

**The Evolution of Noncommissioned Officers
in Training Soldiers**

by

Robert S. Rush

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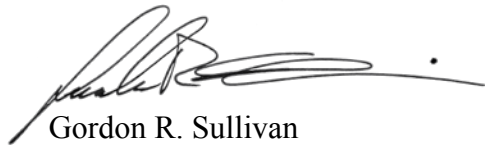
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Foreword

One of the most important responsibilities of noncommissioned officers in the United States Army is the training of the Soldiers they lead. But this has not always been the case. As the NCO Corps has waxed and waned, so their role has evolved over time. The challenges of peacetime recruitment and retention and the exigent demands of wartime combat have produced numerous shifts in the division of labor between officers and their NCOs.

During the Revolutionary War, the Continental Army reflected the egalitarianism of the new democracy, with NCOs seen as little different from the commissioned officers under whom they served. By the start of World War I, the treatment of NCOs more closely resembled that of the Soldiers for whom they were responsible. Today's NCO Corps reflects America's increased education and professionalism; the Army's NCOs are widely recognized as among the finest military professionals in the world.

This paper traces the evolution of the role played by NCOs in Soldier training over the past 234 years. The current system of Soldier training is the result of more than two centuries of learning and improvement. It reflects numerous hard-earned lessons and is an essential part of what makes NCOs the "backbone of the Army."



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The Evolution of Noncommissioned Officers in Training Soldiers

Introduction

Emerging prominently from U.S. Army training doctrine is the relatively new role of senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs) as “master trainers.” Senior non-commissioned officers at the battalion and company level hold primary responsibility for planning and executing to standard all individual and most small-unit training in a manner that is supportive of, and synchronized with, collective and leader tasks. With fifteen to twenty-five years’ service and the benefits of the Army’s Noncommissioned Officer Education System (NCOES), the Army’s senior NCOs are the equivalent of the guild masters of the Renaissance. Guild masters trained mid-level journeymen in the more advanced skills of the craft and taught the journeymen how to train apprentices. Above all, the masters set the standards and enforced them within the trade. Those who did not meet the masters’ standards were retrained or removed from their positions. Likewise, the U.S. Army senior noncommissioned officer today trains the mid-level platoon sergeants who in turn train the junior NCOs.

How did the U.S. Army get to the point that the commander and his noncommissioned officer sequence their work and talk through each stage of their unit’s training plan, once considered strictly “officers’ business”? Many throughout the world see this collective involvement in training as the epitome of synchronization, allowing organizations within the Army to progress smoothly through the different training phases.

The Beginnings

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, noncommissioned officers in European armies assisted the officers, who mainly belonged to the aristocracy, in maintaining good order and discipline within a unit, as well as training recruits, with sergeants and corporals as the principle drillmasters. In the United States during the early years of the American Revolution, with no aristocracy to speak of, the Army reflected the country’s egalitarian nature and blurred the lines between lieutenants and sergeants. There were officers (commissioned and noncommissioned) and men.¹

Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, a Prussian expatriate serving as inspector general for the nascent American Army, wrote the first set of drill regulations, in which he listed the duties of each respective rank within a regiment. The sergeant major (“head of the noncommissioned officers”) and first sergeant generally dealt with administrative aspects of regimental life. In addition to overseeing the everyday details regarding cleanliness and enforcement of good order and discipline, sergeants

and corporals within the companies were expected to instruct recruits in all matters of military training.²

This tradition changed with the founding of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. The military academy was the principal Regular Army commissioning source in the 19th century and taught academics as well as the individual skills of a soldier and the duties of the noncommissioned officer. Officers graduated knowing more about the minutiae of soldiering and training soldiers in individual tasks than did their NCOs.³ As a result, noncommissioned officers were not used to train soldiers during the early years of the U.S. Army's formation because they did not know the drills. In one of the first drill manuals following von Steuben's *Blue Book*, William Duane wrote,

It is too much practice to commit the charge of the elementary drills to non-commissioned officers, by which many great evils are produced . . . and the chance of finding non-commissioned officers, who can clearly comprehend and explain the principles of a good discipline, is not one in twenty; from which cause it is twenty to one that recruits are imperfectly or erroneously taught.⁴

Unlike European armies wherein senior NCOs, under the tutelage of officers, trained subordinate noncommissioned officers, in the U.S. Army the responsibility rested with the company commander, who was by his education the most technically and tactically proficient soldier in the unit. While European armies comprised officers, noncommissioned officers and men, in the U.S. Army were officers and men, with enlisted men serving in noncommissioned officer supervisory roles at the pleasure of their officers. This attitude remained for 170 years.

