

Senior Enlisted Leaders Discuss Current Issues

Stories and photos by
SSG David Abrams

For three days, the voice of the NCO Corps was loud and clear during roundtable discussions at the Senior Enlisted Leadership Conference held at Ft. Bliss, TX. Twenty-one command sergeants major, sergeants major and military retirees representing the Army's major commands and organizations came together May 28-30 for briefings and emotionally-charged debates on enlisted issues ranging from promotions to barracks policies.

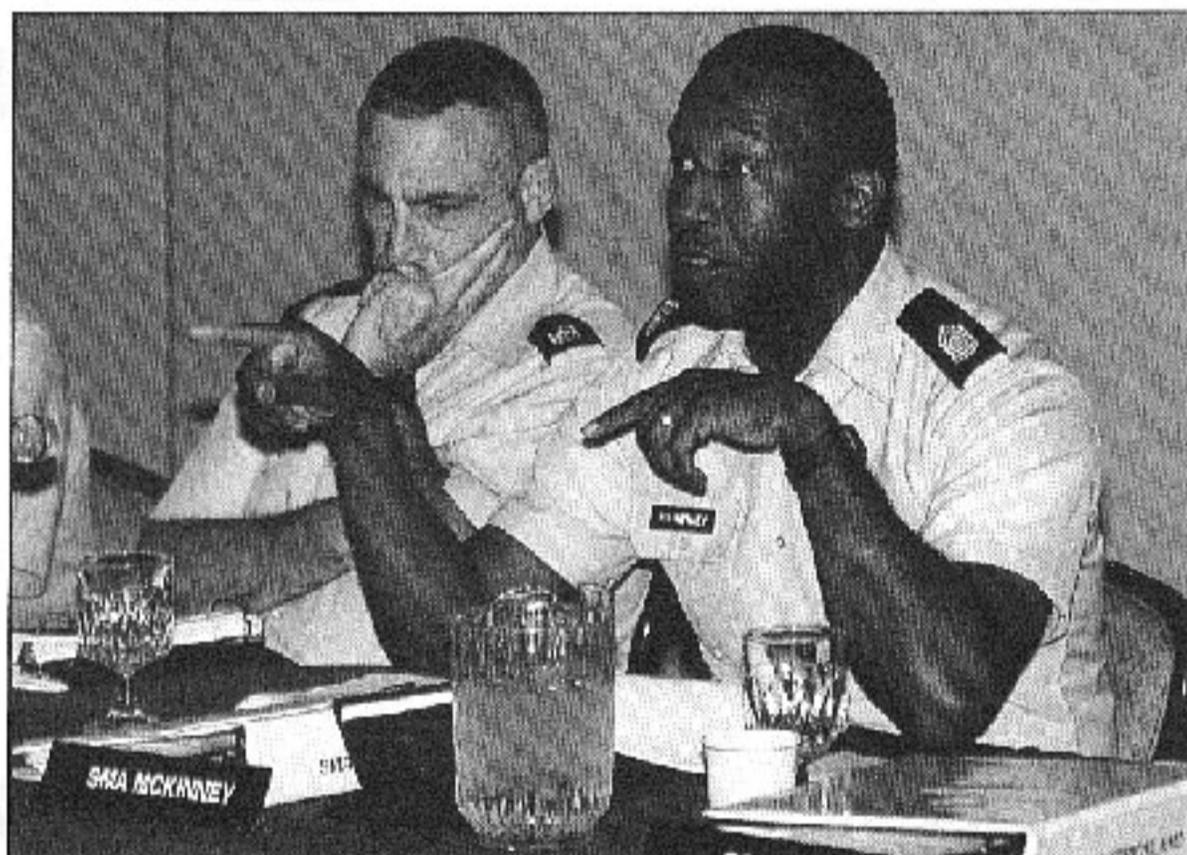
The purpose of the annual conference, said Sergeant Major of the Army Gene C. McKinney, was to "define NCO and enlisted issues, formulate them, then get them going in the right direction through the right channels."

McKinney, who chaired the conference, said he would like to start meeting with a smaller group of senior enlisted leaders every quarter, as well as coming together in the larger group once every six months to talk about top issues affecting enlisted soldiers. He encouraged the group to communicate more frequently with him via E-mail so that everyone could stay abreast of current enlisted affairs.

"The Army is changing every day," he said in an interview with *The NCO Journal*. "Our role as NCOs is getting broader. We, as senior leaders, need to come together to wrestle with the current and future issues which most affect our soldiers and their families. From here, we can take all the feedback we get at the conference back to the Army's decision makers. My philosophy has always been, if you want something to happen you need to start working on it five years in advance."

Most of the topics on the table during the conference, however, were at the forefront of most NCOs' minds today.

