

The History of the Sergeant Major



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The history of the sergeant major extends back to the earliest days of the Army of the United States, but the role that we currently associate with the sergeant major of today is relatively young. Only through continued refinement of the position by forward-thinking leaders, commanders, and noncommissioned officers has the rank of sergeant major been elevated to its prestigious position.

Rudyard Kipling described the Army noncommissioned man as the backbone of the Army, and since the origins of the United States Army, the sergeant major has been recognized at the head of noncommissioned officers. The long history of the sergeant major can be traced back to the fifteenth century. Some may argue that the early French and English sergeant major was the predecessor to the present-day Chief of Staff, but the duties were very similar to the sergeant major of today, specifically, supervision of the regiment's noncommissioned officers.

In 1591, Giles Clayton wrote, "A Sargeant Major...ought to be a man of great courage, for that his office is alwayes to bee in the face of the enemie."¹ Robert Barret, a professional soldier in several armies, made mention of the sergeant major in 1598. He illustrated that the sergeant major delivered the password to the sergeants of the regiment, and that the sergeant "ought to carrie great respect unto the sergeant major."² In spelling out the duties of the sergeant major, sixteenth and seventeenth century writers suggested that he was an assistant

to the commander, and saw to all the details having to do with the day-to-day administration of an Army, mirroring the duties of a modern day sergeant major.³

The earliest mention of the sergeant major rank in the fledgling United States Army was soon after assuming command of the Continental Army in 1775, General George Washington and his staff standardized the table of organization for the infantry regiment, patterning it after the British Army. They included the position of sergeant major to each regiment or battalion headquarters, along with a noncommissioned officer element.⁴

In 1778, General Washington appointed Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben as the second Inspector General of the Continental Army. von Steuben attempted to improve the tactics, regulations, and discipline of the Continental Army. Through his knowledge of Prussian Army regulations, he set out to make Washington's Army capable of meeting British regulars on the battlefield.⁵ In his *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States, Part I* (1779), often referred to as the "Blue Book" (in reference to the color of the original binding), von Steuben defined the role of the sergeant major. By writing that he, "must pay the greatest attention to their [noncommissioned officers] conduct and behavior...."⁶ In his instructions, he noted that the sergeant major should be well acquainted with management, discipline of the regiment and of keeping rosters and forming details. He was expected to be an expert in counting

off the battalion and attending parades. Though early on the sergeant major was an assistant to the Adjutant, his role with the enlisted and noncommissioned officers has remained basically the same. In 1780, General Washington sought a volunteer to kidnap defector Benedict Arnold so he could face American justice, and sergeant major John Champe of the 2d Partisan Corps was selected. Though Champe failed because Arnold's forces redeployed to Virginia, Washington went ahead and arranged for Champe's honorable discharge upon return.⁷

During the next 150 years, other than the number and placement, the role of the sergeant major remained the same. In his 1814 *Handbook for Infantry*, William Duane stated that the sergeant major was, "to the sergeants and corporals, what the major is to the platoon officers."⁸ In the 1820's, the sergeant major was directed to conduct both practical and theoretical instruction for sergeants and corporals.⁹ And in 1909, Captain James A. Moss of the 24th U.S. Infantry produced one of the first guides specifically for the noncommissioned officer, the *Noncommissioned Officers' Manual*. In his description of the sergeant major's duties, he recognized that the sergeant major was responsible for transmitting orders, through the first sergeants, and they would be obeyed just as if they came from the Adjutant. Moss stated that the sergeant major's, "neatness and correctness of dress and in soldierly bearing, he should be faultless, setting an example to the rest of the enlisted men of

the command."¹⁰ He also defined the depth of knowledge required by the sergeant major, stating that he must know, "Army Regulations, the Drill Regulations, the Manual of Guard Duty and so much of the Courts-Martial Manual and the other manuals that pertains to his duties."¹¹

In an attempt to reduce costs in June 1920, Congress eliminated the position of sergeant major by grouping enlisted members into seven pay grades (E-1 through E7). The senior noncommissioned officer in an organization for the next thirty-eight years was the senior master sergeant.¹² But throughout this period the conditions of the enlisted man's career choices were brought to light, first by the 1953 Womble Board, then later the Cordiner Committee. Rear Admiral J.P. Womble's group studied, among other things, the problem of enhancing the noncommissioned officer's status and prestige. But, it was five more years until the Defense Advisory Committee on Professional and Technical Compensation, chaired by Ralph J. Cordiner, caused any change. They developed the *Military Pay Bill of 1958*, which recommended establishing two new enlisted pay grades E-8 and E-9, the "supergrades." In April 1959, the first NCOs were promoted into the newly created rank. But with the creation of the new grades, the question arose of how to address these individuals. Finally, in 1962 Army Chief of Staff General George H. Decker decided that in the tradition of the British Army, the most senior noncommissioned officer would be addresses as "sergeant major",

regardless of military specialty.¹³ However, this created a problem. Although only one E-9 in any color-bearing unit could actually be the senior enlisted man, each staff section also had an E-9.¹⁴ The resulting problems associated with identifying the senior enlisted man of an organization added to the disdain for the new grade. This, coupled with the confusion of the role of the sergeant major, caused a loss in prestige. In his January 1966 article in the *Army* magazine, Sergeant Major Robert Begg recognized this confusion and attempted to clarify the sergeant major's relationship with his commander, the staff, his soldiers, and himself.¹⁵ It was not until the Vietnam buildup in the mid-sixties that the unit sergeant major had at last been clearly defined and recognized within the enlisted grade structure.¹⁶

With its definition of the sergeant major as the senior noncommissioned officer within a unit, the Army set out to identify a title to truly recognize these leaders. Under the direction of the Army Chief of Staff, General Harold K. Johnson, the Command Sergeants Major (CSM) Program was established in July 1967. The program would, "create a small body of selected sergeants major for ready assignment to all major commands of the Army."¹⁷ The Chief of Staff also directed that the insignia of the command sergeant major be changed to make them identifiable. With Johnson recommending that a simple change, such as "...adding a wreath around the star might suffice...."¹⁸

Of the first 192 selectees in December 1967, five of them would ultimately serve in the newly established position of Sergeant Major of the Army. But the program was not extended to the Army Reserve and National Guard until 1974.