Between 1854 and 1882 the U.S. Army modified its stance on using noncommissioned officers to train soldiers. In 1854, the adjutant and sergeant major were charged with the instruction of sergeants and corporals, the principal object to qualify the sergeants to instruct the men, and the corporals to replace sergeants. During the Civil War, with the massive influx of new officers and men, company commanders were made responsible for their noncommissioned officers' training, with the same ultimate purpose as in 1854. Company officers were the principal instructors in the school of the soldier; however, as the regulation stated, if there were not enough company officers present, "intelligent sergeants may be substituted" under the watchful eye of an officer. By 1882, although lieutenants still drilled squads, most of the training during the "school of the soldier" was carried out by noncommissioned officers.⁵

The Struggle for Place

The Spanish-American War of 1898 brought wholesale change for the Army as an institution. What had been a western plains army devoted to chasing Indians and protecting settlers was now a global army with soldiers stationed in Cuba, Puerto Rico,

Panama, the Hawaiian Islands, Alaska and the Philippines. Gone were the days of long service with the same unit. Before 1898 it was not unusual for a soldier to take three to five years before making corporal—not because he was incapable, but because there were no vacancies in the unit. Sergeants took longer; most had been in the same company for ten or more years, and over time had developed a pride in organization and love of service not understood just ten years later.⁶

The U.S. Army initially followed a policy of rotating units overseas and back rather than replacing individuals. Those soldiers not having sufficient time remaining in service for the tour and unwilling to reenlist were transferred out, replaced by soldiers reassigned from other units or from the recruit depot.⁷

To fill units going overseas, some soldiers, essentially still recruits, received appointments as corporals with as little as three months of service and some as sergeants after only three to six months of service. By 1907 the average line noncommissioned officer was as ignorant of his duties as the recruits from which he was drawn and, in the eyes of the Chief of Staff of the Army, lacked both the force of character necessary for discipline and the ability essential for efficiency.⁸

To put this into context, use of U.S. Army NCOs in 1907, even though some had long service, could be equated with the utilization of noncommissioned officers under the old Soviet system after 1945. The noncommissioned officers were there to maintain good order and discipline on and off duty, but if a task or training needed to be done, then it was best supervised by an officer.

Adding to the problem was that when a unit returned from overseas, its enlisted members were usually discharged *en masse*. A noncommissioned officer's rank belonged to the regiment, and when he left the organization, it was as a private. In addition, many NCOs who had been with the same organizations for years had become either too old to be effective, invalided or retired from service, while others not wanting subsequent overseas tours left the service. To relieve the tremendous turbulence unit rotation caused, the Army began sending groups of individual replacements to fill units stationed overseas. These units absorbed the arriving privates, with officers and noncommissioned officers quickly indoctrinating the new arrivals.⁹

Because of these seismic shifts occurring within the Army, officers responsible for their unit's effectiveness lost confidence in the NCOs' ability to train soldiers and resumed the individual trainer role. However, many officers quickly realized that there were not enough hours to accomplish everything required of them; as deeply involved in the day-to-day operations as they had become, they had little time to plan future training. They realized that as long as commanders lacked knowledgeable, hard-working sergeants and corporals, successes would not equal the time and effort expended. Only when a commander had noncommissioned officers who trained soldiers to standard in their military duties would his command reap the benefits of his

planning. Many officers recommended some type of centralized or post-wide military training, but others felt this degraded the company commander's authority and his responsibility for promoting and training noncommissioned officers.¹⁰

