

USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

THE CSM AND THE NCO SUPPORT CHANNEL

An Individual Study Project
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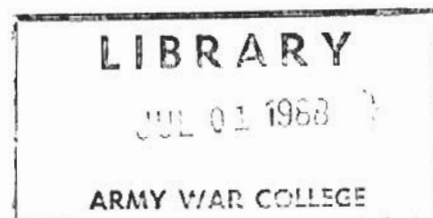
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ABSTRACT

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The command sergeant major is not only the senior noncommissioned officer of a unit, he is traditionally the most experienced and the premier role model for all noncommissioned officers and soldiers of the unit.

However, command sergeant majors are conditioned to function in a dual channel of communication - the chain of command and the noncommissioned officer support channel. Depending on the command sergeants' major interpretation of the purpose of the NCO support channel, there exists the very real potential for critical conflict, especially between the subordinate commanders of a unit and the CSM. This potential for conflict is exacerbated because the duties and responsibilities of the CSM are informally negotiated by him and the unit commander. Subordinate commanders complain that the CSM, in his role as the head of the NCO support channel, infringes on their duties and responsibilities by using the support channel as a conduit for orders.

Should the Army compose a general job description for the command sergeant major; and, is there a true necessity for a formalized NCO support channel? What can be done?

INTRODUCTION

In 1967, shortly after being commissioned a second lieutenant, I arrived at Fort Hood, Texas, for my first duty assignment.

I turned into the battalion headquarters parking lot and guided my car into the first empty space. That it was marked by a small wooden sign on which the letters "SGM" were stenciled had absolutely no significance to me. All I could think of was this was the beginning of a new adventure. I was going to be a tank platoon leader and surely, no job could be more important or prestigious in the entire United States Army.

I reported to the Adjutant, saluted smartly, resplendent in heavily starched fatigues and spit-polished Corcoran jump boots - the perfect image of the ideal officer. Life could be no better than this.

The Adjutant was obviously not as impressed. Politely, but matter-of-factly, he informed me that the battalion commander was with the division commander at the tank gunnery range observing a live-fire exercise. He instructed me to ride with the battalion sergeant major out to the range to meet them. The jeep would be departing in five minutes. After being dismissed, I exited the headquarters building and, in the parking lot, quickly met my first genuine battalion sergeant major.

I glimpsed him as he angrily strode around the perimeter of my car (his, the motor running, blocked my exit) cursing the

unknown owner. Possessing a modicum of intelligence I clearly fathomed that he was upset. I delayed my approach until he was standing by his car, his back to me, arms folded across his chest, staring at my shiny 1962 black Cadillac Coupe De Ville with its red leather interior.

"Sergeant Major, I'm Lieutenant McNulty and the Adjutant said I was to ride with you to the range to meet the battalion commander." I said this all in one breath.

He turned to see from where this strange voice came. And, when he saw this figure dressed in new fatigues and boots and wearing a small gold bar on a baseball cap, all his questions were answered. Here was the owner of that monstrosity in his parking place. I could see it in his face, and my heart began to pump slightly faster. I glanced at the driver of the jeep parked just a short distance away, a young private first-class. He was scrunched down in his seat desperately trying to suppress a guffaw. Both my self-confidence and aura of self-importance began to waver. "Who and what was this man with the shoulders full of stripes? After all, I outranked him, didn't I? What do I do if he criticizes me for parking in his spot? Do I make him stand at attention if he speaks harshly to me? Yes, that's how I'll handle it."

But what may have been in the battalion sergeant's major eyes and mind did not evidence itself in his voice and demeanor. He saluted me smartly and offered me his hand in welcome. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, and relieved that there had been no confrontation, I turned to walk toward the jeep.

"Lieutenant, that sure is a big and handsome car. I wish I could afford one. Do you mind moving it out of my parking space?"

He spoke quietly so only I could hear. And, I quickly moved the car to a slot marked for visitors.

Still nonplussed, I briskly returned to the jeep and jumped in the back seat. Smiling with his eyes and mouth, the battalion sergeant major softly said, "Front seat, Lieutenant." The driver, stone-faced and staring straight ahead, gripped the wheel waiting for the command to proceed. I still had enough presence of mind to give it.

