



The foundation of our Army still rests on the shoulders of noncommissioned officers. We still have the reach, the influence, and the responsibility to rebuild what has been lost. This begins not with a directive or a reform, but with a choice to recommit to the role they signed up for. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. LaShic Patterson)

Once the Backbone

By Command Sgt. Maj. Nancy Weinberger

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Introduction

After three decades in uniform, I have seen our Army transform through wars, reorganizations, and changing missions. Yet the most concerning change has not come from our adversaries or even our operating environment — it has come from within. The role of the noncommissioned officer, once the undisputed backbone of our Army, has eroded. Customs and courtesies are neglected, discipline is inconsistently enforced, and too many of our junior leaders are tactically unprepared or professionally disengaged.

This is not a condemnation of a generation, but a recognition of a system that has slowly lost its way. We did not arrive here overnight, and we will not fix it with slogans or PowerPoint slides. It is time for the senior NCOs of this Army to speak plainly, act deliberately, and

restore what made our Corps great. This article is not a grievance — it is a call to action.

Guardians of Tradition – The Heritage of the NCO Corps

The Noncommissioned Officer Corps was not built overnight. It was forged over generations of hardship, hard training, and hard truths. The Army's earliest NCOs carried halberds — not for ceremony, but to literally keep troops in line during battle formations. They were selected not for what they said, but for what they did: they trained, enforced, led, and above all, set the standard. Today, the U.S. Army's own *Blue Book* reminds us that "NCOs are the standard-bearers," entrusted with preserving customs, courtesies, and the very culture of our force (Department of the Army, 2025a). But somewhere along the way, many of those sacred traditions have faded.

Customs and courtesies are not ceremonial extras. They are the outward expressions of discipline and respect — the very things that bind our formations together in moments of chaos. When a Soldier walks past an officer without saluting, or when a Soldier fails to give the greeting of the day to a senior NCO this signals more than sloppiness. It signals a breakdown in the culture that has underpinned the Army since its founding. This is not about nostalgia — it is about military professionalism. The loss of these traditions has not occurred because of a directive or regulation. It has happened because we, as senior leaders, have allowed them to slip.



As we look ahead, we must remember where we came from. Tradition is not a burden — it is a compass. Our duty now is to re-instill that sense of history and identity into the NCO Corps. That begins with us: the senior sergeants major, the first sergeants, and the platoon sergeants. If we do not teach it, no one will. And if we do not enforce it, it will disappear altogether. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Matthew Keegan)

In *Training Circular (TC) 7-22.7 – Noncommissioned Officer Guide*, NCOs are explicitly charged with understanding Army customs and instilling them in their Soldiers (Department of the Army, 2025b). That includes drill and ceremony, inspections, and a visible pride in service. Yet across our ranks, these tools are too often treated as relics, not responsibilities. The excuse that “things are different now” doesn’t hold up. What has changed is not the mission but our commitment to enforcing the standards that create cohesive, disciplined teams. If we fail to preserve our heritage, we risk raising a generation of leaders who don’t know what they’re part of, or worse, don’t care.

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Standards and Discipline – The Forgotten Responsibilities

Discipline is the foundation of every effective military formation. It is not simply about compliance; it is about readiness, trust, and cohesion. For generations, the noncommissioned officer was the enforcer of standards — on the line, in the barracks, in the field. Our authority was never rooted in position alone; it came from our daily commitment to uphold and enforce the rules that define what it means to be a Soldier. When NCOs fail to enforce standards, we don’t just tolerate mediocrity, we authorize it.

I have personally had a command sergeant major

peer tell me that he will not correct a female Soldier for fear of “getting in trouble.” Having a CSM with this thought process undermines everything the NCO Corps stands for — is a dereliction of duty and totally unacceptable of a senior NCO.

Army Regulation 600-20 is clear: commanders and NCOs are responsible for military discipline and conduct (Department of the Army, 2025c). Paragraph 4-6 specifically empowers leaders to conduct corrective training and ensure adherence to standards. Yet many NCOs hesitate. Some fear being labeled “toxic.” Others are unsure how far their authority extends. And too often, junior

NCOs are promoted without ever being taught *how* to enforce standards — only that they *should*. The result? A breakdown in unit discipline masked by superficial readiness reports and unchecked misconduct that festers below the surface.

We see it in simple things: dirty weapons after ranges, missing accountability of sensitive items, late formations, and out-of-regulation uniformity. These may seem minor, but they are indicators of deeper erosion. As outlined in *TC 7-22.7*, NCOs are responsible for instilling discipline and ensuring Soldiers understand what “right” looks like (Department of the Army, 2025d). That includes correcting behavior, on the spot, without waiting for a counseling form or a commander’s directive.

