

# Clear The Way

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**A**s the Commandant of the Regiment, one of the key tasks I've charged you with is "Breeding the Army's Most Adaptive Leaders... Inspired With Passion." Our noncommissioned officers (NCOs) play the most crucial role. They are heralded as the backbone of the Army, but our NCO Corps is far more than that...far more vital to the life and legacy of this Regiment. Our NCOs—from sergeant to command sergeant major—are our Regiment's DNA, responsible for breeding leaders. Let me explain and then give you a challenge.

From the outset of my career, I was—and still am—awed by the role our NCOs play in the combat effectiveness and long-term vitality of our Regiment and our Army. Sometimes we don't see it...or perhaps we have grown so accustomed to being surrounded by super NCOs that we take it for granted. But have a discussion with a leader of any other nation's army, and it will quickly turn to the extraordinary professionalism of our NCO ranks. They see it immediately and attribute the superiority of our Army to one thing...our NCOs. It has been that way since our birth as a Regiment, an Army, and a Nation.

We often use various parts of the human body as analogies to describe someone's contribution to the team. The cliché that NCOs are the backbone of the Army has been around forever...accentuated by NCOs with great pride and resolve whenever they recite the NCO Creed. I suppose that it alludes to a number of attributes—our Army's courage to stand up for what is right being just one of them. But we also describe the role of NCOs as the eyes and ears of the commander, the muscle that propels the unit into action, the shoulders that do the heavy lifting, the brains that organize a unit for the mission, the hands that mold future generations of Soldiers, the backs on which a unit's success rides, the heart of any organization, the exacting eyes that ensure unit discipline and guarantee readiness, the soul that keeps us going in adversity, and the conscience that discerns right from wrong when confronted with ambiguity. No doubt, NCOs are all these things and more.

No single analogy fully describes the premier role of the NCO in our Army or captures our reliance on them as a Corps. But I'll add one more analogy to the mix because I believe it captures the most important responsibility of our NCO and Corps. It is one they alone own.



The Corps of NCOs is our Regiment and our Army's DNA—that complex code found in all living cells. It is the living set of instructions that is passed from one cell to another during growth and tells the new cell (1) what it is to be, (2) what function it is to accomplish and how it fits in, (3) what form it is to take, and (4) how it contributes to the larger organ and its sense of belonging to something bigger than self; and ultimately, (5) it gives the body its unique identity and form. Like our NCOs, we don't really see our DNA or its function. However, it is fundamental—the very essence of who we are.

Let me give you some examples of how NCOs pass on our Army's DNA. It is the NCO that is the Soldier's first and lifelong example of what right looks like. Every time an NCO interacts with a Soldier—on or off duty—there is a form of cell division that takes place. It passes on the enduring values and leadership traits that are unique hallmarks of our Army to the newer generation. As our primary trainers and coaches, NCOs have the responsibility to inculcate Soldiers with the necessary skills, inspiration, and gut-feel to be effective members of the team, unit, and Army. NCOs transform our Nation's youth into Soldiers... into Warriors...and then into Warrior Leaders. NCOs give Soldiers their very form and function and, in so doing, shape our Army. They breed their replacements! And it is the NCO who is an officer's very first teacher, coach, and sometimes mentor—an officer's most trusted and important advisor throughout his/her career. NCOs are experts—technically and tactically—and teach the officer to bridge from classroom theory to combat application. They coach leadership and keep officers grounded in Soldiering and Soldiers. They inspire us that we may inspire others. No matter what rank, we learn who we are from our NCO Corps.

So here is the question and my challenge to you: Have you promoted good "cell division" within your outfit? Do you foster a climate that allows NCOs to fulfill their role and obligation as the Engineer Regiment's DNA? To our NCOs, are you actively passing on the DNA that is vital to our Regiment's success and legacy? Are you helping police our ranks to ensure that the right DNA is passed on to new generations? Make it a priority; look for opportunities! Don't do it because this is the Year of the NCO, but because our future depends on it...perhaps now more than ever.