



U.S. Army Soldiers in class 09-22 of the 7th Army Training Command (7ATC) Non-Commissioned Officer Academy's (NCOA) Basic Leadership Course conduct their graduation ceremony in Grafenwoehr, Germany, Aug. 30, 2022. The 7ATC NCOA mission is to train and develop future leaders who are adaptive, disciplined and ready to lead effectively at the squad and team levels. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Christian Carrillo)

# Enlisted Army Education: Legit or Just Another Euphemism?

*Sgt. Maj. Phillip Fenrick*

2nd Brigade, 1st Armored Division, Fort Bliss, TX

**N**oncommissioned officers (NCOs) are the backbone of the U.S. Army and, as such, require consistent and quality education to succeed and meet mission requirements. In recent years, the Army overhauled its strategy and planning on enlisted education by replacing the NCO Education System with a more robust NCO Professional Development System (NCOPDS). This strategic shift did not result in meaningful change. By reviewing NCOPDS' history and the empirical data that illustrates the significance of an educated NCO force, it is clear the Army can still achieve

its goals for NCO professional education with one key change—utilizing proper talent management.

## History of NCOPDS

The NCO Corps traces its roots to the American Revolution and the establishment of the Continental Army under Gen. George Washington (Arms, 2007). During that time, and even though the NCO Corps began with the Continental Army, the military relied heavily upon officers as the primary trainers of enlisted Soldiers. On the contrary, the officer's formal education system began



in 1802 with the establishment of the Military Academy at West Point (Elder, 2006). A formal education system for NCOs would not materialize for more than a century. Training for NCOs predominantly began with on-the-job training from officers focusing on skills within the NCO's respective military occupational skill (MOS) and did very little regarding educating NCOs on war or academia (Elder, 2006). On-the-job training proved inconsistent, and NCOs were still significantly less prepared than their officer counterparts.

Over time, officers saw the need for more formalized education for NCOs due to the growing complexity of combat operations. In 1957, the Department of the Army (DA) published its first regulation on NCO academy standards for the few division-level NCO academies across the Army (Elder, 2006). Despite sound intentions, the Army's regulation fell short of expectations by not making NCO academies mandatory, not standardizing training and education across the Army or providing additional manning or funding to support (Elder, 2006). Nevertheless, the NCO education system continued to grow slowly and gain traction. Then in September 1967, the Army began its first 22-week NCO Candidate Course (NCOCC), modeled after the 23-week Officer Candidate School (Elder, 2006). The logic was simple. If the Army could train enlisted Soldiers to be officers, the Army could use the same method to train NCOs.

The NCOCC paved the way for the modern NCO education system. In 1969, the Army developed a concept for three levels of NCO development: a basic course for sergeants, an advanced course for mid-level NCOs and a senior course for high-level NCOs (Elder, 2006). The concept was fully implemented by 1971, when General Ralph Haines helped establish a standard education system for all NCOs, Army-wide (Elder, 2006). From the 1970s, the NCOES courses have undergone several design and name changes to meet the demands and needs of changing times and technology. The NCOES, and the enlisted personnel management (EPM) system, did a decent job selecting, training and promoting NCOs (Elder, 2006). Then the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts created another demand shift for NCO education and talent management.

In 2017 the Army switched to the NCOPDS because the NCOES did not meet the Army Strategy 2018 (Army Strategy, 2018) or the NCO 2020 Strategy. The Army NCO Guide states that the "NCOPDS was established to operationalize the lines of effort outlined in the NCO 2020 Strategy" (DA, 2018, p. 2). The big difference between NCOES and NCOPDS is the emphasis on education and its role in promotion. The

NCOPDS and EPM now emphasize their priorities for future NCOs on the select, train, educate and promote (STEP) process (Davenport, 2017). The Army needs to reassess how it approaches talent management and education to promote the right individuals.

## Importance of Education

Initial NCO expectations were low because the NCOs' formal education system was limited in scope. Officers were necessary because of their advanced military training and ability to read and write orders. Since then, multiple wars and conflicts have reemphasized the importance and value an educated NCO force brings to the Army. Now the Army has shifted its focus away from counter-insurgency operations toward large-scale combat operations and multi-domain operations to face growing threats like China, Russia, Iran and North Korea (ATLDS, 2020). The demand for a more educated NCO force has never been greater to fight and win in a complex and technologically diverse world.

Changing the NCOPDS is one way the Army is trying to improve education for NCOs and simultaneously achieve professional development objectives outlined in high-level strategic plans. To meet their outlined outcomes, the Army must become a learning organization (Keller-Glaze et al., 2016). The Army learning concept for training and education states, "achieving success across the learning continuum relies on close coordination of training and education to develop synergies as personnel develop individually over time, acquiring and performing progressively higher order skills and responsibilities as their careers advance" (DA, 2017, p. 10). Despite having a great NCOPDS and supporting doctrine, a key ingredient still needs to be added, quality instructors.



Students in the Fort McCoy NCO Academy's Basic Leader Course (BLC) get a class photo completed May 19, 2022, at Fort McCoy, Wis. (U.S. Army Photo by Scott T. Sturkol, Public Affairs Office, Fort McCoy, Wis.)



