



## MILITARY INTELLIGENCE NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICER PERFORMANCE: STRENGTHENING THE CORE

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### **“Sergeant, Paint the Flagpole”**

I begin with the punchline of a joke: The [Officer Candidate School] OCS graduate second lieutenant turns to the platoon sergeant and says, “Sergeant, paint the flagpole.” The entire joke, which I will spare you from reading here, is often misused to demonstrate the stereotypical differences in lieutenants from three U.S. Army commissioning sources—U.S. Army Military Academy, Reserve Officer Training Corps, and OCS. What is not immediately apparent from the punchline is the confidence the OCS graduate has in the sergeant’s knowledge and proficiency to accomplish the task. The unstated expectation is that the sergeant will not paint the flagpole alone. The second lieutenant knows the noncommissioned officer (NCO) will assign the task to, and supervise, a team of Soldiers, not only to complete the task but also to complete it to standard. A standard that includes ensuring the Soldiers are properly equipped, the team is properly trained, the task has been rehearsed, and the mission is accomplished in accordance with all appropriate regulations, policies, safety measures, and Soldier welfare considerations. The NCO will ensure a prompt, high-quality result.

Expecting the task to be done correctly by simply putting an NCO in charge exemplifies the adage that the NCO Corps

is the backbone of the Army. This theme appears throughout Army doctrine, including the foreword to TC 7-22.7, *The Noncommissioned Officer Guide*, where the Sergeant Major of the Army Michael Grinston writes, “Throughout the history of the U.S. Army, the NCO has been its backbone.”<sup>1</sup> The adage is also in the preface to TC 7-22.7: “You are ‘The Backbone of the Army.’”<sup>2</sup>

### **The Backbone**

I hope you’re picking up on the not too subtle message that reading, or at least skimming through, *The Noncommissioned Officer Guide* is worthwhile. All Army professionals, including Army Civilians, should read it to understand the importance of the NCO’s role in preparing to fight, and win, any engagement with any current or emerging near-peer threat. The guide also includes a description of the relationship between officers and NCOs and between Army Civilians and NCOs.<sup>3</sup>

Here is another quote from the guide: “The NCO corps is the vanguard for leading and training Soldiers at the crew, team, squad, section, and platoon level. Focusing on the basics with tough, realistic combat training, will ensure that in the crucible of ground combat, our Soldiers will be

victorious.”<sup>4</sup> Also, “NCOs are trainers.”<sup>5</sup> The NCO’s role in training used to be one of the Army’s seven principles of training; now the role is the first of four principles—*train as you fight*.<sup>6</sup> NCOs are directly responsible for training individual Soldiers, crews, and small teams.

### Don’t Diminish the Role of the NCO in Training

I (over) emphasize doctrine to provide the context necessary to indicate the severity of a report compiled by the Lessons Learned Team at the U.S. Army Intelligence Center of Excellence (USAICoE)—*Observed MI NCO Challenges 2019–2020*. The report cites areas of concern that relate to NCO training. We must apply doctrinal tenets, principles, and intent; otherwise, we risk dismissing these challenges if we assume the actions of others (officers, Army Civilians, or contractors) are sufficiently addressing deficiencies. However, it is fundamentally wrong to diminish the role of the NCO in training, no matter how slight or temporary that role may be.

It has been a long time since I served as an NCO; yet I struggle with a bit of misophonia whenever I hear an NCO seeking to have an “outsider” meet a training objective that the NCO is capable of accomplishing. Every major Army installation or joint base has a variety of differing and various training resources to assist NCOs in serving as their organization’s primary trainer. Too often, these resources are perceived as surrogate trainers or the primary training provider. The same problem occurs with mobile training teams staffed by Army Civilians or contractors, or a mix of both. This isn’t my opinion; it’s what NCOs have told us, the USAICoE Lessons Learned Team, over the past 18 to 24 months.

### NCOs Relinquished the Role as the Primary Trainer

As difficult as it is to read or hear, it was easy to understand how the condition developed. An oversimplification of the situation is to state that officers, warrant officers, and advanced individual training (AIT) Soldiers received more emphasis on the combined arms maneuver aspects of intelligence schoolhouse training. While certainly true, additional factors emerged when discussing the military intelligence (MI) NCOs’ challenges.

