
Regimental Command Sergeant Major

This train stops at the next station.

A few weeks ago, I was listening as someone read my biography to a group of people. It began with “CSM Hiltner first entered the military in 1969.” What immediately came to my mind was “Dang, I’m old.” Many in the audience probably thought the same thing. What it really says is that I have been a soldier since 1969 and that I have been associated with the greatest profession in the world during the past five decades. I consider it an honor to say, “Yeah, I’ve been a soldier since 1969.”



CSM Peter Hiltner

It doesn’t seem that long ago when—as an 18-year-old civilian—I got off the bus in Fort Lewis, Washington, and met two individuals I will never forget: Drill Sergeant Goff and Drill Sergeant Washington. They taught me things I will never forget. I recall Goff’s “pleasant” voice as he introduced me to my new name: “Puddin’.” There were other names that Goff and Washington used, but I will not address those here. My first day began in a warehouse full of potatoes, where I was given a peeler and told to get busy.

Basic taught me about button-down cotton fatigues, butt cans, and the center hallway in the bay—impossible to keep clean and reserved for drill sergeants. We had footlockers, we rolled our socks, and we never used anything that was on display. I remember returning from training to find the contents of the barracks emptied into the company street. We were mad, but we knew we had failed to meet the drill sergeants’ standards. The Inspector General’s Office or the Equal Opportunity Office was not part of the equation. The training was tough. We double-timed to all the training sites carrying our M14s at port arms. Our weapon became our best friend. We never talked about quitting or refusing to train. Like our fathers and grandfathers before us, we knew it was our duty to serve, and we accepted it.

After Fort Lewis, I began my tour with the Minnesota Army National Guard. I was a cook in a Signal Company. Oh, did I forget to tell you my MOS was 11B infantryman? I recall the day that I left the National Guard; our commander said that some of us would return to the military. At the time, I thought this guy was crazy! But in 1978, I was back. Again, I found myself in basic training, this time at Fort McClellan, Alabama, and the rest is history.

A short story, but not complete. The Army in the ‘60s was all about Vietnam. To me, the ‘60s was all about rock and roll. Life was good. I was making about \$100 a month, and movies on post were free.

In the ‘70s, the Army was out of Vietnam, the Chemical Corps was no longer needed, and life as a soldier seemed a little easier. Disco was alive and well. Physical training existed but was not practiced often. Sergeants major were referred to as “Smadge.”

When we got to the ‘80s, disco was dead. Ironically, people in country bars started to dance in lines, and that

looked like disco to me. Soldiers would meet on the street, and it could take up to 5 minutes to shake hands. Articles 15 were posted in the mess hall where everyone ate, and commanders had “Night Court” on the training schedule. We had a lot of money back then. I remember replacing parts on vehicles because they looked old, and we were having maintenance team inspections. Going to the National Training Center was a big deal. We were trying to find ways to get to the field to train—money just wasn’t an issue.

Then we entered the ‘90s. The Cold War was over. We taught Iraq a valuable lesson, and it was now time to draw down. Time to figure out how we could do more with less and do it with zero defects. The Army was kind and gentle. Life was good. Privates were paid about \$1,000 a month. Recreational things started to disappear—stuff soldiers had grown accustomed to (craft shops, clubs, etc.)—because they weren’t making enough money.

Now we are in the 2000s, the new millennium, the Army of One, the black beret, Y2K, and Generation X. The Army is not what it used to be.

Somewhere in all that we started saying HOOAH! What did we say before HOOAH? I asked a couple of soldiers, and no one seems to remember. I know it started somewhere, I just don’t remember why. I remember standing at parade rest and saying “Yes, sergeant” and “No, sergeant.” Maybe that’s what we used to say.

A lot has happened in the Army over the last five decades. Some of it will be part of history forever. Many great ideas and great soldiers made contributions. The Army is not what it used to be, thanks to the efforts of all those soldiers. Of course, the Army has never been what it used to be. That’s what it’s really all about—change. If we did business today as

we did in the '60s, we would be in serious trouble. The Army of today is truly an Army of One. There is no more National Guard, Army Reserve, or active duty. It is just simply the Army. In battle, we all will bleed the same; and at the end, we all will stand together in victory.

One area where I have seen major changes is in our NCO Corps. Today, it is more respected, better trained, and better equipped; we lead with distinction and provide positive role models and mentorship for our subordinates, peers, and supervisors. The NCO Corps is the backbone of today's Army and the key ingredient to the future of our Army. The NCOs of today are the ones our nation has called on to lead our soldiers into the next battle. The NCO Corps is largely responsible for the Army of today. Drill Sergeants Goff and Washington, back in 1969, were part of that change. Like Sergeant First Class Albert, my first platoon sergeant, you are part of that change.

As NCOs, we are the ones who have to stand in the face of fear and tell someone the straight facts. America's sons and daughters have been entrusted to us. We are the standard bearers of freedom.

Since 1969, I have come in contact with hundreds of NCOs. Some taught me the right way to do things; some demonstrated the wrong way to do things. Today we have the Army Values, the Soldier's Creed (below), Warrior Ethos, and the NCO Creed. Get reacquainted with these concepts. The power in the written words and the insight you find if you look beyond the words are invaluable.

The time has come to get back to the basics. If you are willing to look past a soldier who is not performing to standard, then you have just set a new standard. The soldier will be an NCO someday and will carry that poor standard you set with him. Demonstrate to soldiers what it means to be the "backbone" of the Army. Your challenge is to take the Army to the next level. There is no doubt in my mind that you—the *backbone of the Chemical Corps*—can do it!

So if someone says to me "You've been in the Army since 1969?" I will answer "Yeah! And I'm an NCO!" The Army has been great to me and to my family, but all good things must come to an end. You see, the train has reached the station, and it's time for me to get off. God bless you all.

Soldier's Creed

I am an American Soldier.

I am a Warrior and a member of a team. I serve the people of the United States and live the Army Values.

I will always place the mission first.

I will never accept defeat.

I will never quit.

I will never leave a fallen comrade.

I am disciplined, physically and mentally tough, trained and proficient in my Warrior tasks and drills. I always maintain my arms, my equipment, and myself.

I am an expert, and I am a professional.

I stand ready to deploy, engage, and destroy the enemies of the United States of America in close combat.

I am a guardian of freedom and the American way of life.

I am an American Soldier.