As we drove along the dusty road toward the range the sergeant major, sensitive that he might have ruffled my composure, talked to me about the battalion. In the course of that conversation he commented that his duties and responsibilities encompassed anything the battalion commander wanted him to do. There were no other written directives, just that pact between the two of them. I wondered then, even as a second lieutenant, how subordinate commanders and staff determined just what this pact between the battalion commander and sergeant major entailed. It seemed to me that a thorough understanding of the sergeant's major responsibilities was necessary to avoid needless conflict in responsibilities for the daily operations of the unit.

In 1984, I got my turn as a squadron commander. Seventeen years had passed and there had been little, if any, change. The duties and responsibilities of the now "command sergeant major"

were still primarily decided by the pact between the commander and him. And the potential for, as well as, actual conflicts of responsibilities still existed among the subordinate commanders and the staff, and the command sergeant major. These conflicts arose in the form of "turf" battles over training, soldier care, soldier details (from police to staff assignments), and more subtly, to whom the first sergeants and other senior NCO's actually responded - the CSM or the subordinate unit commander. These types of conflicts occasionally became extremely heated; and, relationship perceptions between officer and NCO were critically or irreparably strained. For each sometimes viewed the other as an interfering factor in the performance and successful completion of their duties; and, each believed they had been specifically charged with the primary responsibility to train, care, and lead the young soldiers in the unit.

So, who is at fault? Does it matter who is to blame? And so what if these officer/NCO conflicts are largely caused by misperception of duties and responsibilities, bias, or misunderstandings? Does that really matter? Are these conflicts just a minor irritant to be tolerated as part of normal daily operations, or are they warning signs of deeper problems affecting the bond of cooperation between the officer and noncommissioned corps? Whatever the answer, this is not the best way to accomplish business.

Consequently, it does matter that we examine the sources of dissension between the officer and NCO. Does conflict really

exist? Consider some of the results of a recent opinion survey (March 1988) of Sergeants Major Course attendees (E8, E8(P), and E9) at Fort Bliss, Texas.¹ And, keep in mind that these men and women are the best and brightest of our noncommissioned officer corps.

- ° Over 70 percent believe that officers are too busy worrying about their careers to be concerned about enlisted soldiers.

- ° Over 60 percent believe that officers are even slightly loyal to enlisted soldiers.

- ° Over 90 percent believe that, at best, officers are only moderately worthy role models for junior NCO's. And, over 20 percent of those feel the officer is not a worthy role model at all.

- ° Over 50 percent believe that officers are poor listeners, insensitive, intolerant, poor trainers, workaholics, worriers, talkers, strong-willed, and poor mentors.

Is it any wonder the noncommissioned officers believe that it is primarily their responsibility to train, care, and lead the young enlisted soldiers? What has caused and how can we correct this officer/NCO breach?

CAUSATIVE FACTORS

Five causes may be exacerbating these officer/NCO conflicts: first, the formalization of the NCO support channel in AR 600-20; second, the Army's neglect to define the basic duties of a

command sergeant major in a formal job description; third, the Army's policy of permanent appointment to the rank of command sergeant major; fourth, the neglect of the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy to adequately teach the responsibilities of the CSM in battalions, brigades and divisions as a part of formal program of instruction; and, fifth, the neglect to teach the officer corps what is the purpose of the Command Sergeants Major Program. These five faults have had a profound influence on unit effectiveness.

THE NCO SUPPORT CHANNEL

"The battalion NCO support channel begins with the command sergeant major (SGM) and ends with the squad/section chief or team leader."²

With the formalization of the NCO support channel in 1977 in AR 600-20, the Army may have unintentionally created a de-facto second chain of command. At its head is the command sergeant major. It is from him that the activities of the unit's NCO support channel emanate.³ Depending on his tactical and technical competence, personality, leadership style and ability, and particularly his understanding of his duties and responsibilities, the command sergeant major is the guiding force of what the NCO support channel is supposed to accomplish and how it is supposed to function. Armed with this authority to direct the functions of the NCO support channel, a command sergeant major can be either a great help or hindrance to unit readiness, esprit-de-corps, morale and unit professionalism. The operations of the

NCO support channel within a unit will logically reflect the personality of the CSM and, if he has not had good experiences with the officer corps, his feelings will be evident in the way the NCO support channel functions. And it would be wrong to blame the CSM for conflicts between the chain of command and the NCO support channel. It is just not that simple. And, very rarely, is there a problem with the competence of a command sergeant major. The selection process for appointment to this position is one of the most rigorous in existence. The selection board consistently emphasizes that extensive experience in leadership positions is a primary prerequisite for consideration and appointment.