Though the U.S. Army was hesitant to adopt other countries' policies, examination showed that its own attitudes regarding both training responsibilities of the noncommissioned officer corps and NCO education lagged behind those of not only Great Britain, France and Germany, but also Russia, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania. While some officers cautioned against raising the U.S. Army noncommissioned officer's status to that of his counterparts in the European armies, they all agreed that there needed to be a higher regard for NCOs within the U.S. Army.¹²

The Chief of Staff of the Army had examined the attitudes of various countries with respect to their NCOs to find a method by which to increase the proficiency of noncommissioned officers as well as slow their rapid turnover in units. Both British and German NCOs held a status distinct from that of other ranks, with their own quarters, mess and privileges. Although good benefits mattered, the Chief of Staff noted that it was more important that the prestige placed upon the serving NCOs represented a "dignity and a position suitable to their class." He further held that distinctions of rank, such as that between officer and enlisted in the U.S. Army, were necessary for discipline in every army, but also felt that a similar though smaller difference between privates and noncommissioned officers would improve a unit's discipline and efficiency.¹³

In 1916, most of Europe was at war, and U.S. military observers were watching events unfold in Europe. On the subject of foreign noncommissioned officers, the American military attaché in St. Petersburg wrote,

The noncommissioned officers do all the actual work; rarely an officer may be seen, and then only looking on. . . . We can learn a lesson from the Russian Army noncommissioned officers who are capable, patient, self-reliant; they work or drill rapidly and confidently.¹⁴

With the noncommissioned officers living, sleeping and eating with their men, there was little separation between ranks in the U.S. Army. Under these conditions, it was hard for the NCOs to maintain good order and discipline, and many identified more with those with whom they were living than with the organizational goals of their assigned units. There was little to bind the NCO to the organization, and many officers refused to put faith in their NCO leaders to train soldiers. In addition, though NCOs' responsibilities were much greater than those of privates, the salary difference between the two ranks was not significant.

The U.S. Army entered World War I in 1917 woefully unprepared, lacking effective organization, materiel and manpower. The massive expansion of the Regular Army, along with levies to fill National Guard and Organized Reserve divisions, stripped any

semblance of organization and readiness from units deploying to France.¹⁵ Initially, training in the United States was essentially limited to “close-order” and “extended-order” drill, calisthenics and marksmanship. The Army issued self-help manuals to noncommissioned officers on their duties, but there was no information in them regarding training soldiers. Once in France, British and French instructors trained American officers and select NCOs in the new aspects of modern warfare so that they might themselves train their soldiers.

The lack of prestige and status of the U.S. noncommissioned officer concerned foreign officers when they visited U.S. camps preparing soldiers for combat.¹⁶ General John J. “Black Jack” Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, recommended upgrading NCO leadership training at once and provided NCOs with separate mess facilities; his recommendations were implemented within a month.¹⁷

The return to peacetime activities after World War I was similar to that of all wars fought by the United States before 1945: tremendous cuts in Army strength, strict fiscal restraints and a large overhead of redundant officers and noncommissioned officers, which resulted in tremendous turbulence in the force. The noncommissioned officer schools, except for those teaching technical topics, ended shortly after the war because of budget constraints as well as a perceived lack of need for them. It was a period of retrenchment and trying to revisit the “old Army” ways.

General Pershing’s concerns regarding noncommissioned officers in World War I resulted in the Army’s addressing duties and responsibilities of noncommissioned officers. In the regulation concerning companies, the squad leaders’ duties listed ten items, ranging from monitoring their soldiers’ appearance to ensuring “those soldiers desiring to make deposits present their deposit books at the proper time”; however, not one word was written on the noncommissioned officers’ role in training soldiers. The list remained in regulations concerning NCOs until 1962!¹⁸

Training responsibilities remained the same during the interwar years, with non-commissioned officers teaching the basic skills of soldiering such as discipline, close-order drill, calisthenics and basic rifle marksmanship under an officer’s supervision. With the proliferation of new equipment within the different branches, noncommissioned officers were becoming the technical subject-matter experts in their fields, and officers had to rely upon the commitment to duty of those NCOs to see the job done correctly.