It is not enough to identify problems. We must be the solution. Senior NCOs must mentor our sergeants and corporals — not just tell them to enforce standards, but walk them through how to do it professionally, consistently, and with integrity. Disciplinary authority

without development is a recipe for overcorrection or inaction, and both are equally dangerous. It is our job to restore confidence in the authority of the NCO Corps by leading through example and empowering our junior leaders. When I encounter a young NCO, I take the time to ask them about the NCO Creed and what it means to them. Shockingly, nine out of 10 have no clue what the NCO Creed is. How can that be? Why are we failing to be the mentors they need?

In this Army, Soldiers still want discipline. They crave structure, purpose, and leadership. But they will not demand it for themselves. That responsibility belongs to us. Standards are not the responsibility of the commander alone. They are the NCO's domain. If we do not defend that ground, we will lose it — and with it, the very thing that makes our Army exceptional.

Tactical Competence in Decline – Lost in the Paperwork

There was a time when tactical excellence was the measure of a noncommissioned officer. Your squad leader knew the terrain, understood weapons systems inside and out, and could call for fire, medevac a casualty, or lead a bounding movement without hesitation. That was the standard, not the exception. Tactical competence wasn't just expected, it was demanded. Today, I fear we have replaced that hard-earned credibility with checklist leadership and administrative overload. We have developed NCOs who can complete online training requirements and PowerPoint risk assessments but struggle in the field when decisions must be made under stress.

TC 7-22.7 defines the NCO's role as the trainer of individual and small unit tasks (Department of the Army, 2025e). It is the NCO who builds and sustains warfighting skills at the squad and team level. Yet in too many formations, our junior leaders are left underprepared, having received minimal reps under pressure, little field time, and few opportunities to make real tactical decisions. I observed this firsthand during a recent training exercise, Mojave Falcon, with over 8,000

Soldiers in participation. When training is conducted, it's often focused on compliance and metrics rather than mastery. As a result, we are building leaders who know how to conduct an after-action review but who have never experienced friction in a hasty attack or had to adapt a plan when a team leader became a casualty.

This trend has consequences. When units struggle to pass crew qualifications, when NCOs freeze in leadership lanes, when basic soldiering skills must be re-taught at the National Training Center or Joint Readiness Training Center, it is not just a failure of the Soldier. It is a failure of the leader who was supposed to train them. And too often, it is a symptom of tactical competence being replaced by administrative competence.

This isn't about faulting young leaders. It is about how we are developing them. We cannot ask a sergeant to lead a fire team in combat if all they've been trained to do is complete counseling packets and manage Defense Travel System errors. Tactical leadership must be cultivated intentionally. It requires immersive field experience, not just digital modules. It demands mentorship from experienced NCOs who take the time to teach — not just task and report. As we have heard several times over the last year, we must get back to basics. Get out of the buildings and into the field, conducting training that is relevant and engaging.

The solution lies in our priorities. We must re-center NCO development on tactical proficiency. That means more dirt time, more leader reps under duress, and more deliberate mentorship focused on battlefield leadership.



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TC 7-22.7 states that NCOs must be educated professionals capable of leading, training, and developing Soldiers. Yet too many Soldiers attend professional military education not to grow, but to graduate. Courses are often front-loaded with administrative requirements and career progression briefings, leaving little time for rigorous discussion of leadership in practice. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Christian Carrillo)

It also means pushing back against a culture that prioritizes paperwork over training. Tactical competence is not optional — it is the core of our profession. And it is our job to ensure every NCO knows that their first responsibility is to fight and win.

Leadership, Education, and Professionalism – A System Failing Its Own

Leadership in the NCO Corps was once forged through fire — field experience, mentorship, and personal investment from seasoned leaders who lived the Creed and passed it on. Today, we have institutionalized leadership development, but in doing so, we have unintentionally diluted it. Our Noncommissioned Officer Education System (NCOES), now the NCO Professional Development System, was built to produce adaptive, confident leaders. But over the last two decades, it has shifted toward theoretical frameworks, digital coursework, and self-paced learning — often at the expense of meaningful interaction, peer development, and mentorship. We have created more educated NCO's but failed to create tactical leaders. They have no clue about expectations and the responsibilities they own at every level, from corporal to sergeants major.

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not to grow, but to graduate. Courses are often front-loaded with administrative requirements and career progression briefings, leaving little time for rigorous discussion of leadership in practice. Most troubling, our system no longer reliably distinguishes between those who lead and those who merely manage. We have allowed promotion systems and online evaluations to measure success by the absence of failure rather than the presence of excellence.