Staff Sgt. Christopher Colon (pictured right), an Instructor at the Noncommissioned Officer Academy Hawaii, delivers critical feedback regarding a recent training session to a Student attending the course. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Christopher Thompson)

There is a stigma that being a professional military education instructor inhibits talented NCOs' careers.

### Talent Management Process

A problem the Army has is convincing NCOs to volunteer for instructor duty. Many NCOs believe an instructor assignment is a career killer because it will "put them behind peers who stay in the operational force." That stigma is firmly intact in today's Army. Dispelling stigmas is challenging, especially when the bias is deeply rooted. The current belief is that if leaders want to be competitive for promotion, they must take the most challenging assignments or deployments and stay in the operational force. This stigma remained through the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts despite efforts to prioritize assignments for NCOs as NCOPDS instructors and remains today. The Army needs a better selection process.

The instructor selection process lacks sophistication. Volunteers are relied upon first, but there are never enough volunteers. After volunteers, the Army Human Resources Command selects instructors from the available pool of NCOs, as instructors are a firm Army requirement. Army regulation states, "only the highest quality Soldiers will be assigned as instructors or advisors" (DA, 2019, p. 55). Sounds impressive; however, the regulation only states the NCO must be a high school graduate (or GED equivalent), have no questionable character flaws, be the same or higher rank as those in the course and have graduated from the course they will teach (DA, 2019). These criteria for instructor selection are minimal, proving to be subjective at best over time. Higher standards are needed.

The Army manual on NCO professional development states that the NCOPDS is "integrated and synchronized in the development of the next generation of competent and committed NCOs of character" (DA, 2018, p. 2). Training future leaders is essential, yet the best NCOs do everything they can to avoid becoming instructors. The Army, MOS branches and respective proponents are adding extrinsic motivators to get quality instructors. For example, the centralized promotion board looks at NCOs with instructor time as more favorable than those without (Cordova & Johnson, 2018).

That said, board members are just as subject to bias as anyone else. The overall selection rate for promotion of all NCOs in 2018 actively serving in the operational force was 36%, while those in the generating force were 40% (Cordova & Johnson, 2018). The evidence does not show overwhelming support that the Army emphasizes selecting and retaining quality instructors. These narrow differences in promotion rates are hardly worth the time, energy and effort to motivate an NCO to become an instructor. The Army needs to look at ways to assess and select the best NCOs to serve as instructors rather than relying on volunteers or random selection.

### A Way Forward

One way to find high-quality NCOs and employ them as instructors quickly is to eliminate the Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFAB). Once discontinued, SFAB NCOs are eligible and qualified to serve as NCOPDS instructors. There are currently five SFABs in the active-duty Army and one in the National Guard, each consisting of about 816 Soldiers (Feickert, 2021a). While not every Soldier in an SFAB can serve as an instructor, the vast majority can. A unique SFAB facet is that all members are not only volunteers but were all specifically recruited, assessed and selected via a board process, like how special forces do their assessment and selection process (Feickert, 2021a). The SFAB draws in the Army's best NCOs, with recruitment fulfilled primarily through word of mouth.

The SFAB is an alluring unit because it is a new and exciting way for conventional force NCOs to join a unit with a unique and strategically important mission.



In addition to its mission and brown berets, NCOs who serve in the SFAB receive a monetary bonus and enjoy higher promotion rates than their counterparts in the conventional force (Kimmons, 2020). Essentially, SFABs pillage the most talented NCOs from the ranks. Ultimately, the greater Army loses because it now must rely on a pool of less qualified NCOs.

The strategic necessity of the SFAB is no longer needed. Special forces units are returning to their original missions, and the Army is now moving to a regionally aligned readiness and modernization model (Feickert, 2021b). Additionally, the National Guard has had a State Partnership Program since 1991 and now has 85 partnerships with 93 nations (National Guard, n.d.). The Army does not need the SFABs to accomplish its mission or professional development plans. Therefore, it is time for the Army to part ways with SFABs and repurpose its highly qualified and sought-after NCOs to serve as instructors within the professional military education system.

## Conclusion

The NCO Corps has a long and proud history. It will continue to be the Army's backbone and serve as its primary trainer of Soldiers and enforcer of discipline. However, the Army must still reach its professional development objectives detailed in strategic documents. NCOs need an education that embodies Army doctrine while meeting the demands of an unknown future by genuinely becoming a learning organization and using its talent management process to place the best NCOs as NCOPDS instructors. The Army must try to end the adage that serving as an NCOPDS instructor will ruin an NCO's career. An NCO's mindset should be that they would not have a future in the Army if they do not serve as instructors. Every NCO wants to change the Army, but only some are willing to step up and try to serve as an instructor to train and educate tomorrow's force. In today's world of instant gratification, it is critical to remember that a leader's impact is usually only fully realized long after they are gone. An instructor's legacy affects the lives of hundreds if not thousands of Soldiers. What will your legacy be? ■

