



First sergeants (and sergeants major) need the time and flexibility while in position to focus and direct their experience and expertise to training, education, and overall tactical growth. (U.S. Army photo by Markus Rauchenberger)

Sharpening the Asymmetric Advantage

By Retired Master Sgt. Robert Kussart

As contested environments redefine warfare, the foundation of senior NCOs' expertise rests in their war on terrorism experience. However, amid the clash of old and new paradigms, a chasm emerged between these NCOs' historical mastery and their readiness for the multi-domain battlefield.

A truth arises: Senior NCOs must transform from yesterday's rigid managers into tomorrow's

adaptable leaders. By exploring FM 3-0's unmined possibilities, the adverse effects of cultural norms, and the paradoxical nature of experience (as an asset *and* liability), this article urges reform. Only change can bridge the gap between history and innovation, forging senior NCOs poised to triumph in the complex, interconnected, and ever-changing theater of multi-domain operations (MDO).

The First Sergeant: Perception vs. Reality

Consider this scenario: An NCO with an illustrious career steps into the role of senior enlisted advisor to the commander, as the first sergeant. However, the position — long esteemed by the Soldier — differs greatly from his expectations.

The *first sergeant* is the senior enlisted advisor to the commander at the company, troop, or battery level. The NCO guide (Training Circular 7-22.7) states:

“ISGs are responsible for maintaining and enforcing standards, ensuring training objectives are met, developing the Soldiers in the unit, all administrative functions, and ensuring the health, welfare, and morale of the unit and their Families. The ISG serves as a coordinator for training and resources, as well as the lead integrator with outside organizations and entities. The ISG is the standard bearer for their organization and serves as a role model for all Soldiers, NCOs and Officers.”

(Department of the Army, 2020)

However, the first sergeant in this example experiences circumstances that contradict these expectations.

An Alternative Definition of First Sergeant

Rather than the role the NCO guide portrays, our first sergeant discovers a more accurate description of his position: *a senior enlisted social worker, clerical and*



Many senior NCOs count three years (or more) since they were members of a tactical team. Tactical proficiency translates to shooting, moving, communicating, and medicating. They form the foundation used to measure collective actions' effectiveness and are elements our asymmetric advantage (Soldiers) use to be more lethal than our peers. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Cornelius McLean)

administrative manager at the company/troop/battery level.

To this summary could be added: *Metrics manager, the most experienced Soldier in the formation, with no (circumstantial) experience related to what the ISG does and no requirement to be who they were when they earned the position and promotion.*

Despite what the NCO guide says, our first sergeant doesn't ensure training standards, though his experience, performance, and potential attest to his ability to do so. However, he's rarely in a position to ensure those standards are met without dropping the ball on his real job: *The senior enlisted clerical and administrative manager at the company/troop/battery level, metrics status manager, and primary recordkeeper and data entry specialist for things such as (but not limited to):*

- *Monthly reports*
- *Digital Training Management System (DTMS)*
- *Medical Protection System (MEDPROS)*
- *Human Resources (HR) Metrics*
- *Electronic Military Personnel Office (eMILPO)/Integrated Personnel and Pay System-Army (IPPS-A)*
- *The barracks or the Unit Manning Report (UMR)*

The first sergeant (and others like him) functions as a human resources specialist — regardless of previous expertise, skills, and attributes.

As the Army begins “transforming in contact” (Roque, 2024), an opportunity to modernize the first sergeant's role emerges.

What Should the First Sergeant Be?

Experience and training should drive senior enlisted leaders to be the storied position of senior enlisted advisor to the commander. They should be to the company, troop, or battery what the platoon sergeant has been to the platoon during the war on terrorism.

As the Army transitions to Multi-Domain Operations (MDO) with the recent publication of its newest manual on operations, FM 3-0, the Army is now a division unit of (tactical) action force. Now that the division is the unit of action, companies, troops, and batteries are full-fledged maneuver elements.