As in the First World War, the U.S. Army, although partially mobilized, was unprepared for war on 7 December 1941. Between 1941 and 1945, millions of soldiers entered service through either the draft or voluntary enlistment. Many learned their duties either within the units to which they were assigned or through newly established replacement training centers, where many of the older prewar noncommissioned officers were assigned. As in previous wars, many of the newly promoted noncommissioned

officers had no more training than those they were leading, and officers again instructed soldiers in subjects once delegated to NCOs to teach. Instead of training the trainer, officers bypassed the noncommissioned officer and directly taught the soldiers, with the NCOs relegated to watching along with everyone else.

The problem became so severe that, much as Pershing had done in 1917, Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall in 1944 published a stinging rebuke to commanders who were failing to train their NCOs:

The commander who lacks the moral courage and the professional skill to develop and maintain a thoroughly competent corps of noncommissioned officers throughout his command thereby demonstrates his inability to assume the responsibilities of leadership in combat. Such a commander forfeits the confidence and respect of his subordinates. He destroys the morale of his organization. He will surely fail in battle. . . . Especially in organizations with a commissioned over strength, there has been a tendency to permit the surplus officers to usurp the authority of the noncommissioned officers. This practice must be discontinued.¹⁹

General Marshall designated nine areas for special attention by commanders to train and enhance the prestige of the noncommissioned officers corps; none dealt with the NCOs' role in training soldiers. Versions of his instructions also remained in the regulations until 1962.²⁰

For World Wars I and II, as in the wars of the 19th century, sergeants major and first sergeants of the U.S. Army conducted the administrative details of their respective organizations. In platoons, sergeants and corporals were responsible for the personal details of soldiering—ensuring that billets were clean and orderly and that soldiers bathed, were in clean and correct uniforms and properly maintained their equipment, and that they knew their soldiers' duty status—and most important, for leading their soldiers in combat.²¹

With the experience of World War II highlighting the importance of noncommissioned officers, the Army published a career development plan in 1948 for enlisted men, which provided them with a path from basic recruit through four grades of warrant officer. Soldiers received recommendation for promotion to the next higher grade through a combination of competitive examinations, evaluation reports and promotion boards, without regard to unit vacancies. However, the Korean War ended the program in its infancy. Only in 1975 was a career development plan established for noncommissioned officers.²²

Some organizations within the Army set up NCO academies, the first being established in Germany in 1947 to prepare noncommissioned officers for duty with the U.S. Constabulary. However, not all NCOs attended, and the schools were haphazardly administered; most were closed after only a few years.

After each war, noncommissioned officers must have felt very much like the soldier in Rudyard Kipling's poem "Tommy"²³—necessary and wanted in war but shunted aside during peace. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Army life became merely a job like any other: "Tell me what you want me to do and I will do it, but don't ask me to initiate work on my own." Within the parameters of the regulations, NCOs were given "all authority that is rightfully theirs and the creation of increased opportunity . . . to exercise command and initiative." Given this latitude but no training or expectations for their duties as trainers, the noncommissioned officers often either neglected to train or imperfectly trained their soldiers while the officers looked elsewhere. The other tenet in the regulation, "prompt removal of noncommissioned officers who fail to attain or maintain acceptable standards," was seldom carried out.²⁴

Toward a Professional Noncommissioned Officer Corps

The Korean War highlighted deficiencies in the U.S. Army's approach to training. The 1954 regulation regarding NCOs and specialists advised commanders to seek recommendations regarding enlisted members from noncommissioned officers, including for the first time their input on training soldiers. If a commander could walk around during training encouraging and correcting minor mistakes—rather than (with his officers) having to conduct most or all of the training—then he had trained his noncommissioned officers well.²⁵

Many believed that the only way the U.S. Army would become more technically and tactically competent was to rely more upon the noncommissioned officer. Regulations now stipulated that noncommissioned officers would be employed to the maximum extent possible as training instructors. It was also stipulated that once noncommissioned officer rank is attained, an NCO "will not lose his status because of transfer from a unit, organization, or station to another unit, organization, or station." On the other hand, it held accountable those NCOs who failed to maintain the acceptable standards of leadership. In one of the self-help books written for NCOs, sergeants were admonished to read the regulations and manuals, and not to expect that only officers had to know all the complex details.²⁶

In 1957, the U.S. Army published regulations regarding NCO schools. Their mission was to assist noncommissioned officers in recognizing and assuming their responsibilities, increasing technical knowledge and enhancing leadership techniques as well as developing high personal and professional standards within the noncommissioned officer corps. More important, the longest portion of the course was devoted to methods of instruction on how to train soldiers. Attendance at NCO academies was neither mandatory nor tied to promotions.²⁷ Those noncommissioned officers graduating returned to their units and by their example raised the training standard.