The causes of most conflict within the chain of command may stem from a misunderstanding of the difference between the chain of command and the noncommissioned officer support channel.

Consider AR 600-20 and its definitions of the chain of command and the noncommissioned officer support channel.

"[The chain of command]...is the succession of commanders, superior to subordinate, through which command is exercised. It extends from the President...down through the various grades of rank, to the enlisted persons leading the smallest Army elements."⁴

The regulation unequivocally states that the chain of command is the Army's most important organizational technique.

In describing the noncommissioned officer support channel, AR 600-20 states it "is responsible for supporting the chain of command and assisting in the accomplishment" of a number of

important tasks.⁵ The tasks identified are quite specific - administering NCODP, maintaining the professional standards of the NCO corps, taking care of military equipment and facilities, supervising the military appearance and courtesy of enlisted personnel, and the training and caring of individual soldiers, to include caring for their families. Nowhere does AR 600-20 say that the NCO support channel is a conduit for the issuance of orders. Whereas AR 600-20 is very specific in defining the chain of command, it fails to do the same when defining the purpose of the NCO support channel. "Supporting" the chain of command and "assisting" in the accomplishment of important tasks leave the door wide-open for interpretation of the NCO support channel's purpose. And, if the beliefs of a cross-section of our most distinguished NCO's of USASMA are indicative of the NCO corps, then we must assume that they view the NCO support channel as a more effective conduit to accomplish their duties and take care of their soldiers.

The Army Noncommissioned Officer Guide, FM 22-600-20, is an excellent manual in generally describing the duties and responsibilities of the noncommissioned officer. The proponent organization for this FM is the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy. The FM was written by Academy senior NCO's and the final draft was approved by the Academy command sergeant major. No officer assigned to the Academy participated in the FM's preparation. The final draft of the FM was approved for publication after review by the SMA and the CSM's of FORSCOM, TRADOC, and

Combined Arms Center at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas.⁶ Consider the following extracts as they pertain to the descriptions of the chain of command and the noncommissioned officer support channel, and the duties and responsibilities of the noncommissioned officer.

"Another source of your authority stems from the combination of the chain of command and the NCO support channel. Orders and policies passed through the chain of command and the NCO support channel automatically provide the authority to get the job done."⁷

"In addition to passing information, this channel is used for issuing orders and getting routine but important jobs done."⁸

"The chain of command backs up the NCO support channel by legally punishing those who challenge the NCO's authority."⁹

AR 600-20 does not mention the word "orders" in its definition of the NCO support channel and explicitly states that the support channel is responsible for "supporting the chain of command, not vice-versa.

There must be only one simple and direct channel for sending orders from the highest to the lowest level of command. One simple and direct channel saves time and minimizes the possibility of misinterpretation of aim or intention. If the chain of command is working properly there is no need for a formal NCO support channel. Its responsibilities and tasks, as described in AR 600-20, are also inherent responsibilities and tasks of the chain of command as outlined in the same AR. Everyone who is a part of the NCO support channel is also a part of the chain of command (or staff or technical channels) with one notable exception - the command sergeant major.

JUST WHAT DOES THE CSM DO?

Sergeants Major are not new. The position existed even in the Revolutionary War. The Baron Frederick W. Von Steuben wrote that they were the NCO's who should overwatch and be responsible for the behavior and conduct of all enlisted soldiers. He also stipulated they (SGM's) be responsible for discipline, rosters and details, attend parades involving the battalion, and assist the adjutant.¹⁰

In today's army what does a command sergeant major do? What do we want him to do? Why can't we formally articulate the general duties and responsibilities (in other words, a job description) for the command sergeant major? The modern army has been struggling with these questions for years, and it is unfair to our most distinguished NCO's that we neglect to do so. We put the unfair burden on his shoulders to be constantly negotiating his duties.