Gone are the days when first sergeants were forward operating base (FOB) mayors and *the old guy who does admin*. Their role (and that of sergeants major and command sergeants major) needs a critical shift in duties and responsibilities.

FM 3-0 states that in *contested* operational environments:

“Army forces cannot expect to deploy without being challenged by the threat. For decades, U.S. military forces conducted uncontested and generally predictable deployments from home stations to operational theaters because threat actors lacked the capability to significantly affect



Leaders at all echelons will have continuous access to greater reach, both up and down the communications framework, which encourages micromanagement and increases our signature in the Electromagnetic Spectrum (EMS). (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Spc. Annie M. Riley)

deploying units at home stations or while in transit to a theater of operations. This is no longer the case. Peer threats possess the capability and capacity to observe, disrupt, delay, and attack U.S. forces at any stage of force projection, including while still positioned at home stations in the United States and overseas. Commanders and staffs must therefore plan and execute deployments with the assumption that friendly forces are always under observation and in contact.”

(Department of the Army, 2022)

Contested environments are not defined, and almost no experienced soldiers have been in them. Most currently serving senior NCOs grew up during the war on terrorism, which FM 3-0 doesn't mention. The field manual also neglects to discuss why and how the war on terrorism put future senior NCOs in a compromising position.

People are averse to change. In this case, they were reluctant to modify what they thought was right for a decade or two. David Barno and Nora Bensahel explain that cultural standards that “value process over substance, muffle the ideas of junior personnel, and disparage education and critical thinking must be eradicated and replaced with new norms that reward willingness to think creatively, innovate, and change” (Barno & Bensahel, 2016).

The authors are spot on, which is especially true

for senior members of the NCO corps. As these NCOs age in the organization, they may become complacent. The thought of change can be stifling. The U.S. Army views its most experienced Soldiers as assets because of their experience. However, that same experience could instead make them liabilities.

Experience: An Asset and a Liability

NCO experiences help shape how the Army learns.

According to the U.S. Army Learning Concept for Training and Education, to address learning environment challenges, training and education must meet specific requirements in the future (Department of the Army, 2017).

Those requirements have hardly changed from the 2017 to 2024 learning concept. For some, the institutional, home station, and self-training and education model creates additional self-imposed challenges. The Army must consider, acknowledge, and fix these issues to shape what senior NCOs can contribute to the critical question:

“How does the Army, as a learning organization, empower and enable learners, operating as part of the Joint Force in ambiguous, complex, multi-domain environments, to fight and win our Nation’s wars?”

(Department of the Army, 2024)

Let's examine these requirements (and the solutions to their challenges) individually.

**Requirement:
Create chances to hone and master skills**

“Create situations allowing individuals and teams to master fundamentals and hone skills.”

(Department of the Army, 2017)

Challenge #1: *Senior NCOs don't have recent and meaningful repetitions of basic tasks.*

Limited recent experience happens because of the current key developmental and broadening process. When an NCO becomes a first sergeant, or even a sergeant major or command sergeant major, they are years removed from tactical experience and expertise.

For example, many senior NCOs count three years (or more) since they were members of a team that entered and cleared a room. Keep in mind that this only considers senior NCOs. (This trend is widespread, starting with staff sergeants and even sergeants.)

Often, lack of training amplifies the years removed from training. It isn't uncommon (often, it's the norm) for an NCO to finish platoon sergeant time and then do the following:

- **2 to 3 years of broadening**
Few broadening assignments further tactical prowess. (When was the last time a recruiter practiced tactics, techniques, and procedures — let alone leading?)
- **2 to 3 years as a first sergeant**
How often do first sergeants perform tactical tasks?
- **2 to 3 years on staff, further broadening or attending the Sergeants Major Academy**

The point: Senior NCOs receive minimal tactical training and education, yet they are expected to be tactical subject matter experts of their assigned maneuver formations.

Challenge #2: *Senior NCOs regularly attend badge-producing schools during their tenure in the Army.*

Badges look nice and are worth promotion points. Special operations forces (SOF) can and do use Military Free Fall (MFF), and they can use SCUBA training — but SOF is an exception.

