

Gunner's Seat

Noncommissioned Officer Expertise

"There are three reasons I failed. Not enough training. Not enough training. And not enough training." —Haruki Murakami

If our goal is the mastery of fundamentals, then noncommissioned officers (NCOs) are the start point. An NCO's primary duty is to train, and to him or her is entrusted the responsibility for training enlisted Soldiers, crews and teams. They take broad guidance from their leaders: identify the necessary tasks, standards and resources, and then plan, prepare, execute and assess training. NCOs ensure Soldiers demonstrate proficiency in their individual skills, warrior tasks and battle drills. Simply put, the NCO is responsible for training and maintaining the Soldier. On their shoulders rests the individual expertise, adeptness of the team and crew, and in large part, the proficiency of the organization.

The NCO has served many roles in the U.S. Army. The sergeant has been, and forever will be, in charge of training the individual Soldier. Sergeants know their Soldiers, their skills and their shortcomings.

One of the earliest examples of the use of the NCO in American history is SGT John Ordway of the famed Lewis and Clark Expedition. Throughout the winter of 1803-04, Ordway, an experienced soldier from 1st Infantry Regiment, assisted CPT William Clark in establishing Camp River Dubois. During the five months of the encampment, Clark and Ordway received, selected, trained and disciplined personnel for the expedition. On several occasions, Ordway commanded the camp in the officers' absence. He was the top sergeant of the expedition, expected to maintain order and discipline and to see that daily operations ran smoothly.

He was also expected to lead. On the trip back to Saint Louis, MO, where they started, Ordway was placed in command of 10 men entrusted to make the trip back to the head of the Jefferson River, where the expedition had left their canoes before crossing the mountains. They were to follow the river and travel to the Missouri River, where they would meet Lewis and Clark. Ordway and his group successfully completed this challenging assignment, reuniting with the main body and bringing to a close one of the most dramatic episodes in American history. Throughout the expedition, military training and discipline proved critical, and NCO expertise proved pivotal to the mission's success.

Another illustration of NCO expertise, adeptness of a crew and organizational proficiency is SGT Curtis Grubb Culin III. A native of Cranford, NJ, Culin was serving as a tanker with 102nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (New Jersey National Guard, "Essex Troop," 2nd Armored Division) when he came up with the four-pronged plow device created from scrap steel from a German roadblock. When attached to the front of his tank, it was successful in rapidly plowing gaps in the hedgerows during the Battle of Normandy.

Culin's innovation and initiative were mentioned in one of the last addresses by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in a Jan. 10, 1961, speech to the American Society of Mechanical Engineers: "There was a little sergeant. His name was Culin, and he had an idea. And his idea was that we could fasten knives, great big steel knives in front of these tanks, and as they came along they would cut off these banks right at ground level – they would go through on the level keel – would carry with themselves a little bit of camouflage for a while. And this idea was brought to the captain, to the major, to the colonel, and it got high enough that somebody did something about it – and that was GEN [Omar] Bradley – and he did it very quickly. Because this seemed like a crazy idea, they did not even go to the engineers very fast, because they were afraid of the technical advice, and then someone did have big questions, 'Where are you going to find steel for this thing?' Well, now, happily the Germans tried to keep us from going on the beaches with great steel *chevaux de fries* – big crosses – there were all big bars of steel down on the beach where the Germans left it. And [Culin] got ... these things sharpened up, and it worked fine. The biggest and happiest group, I suppose, in all the Allied armies that night were those who knew that this thing worked. And it worked beautifully."

Culin's story perfectly demonstrates an NCO's mastery of his craft, ability to innovate and then train his unit and others to overcome a problem.

As illustrated in *The Story of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps* published by the U.S. Army's Center of Military History, in both the 20th and 21st centuries, technology dramatically changed the Cavalry, as it has warfare in general. The NCO Corps coped with the new inventions, just as it had taken other developments in stride. NCOs met this new challenge by becoming the commanders of individual tanks and armored cars and mastering the technical skills to maintain the fleets of new war machines, just as they had led patrols and cared for horses and saddles. It was the NCO Corps that in many ways provided the glue that held the branch together during the wrenching changes from horses to the internal-combustion engine.

The sergeants and corporals found that when technology changes, many functions continue, whether Soldiers are mounted on chargers, tanks or helicopters. Reconnaissance, screening and raiding can be performed by armored vehicles and helicopters; shock action by main battle tanks and attack aircraft. In each case, the fundamental techniques of leading, training and supervising troops on a day-to-day basis do not change. Whether on horseback or in a turret, the Cavalry NCO carries a great deal of responsibility. He must make quick decisions about deployment of forces on all types of terrain while remaining ready to respond quickly to mechanical breakdowns or the actions of hostile forces. He remains the immediate link between the officer and the private, translating planning into action.

In short, throughout our Army's history, it is the NCO who, as a master of the fundamentals, is an expert in his field and a trainer of the Soldier on which the success of our formations has rested. In the future, our success may well rest on the NCO's ability to maintain this level of expertise in a complex world.

Forge the Thunderbolt!

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Acronym Quick-Scan

NCO – noncommissioned officer