In the tactical formations, MI NCOs found it difficult to synchronize the training of MI Soldiers distributed among

differing organizations. The locations of MI Soldiers in the current brigade combat team’s (BCT’s) organizational structure added complexity when operating in garrison or the field. Some units are able to overcome these difficulties when the BCT S-2 operates as the senior intelligence officer for the entire MI complement within the BCT formation. That’s a good start. We’re confident a trained, skilled, and able officer will fill every BCT S-2 position. Is the BCT S-2 intelligence master sergeant (military occupational specialty [MOS] 35Z, Intelligence Senior Sergeant) position always filled by an MI master sergeant? How often does the BCT senior intelligence sergeant (an infantry sergeant first class position) serve as the BCT S-2 section senior NCO? What about the differing sections of the BCT S-2 cell or the MI company when combined to form the brigade intelligence support element? Does the senior geospatial intelligence cell NCO hold an MI or engineer MOS? Our NCOs tell us that the current BCT organizational structure does not make it easy for them to train Soldiers.

NCOs also shared that they believed they did not have to concentrate on being, or even seek to become, the unit’s primary trainer because of their (self-admitted) overreliance on high-quality external training resources available from functional training, Foundry, and U.S. Army Forces Command. Why try to do something someone else is able to provide?

#### The Army’s Principles of Training

- ◆ Train as you fight.
- ◆ Train to standard.
- ◆ Train to sustain.
- ◆ Train to maintain.<sup>7</sup>

#### Want to Learn a New Word? *Misophonia*

*misophonia*: a condition in which one or more common sounds (such as the ticking of a clock, the hum of a fluorescent light, or the chewing or breathing of another person) cause an atypical emotional response (such as disgust, distress, panic, or anger) in the affected person hearing the sound.<sup>8</sup>

### Tactical and Technical Proficiency Shifts

The NCO hallmark of tactical and technical proficiency has shifted to—

- ◆ Company grade commissioned officers as the tactical experts.
- ◆ Warrant officers as the technical experts.

**Combined Arms Maneuver Tactical Proficiency.** This NCO challenge may result from an unintended consequence of a best practice. We have watched the improvement in MI commissioned officer training and proficiency in combined arms maneuver as the institution emphasized large-scale ground combat operations.

Over the past several years, the Army revised its training in large-scale ground combat operations for MI enlisted, lieutenants, and captains to provide multiple iterations of practical exercises, producing competent and confident

graduates. We have observed, and NCOs have shared, the problems NCOs face in achieving the same degree of currency and proficiency as their officer and junior Soldiers in conducting intelligence task performance for large-scale ground combat operations. Too often, we have seen MI captains, instead of NCOs, leading teams in building intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) products used in the tactical-level military decision-making process and targeting. I'll describe the impact of this condition later, but first I want to emphasize that every MI NCO we have encountered does not willingly accept the status quo. The overwhelming response is clearly stated. As an MI company staff sergeant confided to us, **"I've failed as an NCO when an officer has to do my job."**

**MI Technical Proficiency.** MI warrant officers step in to fill the role as the technical experts. Often, this includes performing as the intelligence discipline primary trainer, thereby abandoning the expectation of warrant officers to advise, oversee, and guide NCOs in delivering training. Some warrant officers revealed it is sometimes difficult to avoid reverting to NCO functions when operating under time-compressed deployment schedules. Both warrant officers and NCOs occasionally state the self-fulfilling prophecy of NCOs not having enough time to become proficient in training their subordinates. Yet, NCOs also report they avoid attending Soldier training sessions to prevent exposing their lack of familiarity with intelligence support to combined arms maneuver tasks.

security. Their confidence stems from familiarity and experience gained through multiple combat deployments. NCOs are proficient in information collection for wide area security, targeting, intelligence architectures, and combined operations, as well as simultaneously operating in multiple domains. However, they recognize a disparity in knowledge of, or performance in, near-peer threat order of battle factors.