Conversely, nearly every badge NCOs can earn and wear in the General-Purpose Force (GPF) has one thing in common except for Expert Soldier, Medic, and Infantry Badges (E3B): They don't represent tactical proficiency.

Tactical proficiency, in this case, translates to shooting, moving, communicating, and medicating, which are the basics of how individual and collective tactical prowess is gauged. Additionally, these basics form the foundation used to measure the effectiveness of collective actions and are elements our asymmetric advantage (Soldiers) use to be more lethal than our peers.



Experience builds perception of the world, and perception creates the realities that shape training programs. Home station and institutional opportunities for Soldiers to train for the realities of the multi-domain battlefield hardly exist. Where they do, Soldiers never repeat it — even if the scenario isn't watered down due to authorities and policies. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Spc. Marie L. Bryant)

Those skills matter in the *last 100 yards*, but nearly no badge-producing schools focus on those significant tactical attributes.

**Requirement:
Prep Soldiers to exercise mission command**

“Army training and education prepares Soldiers, and Army civilians to exercise mission command to exert influence on key individuals, organizations, and institutions through cooperative and persuasive means.”

(Department of the Army, 2017)

Challenge #1: *During the war on terrorism, Soldiers did not focus on the principles of mission command.*

Two conditioning trends occurred. The first was constant and reliable command and control (C2). The second was the *Concept of Operation (CONOP) mentality*, although others might call it risk aversion or an inability to abide by and accept prudent risk (McBride & Snell, 2017).

These realities combine and create a culture and generational Army that isn't comfortable working toward understanding intent, task, purpose, and end state based on disciplined initiative; they always had uncontested C2 and always had to brief slide CONOPs to get approval for anything. If they know the planning process, many leaders from the war on terrorism era feel they must always ask for permission, whether in person or over available communication platforms.

In the future, things like the Integrated Tactical Network (ITN), Individual Virtual Augmentation System (IVAS), Joint All Domain Command and Control (JADC2), or even the Enhanced Night Vision Goggle-Binocular (ENVG-B) might create additional (and some of the same) C2 challenges.

Leaders at all echelons will have continuous

access to greater reach, both up and down the communications framework, which encourages micromanagement and increases our signature in the Electromagnetic Spectrum (EMS).

Threat-kill chains will revolve around such system emissions, along with the training time, resources, and requirements for Soldiers and units to use them effectively.

This reality starkly contrasts with how the Army conducts C2, which is with the mission command approach (Department of the Army, 2022)

**Requirement:
Allow individuals to thrive in chaos**

“Create situations allowing individuals and teams to experience, become comfortable, and eventually thrive in ambiguity and chaos and then provide meaningful performance feedback.”

(Department of the Army, 2017)

Challenge #1: *During the war on terrorism, ambiguity and chaos were typically not very kinetic.*

During the war on terrorism, Soldiers almost always had unlimited overmatch. Micro-tactical units (e.g., squads) regularly used strategic and operational assets to solve simple problems, such as armed irregulars with rifles and improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

The days of providing air support to a conventional

squad with fixed-wing aircraft dropping 2,000-pound GPS-guided bombs on a team of insurgents with AK-47s are long gone. The new IED is the small Unmanned Aerial System (UAS), and emerging Unmanned Ground System (UGS) and Unmanned Sea System (USS), against which we hardly ever train.

The war on terrorism was never nonkinetic — Electronic Warfare (EW), Signals Intelligence (SIGINT), UAS, Information Warfare (IW) — except for the occasional terrorist or insurgent information campaign.

As a Soldier who learned from Ukraine’s challenges firsthand, I realized that the ambiguity and chaos during the war on terrorism were child’s play compared to Large-Scale Combat (LSCO) and Multi-Domain Operations (MDO).

Our experiences build our perception of the world, and our perception creates the realities that shape our training programs. Home station and institutional opportunities for Soldiers to train for the realities of the multi-domain battlefield hardly exist. Where they do, Soldiers never repeat it — even if the scenario isn’t watered down due to authorities and policies.

