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Evolution of the Air Force Noncommissioned Officer

"Backbone of the United States Air Force"

As the Air Force moves into the 21st Century, our success will depend on the leadership role of the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO), "the backbone of the Air Force." The Noncommissioned Officer has always played a vital role in the United States Military. Military leaders have relied on NCOs to set the tone for military units. They know that the success of military units largely depends on the quality of it's NCOs, as proven throughout history.

The Air Force NCO evolved from the United States Army Air Forces (AAF) NCO upon establishment of the United States Air Force in 1947. Just prior to establishment, on 12 May 1947, CWO H.E. McKelvy of the AAF Special Staff School presented a 50 minute talk titled "Responsibilities of the Non-Commissioned Officer" to the General Air Inspection Course. One of his key points was to recognize that "our non-commissioned officers were once known as the backbone of the Army." (1:1) CWO McKelvy was setting the tone for what is now the best, most educated force of NCOs in the world--"The United States Air Force Noncommissioned Officer." I say, "our NCOs are unmatched by any other Air Force in the world."

Since the early days of the United States Air Force, military leaders have recognized the importance of the NCO. Examples of importance are noted by the number of units that established programs geared at honing the leadership skills of NCOs. Several units established programs designed to develop the NCO into a better leaders. One of the first examples is the 9th Bombardment Wing, 14th Air Division, 15th Air Force, Strategic Air Command, Travis Air Force Base, California. Base regulation 35-8, dated 26 Feb 52, titled "Troop Management" was established. The purpose of the regulation was to establish a program of active leadership among NCOs on Travis Air Force Base. Troop management was designed to foster more individual productivity, better personnel control, and to improve discipline and morale. The troop management program emphasized that NCOs were leaders as well as technicians. (2:1) Senior Noncommissioned Officers were charged as element leaders and reported to squadron

commanders. NCOs were charged with two types of responsibilities: job related and military. Job related focused on productive hours, training, discipline, morale, conduct, behavior, and appearance. Military responsibilities included military customs and courtesies, customs unique to the unit of station, special service activities, Airman Information and Education Program, unit policies concerning privileges and awards, Uniform Code of Military Justice, proper dress, etc. (2:2-3) NCOs were charged with setting the tone within the unit. NCOs differ from civilians in that they are part of the military profession--"The profession of arms." Not only did they have to prescribe to those responsibilities encountered in their technical specialties, they had to abide by a special code, which applies only to those entering the military.

The NCO was taking on a greater role as the Strategic Air Command was faced with the problem of expanding combat units by 50 percent, while the current build-up of personnel was only 20 percent. (2:1) While the Strategic Air Command recognized the importance of the NCO in making this difficult task a reality, so did Headquarters, United States Air Force. On 21 Apr 53, the Department of the Air Force issued Air Force Regulation 39-6, Responsibility of Noncommissioned Officers. The initial regulation was one page long, delegated all authority necessary to lead airmen of lesser rank, and had a general listing of NCO responsibilities, specifying many important requirements. NCOs were charged with an equal and continuous obligation, both on and off duty, for the advancement of individual and group proficiency, discipline, morale, and esprit de corps. (3:1)

The 10th Air Division, recognized the importance of the NCO and established a Non-Commissioned Officer prestige program and Airman of the Month award. The approach for integrating a spirit of responsibility and prestige for the corps of non-commissioned officers arose out of a letter signed by Major General George H. Acheson, Command of the Alaskan Air Command, and similar requests by other senior officers urging their consideration and utmost cooperation in the program. (4:17) An organization of Master Sergeants representing all 10th Air Division units on Elmendorf Air Force Base met to discuss common problems and suggest recommendations on the entire program as outlined in AFR 39-6, dated 21 April 1953. This

group met periodically to work noncommissioned officer issues. (4:17) They discussed various issues and among them were privileges, such as a separate club for NCOs, however lack of funds precluded it at the time. Despite this, future plans were made for construction of a partitioned room within the dining room in Building 2-900 for use by Tech and Staff Sergeants. It was apparent that senior base leaders were well aware of the importance of the NCO and that they were willing to invest in their success by providing them privileges commensurate with their level of responsibilities. Not only were the NCOs evolving in the United States and Alaska, but halfway across the world.