The Army was rapidly turning into a force of professional officers and noncommissioned officers able to get the most from the two-year draftees who cycled through

the lower grades. Noncommissioned officers were on average more intelligent than the draftees, although the draftees had a higher educational level.²⁸ One of the most significant changes in the regulations occurred when the NCO regulations were incorporated alongside the duties and responsibilities of officers in Army Regulation (AR) 600-20, *Army Command Policy* (1962), demonstrating the importance now placed on NCO leadership. It also listed the first sergeant in an intermediary position between the officers and the enlisted members.²⁹

Vietnam slowed the changes occurring in the U.S. Army's noncommissioned officer corps. Priority was on keeping units in Vietnam filled, and training in units stateside suffered. Requirements were similar to those placed on the Army noncommissioned officers at the turn of the century. Long-serving NCOs left the service because of the tremendous demands put on them during Vietnam. Those who remained, many with only a few years of service, may have been good combat leaders but were not necessarily competent trainers and were hesitant to enforce good order and discipline. As a stopgap measure, the Army established noncommissioned officer candidate courses, very similar to the courses conducted by European countries during the two world wars, where soldiers graduated as sergeant team leaders or staff sergeant squad leaders.³⁰

By the end of the ten-year war in Vietnam, the noncommissioned officer corps was a shambles. Company officers again bypassed NCOs and went straight to the troops to get the job done; they also conducted much of the training themselves. The fault was not necessarily that of the noncommissioned officer; it is difficult for an NCO, raised in combat, to train others when he himself had not been trained.

The Army leadership recognized that raising the quality and status of the noncommissioned officer corps was necessary for the Army to transition from a conscript army to a truly professional force. In the past, to the great majority of enlisted soldiers, regardless of rank, "training" meant nothing more than hands-on experience and learning through osmosis. An "old soldier," relying on experience rather than on the manual, could show the new soldier the ropes—how to put on the uniform, pack the haversack, and clean weapons and individual equipment—but not much else.

To formalize the training process, the Army created the Noncommissioned Officer Educational System (NCOES) in 1971. It had four specific objectives:

- to increase the professional quality of the NCO Corps;
- to provide enlisted personnel with professional development;
- to enhance career attractiveness; and
- to provide the U.S. Army with trained and dedicated NCOs to fill positions of increased responsibility.

Each of the NCOES levels addressed a career point: the Primary Leadership Course taught young soldiers the basic tenets of being a leader and trainer at the junior NCO level; the Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course prepared sergeants for duty as squad, crew and section leaders; and the Advanced NCO course emphasized technical and advanced leadership skills and knowledge of military subjects required to train and lead soldiers at the platoon level. The senior-level course at the Sergeants Major Academy provided career enhancement for senior NCOs similar to that provided for officers by the senior service colleges; many of the texts came from the Command and General Staff College and the Army War College.³¹ With the implementation of the Enlisted Personnel Management System, the Army for the first time had put into place a formal, standardized system that educated enlisted men and women in step with grade progression, and later linked to promotion.

The Decade of the Noncommissioned Officer

Major changes regarding the noncommissioned officer's role in training occurred in 1980 when AR 600-20, *Army Command Policy*, designated the first sergeant as "the individual train[er] of enlisted members of the unit," rather than as an administrator. The regulation further emphasized that "although routine administrative duties were supervised by the first sergeant . . . they were not to assume priority over his training duties." Responsibilities of the squad leaders also changed. They were now held responsible for the "individual training, personal appearance, and cleanliness of their soldiers." The Army supplemented its institutional military training programs with the Noncommissioned Officer Development Program, a unit-level initiative administered by sergeants major and first sergeants that further developed NCOs.³²

