

NCO History Pt. 7: Korean and Vietnam Wars  
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In the years following World War II, a strong emphasis was placed on education for noncommissioned officers and junior Soldiers to help with their career progression.

In December 1949, the first class attended the 2nd Constabulary Brigade's NCO school in Germany. Eight years later, the U.S. Army-wide standards were established for NCO academies in accordance with Army Regulation 350-90. By 1959, over 180,000 Soldiers had attended an NCO academy.

The Army also emphasized the need to advance education outside the military and in 1952 the Army Education Program was born, which allowed credits for academic education to be attained by Soldiers. The program was also designed to help Soldiers attain high school and college diplomas.

The U.S. Army was drawn into a conflict on foreign soil when North Korea invaded South Korea in 1950, after failed attempts to re-unify Korea under a central government.

The United States backed South Korea, while the North Korean Army gained support from China and the Soviet Union.

During the conflicts of the Korean War, the NCO Corps found themselves leading units through deep eroded hills, narrow valleys, deep gorges and thick ridges, advancing mainly in squad size elements.

The Korean War was also the first time the Army entered a war as an integrated force, with black and white Soldiers fighting side-by-side in the same units.

After three years of conflict, primarily around the 38th parallel, a cease-fire was established in July 1953.

The NCO Corps saw the addition of two new ranks in 1958, the ranks of E8 and E9. They were created to "provide a better delineation of responsibility in the enlisted structure."

Conflict broke out in 1959 with communist North Vietnam attacking South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

The first American ground troops were sent to Vietnam in 1965, where they encountered a conflict unlike any they had been subjected to before. Battles took place without any clear front lines, and with the dense jungle surroundings it became hard to tell friend from foe.

Due to the terrain and types of missions, many operations were carried out at a squad or platoon sized element, forcing NCOs to lead Soldiers into combat with a decentralized sense of command control.

In the U.S., the Army, realizing the potential for a long drawn out war and need for more qualified NCOs, created the Noncommissioned Officers Candidate Course. It was a 10-week course conducted at Fort Benning, Fort Knox or Fort Sill. Upon graduation the Soldier was promoted to E5 and the top 5 percent received a promotion to E6. Initially, this program was received with mixed feelings, as it was perceived to undermine the prestige of the NCO Corps and the journey a NCO took to join its ranks.

In 1966, Sergeant Major William O. Wooldridge was selected as the first sergeant major of the Army, with the responsibility of being a consultant and advisor to the chief of staff.

The next year, Army Chief of Staff Harold K. Johnson, who had selected SMA Wooldridge, established the position of command sergeant major, who would act as an assistant to the commander at the battalion level and above.

In the midst of the Vietnam War, the Army continued to push NCO development with the creation the Noncommissioned Officer Education System. The first three NCOES's were Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course, Advanced Noncommissioned Officer Course and Sergeants Major Academy.

In April 1975, North Vietnam captured Saigon, a year later the war ended as North and South Vietnam were reunified. U.S. military operations ceased in the region, two years earlier in 1963 with the passing of the Case-Church Amendment by Congress.

After fighting the spread of communism in Korea and Vietnam, while being in a state of readiness with the ongoing Cold War, the NCO Corps would not be called back into a full scale war until the early 1990's during Desert Strike.