

# SMA McKinney Launches

By SSG David Abrams

## Starting with

"No one is more professional than I," Gene McKinney recites the Creed of the Noncommissioned Officer from top to bottom. "All the answers are in there," he says. "It talks about how professional we should be, it talks about us being the backbone of the Army, it talks about NCO-officer relationships, it talks about integrity. It's an affirmation of how we do business."

McKinney challenges anyone to test him on the Creed. "Give me one word from anywhere in there and I'll be able to pick up and finish it out for you. That's how committed I am to the Creed."

Since becoming the 10th Sergeant Major of the Army on June 30, the 47-year-old native of Monticello, FL, wears his commitment to the NCO Corps on his sleeve, along with the nine service stripes and the recently redesigned SMA insignia.

"I think the Corps is the best it has ever been," he says. "I think it will get even better. We have a lot of young, smart NCOs who want to make a difference, who want their share of responsibility, who are willing to learn from their mistakes. I'm so proud to be a part of that."

On the eve of the 1995 Worldwide NCO Education System Conference, McKinney pauses between preparing his opening remarks and visiting trainees at Ft. Bliss' NCO Academy to talk about the challenges he faces at the top of the enlisted chain and about his vision for the future of the NCO Corps.

"One of the things I want to emphasize at this conference is that we need to ensure our NCOs are prepared for the 21st century and the challenges of Force XXI," he says while relaxing at his guest quarters. Even in repose, his six-foot, two-inch, broad-shouldered frame seems tensed for action. "Because of in-

creasing technology, we need to focus even more on leadership. I think we've tended to get a little separated from each other—nowadays, everybody's got their own little cubicle and computer terminal—but the one factor that pulls it all together is leadership."

As McKinney leads America's enlisted toward the challenging hurdles of Force XXI's battle-ready focus, he says there are some soldiers who are understandably resistant to sweeping changes. "As we assimilate Force XXI, we need to be more flexible, more efficient," he notes. "One of the things we must be willing to do is get rid of the excess baggage of old, traditional ways of thinking. If some of those ways are applicable, let's keep them; if not, let's drop them. We need to be critical and analytical in our thinking. If we can find a way to do something easier and still have it be effective, then of course that's the right way to do business."

**“Even at a young age I was leaning toward the green suit.”**

Take a look in McKinney's high school yearbook and, while his classmates listed their career goals as "Accountant," "Movie Star," or "Teacher," the future SMA wrote "Military."

"Even at a young age I was leaning toward the green suit," he says.

Soon after graduation, McKinney seized that goal by enlisting in the Army in 1968. He served a one-year tour in Vietnam, returned to Ft. Bragg, NC, made the grade of sergeant, then abruptly left the service. He'd gotten married and, since both he and his wife Wilhemina wanted to attend college it became, he says, "an affordability issue." Unable to foot the bill for both educations on

what the G.I. Bill provided at the time, McKinney came back into the Army. He'd been out of uniform for only 35 days.

"My mother had a lot to do with that decision," he says, his eyes twinkling behind wire-rimmed glasses. "She said, 'You've been to Vietnam, seen some of the hardest combat known to man, and they made you a sergeant. You've obviously done well for yourself in the service. Why leave it now?' It made perfect sense to me, so I came back in. At that point, I knew I wanted to make the military my career. I told everyone I was here to stay."

Twenty-seven years after first raising his right hand for the oath of enlistment, McKinney sits at the peak of the profession. He comes to the Pentagon from a three-and-a-half-year assignment as command sergeant major of the U.S. Army Europe and 7th Army in Heidelberg, Germany. Prior to that, he held CSM positions at 1st Armored Div and 8th Inf Div (Mechanized).

When asked if he ever imagined he'd be sitting behind the SMA desk when he was a teenager penning career goals in his yearbook, he shakes his head and says, "You can never see the full development of yourself down the road. But there's a certain distance you *can* see. I believe if you go as far as you can see and then get there, you'll be able to see a little bit farther and so on. I kept seeing myself in the position and grade one step above where I was at.