The Army regulation on status reporting issued in 1967 required units to report personnel strength by number of officers, warrant officers and enlisted men. In 1981, the regulation changed to require senior grade reporting to include officers, warrant officers and noncommissioned officers sergeant and above, recognizing for the first time the importance of NCOs to unit readiness.³³

The U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983 further demonstrated the weaknesses of Army training, particularly that of a specialized nature. The U.S. Army leadership belatedly realized that training would not progress past a certain point unless there was a delineation of duties. Officers did not have the time to plan both individual and collective training tasks to the advanced level necessary; for example, gunnery tables seldom successfully progressed farther than the individual system because that is where the principal focus lay. Nor were officers familiar with the intricacies of the duty position of each soldier who served under them. Training would improve only when NCOs were made responsible for individual as well as most squad, crew and team training, which in turn allowed officers time to plan platoon and higher collective training.

Field Manual (FM) 25-100, *Training the Force* (1988), laid the foundation for this major doctrinal change. While officers at every level remained responsible for training to established standards during both individual and collective training, FM 25-100 directed senior noncommissioned officer leaders to select specific individual tasks that support the collective tasks scheduled to be trained, and further stated that “NCOs have the primary role in training and developing individual soldier skills.”³⁴

FM 25-101, *Battle Focused Training* (1988), further delineated the training role of senior noncommissioned officers by stressing that prerequisite training be completed so that soldiers’ time was not wasted; that they train the trainers who train the soldiers; that they know their units’ and soldiers’ training needs; and, based on that assessment, that they plan appropriate time to train to standard and ensure that training is conducted to standard. Finally, AR 350-41, *Training in Units* (1993), assigned “primary responsibility for collective training to officers and primary responsibility for soldier training to NCOs.” NCOs would also train most sections, squads, teams and crews.³⁵

Conclusion

With our nation in an extended war, the Army is out of balance, with insufficient time between rotations to train much beyond the mission at hand. Although noncommissioned officers are at the forefront of training those soldiers, sections, squads, teams and crews for their combat assignments, the Army is beginning to see a generation of NCOs who have lost core skills and cannot teach those skills to their subordinates who will replace them one day. While there are challenges, and though the regulations have changed numbers, the intent is still clear: noncommissioned officer training of individuals, crews and small teams is now an established doctrine, being codified in AR 600-20, *Army Command Policy*, as well as in FM 7-0, *Training for Full Spectrum Operations* (2008), and FM 7-1, *Battle Focused Training* (2003). Training is now a primary duty of NCOs, with their input crucial to the “top-down/bottom-up” approach, which helps ensure the organization trains on the most important tasks.³⁶

The United States Army and its Noncommissioned Officer Corps have come a long way since NCOs were not allowed to conduct individual training. It has only been within the past twenty years that Department of the Army regulations charged sergeants and corporals with the individual training role, and only within the last ten years that senior NCOs have been given responsibility by regulation to plan and conduct training of soldiers, sections, squads, teams and crews. This is not to say that NCOs in good organizations before this guidance was issued did not train soldiers; they did—it only made sense. Nevertheless, in some organizations they did not because it was the officers’ prerogative to plan and conduct training of their own organization. The combination of operational assignments, institutional and organizational training, and responsibility for training soldiers has elevated the NCOs’ effectiveness to levels never before seen.

According to Brigadier General John S. Brown, former Chief of Military History, the characteristic that most distinguished Americans from their late-20th-century adversaries was the caliber of their NCOs. No army exceeded and few approximated the combination of experience, leadership and technical knowledge represented by sergeants through command sergeants major. This does not diminish the roles played by officers and other ranks; it just highlights what has made the U.S. Army what it is today.³⁷

Today noncommissioned officers working within the commander's intent and collective training plan are responsible for individual training of soldiers through the collective training of sections, squads, teams and crews. The Army leadership now trusts them with what used to be considered "officers' business."

Endnotes

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- ⁴ William Duane, *A Handbook for Infantry: Containing the First Principles of Military Discipline Founded on Rational Method: Intended to Explain in a Familiar and Practical Manner, for the Use of the Military Force of the United States, the Modern Improvements in the Discipline and Movement of Armies*, ninth edition (Philadelphia: privately printed, 1814).
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