When NCOs attended institutional AIT, they recall focusing on the most probable and lethal area of operations that did not involve any near-peer threat forces—Iraq and Afghanistan. When, or even if, combined arms maneuver factors were trained to current NCOs during their AIT more than a few years ago, many NCOs do not recall several aspects of that training. For example, the importance of vehicle identification; aggregating and disaggregating of enemy tactical formations; combined arms maneuver tactics, terminology, and indicators; organic information collection/reconnaissance and surveillance capabilities; or tactical intelligence and communications architectures. The NCOs we have encountered at Fort Irwin, California, reveal their surprise at the speed, distances, and lethality (number of simulated casualties) experienced during a National Training Center (NTC) rotation. Many state that the realistic training conditions at NTC are not (cannot be) replicated at home station training. The conditions in previous deployments are much different from the austere NTC tactical environment. They quickly notice the absence of infrastructure (such as

water, electricity, and facilities), readily available MI systems maintenance, sustainment of all types, and various types of contractor support.

### **Role of the MI NCO versus the Army NCO**

The final challenge is that "NCOs conduct the daily operations of the Army."<sup>9</sup> They are not going to sit around and do nothing while officers, warrant officers, and Soldiers attend to intelligence production tasks for combined arms maneuver. NCOs tell us that

if they are not employed in their respective intelligence discipline or team-leading roles, they will relegate themselves to performing generic NCO command post tasks. These may include ensuring electric power generators are fueled and operating seamlessly; ensuring physical, operations, and information security; coordinating Soldier welfare



U.S. Army photo

Leaders training leaders—every Soldier going through the 7<sup>th</sup> Army Noncommissioned Officer Academy's Basic Leaders Course training must work together in squads.

### **Reluctant to Admit a Lack of Expertise**

NCOs report their knowledge of large-scale ground combat operations is surpassed by recent graduates of USAICoE institutional training, particularly privates to specialists, warrant officers, and second lieutenants to captains. NCOs are confident in performing intelligence tasks for wide area



considerations (latrines, sleeping areas, subsistence, etc.); and performing other useful but generic tasks. Completing generic tasks is important; however, an insightful sergeant first class said that officers who allow NCOs to be diverted from their critical intelligence roles “deny NCOs the opportunity to grow.” The short-term gain of officers and privates building IPB products to get through an NTC rotation has a long-term effect. At the Army Lessons Learned Forum in January 2020, several general officers discussed trends at the combat training centers. An unidentified general officer made a comment when addressing the number of NCO challenges that each of the combat training centers had reported. He said, “We may be neglecting the very foundation of our Army’s strength.”

### Support the Backbone by Strengthening the Core

If you want to help heal an aching back, and avoid future backaches, strengthen your core. This is good advice from my physician’s assistant and gym rat (physical fitness advocate) colleagues. We can apply the same principle to strengthening the Army’s backbone. We can strengthen, and derive strength from, the core—in this case, the core leader competencies.