"It's not always as clear as you want it to be, but you can make it a lot clearer by just plugging away at your goal," he adds. "Persistence and determination. There's nothing in the world that can take the place of persistence. Talent won't, genius won't, education won't. If you're persistent and determined to keep going, you'll get there."

This is the message McKinney wants to bring to the soldiers he visits at units around the globe. He says he wants to

# Each Day With NCO Creed

especially reassure some of the younger, first-term soldiers that the job they're doing isn't going unnoticed and shouldn't go unrewarded.

"The level of responsibility in our young specialists and sergeants today is far different from that of their peers in the past. In Macedonia, I've seen sergeants manning observation posts, running patrols, preparing operations orders, taking care of logistics, cooking their own meals and pulling their own security—all this without an officer or senior NCO in sight. Our soldiers are working hard, doing things far above their level of experience and some of them are still not getting promoted like they should.

**“If we can find a way to do something easier and still have it be effective, then of course that's the right way to do business.”**

"I do have some concerns about local promotion boards," he adds. "Not necessarily in how the local boards select and promote, but in the larger retention and MOS-management issues of the system. We need to give soldiers more of an opportunity to get promoted. I'm not sure how to fix the local promotion situation, but I *am* looking very hard at that issue."

McKinney is a storyteller. Whether joking about the confusion that arises when he and twin brother James (also a CSM) are mistaken for each other or about the time he called home to his wife

and another man answered ("It turned out to be former SMA Kidd....I'd accidentally dialed his number!"), McKinney loves to spin a tale.

Right now, he's answering critics of the centralized promotion system. "When I hear people complaining about how the system is 'broken,' I tend to think that's only their perception," he says. "It's their lack of understanding how the board works.

"Let me tell you a story. There once was an older, experienced umpire and, during one particular ball game, every time he called something there was a guy up in the stands who'd yell 'It's a ball!' or 'It's a strike!'—just the opposite of what the ump had said. Finally, the official stopped the ball game and went up into the stands. 'How much money do you have on you?' he said to the fan. The fellow opened his wallet and showed the ump 10 one-dollar bills. 'That's what I've got, too,' said the ump. 'Now here's what we're gonna do: we'll line your dollar bills up on home plate and then we'll line my dollar bills up on home plate—that's 20 dollars neatly laid out on home plate—then, from where you're sitting in the stands, you read off the serial numbers on each one of the bills. Every one you can read, you can have and every one I can read I get to keep.' The fan protested, saying, 'No, no, you're too close.' The ump poked his finger at the guy and said, 'That's exactly my point—I'm closer to the issue.'"

McKinney sits back, pleased with his analogy. "So, when I hear soldiers say the promotion system is broken and that certain colleagues of theirs should never have been promoted, I tell them there are people behind home plate who are closer to the serial numbers. Everyone I know who's sat on the centralized promotion board has said they've been extremely fair and equitable in picking the right people."

The SMA is willing to discuss the matter with anyone. "I'm prepared to

address complaints and criticisms in any forum as long as the people are more specific on what they feel is 'broken' in the system."

When McKinney was a staff sergeant serving as a scout section leader in 3rd Squadron, 3rd ACR at Ft. Bliss, he met one of the most influential people in his career. Felix Helms was the first shirt for McKinney's unit and from the moment the future SMA set foot in the door, Helms saw the young soldier's potential.

**“I think the Corps is the best it's ever been. I think it will get even better.”**

McKinney smiles as he recalls Helms' mentorship. "The guy was tough as nails, but he always looked out for my best interests," he says. "One day he called me into his office and asked me to take over the communications section because, he said, they lacked leadership. I told him, 'First sergeant, I can barely spell communications let alone run the section with all its different radios and pieces of equipment.' His answer to me was: 'You're an outstanding leader and good leaders always find a way.'"

McKinney overcame his apprehension, working in the signal section for nearly a year before moving on to be scout section sergeant and then to platoon sergeant.