One organization and facility that could offer MDO training and expertise — the Asymmetric Warfare Group’s Asymmetric Warfare Training Center (AWTC), Cyber and Urban Training Area — closed when the Asymmetric Warfare Group was deactivated. It happened



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despite their resources, real-time Peer/Near-Peer (PnP) war expertise, and related experiences (Thorn, 2020).

Senior NCOs will be required to help form and standardize training and education they know very little about, have never been trained for, lack the resources to train for, and never experienced themselves.

Some might argue that the Combat Training Centers offer the training opportunities the Army seeks. They have some capabilities to form suitable training environments. Still, material, contracts, contractors, opposition force tactics, authorities (policy), Mission Essential Tasks, Observer Controller/Trainer shortcomings, and facilities don't allow genuine ambiguity and chaos to provide the experience and repetition required to build a lethal, flexible, and adaptable senior NCO corps.

The Senior NCO Problems, Summarized

The current senior NCO corps isn't ready to lead Soldiers and advise their officer counterparts during Multi-Domain Operations, primarily because of the following:

1. Key developmental positions, such as first sergeants and command sergeants major, are overly emphasized and misdirected. These positions prioritize metrics and administration over training, education, expertise, and experience.

The convergence of admin-focused key developmental senior NCO positions with required nonlethal training and education that out-prioritize actual lethality is degrading formations and stealing seasoned leaders from those they are there to lead. Badge-producing schools do not produce lethal Soldiers.

Oddly, as "lethality" continues to grow its buzzword notoriety, nonlethal professional military education and training like Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention (SHARP) and Equal Opportunity (EO) are some of the only required schools at the company, troop, and battery level. When will Ranger School, Marksmanship Master Trainer Course, or Counter-UAS Course (as a few examples) become a tracked metric to gauge "lethality"?

2. The Senior NCO corps needs more recent and relevant tactical experience and repetition.

NCOs are promoted and managed away from Career Management Field proficiency, losing critical growth opportunities, while perishable skills atrophy. Senior NCOs coming to the regular Army from Special Operations Forces like the Ranger Regiment or the recently shuttered Asymmetric Warfare Group (AWG) are exceptions — about as far from the norm as can be found, even though they are what their peers should strive to be. The Abrams Charter is hardly in effect (Woods, 2003).

An AWG master sergeant could influence and inform more than an entire brigade's worth of first sergeants — with a finger on the pulse of reality. Whatever was gained from shuttering AWG has not been realized in warfighting



According to the author, rather than the role the NCO guide portrays, first sergeants soon discover a more accurate description of their position: a senior enlisted social worker, clerical and administrative manager at the company/troop/battery level. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Darrell Stembridge)

capability. Our NCO corps took a step back by losing the one unit that could rapidly help inform its relevance.

3. The NCO corps shapes its training and education mental models based on recent operational experience, the war on terrorism — which is dangerous when informing our future.

Currently, the Army cannot expose senior NCOs to the intricacy and challenges of MDO environments. It isn't capturing and communicating lessons learned from ongoing conflicts that outpace Doctrine, Organization, Training, Materiel, Leadership and Education, Personnel, Facilities and Policy (DOTMLPF-P) framework almost daily.

The Solutions

If three statements can summarize senior NCO issues, four more can supply their resolution:

1. Get over it.

We maintain a cultural insistence that senior NCOs are more akin to human resource specialists than career management field experts. First sergeants (and sergeants major) need the time and flexibility while in position to focus and direct their experience and expertise to training, education, and overall tactical growth.

Add one spot on each company, troop, or battery Table of Organization and Equipment (TOE) for a mid-career (sergeants first class/master sergeants) NCO from any career management field to do what current first sergeants do, then allow first sergeants to be what they need to be now: *senior enlisted advisors to company, troop, or battery commanders; second in charge, ground force commanders, and the commands' most experienced Soldiers and leaders; individuals who focus on developing others through:*

- *Home station training and self-study*
- *Building and conducting tough and realistic training and retraining*
- *Managing and mentoring others for institutional training and education*
- *Awards, decorations, and unit discipline*

2. If today's first sergeants are essentially yesterday's platoon sergeants, they need more tactical training more often.

