



in 1629, Scotsman James Achesone wrote a manual on army organization and tactics, but present-day NCOs can find valuable lessons in his work. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

What Today's NCOs Can Learn From the Sergeants of Pike and Shot

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In 1629, James Achesone penned a manual on army organization and tactics in his native Scotland. Achesone, who described himself only as a “Gentleman at Arms,” titled the pamphlet *THE MILITARY GARDEN*. (The full title: *THE MILITARY GARDEN OR, INSTRUCTIONS FOR ALL YOUNG SOLDIERS AND SUCH WHO ARE DISPOSED TO LEARN AND HAVE KNOWLEDGE OF THE MILITARY DISCIPLINE*.)

Much of Achesone’s knowledge has lost relevance in the nearly four centuries since publication. He was writing in the twilight of the era of warfare known as *pike and shot* – characterized, as the name implies, by the hybridization of infantrymen into two types: pikemen and musketeers. These men marched and fought in square formations on open fields, taking commands from the sound of drums, their eyes often blinded by thick black powder smoke.

It was a battlefield unrecognizable from today’s – speckled with sieges, vibrantly colored uniforms and flags, and cavalry charges often led by kings and princes.

Not all of the pamphlet is obsolete, however. While warfare has changed, the text reveals how many of the basics of what today’s U.S. Army considers good soldiering were in place on 17th century battlefields – specifically, noncommissioned officers’ (NCO) proper roles and duties. Exploring the commonalities between Achesone’s manual and modern Army standards affirms the NCO Corps’ fundamentals.

As a side note, Early Modern English spelling varies wildly and often differs from contemporary orthography. For ease of comprehension, this article updates outdated spelling. (Readers seeking the original text will find a link in the references.)

The Sergeant

After a brief foreword thanking his supporters and reminding his readers that though we should always desire peace, “war is to be provided for, and the youth ... is to be trained thereunto” (Achesone, 1629, preface), Achesone begins by breaking down and explaining the “offices” of a pike and shot company from highest to lowest rank: captain, lieutenant, ensign, sergeant, and corporal. While referring to all these as “officers,” there was an understanding of a commissioned versus noncommissioned officer (even if the vocabulary was not as defined). Soldiers ranked as ensigns or higher most often purchased their commissions. Sergeants and corporals were selected from the ranks of private soldiers.

Achesone describes the sergeant’s job this way:

IN this officer consists the principal parts of the observation of military discipline, and for that the execution of the superior officers orders, and commands, do concern his charge and duty, it [is] important that he be a skillful and valiant Soldier, and well experienced in Military discipline, yea of so great importance, that more tolerable it were for all the officers of the company (were it the

Captain himself) to be unskilled men and of little experience, rather than the Sergeant, who of necessity ought to be an expert Soldier, and of great spirit and diligence. He is to rank the Soldiers as he shall think good, not suffering them to contend or fall out amongst themselves for the Front or best places.

(Achesone, 1629, p. 3)

Writing an inept commander is better than an inept sergeant is a bold claim. In some ways, it foreshadows the poet Rudyard Kipling’s famous quip, partially enshrined in the NCO Creed, that “the backbone of the Army is the Non-Commissioned Man” (Kipling, 1926, p. 515).

However, it was not a claim made baselessly. A skilled sergeant then, as now, could lead his soldiers through poorly devised orders and likewise increase the odds of victory and survival. On the contrary, the most brilliantly conceived strategy could not then and cannot today be executed by bungling, corrupt, or inexperienced sergeants.

In the days of pike and shot, the square formation ruled the battlefield. As Achesone points out, it was the sergeant’s role to know his soldiers, to best place them and march with them, to lead from the front, and to ensure unit integrity. If he made poor decisions due to his lack of experience or ignorance of his soldiers, the



Sgt. 1st Class Phillip Reed, assigned to Bravo Troop, 3rd Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, inspects an M2 .50 caliber machine gun during sergeant’s time training at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, on July 28, 2016. As a platoon sergeant, Phillip ensures his skills are as sharp as the Soldiers he leads. The most brilliantly conceived strategy could not be executed today by bungling, corrupt, or inexperienced sergeants. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Armando R. Limon)



Gustavus Adolphus, the King of Sweden, fielded exclusively Scottish regiments during the Thirty Years' War. This Johann Jakob Walther oil painting portrays Adolphus' participation in the Battle of Breitenfeld, Germany, in 1631. James Achesone's native Scotland wasn't directly involved in the war, but thousands of Scotsmen like himself served as mercenaries on all sides of the conflict. (PD-US, United States Public Domain)

odds increased the square would break under enemy attack, endangering the formation.