This failure is not just systemic — it's cultural. We have normalized mediocrity in how we teach leadership. We rarely expose junior NCOs to the ethical dilemmas, friction points, or disciplinary challenges they will face in garrison and in combat. Leadership has become a topic to be briefed, not a muscle to be developed. The result is a generation of NCOs who have never been mentored on the importance of the NCO Creed, nor how to live by it.

Once, when I was a young NCO, I had a first sergeant who did not adhere to the NCO Creed. He was openly having an inappropriate relationship with an enlisted Soldier in our organization. His actions made me realize early on that not all NCOs are the same. I have consistently sought to live the Army Values in all that I do and to exemplify, for every NCO I have served alongside, what it means to respect our time-honored Creed through action and example.

This is not a critique of our young leaders; it is a challenge to us, the senior NCOs. If we are not personally developing the next generation of squad leaders and platoon sergeants, then we are part of the failure. NCOES cannot replace experience, just as a certificate cannot replace character. The most powerful leadership tool we possess is personal example (U.S. Army, 2025f). Our Soldiers are watching what we do — not what we say.

Restoring professionalism in the NCO Corps means reclaiming ownership of leader development. It means pushing for more field-based education, fewer slideshows, and more hard conversations. It means mentoring two levels down, not just counseling one level up. And above all, it means taking pride in growing leaders, not just checking blocks. If we fail to invest in our own ranks, we will raise a generation of tacticians with no compass, administrators with no purpose, and sergeants with no standard.

Conclusion

I did not write this essay to reminisce. I wrote it because I believe in the Corps I have served my entire adult life. I have worn the uniform through decades of change, conflict, and growth — but the greatest threat I've seen to the strength of our Army has not come from outside our formations. It has come from our own failure to protect what made the NCO Corps the envy of militaries across the world: discipline, competence, and moral authority. If we allow standards to slip, if we treat traditions as outdated, and if we prioritize careerism over character, then we are not leading, we are managing decline.

But it is not too late. The foundation of our Army still rests on the shoulders of noncommissioned officers. We still have the reach, the influence, and the responsibility to rebuild what has been lost. This begins not with a directive or a reform, but with a choice by every first sergeant, platoon sergeant, and squad leader to recommit

to the role they signed up for. That means enforcing the standard, not apologizing for it. It means training your Soldiers, not just tracking them. It means mentoring the next generation with the same intensity that someone once invested in you.

To my fellow senior NCOs: Our work is not done. Rank does not equal impact unless we use it. Our legacy will not be the positions we held, but the leaders we leave behind. If we do not take deliberate action now — if we do not return the NCO Corps to its rightful place as the Army's backbone — we will become bystanders to our own decline. I did not serve 30 years to watch that happen. And I know many of you didn't either.

Let's get back to being the kind of NCOs those before us would be proud of. Let's show these Soldiers that we are the standard bearers, and not just bystanders in their formations.

"No one is more professional than I. I am a Noncommissioned Officer, a leader of Soldiers." ■

The Creed of the Noncommissioned Officer

No one is more professional than I.

I am a Noncommissioned Officer, a leader of Soldiers.

As a Noncommissioned Officer, I realize that I am a member of a time-honored corps, which is known as "The Backbone of the Army."

I am proud of the Corps of Noncommissioned Officers and will at all times conduct myself so as to bring credit upon the Corps, the Military Service, and my country regardless of the situation in which I find myself.

I will not use my grade or position to attain pleasure, profit, or personal safety.

Competence is my watchword.

My two basic responsibilities will always be uppermost in my mind — accomplishment of my mission and the welfare of my Soldiers.

I will strive to remain tactically and technically proficient.

I am aware of my role as a Noncommissioned Officer. I will fulfill my responsibilities inherent in that role.

All Soldiers are entitled to outstanding leadership; I will provide that leadership.

I know my Soldiers and I will always place their needs above my own.

I will communicate consistently with my Soldiers and never leave them uninformed.

I will be fair and impartial when recommending both rewards and punishment.

Officers of my unit will have maximum time to accomplish their duties; they will not have to accomplish mine.

I will earn their respect and confidence as well as that of my Soldiers.

I will be loyal to those with whom I serve; seniors, peers, and subordinates alike.

I will exercise initiative by taking appropriate action in the absence of orders.

I will not compromise my integrity, nor my moral courage.

I will not forget, nor will I allow my comrades to forget that we are professionals, Noncommissioned Officers, leaders!



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