Make the Master Leader Course specific to career management field for one part, teaching and drilling things such as (but not limited to) running a company, troop, or battery command post (CP), CP signature management, CP Emissions Control (EMCON), and survivability, company, troop, or battery medical evacuation procedures under mass casualty (MASCAL) conditions with no golden hour, enabler integration, PnP critical capabilities, and ways to circumvent them.

Don't change the second part (currently the only part) with its common core approach.

Further, incentivize tactical expertise by providing college credits toward more training and experience than currently offered — possibly accrediting certain career tracks. Additional incentives for occupational specialty skills and experience will reduce the number of people marginalizing their jobs for college and increase the number of people applying for and completing professional and tactically relevant civilian and professional military education.

3. NCOs need better events.

Soldiers and the keepers of military education standards, NCOs, need exposure to events like the Asymmetric Warfare Group's Contested Micro Experiment (ACME) (Thorn, 2020). This experiment enabled training in a multidimensional operating environment through total immersion in a realistically replicated Peer/Near-Peer (PnP) scenario, directly incorporating real-time threat actions and capabilities into a flexible training model.

Combat Training Centers (CTCs) don't accomplish this. Soldiers and NCOs would still require relevant

Operational Environment (OE) exposure far before any CTC rotation if they did.

The Army needs a course that immerses NCOs in the realities of MDO (like ACME). In a budget- and personnel-constrained Army — where units get close to no more money and no more people (sometimes less) — the Army needs to figure out how to accomplish this now.

Repurpose every air assault school's budget, land, personnel, and additional resources to focus on building and running numerous multi-domain operating environment training courses (MDOETC).

If unwilling to cut air assault, reduce the number of classes run each year and focus on the course's logistical aspects, such as building and inspecting sling loads while eliminating rarely used insertion methods, freeing resources, and conducting both courses, Air Assault and MDOETC.

4. We need a unit like the Asymmetric Warfare Group.

Recent and current events — such as the fights in Nagorno-Karabakh, Ukraine, Israel, and even the drug wars in Mexico — solidify the need for the reactivation of the Asymmetric Warfare Group or a similarly charged unit.

The U.S. Army must stand the group back up or watch the rest of the world outpace and out-modernize it, an issue since 2021. Its ability to modernize the NCO corps is further behind today than in 2019, when AWG led the LSCO and MDO modernization charge.

Conclusion

The U.S. Army's biggest asymmetric advantage, Soldiers, must

be realistically and relevantly trained and educated and have outstanding leadership to be effective during Multi-Domain Operations. The Army can do that by bringing back AWG and operationalizing that today's first sergeant is to MDO what yesterday's platoon sergeant was to unified land operations and full spectrum operations.

Senior enlisted advisors must be trained, educated, experienced, and available. If they aren't, the Army won't be able to employ its most significant asymmetric advantage — because that advantage will be preoccupied and irrelevant. ■



The days of providing air support to a conventional squad with fixed-wing aircraft dropping 2,000-pound GPS-guided bombs on a team of insurgents with AK-47s are long gone. The new IED is the small Unmanned Aerial System (UAS), and emerging Unmanned Ground System (UGS) and Unmanned Sea System (USS), against which we hardly ever train. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Matthew Visser)

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Retired Master Sgt. Robert Kussart served as an infantryman from rifleman to company first sergeant, to troop sergeant major. He also served in the light infantry, Stryker infantry, special missions, modernization units, and as a Ranger instructor. Some of his awards and decorations include the Bronze Star with V device for valor and the Purple Heart (with oak leaf cluster for two awards). Kussart also won the 2018 Asymmetric Warrior of the Year award for the Asymmetric Warfare Group.



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