McKinney credits Helms' faith in his leadership ability for his success with that platoon. "He was always trying to teach me something," he recalls. "I'd be on my way out the front door for the day and he'd call me in and say, 'Come here, let me show you how to run a suspense file.' Or, maybe it was how to counsel or how to set up a duty roster. It doesn't

really matter. When you get down to it, it's not about what skills he taught me, it's the fact that he gave a damn about me."

As SMA, McKinney says he cares just as deeply about all the soldiers now under his purview.

"When I visit soldiers in the field, I want to absorb what's bothering them," he says.

These days, the "bothersome" issues increasingly center around quality of life—a blanket term which includes everything from the condition of military housing to the types of candy bars in Meals, Ready to Eat.

"What is quality of life? It's peace of mind," McKinney says. "The soldier asks himself, 'No matter how much sacrifice I have to make on the battlefield, what am I going home to when the fighting stops?' If a soldier is reasonably comfortable with the fact that he's going back to a decent environment, that his family's being cared for and that the issues which have come up while he's been away have been to some degree resolved, then he's going to do all he can out there on the front. That's not to say

**“I'm not sure how to fix the local promotion situation but I am looking very hard at that issue.”**

he won't give his all even if the quality of life isn't up to standard, but you have to understand that we're all human beings. Families are an important part of our lives. So, we have to balance soldiers being cared for and families being cared for."

In the past decade, the balancing act has gotten better. McKinney says great

strides have been taken toward improving quality of life for soldiers and families, but there are still more steps to be taken—especially in the treatment of single soldiers, he adds.

"We talk about all the great, smart, young men and women we have in the Army, but we still want to corral them up, put them in a cage and lock the door," he says, referring to lifestyle restrictions in the barracks and, occasionally, the workplace. "When you corral those young soldiers, you also corral their creative and innovative ways of thinking. If you treat a person the way you see them, they'll stay that way; but if you treat that person the way you *want* them to be, then chances are they'll change. In other words, if you see me as a lazy old bum, I'll stay that way; but if you see me as a mature, intelligent person who can go out and make a lot of things happen, then for the most part I'm not going to go out and disappoint you because I want to prove you right. Whichever way you push me, that's the way I'm going."

For the next 16 months, McKinney will be pushing himself as he embarks on a whirlwind, continent-hopping tour of Army installations. Though he'll still attend to important affairs at his Washington, DC, desk, his goal is to meet and greet as many soldiers as he can in as many places as he can as quickly as he can. The dust won't even have time to settle under his combat boots.

He wants to bring his message of faith in the NCO Corps to soldiers and officers at all levels.

As the SMA, McKinney also wants to act as a sounding board for legitimate grievances which may exist on the local level. He'll be looking for patterns of similar problems which may indicate a larger issue that needs to be addressed. The SMA's job, he notes, is like that of a funnel, channeling bona fide complaints and solutions to the top of the chain of command.

"At the same time, I don't want anyone to think this job has the authority to change anything," he cautions. "I *do* have the position and the location to influence things, but I *don't* make changes. I use factual information and, of course, some of it becomes emotional. It also goes without saying that I don't want to circumvent the local chain of command."

**“I didn't come into this job with any preconceived ideas that the Army's broken. Nor did I come in thinking the Army's all fixed. I came with an open mind.”**

Nonetheless, McKinney radiates an openness which makes it easy for even the lowest-ranking soldier to approach him with a great deal of respect yet very little fear.

"I've been in the foxhole my whole career—on the tanks, in the cold, in the heat," he tells one group of soldiers at Ft. Bliss. "I want to assure you, I won't forget where I came from."

"I didn't come into this job with any preconceived ideas that the Army's broken," he adds. "Nor did I come in thinking the Army's all fixed. I came with an open mind."

A mind, by the way, that is filled with the NCO Creed at the start of each day. ■

*Abrams is senior journalist for The NCO Journal.*