The Japanese Air Defense Forces (JADF) were working on lifting the morale of the NCO corps. Quoted from the JADF unit history recognizing their philosophy is:

No command is stronger than the morale of the men who act out the commander's decisions. And nothing influences a man's moral more than his job, his family, his home, and his chance to improve himself through education. (5:84)

Considerable effort was devoted to raising the prestige of the noncommissioned officer corps, including such things as housing, off-duty education, and dependent schools. Well qualified NCOs were leaving the Air Force, trading in the blue suit for a civilian life. Many NCOs felt they were treated like airman and JADF Regulation 35-5 "treated NCOs like children" including very little difference in privileges. Many felt their officers didn't support them and that officers constantly overruled them in front of their subordinates, undermining the little authority they did hold. There was a feeling that incompetent officers and poor leadership was holding back the NCO from doing his best job. Additionally, others felt the Air Force displayed little regard for the married NCO, and made family life very insecure. (4:85) The Far East Air Forces (FAEF) requested the JADF to evaluate its program to increase the effectiveness and prestige of the NCO. Unit commanders took this matter seriously and initiated actions to resolve various problems. Some of the corrective actions included NCOs attending staff meetings, Senior NCOs filling officer positions,

emphasis to junior officers and airman to use the chain of command, separate dining facilities for NCOs, and several other initiatives geared at bolstering NCO prestige.

There were recommendations to establish training programs to familiarize NCOs with their new responsibilities. These new privileges were to be earned, not merely given.

In 1954, 18th Air Force initiated a program to improve the prestige of the NCO. The Headquarters determined that NCOs were already serving in positions of increased responsibility and deserved additional prestige. (6:26) The 456th Carrier Wing were using NCOs for promotion boards, speaking in training programs, and fully operated the NCO club. NCOs were in positions that had been previously been filled by officers. (6:26) As the evolution of the NCO continued, 18th Air Force was not without it's share of problems. While some NCOs wanted more responsibility, others, wanted to continue working in the technical area without having to deal with the leadership responsibilities. Overall, it was the opinion that it would be a good idea to establish specialist rates. They even considered placing a number above the rank insignia to denote class specialists. However, there was a feeling of a loss of prestige by adding the numerical designations. Additionally, most airmen favoring the specialist ratings did not want to give up the privileges that came with their present grade. It just wasn't fair to give the specialist a commensurate prestige of that of a supervisor, if they didn't have those additional responsibilities. (6:27)

In 1953, the Human Resources Research Institute, Air Research and Development Command, conducted a study to take a look at the stability of the Air Force NCO and those which concentrated mainly on the technical areas. Both officers and Noncommissioned Officers In Charge (NCOICs) were in agreement over the majority of content of NCO jobs reviewed in the study. The report stated that over 50 percent of NCO jobs in the maintenance squadron evaluated were technical positions and had no supervisory responsibilities at all. The squadron staff personnel considered the problem seriously enough to possibly make changes in the grade structure or initiate some kind of managerial training to be used when transitioning from technical to supervisory functions. Four recommendations were made, however, the existing NCO ladder

was the number one choice. Consideration was given to expand to five grades of airman, technical grades with some limited responsibilities, and a technician and supervisor branch in the first three grades. (7:1-27) As you can see there has been quite an effort to perfect the enlisted corps. The main focus, however, was to increase the prestige and status of the NCO and to improve their quality of life. This trend continued through the 50's and 60's.