In July 1967, General Harold K. Johnson, then the Chief of Staff of the Army, signed an order establishing the command sergeant major program for the purpose of improving the prestige and effectiveness of sergeants major filling the senior enlisted slots from battalion up through major command. In 1969 the first CSM chevrons were pinned on 192 sergeants major who were already serving as the top enlisted soldiers in their units. Since that time more than 5,000 soldiers have been appointed to the rank of CSM.¹¹ In that same interview, former SMA Leon L. Van Autreve commented that the CSM program was established "with little

understanding of what it should do. There was no definitive word to indicate the difference between CSM and sergeant major," he said.¹²

Former SMA William G. Bainbridge, in the same article, said establishing the CSM program was "significant" because it added a title to the NCO rank structure that specifically recognized the Army's "most experienced senior NCO's."¹³

The CSM billets have expanded dramatically from the original 192 unit appointments. Expansion has occurred primarily in the administrative commands and agencies. Whereas the CSM would most likely be found in the corps down to the battalion level, more and more administrative positions have been designated as CSM rather than SGM positions.

AR 614-200 (Selection of Enlisted Soldiers for Training and Advancement) states that the establishment of a CSM position is appropriate only if: (1) "the incumbent is to be the principal enlisted assistant to the commander in an organization with an enlisted troop strength equal to a battalion or higher," (2) "commanded by a lieutenant colonel (05) or above." "The TDA equivalent of a battalion is an organization commanded by an 05 or higher and the commander has authority over 300 or more enlisted soldiers." "Enlisted soldiers under the commander's authority will include those authorized by TDA and MTOE of subordinate units in the official chain of command and assigned students, transients, trainees, and patients."¹⁴ Conversion of these positions has created the situation that of the approximate

4,500 E9's on active duty, almost 1,400 are serving in CSM positions.¹⁵ U.S. Army major active land combat units account for less than one-half of all these positions.¹⁶

If CSM positions were primarily located within major active land combat units, the job of establishing a general job description would not be so overwhelming. But as former SMA Van Autreve said, the Army established the CSM program "with little understanding of what it should do." In order for the Army to eliminate confusion of responsibilities within the chain of command it must, in conjunction with the deformatization of the noncommissioned officer support channel, establish a job description for the command sergeant major. This cannot be done, however, unless there is a serious review and consideration given to reducing the number of CSM positions within the Army. There are too many designated positions which require primarily staff sergeants major administrative and technical experience rather than generalist leadership capability. The spirit and intent of the CSM program seems to have been lost. The CSM was to be the senior NCO at battalion level or higher (higher meaning brigade, division, corps, army). If the CSM program can be reoriented, then the general duties and responsibilities can be better and more clearly defined.

The CSM is the individual the commander wants to carry out NCO policies and standards within the unit. The CSM should be the man who ensures that the NCO's are doing what they're supposed to do to train, discipline, and care for young soldiers.

But it is also the subordinate commander's responsibility to ensure his unit carries out the policies and meets the standards of his higher headquarters and the Army. Nothing causes more confusion and conflict than when the subordinate commander and the CSM both see themselves as the one in charge of making this happen.

In three years of serving on an exchange assignment with the British Army, I never saw or heard of a conflict of interests on duties and responsibilities between a British officer and the regimental sergeant major. Three hundred years of fine-tuning and tradition have very effectively defined the duties of both. The U.S. Army inadequately investigated the British system before establishing the CSM program. It is not that our English cousins have all the answers, it is just unwise for us to think that they don't have any.

A British noncommissioned officer, even comparing similar ranks, has more responsibility and authority than his American counterpart.¹⁷ The warrant officers (E8/E9 equivalent) and sergeants (E5-E7 equivalent) handle 98 percent of the regiments' daily operations when in garrison. This includes all training up to the crew/squad level. When this level training is being conducted, any officer who is a member of a crew (such as a tank's) is present for and participating in the training as a member of the crew and not in a supervisory position. The sergeant is instructing the crews and the officer is solely present in the role of a crew member. It is rare we see this occur in the U.S.

