



A photo of the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. on May 25, 2016. The military wants to develop future senior enlisted leaders to be strategic-level thinkers. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Marisol Walker)

Developing Strategically-Minded Enlisted Leaders

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I recently had a conversation with my brother, a sergeant first class, working as a drill sergeant at Fort Benning, Georgia. I encouraged him to apply for the White House Fellowship. I told him it is a broadening assignment where he can gain expertise on strategic-level policy. For a little bit of context, the White House Fellowship is a one-year assignment, open to both enlisted Soldiers and officers, at the White House where they can rub elbows with supreme court justices, cabinet secretaries, senior White House officials, members of Congress, foreign heads of state, and military leaders (Mackey, 2020 p. 56). The White House Fellowship is one of the

few strategic-level broadening assignments available to enlisted service members.

Examining the Broadening Opportunity Program (BOP) released by the U.S. Army Human Resources Command confirms only two of the 15 strategic-level broadening assignments are open to enlisted Soldiers (Mackey, 2020, p. 2).

Enlisted career paths are very structured. Soldiers can generally plan out their careers, from private to command sergeant major. While this may be beneficial for career planning, it doesn't encourage enlisted Soldiers to pursue strategic-level broadening assignments because

their options are limited. The U.S. Army should make more broadening assignments available to enlisted Soldiers, like the Joint Chiefs of Staff Intern Program, to develop strategically minded enlisted leaders

Developing Enlisted Leaders for Tomorrow's Wars

The idea of developing enlisted leaders into strategic-level thinkers is paramount to the future of warfare. *Developing Enlisted Leaders for Tomorrow's Wars*, a document published by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and signed off by the top enlisted leaders from every service, highlights the need to tackle this ambition (Joint Staff, 2021).

The document states, "the emerging operating environment demands that joint enlisted leaders be far better educated and more knowledgeable in the employment and integration of the instruments of National Power" (Joint Staff, 2021, p. 1). Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (SEAC), Ramón Colón-López, highlighted that we need to change the force to confront strategic challenges from China and Russia (Garamone, 2022).

The military has transitioned to developing strategically minded enlisted service members through the Gateway course that Colón-López calls "Keystone-minus." Taught at National Defense University specifically for E-6s and E-7s, the Gateway course discusses U.S. national strategic policy, national military capabilities and organization, a joint forces overview, and regional knowledge and operational culture (National Defense University, 2022 p. 2).

This course is an effort to develop future senior enlisted leaders to be strategic-level thinkers. However, it is only 12-day days long (National Defense University, 2022, p. 5). Given the short length of the course, would those enlisted Soldiers who take the course walk away with a concrete understanding of strategic level concepts? Twelve days is not nearly enough time.

In 2013, Brig. Gen. Timothy Connelly, then a lieutenant colonel, produced a thesis for the Army War College "*Developing Strategic Leaders in the NCO and Warrant Officer Corps*" (Connelly, 2013). He recommended increasing enlisted broadening assignments to build bridges between services, governmental agencies, and international organizations (Connelly, 2013).

Connelly also recommended NCOs receive a strategic military education (Connelly, 2013). While the author highlighted that senior NCOs attend the Keystone-minus course, only few can attend so there is little opportunity to "build a bench" of strategically minded senior NCOs (Connelly, 2013).

Anyone interested in this topic should read his thesis; however, his two policy recommendations should be expanded and combined to build strategic-level NCOs through the JCS Intern Program.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff/Office of the Secretary of Defense/Army Staff Internship, commonly known as the JCS Internship, is a broadening assignment for post key-development Army Captains (Meyer & Kennedy, 2021). Captains spend a year at Georgetown University earning a master's degree in policy management, one year on the Joint Staff or Office of the Secretary of Defense staff, and a third year on the Army staff (Meyer & Kennedy, 2021). In all, service members spend one year in school and two years working with Pentagon staff.

Opening the program up to sergeants first class, because they have enough time at tactical and operational levels, would make those NCOs effective advisors at the strategic level. Most sergeants first class are either career enlisted or close to it, meaning the Army gets a good return on investment by keeping these Soldiers in the force. This approach would develop strategic level thinkers who may one day serve as sergeants major at the brigade, division, and corps levels.

The benefits of making a similar internship program available to NCOs would include positive relationships built while attending the university and attaining a master's degree and while working with Pentagon staff. An integrated enlisted and officer cohort going through Georgetown together could develop strong relationships that could last throughout their careers.

Additionally, once these NCOs are assigned to Pentagon staff, they may further develop networks and relationships



SEAC Ramón Colón-López, Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recites the oath of enlistment with service members on Al Dhafra Air Base, United Arab Emirates, Jan. 10, 2023. Service senior enlisted leaders have envisioned an enlisted force be far better educated and more knowledgeable in the employment and integration of the instruments of National Power. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Sabatino DiMascio)



U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Nathan Cassidy, with 10th Support Group Ammunition Depot, briefs senior leaders near Kure, Japan, Mar. 10, 2023. The Army should make more broadening assignments available to enlisted Soldiers to develop strategically minded enlisted leaders. (Defense Department photo by Brian Lamar)

with other military and civilian leaders. Developing relationships is vital to accomplishing even the simplest tasks.

Another consideration is the opportunity to gain a different perspective. NCOs bring points-of-view different from their officer counterparts. Based purely on numbers, enlisted Soldiers are rare in the strategic halls of the Pentagon. One could argue that the "best military advice" should come not only from officer input and perspective, but also from strategically minded enlisted leaders. The JCS Internship has the potential to play a pivotal role in developing strategic thinking, and experienced, NCOs.

Limitations

Training programs are not without their limitations and the JCS Internship is no exception. One limitation is the small number of individuals selected for the JCS Internship.

At Georgetown University there are on average of 12-15 students per year who are Army JCS interns. Even if the program doubled to add 12-15 NCOs the U.S. Army would gain little from so few enlisted Soldiers going through the program. That is a fair argument; however,

expanding the JCS Intern Program is more of a steppingstone rather than the solution.

Expanding the JCS Internship is only one broadening assignment that should be extended to enlisted. Successful implementation of enlisted into the JCS Internship could prompt more significant discussion on other broadening assignments.

Since most sergeants first class may not have an undergraduate degree, a prerequisite for the JCS Program, that may be a barrier for many NCOs, but it may push them to attain those prerequisites. Not having an undergraduate degree may also prompt further discussion on NCO higher education. Nevertheless, it is crucial to maintain the program's competitive and selective edge.

Finally, the fact NCOs do not want to participate in the JCS Internship should be addressed. They may view a Pentagon assignment as "away from the fight" or a place where you "die on the vine" (Misso, 2018). Simply put, enlisted culture discourages Soldiers from taking on assignments that deviate from a more "traditional" career path. For the U.S. Army to gain forward-thinking, strategically minded NCOs, that culture needs to change.

Conclusion

There are many significant assignment opportunities available for both officers and enlisted Soldiers. However, the U.S. Army lacks broadening assignments for NCOs, to develop them as strategic-level thinkers. As we look at the great power competition with Russia and China, the Army needs to develop strategic thinkers within the NCO ranks. Pre-existing broadening assignments for officers should be expanded to NCOs. More specifically, the Army should expand the JCS Internship to include NCOs. Developing strategic level thinkers in the enlisted ranks is not only good for individuals, but also for the Army and the nation. ■

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