Today's Army expects sergeants to know their soldiers for the same reason. Not knowing their subordinates dooms leaders to fail in vital decision-making situations. Even if the battlefield has changed, the need for experienced sergeants has not.

The Corporal

The lowest-ranking NCO in a company then as today, the corporal fulfilled roles and duties described this way by Achesone:

AS he is a degree above the private Soldier, so ought he in skill, let no man that is a Soldier, seek to come to preferment in any office in the Field, except he know himself fit to discharge the same, or else he shall become a laughingstock to others, and be condemned of all men, as he justly deserves, that taketh upon him more than he is able to perform.
(Achesone, 1629, p. 3)

The picture painted is of a probationary leader who has earned a degree of distinction above his peers but still has a way to go before promotion to sergeant.

Achesone's description is not a fleshing out of jobs or responsibilities but rather a warning. While corporals have earned some respect and authority, they must not let it go to their heads. Any corporal who does not ensure he has and continues to acquire necessary soldierly knowledge will become a laughingstock.

The rank of corporal was a steppingstone to leadership, demanding the humility to continue learning and building on demonstrated potential. The same can be said today. Any new corporal who takes their rank to mean that they have nothing left to learn or consider themselves better than their junior enlisted peers will lack the respect necessary to lead soldiers effectively – and possibly find themselves out of the NCO Corps.

Things were not so different in Europe 400 years ago. Let any corporal who reads this heed the warning: While your stripes are an accomplishment, you still have a way to go.

Then vs. Now

When Achesone wrote his manual, Europe had been on fire for more than a decade. In 1618, the Bohemian Revolt against the Holy Roman Emperor escalated into a conflict now known as the Thirty Years' War. By its

end, almost the whole continent had been dragged into it in one way or another, making it the deadliest war in human history up to that time. As many as five million people died in Germany alone (Childs, 2001, p. 73).

While Achesone's native Scotland was not directly involved, thousands of Scotsmen served as mercenaries on all sides of the conflict. Scottish expatriates were so common that several countries fielded exclusively Scottish regiments, most notably the King of Sweden, Gustavus Adolphus (Wood, 1987, p. 13).

Achesone's written advice was not theoretical but proven and validated by ongoing conflict. The battlefield he knew is now a long-ago chapter in history. However, his observations on the roles of NCOs have barely aged, if at all. While times change, people do not. The value in reading Achesone's manual today is in how it demonstrates this point.

The ideal sergeant Achesone described then would live up to the modern NCO Creed. Sergeants today must be competent enough to do their job and inspire the confidence of their soldiers, just as sergeants in a pike square must have been.

Sergeants today must know their Soldiers' strengths and weaknesses both to develop them and to place them in roles and tasks that suit them best and allow them to contribute to the mission's success. A sergeant's job 400 years ago and an ocean away was no different.

The same can be said for a corporal. In Achesone's day, a corporal had to be well prepared to assume a sergeant's responsibilities. Thankfully, the Army recently took steps to improve the quality of corporals and ensure they receive the mentorship and guidance necessary for success.

The corporal directive, started in 2021, shows this advancement best. The change requires all Soldiers to pin

the rank before making sergeant – a departure from the days when most soldiers skipped it, going straight from specialist to sergeant. A 2021 *Army Times* article quotes then-Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Grinston, who saw the change as a way to recognize corporals' "role as a noncommissioned officer and ensure they're getting the coaching and mentorship they need to be successful" (Venhuizen, 2021).

The same article notes Sgt. Maj. Kenyatta Gaskins' description of the revised approach as a "junior leader development process" – a process that Achesone and his contemporaries likely would have thought wise.

Conclusion

When it was published, Achesone's pamphlet was not particularly revolutionary. It is no more groundbreaking today. For the most part, the only reason to read it or any

manual about pike and shot warfare is for antiquarian enjoyment of history.

Nevertheless, it offers genuine wisdom worth reflecting on regarding NCO duties and responsibilities. Technology, strategy, and doctrine change, but the basic principles that make a good leader – such as competence, knowing one's subordinates, and accepting mentorship – do not.

A keen observer finds universal truths anywhere at any time. Achesone's 17th-century manual testifies to this.

As the Army finds itself in a period of self-reflection and faces 21st-century challenges, leaders can take solace in the fact that our NCO Corps is founded on wisdom validated through centuries of learning on the battlefield.

The fundamentals that worked for the sergeants of pike and shot are the same fundamentals that, when properly followed, work for today's and tomorrow's sergeants. ■



A display at the Swedish Army Museum in Stockholm shows troops' lack of consistent dress in a pike-and-shot formation during the Thirty Years' War. (Peter Isotalo, PD-US, United States Public Domain)

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