Army. If the British NCO is not competent in his instruction, the regimental sergeant major sees to the problem - not an officer.

Frequently, no officers are present during the conduct of certain training. This is fully accepted and expected by the British NCO's because training individual soldiers is an NCO's responsibility. The U.S. Army must learn to give commensurate responsibility to its NCOs. A word of caution, however, is necessary. In the British Army, what goes on the training schedule is decided by the squadron leader/company commander.¹⁸ Regimental/battalion-level staff imposes very little direction over individual, crew or squad level training. Regimental staff only becomes involved in the coordination of facilities and resources needed by the subordinate units to conduct training.¹⁹ The crew and squad training system works well with a minimum of officer intervention.

Since training is a normal everyday occurrence, the regimental sergeant major rarely becomes involved in it, nor does he normally inspect training. That would be considered interfering in the squadron leader's/company commander's responsibilities. This is not to say he is not aware of what is going on because he makes it his duty to always be fully informed. What if a noncommissioned officer is not cutting it as an instructor? It is the squadron sergeant major (first sergeant) who will bring it to the attention of the RSM, quietly and informally. And, after duty hours, probably in the Warrant Officers and Sergeants Mess, the

RSM will begin to resolve the problem. This way subordinate commander-sergeant major conflicts of responsibility are kept to the absolute minimum.

The influence of the British regimental sergeant major on the quality of training is just as effective as what we wish the command sergeant major to have in the United States Army. The difference is in the protocol followed. Are the British RSM's duties and responsibilities formally described in writing? No, they are not. But, the RSM's know what it is they are supposed to do. That may sound paradoxical but it's not unusual when you consider the British loathing for formal written directives. Great Britain is one of the great democracies of the world although it has no written constitution or bill of rights. Yet, they get the job done and they do it quite well. The NCO support channel exists in the British Army and is stronger than its U.S. Army counterpart. That it is informal in no way diffuses the influence of the RSM or the support channel effectiveness.

THE PERMANENT WREATH

The U.S. Army appoints senior noncommissioned officers to the rank of CSM permanently. Unless he fouls up royally, or requests removal from the program, a CSM is appointed for the remainder of his military career.²⁰ Long ago we learned in the Army that it was not wise to do that with officers. Green tabs go on and come off. One day an officer is a commander, next day he's a staff officer, regardless of whether he's a captain, a

colonel, or a general. The same should be the case of the rank of command sergeant major. It is unwise for the U.S. Army to espouse two opposing rationales for command designated positions. For the officer, command is a temporal responsibility. At some determined time he is required to pass the colors to another. Even the specific tenure of command has been a subject of great study and debate - eighteen months, thirty, thirty-six, and now approximately twenty-four months. The debates pertaining to the ideal length of a command tour have been based on the period of a commander's optimum effectiveness to his unit. The Army was wise to realize that the strains of command are real, psychologically, on both the unit and the commander. Another major consideration was to provide as many qualified and deserving officers as possible the opportunity to command.

So, if we believe this is the best system for the officers' corps, why not the same for command sergeants major? Under present policy, a CSM can only be assigned to CSM-designated positions.²¹ Consequently, in order to allow for new CSM's to be given battalion positions, the CSM-designated billets have greatly expanded above the Corps level. Now, there are poor, average, above-average and outstanding sergeants major, the same as for battalion commanders. As with battalion commanders, where we advance only the outstanding, command sergeants major should only be given subsequent command designated positions if they have proven to be outstanding. We do not presently follow this policy. A CSM has career tenure and this is a critical mistake.

There are not sufficient or justifiable reasons to continue this career tenure policy. The average or below average command sergeant major has no incentive to improve his abilities because he cannot be penalized for meeting only minimum standards in the performance of his duties.

As long as AR 614-200 requires that all members of the command sergeant major program be assigned only to positions that have been designated as CSM positions this cannot be done.²² By changing the policy to allow lateral assignments of CSM's to staff positions the Army will actually strengthen the CSM program by ensuring that only the most highly qualified are wearing the wreath.