## References

- Arms, L. R. (2007). A history of the NCO. *US Army Museum of the Noncommissioned Officer Publication*. [http://ncohistory.com/files/NCO\\_History.pdf](http://ncohistory.com/files/NCO_History.pdf)
- Army Training and Leader Development Strategy (ATLDS). (2020). The army training and leader development strategy. *Center for the Army Profession and Leadership*. [https://www.google.com/url?client=internal-elment-cse&cx=011973128648969648057:7mc9wy346zc&q=https://capl.army.mil/repository/armytraining.docx-&sa=U&ved=2ahUKewjFtYWa\\_bH1AhVdJEQIHf9eBjAQF-noECAAAQ&usg=AOvVaw2vtOuavyc0w03uBq7EHfCf](https://www.google.com/url?client=internal-elment-cse&cx=011973128648969648057:7mc9wy346zc&q=https://capl.army.mil/repository/armytraining.docx-&sa=U&ved=2ahUKewjFtYWa_bH1AhVdJEQIHf9eBjAQF-noECAAAQ&usg=AOvVaw2vtOuavyc0w03uBq7EHfCf)
- Army Strategy. (2018). The Army strategy. Army.mil. [https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/the\\_army\\_strategy\\_2018.pdf](https://www.army.mil/e2/downloads/rv7/the_army_strategy_2018.pdf)
- Cordova, L., & Johnson, C. (2018). Information paper: 2018 CMF 11 sergeant first class selection board. *US Army Fort Benning and the Maneuver Center of Excellence*. [https://www.benning.army.mil/infantry/ocoi/content/PDF/FY18%20SFC%20Analysis%20\(V3\).pdf](https://www.benning.army.mil/infantry/ocoi/content/PDF/FY18%20SFC%20Analysis%20(V3).pdf)
- Davenport, D. S. (2017, February 27). *Where the NCO professional development system began*. www.army.mil. [https://www.army.mil/article/182534/where\\_the\\_nco\\_professional\\_development\\_system\\_began](https://www.army.mil/article/182534/where_the_nco_professional_development_system_began)
- Department of the Army. (2017). *TP 525-8-2: The US Army learning concept for training and education 2020-2040*. Training and Doctrine Command Administrative Publications. <https://adminpubs.tradoc.army.mil/pamphlets/TP525-8-2.pdf>
- Department of the Army. (2018). *DA PAM 600-25: US Army noncommissioned officer professional development guide*. Army Publishing Directorate. [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/ARN13774\\_DAPam600-25\\_FINAL.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN13774_DAPam600-25_FINAL.pdf)
- Department of the Army. (2019). *AR 600-214: Enlisted assignments and utilization management*. Army Publishing Directorate. [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/ARN14314\\_AR614-200\\_FINAL.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN14314_AR614-200_FINAL.pdf)
- Department of the Army (DA). (2020). *TC 7-22.7: The non-commissioned officer guide*. Army Publishing Directorate. [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/ARN20340\\_TC%207-22x7%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN20340_TC%207-22x7%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf)
- Elder, D. K. (2006). *Educating Noncommissioned officers: A chronology of educational programs for the American NCO*. ncohistory.com. <https://ncohistory.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/educating-noncommissioned-officers.pdf>
- Feickert, A. (2021a). Army security force assistance brigades (SFAB). Congressional Research Service. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/IF10675.pdf>
- Feickert, A. (2021b). The Army's new regionally aligned readiness and modernization model. Congressional Research Service. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/weapons/IF11670.pdf>
- Keller-Glaze, H., Bryson, J., Riley, R., Horey, J., Bickley, W. R. (2016). Identifying, preparing and evaluating army instructors. Army Research Institute. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1009045.pdf>
- Kimmons, S. (2020, May 7). SFABs look to grow force, expand missions around the world. www.army.mil. [https://www.army.mil/article/235370/sfabs\\_look\\_to\\_grow\\_force\\_ex](https://www.army.mil/article/235370/sfabs_look_to_grow_force_ex)

[pand missions around the world#:~:text=Not%20only%20do%20SFABs%20have,to%2041%25%20across%20th](#)

National Guard. (n.d.). State partnership program. Official

---

Website of the National Guard, <https://www.national-guard.mil/leadership/joint-staff/j-5/international-affairs-division/state-partnership-program/>

**Sgt. Maj. Phillip Fenrick** is the operations sergeant major for 1st Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Brigade, 1st Armored Division, at Ft. Bliss, Texas. He is a graduate of the Sergeants Major Academy (Class 72). His previous assignments include troop sergeant major for the Asymmetric Warfare Group's Leadership Development Troop; Rifle Company, Heavy Weapons Company, and Headquarters and Headquarters Company first sergeant for 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry Regiment (Airborne). Fenrick deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan multiple times in various leadership positions. He holds two bachelor's degrees, a BS in Strategic Studies and Defense Analysis from Norwich University and a BA in Leadership and Workforce Development from the Army Command and General Staff College. He also has a master's degree in Leadership Studies from the University of Texas at El Paso.

---



<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

**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.

---

