



Early leadership roles progressively shaped my strategic and operational acumen, leading to my assignment as operations sergeant at the 40th Special Troops Battalion (STB), 40th Infantry Division, and as the operations sergeant major and dual-hatted senior enlisted advisor, 160th Infantry Regiment California ANG, and Joint Multinational Training Group Ukraine command sergeant major. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Spc. Samantha Miller)

# My AGR Journey from Readiness NCO to CSM

*By Retired Command Sgt. Maj. Sergio Porras*

## Sergeants Major Course

**T**his article chronicles my career progression in the California Army National Guard (ANG) under Title 32 Active Guard Reserve (AGR) status, beginning as a staff sergeant readiness NCO for Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 184th Infantry Regiment, in Fullerton, California.

Without the support of a training NCO or supply sergeant, I was thrust into a high-responsibility role requiring resourcefulness and leadership, including as a new platoon sergeant.

This experience laid the foundation for my near mobilization to Iraq, service as rear detachment NCO, completion of the Advanced NCO Course (ANCOC) on Title 10 mobilization orders, and selection to

embedded training team (ETT) noncommissioned-officer-in-charge (NCOIC).

These roles progressively shaped my strategic and operational acumen, leading to my assignment as operations sergeant at the 40th Special Troops Battalion (STB), 40th Infantry Division, and as the operations sergeant major and dual-hatted senior enlisted advisor, 160th Infantry Regiment California ANG, and Joint Multinational Training Group Ukraine command sergeant major.

Through this journey, I cultivated adaptive leadership, resilience, and mission-focused mentorship, all grounded in the ethos of the NCO corps.

## Introduction

The AGR, or Title 32, state program offers a unique full-time career opportunity for enlisted leaders in the National Guard. Unlike traditional drilling soldiers, AGR NCOs provide the continuity, readiness oversight, and operational leadership essential for mission success.

My career in the California ANG exemplifies the dynamic demands and transformational potential of AGR service. From humble beginnings as a staff sergeant readiness NCO without adequate support, to becoming the senior enlisted leader of a Ukraine regiment, my journey was marked by challenges that fostered professional growth, innovation, and a deeper commitment to service.

This article presents a detailed narrative of that path, highlighting the key assignments, developmental milestones, and leadership lessons that defined my 28-year uniformed career.

The foundation of my AGR service was rooted in Army Regulation (AR) 135-18 (HQDA, 2019), The Active Guard Reserve Program, which governs the AGR program under Title 32, U.S. Code.

It outlines AGR Soldier selection, use, and administration policies and procedures and stipulates they serve full time in support of National Guard operations. They are expected to maintain the same standards of performance, discipline, and leadership as their active-duty counterparts.

The regulation emphasizes readiness, operational continuity, and professional development, and it establishes the framework through which AGR NCOs are managed throughout their careers.

Understanding and adhering to AR 135-18 was a fundamental aspect of my responsibilities, especially as I progressed into positions involving personnel management, training oversight, all aspect of logistics, and senior enlisted advisor responsibilities.

## My Role as Readiness NCO

After I was assigned as readiness NCO, I quickly realized the enormity of the task ahead when the company first sergeant called me and told me the organization was always in the field and to expect no quarters.

With no training NCO or supply sergeant assigned, It was responsible for managing readiness tasks, training schedules, supply requisitions, property accountability, and administrative responsibilities. Despite being a fairly junior NCO, I had to operate at a much higher level of responsibility, effectively managing the daily operations of a unit that spent a lot of time in a field training environment.

The lack of critical personnel forced me to innovate and seek mentorship beyond my immediate chain of command or organization because we were geographically separated from other units.

I established systems for managing unit readiness, maintained constant communication with the company command team and battalion staff, and developed training trackers and logistical standard operating procedures (SOPs) from scratch.

Through long hours and a commitment to my Soldiers' success, I earned the trust of my commander and peers. This foundational experience, with minimal support, instilled in me the value of operational discipline, initiative, and the importance of leading by example.



From humble beginnings as a staff sergeant readiness NCO without adequate support, to becoming the senior enlisted leader of a Ukraine regiment, my journey was marked by challenges that fostered professional growth, innovation, and a deeper commitment to service. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Macaydan Hawkins)

## Mobilization for Iraq and Rear Detachment Duties

As the unit prepared to deploy to Iraq, it went to Fort Bliss, Texas, to train. The command team still lacked full confidence in my leadership ability and recommended I be left behind as the rear detachment NCOIC.

When the unit deployed, I remained behind to continue drill training, provide family support, manage administrative processes, and ensure unit continuity. This role, though often overlooked, was critical to sustaining morale, mission effectiveness, and dignified transfer of fallen warrior remains to families.

I served as the families' primary point of contact, facilitated benefits and leave processing, and coordinated with state-level organizations to address Soldier issues. It was during this time that I truly understood leadership's holistic nature — not just operational readiness, but emotional resilience and supporting the force.

The experience deepened my empathy and reinforced my belief in servant leadership, a theme that followed me throughout my career.

## **ANCOC and the Transition to Strategic Thinking**

My selection to attend ANCOC marked a pivotal career transition.

The course challenged me to move beyond tactical execution and embrace operational and strategic-level thinking. It emphasized leadership theory, the military decision-making process (MDMP), and developed critical thinking skills that make company readiness NCOs into operations sergeants at the battalion level or beyond.

