

### Backbone Development



CSM Peter Hiltner

“...I realize that I am a member of a time-honored corps, which is known as ‘the Backbone of the Army.’” This sentence is from the first paragraph of the *Creed of the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO)*. There is no doubt that the NCO Corps is the backbone of the Army, and many say that this is the most quoted phrase in the Army today. I believe that the phrase *time-honored* corps is also significant. The NCO Corps is not something that just happened; it took years and vision to make it time-honored.

When you read about the history of the NCO Corps, you find that it originated with the Continental Army in 1775. These first “backbones” were a combination of the traditions and standards set by the armies of Prussia, France, and England. Over time, our NCO Corps took on its own structure and became that which all other countries try to emulate. In 1778, the NCO Corps began to develop clear duties and responsibilities.

General Friedrich von Steuben, the Inspector General of the Continental Army, wrote one of the first manuals of military training and procedures, *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States* (most commonly known as the “blue book”). Congress adopted the manual in 1779. A few pages of this book identified the duties of an NCO, including the responsibility for training, sick call, and discipline.

First sergeants of this period accounted for soldiers on the morning report and maintained the duty roster. They also kept books of information about their soldiers that were not unlike the leader books we now carry. During this time, the NCO ranks consisted of sergeant major, quartermaster sergeant, first sergeant, sergeant, and corporal. The blue book still exists as Field Manual 3-21.5, *Drill and Ceremonies*, and its legacy exists in many other Army publications.

By the outbreak of the Civil War, NCO duties and responsibilities were becoming more and more complex. NCOs carried the unit colors into battle. They were on every skirmish line, barking instructions and orders to keep the lines together. Commanders were able to tell where their units were located on the battlefield by observing the position and location of the unit colors. After the Civil War, NCOs were charged with maintaining good order and discipline among the troops. This was difficult at times; the Army was moving west and living in some very challenging locations. By the 1900s, the blue book had grown to several hundred pages, and the NCO Corps was firmly established.

When the United States entered World War I, the history of the Chemical NCO began. In James Thayer Addison’s book (1919), *The Story of the First Gas Regiment*, Sergeant John T. William—from D Company, 1st Gas Regiment—told what happened on 30 July 1918:

“Our own guns were firing over our heads. We heard the sputter of machine-guns distinctly, and there came an occasional distant whine of an enemy shell. ...All went well until a terrible thunderous crash sounded almost in our line. There was a rain of rocks, shell fragments, and clay ringing on steel helmets. ...No one was hurt, although I think each one of us pinched ourselves to make sure that we still lived. A few yards, and another shell burst near us, then a third and fourth. Now we turned, and the shells were singing harmlessly over our heads, and we breathed more freely, when there came a crash just above our heads, then another. Four men instantly went down, not to rise again. Two were instantly killed, the others died before they could be taken to the dressing station. ...We had our first experience of fallen comrades. ...We had had our baptism of fire.”

This was just the beginning of the history of the Chemical NCO Corps. Another World War I soldier, Sergeant Robert Brantley from North Carolina, was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for action in France. He, as is stated in his award citation, “remained at his location after his detachment had been ordered to the rear, administered first aid to a wounded comrade, and carried him through withering machine-gun fire to safety.”

The 7 December 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor launched our nation into a second world war. The NCOs trained soldiers to deploy overseas, and chemical NCOs found themselves in battle once again. On 12 April 1942, Sergeant Doyle H. Knight, 7th Chemical Company, won the Silver Star for gallantry in action at Fort Mills, Corregidor, Philippines. His citation reads in part:

“While in charge of a detail of five enlisted men engaged in the emergency field operation of a critical

item of war material, Sergeant Knight...voluntarily remained in the immediate vicinity of the plant in the face of an alarm announcing an aerial bombardment by the enemy. A direct hit by a heavy enemy bomb killed this gallant noncommissioned officer and three of his associates. The example of heroic devotion to duty...served as an inspiration to the entire personnel of his unit.”

The critical item of war material was sulfuric acid, which was needed to replenish the storage batteries used in the electric generator units, the radio sets, and the vehicle batteries that were essential to the defense of Corregidor. Sergeant Knight and his detail were manufacturing the sulfuric acid from the smoke filling of 4.2-inch chemical mortar shells.

Acts of heroism like this continue, but our past is not everything. We, the NCOs of today, are developing the future soldiers that will replace us. Sometimes I hear NCOs say that they are leaving the Army because the NCO Corps is not what it used to be. The NCO Corps can't remain the way it was; it has to change. The NCO Development Program and the NCO Education System (NCOES) are the cornerstones of this change.

The development of the NCOES began in 1947 with the establishment of the 2d Constabulary Brigade NCO School in Munich, Germany. Eight years later, Army standards for NCO academies were published, and by 1959, more than 180,000 soldiers were attending NCO academies. After the Vietnam War and the end of the draft, the Army began to transform the NCOES into what it is today. The system begins with the Primary Leadership Development Course and ends with the Sergeants Major Course.

Today, the NCOES is tied to promotion. Soldiers must complete each level of training successfully to maintain their promotion to the next higher grade. Our job as NCOs is to make sure that our soldiers are successful when they attend these courses. The process of backbone

development begins when a soldier enters the Army. The NCO that you present to your soldiers is the NCO that your soldiers will become. NCO development is more than handing soldiers a study guide and telling them to get ready for the next promotion board. NCOs coach, teach, and mentor every day. Our soldiers observe us 24 hours a day. They see, know, and do what we demonstrate through our words and actions. When a soldier fails to meet the standard at an NCOES course, it tells me that an NCO has failed. Few soldiers fail an NCOES course because of academic difficulties. Soldiers routinely fail to pass the Army Physical Fitness Test or meet the height and weight standards. NCOs can prevent these failures if they take the time. You see the warning signs. You know the right thing to do.

As you look across your formation, what do you see? Do you see the next time-honored corps? You should, because those soldiers *are* our future. Those soldiers are the next Sergeant Brantley or Sergeant Knight. Those soldiers are the ones who need you to show them the way; it is time to get back to the basics. I remember a staff sergeant telling me that I would never make it in the Army. I also remember another sergeant taking the time to show me *how* to make it. I remember them both—one understood what it meant to be an NCO, the other didn't. As I read stories about the soldiers who are currently deployed, the comments always include credit to their NCOs for the training they received and that they were only reacting to the standards set in training. What a testimonial!

Remember, you are whom the future NCOs are going to talk about when they recite the Creed. You are responsible for the development and mentoring of the future backbones of the Army. I encourage you to take the time to coach, teach, and mentor. Take the time to demonstrate and teach your soldiers the importance and significance of the seven Army values. Get your soldiers ready today. Work with your soldiers. Show them what it means to be an NCO. Don't be their buddy; they want you to be their leader. Earn their respect.