Once developed, the role of the command sergeant major was controversial. Some disgruntled commentators complained that CSMs were not commanders.¹⁹ Many voiced concern that the command sergeants major would usurp the lines of authority in the chain of command, and commanders were thought to be underutilizing their CSMs. In his address to senior sergeants during a 1966 Sergeants Major conference, Johnson warned, "But you have to be careful now that in this sergeants major chain you are not establishing some kind of end run position, because this, if it ever developed, and if it ever were then ever identified, would be the very quickest way to torpedo the whole program."²⁰ Though many major commands attempted to define the duties of the command sergeant major, it took until December 1975 for it to materialize.

Also in 1966, Johnson significantly enhanced the noncommissioned officer corps by creating the position of Sergeant Major of the Army. His action was the result of the 1965 Sergeants Major Personnel Conference. This conference, attended by senior sergeants major, recommended establishing such a post. After receiving names of those recommended for the position, Johnson chose the only candidate serving at that time

in Vietnam, Sergeant Major William O. Woolridge. The guidance that Johnson gave Woolridge before his swearing in ceremony on July 11, 1966 was that he would be his principal enlisted assistant and advisor on all matters pertaining to enlisted members in the Army.

This position was conceived as an ombudsman for enlisted personnel, but its role eventually expanded beyond that. In the 1967 edition of *Army Regulation 600-20, Army Command Policy and Procedure*, it stated that the position of the Sergeant Major of the Army "serves as the senior enlisted advisor and consultant to the Chief of Staff of the Army on problems affecting enlisted personnel and their solutions."²¹ Soon after his selection as the eighth Sergeant Major of the Army, Julius Gates went on to describe what he thought his duties would be, "I think the Sergeant Major of the Army's job is to support and keep the Chief of Staff informed about the enlisted concerns of the Army, and let him know how soldiers are training and living at the canteen-cup level."²²

By the end of the war in Vietnam, the noncommissioned officer system was plagued with problems the war had left on the corps. Senior Army commanders gathered for a conference at General William DePuy's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) headquarters to discuss the role of the CSM. DePuy noted that, "He [the sergeant major] sort of floats around out there and observes what's going on with soldiers and tells the old man

about that. Fine, I think he can do that, but that's a very limited view of what a sergeant major is supposed to do."²³ DePuy also pointed out that, "the overwhelming number of captains commanding companies...in the Army rejected the claim of the sergeant major to any authority at all over unit noncommissioned officers."²⁴ The conferees agreed that the line of authority from the CSM on down through the noncommissioned officer echelons must be clear and understood by all. DePuy then went on to lay the foundation for what is now known as the noncommissioned officer support channel. He wrote that the noncommissioned officer has two responsibilities, "to accomplish an assigned group of collective missions..." and, "to supervise the training of the individual soldiers in that squad, section or crew." He concluded by stating that it, "should be almost an exclusive responsibility of the first-line supervisors under the direction of and with the support of platoon sergeants, first sergeants, and command sergeants major."²⁵ In 1977 a Sergeants Major Academy Task Force was created to form Army doctrine on the duties and responsibilities of the noncommissioned officer. The Task Force developed *Field Manual 22-600-20, The Duties, Responsibilities, and Authority of NCO's*, and when finally printed in March 1980, the noncommissioned officer support channel was finally formalized.

In 1985, Colonel Claude Abate and Lieutenant General Warren P. Giddings pointed out that, "The CSM is the most experienced

enlisted member of the battalion and to limit his duties and responsibilities to routine matters associated with garrison operations does not take full advantage of his background, experience, rank, or position."²⁶ The Army was coming to terms with the realization that the sergeant major was an important asset for commanders not only in garrison, but also on the battlefield.

By 1989, a Leader Development Task Force was formed, and drawing heavily from the Professional Army Ethic, the NCO Creed, and the Oath of Enlistment, they developed leadership competencies and the skills, knowledge and attitudes that the command sergeant major and sergeant major should possess. By formalizing these competencies in *Training Circular 22-6, The Army Noncommissioned Officer Guide* in November 1990, the roles of the sergeant major were clearly defined. By then, commanders had recognized the importance of the sergeant major, and noted in *TRADOC Pamphlet 525-100-2, Leadership and Command on the Battlefield: Battalion and Company*, "[During Operation Desert Storm] many battalion commanders commented that their command sergeants major seemed to be everywhere, talking with soldiers, smoothing problems in the logistics and maintenance efforts, and assisting the commander with control of the unit."²⁷

Beginning with the earliest days of the inception of the United States Army, the role of the sergeant major has always been at the head of the noncommissioned officers. Through

refinement and expansion of our military, the position of the sergeant major has matured to its rightful place in the corps of noncommissioned officers. In his article in *Army* magazine in May 1986, LTG Robert L. Wetzel summed up how he utilized his sergeant major in combat, "The same way I use him in peacetime-- to show the way. I expect the sergeant major to be at or near the point of decision at critical times and provide me, as the commander, with an unbiased assessment."²⁸

The sergeant major will surely enter the 21st century with clearly defined duties, responsibilities, admiration and respect.

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