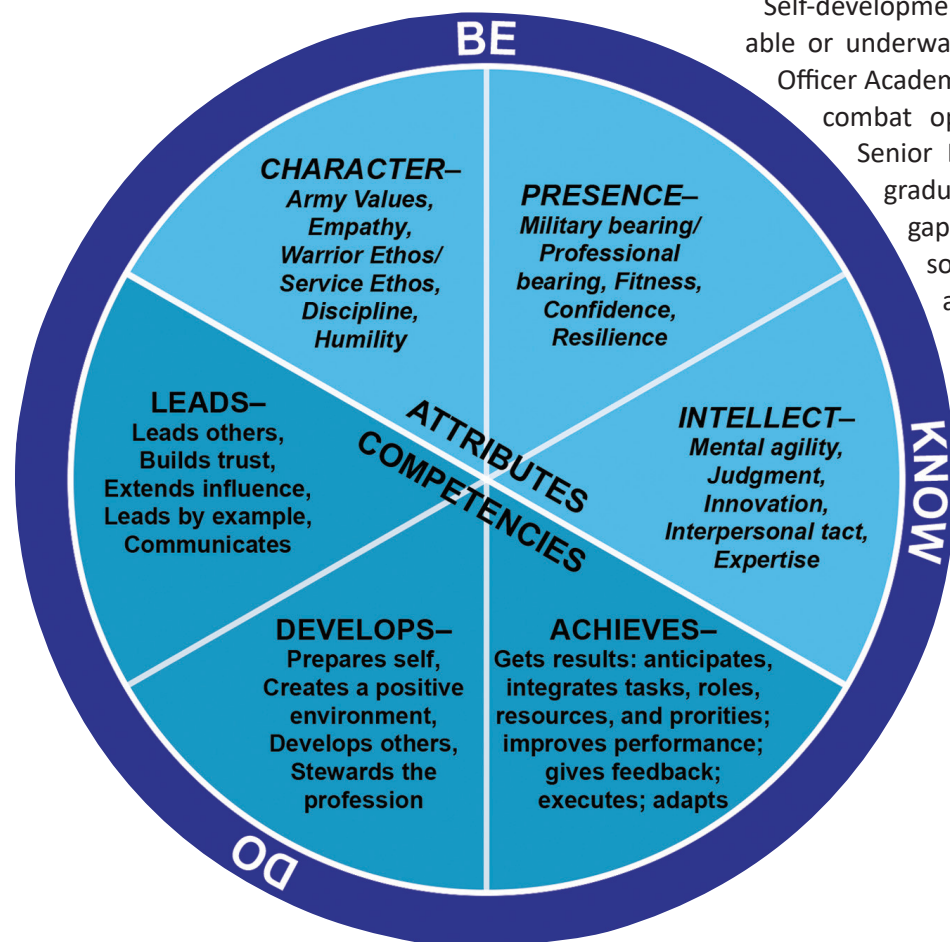
The most difficult yet immediately available solution is *self-development*. We have observed several MI NCOs at combat training center rotations or home station training exercises effectively and successfully lead teams of MI Soldiers in completing intelligence support to large-scale ground combat operations tasks. When asked how, or where, these NCOs had learned so much about large-scale ground combat operations’ combined arms maneuver, each one said it was intensive self-development—a desire to acquire the same level of knowledge and proficiency as their Soldiers in this area. Several NCOs sought guidance from their officers, from other NCOs, or from their own Soldiers. In each case, regardless of the source of instruction, the NCOs identified the importance of not being ashamed to tell their leaders they needed additional training or mentoring.

There is no such thing as tough. There is **trained and untrained**. Now which are you?

—John W. Creasy, portrayed by Denzel Washington in *Man on Fire*.<sup>11</sup>

Self-development is not the only resolution strategy available or underway. The Fort Huachuca Noncommissioned Officer Academy is emphasizing more large-scale ground combat operations content in its Advanced and Senior Leader Courses. Over time, as students graduate from these courses, the performance gap between enlisted, NCO, and officer personnel will narrow, reverting to a better alignment of knowledge and skills.


The USAICoE Lessons Learned Team is also seeking to increase its contacts and engagements with MI NCOs at combat training centers, at home station training, and throughout the operational environment to provide more rapid and direct feedback to those who train, develop training, and assess the training of NCOs. The USAICoE Lessons Learned Team is working with other elements involved in NCO training at the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, U.S. Army Forces Command, U.S. Army Intelligence and Security Command, and U.S. Army Cyber Center of Excellence to contribute to NCO leader development. Collaboration involves sharing observations, best practices, and the



The Army leadership requirements model<sup>10</sup>

commitment to focusing on NCO topics during at least one of the three monthly MI Lessons Learned Forum online sessions per calendar quarter.

## Conclusion

The U.S. Army NCO Corps' education, experience, commitment, and competence are unmatched by any other nation's military force. We hope to assist our NCOs in resuming their positions as primary trainers. An NCO trained me to be a Soldier, an NCO, an officer, and an Army Civilian. Now, as a key member of the USAICoE Lessons Learned Team and MI Lessons Learned Forum, I have the opportunity to help repay my debt to the Army's backbone! 

## Endnotes

1. Department of the Army, Training Circular (TC) 7-22.7, *The Noncommissioned Officer Guide* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 1 January 2020), foreword.

2. Ibid., v.

3. Ibid., 7-1–7-7.

4. Ibid., foreword.

5. Ibid., vi.

6. Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Publication 7-0, *Training* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 31 July 2019), 3-1.

7. Ibid.

8. Merriam-Webster, s.v. "misophonia (n.)," accessed 14 October 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/misophonia>.

9. Department of the Army, TC 7-22.7, *Noncommissioned Officer Guide*, vi.

10. Ibid., 3-3.

11. *Man on Fire*, directed by Tony Scott (Los Angeles, CA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2004) (emphasis added).

Check out the MI Professional Bulletin website at <https://www.ikn.army.mil/apps/MIPBW>.



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