On 16 Oct 1966, the 1962nd Communications Group held a dining out at Kadena AB, Okinawa. Major General Richard P. Klocko, Commander of Air Force Communications Service, began his speech by stating that, "Sergeants are the backbone of the Air Force" and "no one can question the truth of that statement." He also stated, "It's important our officers recognize the role our NCO's play and that they afford them the prestige and status that they have earned and rightly deserve." (8:1) I believe Major General Klock truly understood the importance and role of the NCO. His entire speech is full of those principles which make up our NCO Creed. Major General Klocko talked about the respect the airman have for their sergeants. He said, "He [airman] looks to his sergeant because he believes that the man with all the stripes is wiser and more experienced, and he has faith that he will not be steered wrong." (8:3) Major General Klocko understood and communicated what the NCO is and always will be "The backbone of our Air Force."

As the enlisted force evolved into the most critical part of the Air Force, the NCO has become more relied upon than ever before. The September-October 1966 edition of Air University Review had an article written by Lieutenant Colonel Ernest M. Magee said,

An Air Force made up of wholly of NCO's. Here we would find a mature group possessing worker skills to a high degree, coupled with the capability-to large extent-of planning, organizing, and directing. A blending of Indians and chiefs. It was comparing a force made up of officers only, NCOs only, or Airman Only. If no other combination was available, the NCO would be the most useful choice over the long run. (9:56) The article went on further to discuss the importance of NCO professional military education. By

1966, six major commands had over 40 schools, which produced over 10,000 graduates annually. (9:57) This showed the emphasis the Air Force had placed in educating their NCOs.

NCOs continue to take on more and more responsibility in today's Air Force. They are now serving in positions that have traditionally been held by officers. NCOs are better educated than ever before. In 1994, 6,327 people graduated from the Community College of the Air Force and the number of people with degrees serving in the Air Force was almost 50,000. (10:14) This is directly attributed to the commitment our Air Force has made in building the prestige of the NCO. The past 49 years have seen a continued evolution of the NCO and the heritage and proud tradition should continue.

Noncommissioned Officers, know and live by the code of "Duty, Honor, Country." Throughout history, the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) has been the key component of the military unit. In 1896, Rudyard Kipling saw the importance of the NCO when he said, "...the backbone of the Army is the noncommissioned [officer]" (11:1) and it is even more evident in military units today than ever before. More and more responsibility is resting on the shoulders of our NCO corps.

As new airmen obtain NCO status, they should continue to be encouraged to progress technically, however, building their knowledge of their military profession and their responsibilities as an NCO should be that primary focus. An NCO's training begins by using the "Creed of the Noncommissioned Officer" as a guide. NCOs are the vital link between those who make the orders and those who carry them out, so they must be trained to become professional leaders of people. (14:10) Emphasis must be placed on being proud of the NCO, bringing credit upon the force, by maintaining the best conduct at all times. This builds NCO's credibility as a leader, so troops respect them and are willing to act on such orders as killing the enemy and destroying their resources. NCOs must know their two most basic responsibilities are "mission and the welfare of their people." (12:1) NCO's must understand Air Force Doctrine and how "people will be the decisive factor in war" and how the NCO's can make this happen. (13:18) NCO's will continue to accomplish the mission with swift and decisive actions essential to winning

in the tough military conditions of the present and future. NCOs will continue to stand tall, follow-through on every action, and "earn the respect and confidence of officers and their people." (12:1) NCO's will always be fully loyal to their seniors, peers, and subordinates and will always remember the importance of accomplishing their duties without the need for constant supervision. They will "never compromise integrity, nor moral courage." (12:1) By following the Creed of the NCO, NCOs will continue to be proud professionals, noncommissioned officers, leaders! (12:1) Since the establishment of the Air Force, the creed has embodied the guiding principles of the Air Force NCO, and this should never change. Each one of us should continue to build on the proud heritage that NCOs left us, beginning when the Air Force was established on that proud day on the 18th of September in 1947.

By:

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