PREPARING FOR THE JOB

In 1972, the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy was established. The purpose of the Sergeants Major Course was:

"To provide a program of study to prepare selected noncommissioned officers for positions of greater responsibility throughout the Defense establishment."²³

The Army has recently made graduation from the Sergeants Major Academy a requirement for appointment to command sergeant major. In November 1987 the Academy's new educational complex opened, greatly expanding student capacity. Annual student enrollment will double from 500 to approximately 930. The majority of students are not combat arms MOS's. With the doubling of students, the Army is now considering that graduation from the Academy will be a requirement for promotion to sergeant major.²⁴

But the scope of the Sergeants Major Course has evolved far beyond what was originally intended. The POI is now designed to be generic in nature. The program of instruction is:

"...designed to prepare Master Sergeants and Sergeants Major for positions of responsibility throughout the Defense establishment. Major subject areas include Leadership, National Security Affairs, Resource Management, Military Studies, Research Projects, Physical Training and Appearance, Professional Development, and a College Electives Program. Emphasis throughout the course is on the assigned and inherent duties, responsibilities, and authority of the senior noncommissioned officer in today's Army."²⁵

Nowhere in the POI are the duties and responsibilities of the noncommissioned officer on the battalion to the corps-level taught - the levels where command sergeants major can and should exert their greatest influence in the Army. In fact, the educational objectives of the Sergeants Major Course, as directed by AR 351-1, are

- update the students on contemporary Army problems
- improve communication skills
- develop intellectual depth and analytical ability, and
- enhance the students' understanding of resource management.

THE OFFICER CORPS

Constant, unrelenting emphasis and use of the chain of command is absolutely essential to the success of any Army unit. Operational readiness requires that orders be given and obeyed in the shortest possible time and with the least possible chance of misinterpretation. Any conflict which dilutes the chain of

command's effectiveness has to be resolved. The role of the command sergeant major needs to be closely examined and his duties and responsibilities formalized. Concurrently, we need to reevaluate the necessity of a formalized noncommissioned support channel. At present, it may very well be counterproductive to the chain of command.

And, finally, in order to ensure that potential officer/noncommissioned officer conflicts of responsibility are kept to an absolute minimum, the Army must educate all officers as to the purpose of the command sergeant major program and the relationship between the chain of command and an informal NCO support channel. Many of the misunderstandings, misperceptions and conflicts could be eliminated if officers were knowledgeable of what a command sergeant major is supposed to do and how he can help in improving the function of the chain of command. This could very easily be accomplished within the officers' formal education system.

CONCLUSION

The command sergeant major and the entire noncommissioned officer corps are truly the "backbone" of the Army. However, clichéd that comment is does not lessen its pertinence. The command sergeant major and the NCO's are the executors of the Army's and its commanders' policies. Commanders must be ever vigilant to ensure that the command channel is allowed to "extend upward in the same manner for matters requiring official communication from subordinate to superior.²⁶

Officers must allow noncommissioned officers to use their full range of talents. The command sergeant major is the ideal individual to help make this happen. But, until the areas of conflict between the chain of command and the noncommissioned officer support channel are resolved, the potential is very great that the command sergeant major may be a primary hindrance in a unit's attaining optimum operational readiness.

I would hope that each of the five causative factors identified as possible contributors to officer/noncommissioned officer conflict would be subjected to intensive debate. Many may believe that I have been overly dramatic and "crying wolf" about the formalization of the NCO support channel creating a de-facto second chain of command. Many may also prefer that the duties and responsibilities of the CSM remain vague and a matter to be decided between the commander and the CSM. I would specifically hope that extensive and intensive debates would be conducted on the rationale for the policy of permanent appointment to the rank of CSM. This is a ludicrous policy which hurts the Army. I doubt that many would object to the adjustment of officer and noncommissioned officer education systems programs of instruction to more adequately teach the responsibilities of the command sergeant major program, though I consider it critical that it be added to POI's.

Officers and noncommissioned officers need each other. Our duties and responsibilities in this "profession of arms" demand we be in concert in order to succeed. But the officer/NCO bond has been weakened and the causes of that weakening must be addressed now.