The course exposed me to NCO guardsmen from units across the nation, broadening my perspective and refining my leadership identity. I began to see myself not just as a problem solver but as a leader of leaders.

The experience was intellectually demanding and personally transformative. It confirmed my readiness to take on more senior roles and responsibilities to support both state and federal missions. It also reignited my desire to deploy to a combat theater to continue my leadership evolution.



After I was assigned as readiness NCO, I quickly realized the enormity of the task ahead when the company first sergeant called me and told me the organization was always in the field and to expect no quarters. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Matthew Sprowl)

## **Embedded Training Team NCOIC**

Following ANCOC, I served as an ETT NCOIC in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. This role placed me in a combat environment where I was responsible for training, mentoring, and advising Afghan National Army (ANA) counterparts.

Leading an ETT required cross-cultural competence, patience, and adaptability. The ANA battalion was based out of Pul-e-Charkhi, a maximum-security prison on the

outskirts of Kabul, Afghanistan, with American advisors from Camp Blackhorse, Afghanistan.

Every interaction with the ANA demanded cultural sensitivity and a nuanced understanding of leadership. I led daily mission briefs, participated in joint patrols, and coordinated with coalition partners to deliver impactful mission support.

This deployment tested my leadership, resilience, and ability to influence without formal authority. It also solidified my belief in the power of informal or formal mentorship and professional development.

## **Operations Sergeant**

After redeploying, I was assigned as the 40th STB operations sergeant, responsible for coordinating and synchronizing battalion-level operations, managing training calendars, and supporting the battalion's MDMP in support of 40th ID operations.

This assignment provided my first real exposure to the inner workings of battalion staff and the critical role NCOs play in staff integration in the warfighting function construct. I learned how to align operational tasks with command intent, communicate effectively across functional areas, and ensure mission execution through detailed planning.

My time at 40th STB sharpened my organizational skills and reinforced the importance of collaboration across warfighting functions.

## **Operations Sergeant Major**

Working as operations sergeant major (OPS SGM) for the 160th Infantry Regiment was both an honor and a challenge. In this senior enlisted position, I was responsible for planning and executing regimental operations, synchronizing with subordinate units, and advising the regimental commander on all enlisted matters.

The OPS SGM role required not just operational expertise, but also emotional intelligence, discretion, and a deep understanding of

institutional processes. I worked closely with company-level first sergeants, battalion OPS SGM counterparts, and external stakeholders to ensure readiness and alignment with strategic objectives.

This was a capstone assignment that validated my years of experience and positioned me for greater responsibilities as I transformed an organization near the bottom in readiness into a leading organization for years after my arrival.



When the unit deployed, I remained behind to continue drill training, provide family support, manage administrative processes, and ensure unit continuity. (U.S. Army Photo by Spc. Christopher Bailey)

## Dual-Hatting as OPS SGM and Command Sergeant Major

In a unique and demanding twist for a National Guard Battalion, I was dual-hatted as both the operations sergeant major and the regimental commander's senior enlisted advisor (SEA).

Handling these responsibilities required a careful balance of operational oversight and Soldier advocacy for more than three consecutive years.

As SEA, I focused on NCO professional development, advised on enlisted policy, and served as a conduit between the enlisted force and command leadership. I led professional forums, mentored junior leaders, and cultivated a command climate grounded in trust and accountability.

This dual role tested my capacity to lead across multiple domains and solidified my role as a strategic enlisted leader.

## Reflection and Lessons Learned

Looking back on my AGR journey, I recognize a clear arc of transformation. I began as a tactical-level NCO managing unit readiness under duress, and through persistence, mentorship, and continuous learning, rose to become a senior leader shaping institutional outcomes.

Each assignment brought new challenges that demanded growth — from emotional resilience during

rear detachment duties to cultural competence in Afghanistan, and operational agility as a battalion and regimental staff NCO.

This journey has taught me that leadership is not a position but a process. It is built on humility, integrity, and the relentless pursuit of excellence. As a command sergeant major, and now as a federal civilian leader, I carry forward the lessons of servant leadership and mission focus, and I carry a deep responsibility to mentor the next generation.

## Conclusion

The AGR path is not for the faint of heart. It demands sustained commitment, adaptability, and a willingness to serve wherever the mission requires. My journey from a staff sergeant in a personnel-strained company to regimental SEA is a testament to what's possible through dedication and leadership.

In each chapter of my career, I sought to uphold the values of the NCO corps and to leave every position better than I found it. This journey not only shaped who I am as a leader but prepared me to continue serving the nation in new and impactful ways. To those considering the AGR path: embrace the challenge. It may just make you the leader you were always meant to be. ■



My selection to attend the Advanced NCO Course marked a pivotal career transition. It challenged me to move beyond tactical execution and embrace operational and strategic-level thinking. (U.S. Army photo by Mel Slater)

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**Retired Command Sgt. Maj. Sergio Porras** joined the Army in July 1990 as a 12B combat engineer. He served in a variety of assignments to include driver, gunner, team leader, squad leader, platoon sergeant, rifle platoon sergeant, rifle company first sergeant, battalion operations sergeant, operations sergeant major, and command sergeant major. Porras earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Multidisciplinary Studies and Master of Science degree in Leadership from University of Arkansas Grantham.

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