances in enlisted career options by allowing talented NCOs to become remotely piloted system aircraft pilots and teach at the U.S. Air Force Academy. These programs prove the enlisted corps is now capable of augmenting the commissioned officer tier, adding perspective, rank, and background to professional military education (PME).

PME has evolved as well, aiming to deliberately educate NCOs to become capable strategic advisors in joint military operations. Leaders state that requirements for enlisted leaders include credibility, critical thinking, and creativity. NCOs will need a “precise blend of education, training, and experience, deliberately cultivated throughout a military career. In order to yield this outcome, we must not be content with the status quo while our adversaries continue to close the gap in military capabilities” (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2021, p. 6).



U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Bonnie Rushing, instructor for the U.S. Air Force Academy, Military & Strategic Studies Department teaches Airpower & Joint Operations Strategy to cadets in the Multi-Domain Laboratory Oct. 28, 2021. (U.S. Air Force photo by Mr. Jeff Holmquist)

### Enlisted Career Trends and Efficiencies

Despite pay grade and quality of life differences (e.g., housing allowances, officer facilities, etc.), many personnel decide early, to make a career out of their military enlistment, motivated by development opportunities and education. However, the NCO Corps maintains its requirement for traditional personnel and career field-specific technical skills. While it may seem like this trend would lead to burnout and, subsequently, high rates of separation from the U.S. military, that is simply not true. In fact, enlisted personnel volunteer to continue military service past their contracts en masse. The Army, Marine Corps, and Air Force met their retention goals for fiscal year 2021, while the Navy came close (between 94% and 98%) (Congressional Research Service [CRS], 2021, Table 1). In fact, the Air Force retained more members than its goal, maxing out at 127% for first term Airmen (CRS, 2021, Table 1).

### Conclusion

The evolution of the enlisted force is important and relevant to all Americans, from the President and Congress to the common taxpayer. The NCO Corps’ growing responsibility and motivation continues to evolve, and the fully-manned and highly-skilled military workforce strengthens national security capabilities. U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Brown (2020) says the military must “accelerate change or lose,” advocating for a broader skill set and modernizing defense capabilities (p. 2). The U.S. risks losing to near-peer competitors if service members and leaders are not willing to make changes. Thus, by changing and increasing the NCO Corps’ scope of responsibility and tapping into enlisted talent, the U.S. efficiently advances national defense and gains a competitive advantage against any adversary. ■

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**Master Sgt. Bonnie Rushing, U.S. Air Force** is an instructor at the U.S. Air Force Academy, Colorado. She earned her Master of Science in strategic intelligence from the National Intelligence University in 2017. Her previous assignments include deploying to South and Central America as a linguist for Special Operations aircrews.

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