The following is a general look at the



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discussion swirling around the hot items at the conference:

APFT Requirement

Since 1995, when the Council of Sergeants Major recommended making the Army Physical Fitness Test an entrance requirement to Noncommissioned Officer Education System schools, the subject of the fitness test has been a hot one. Prior to last year, NCOES students took an APFT soon after arrival and those who failed were allowed to retest near the end of the course. If they passed the second test (and met all other course requirements) they were allowed to graduate. Current policy dictates, however, that all students take the APFT within 72 hours of arrival at school. Failures are dropped from the class and sent back to their units.

In speaking to the conference participants during a roundtable discussion, Army Chief of Staff GEN Dennis J.

Reimer said, "Overall, my feeling is to keep the policy in effect" — a statement that was met with universal agreement by the senior enlisted leaders in the room.

"I think we face a degradation of the NCO Corps if we let NCOs go through a course without passing the APFT," said CSM Larry D. Pence, command sergeant major of the Office of the Chief, National Guard.

In a March 8 message, Reimer directed that the current policy be kept in place.

NCOES Attendance

McKinney was adamant when it came to the practice of sending non-promotable soldiers to NCOES courses.

"I don't want another non-promotable in school," he told the sergeants major. "Period. End of discussion. I'm tired of it. Part of our problem with NCOES is that we're out there keeping

things alive just to keep them alive."

Barracks Policy

Some of the senior leaders felt soldiers living in barracks need a standard, general policy which would apply to all soldiers equally across the Army. While local commanders would retain control over their soldiers and barracks, those at the conference felt that additional guidance from higher levels would not be a bad thing.

"A soldier living under one barracks policy at Installation A should not have to PCS to Installation B where he gets in trouble for doing something that was perfectly OK at Installation A," said CSM Henry D. Bone of U.S. Army Special Operations Command. "It's just not fair to the soldier."

"We owe our soldiers some form of predictability and stability when it comes to barracks policies," McKinney agreed.

"When a soldier goes from post to post, he or she should expect to be treated the same way."

The Sergeant Major of the Army added that he is currently trying to come up with a different name than "barracks" for the single enlisted soldier living facility.

Extremism

McKinney was also emphatic on this issue: "We do not have an extremist problem in the Army."

He speaks with authority after having served on the recent Task Force on Extremist Activities, organized in the wake of the alleged racially-motivated slayings of two Fayetteville, NC, residents. Two Ft. Bragg soldiers were charged with the killings. A third soldier was charged with conspiracy to commit first-degree murder.

Consensus at the Senior Enlisted

Leadership Conference was that the three soldiers did not represent the military as a whole and that recent media reports may have blown the matter out of proportion.

However, Bone echoed the frustration of many NCOs concerning the limits of their authority when he said, "What if a sergeant comes across a soldier who has a Nazi flag hanging in his room and he suspects him of participating in extremist activities, but when he asks him to take it down that soldier says it's a souvenir his grandfather captured in World War II. What's an NCO to do in that case?"

Reimer said he understood the leaders' frustration and agreed the regulation is "ambiguous at best." He also condemned the alleged behavior of the three Ft. Bragg soldiers, saying they don't reflect general attitudes within the Army. "We're so small, we can't af-

"Our soldiers over there in Bosnia are doing us... proud."

*GEN Dennis J. Reimer,
U.S. Army Chief of Staff*

Fresh from a trip to the Bosnia theater of operations, Army Chief of Staff GEN Dennis J. Reimer had nothing but praise for the NCO Corps when he briefed a group of command sergeants major at the annual Senior Enlisted Leadership Conference May 29.

"Our soldiers over there in Bosnia are doing us all proud," he told the 21 leaders gathered around the conference table. "They all look good; no one's out of uniform. This kind of behavior is ingrained in them, it's second nature, and that's NCO leadership at its finest. It's a tribute to what you have done."

During the two hours he spent with the top enlisted leaders from the Army's major commands, Reimer spoke on a wide variety of topics affecting the enlisted population. However, it was the professionalism of NCOs in Bosnia that seemed to make the greatest impact.



"Every time I go to Bosnia, I'm tremendously impressed," Reimer said. "The quality of life is getting better on a daily basis. The food is improving and morale is high."

"There has been a lot of criticism of the no-alcohol policy," he added, "but looking at the safety record, I think it's the absolute right thing. There have been fewer accidents in Bosnia than there probably would have been if those units had stayed in Germany."

One issue that concerned Reimer was the high personnel tempo throughout the Army. "It's very hard

to define a matrix for PERSTEM-PO," he told those at the conference. "Right now, the average length of deployment for a soldier is 138 days. I've just said good-bye to some NCOs who were off on their seventh deployment since Operation Desert Storm. I feel we're deploying too many too much."

This can directly affect training, he added, citing one of the problems with military training is the "turbulence and lack of personnel — particularly in the middle-grade NCO ranks."

However, even as Army leaders deal with what Reimer called the "stresses and strains of the New World Order," one of the keys to operational success will always be those who wear the stripes. "The NCO Corps is what makes our Army different," he said. "We are the envy of every other army because of our NCOs. Everyone wants to know our secret, but I tell them it's really no secret. Our success lies in our people. There are no shortcuts — you can't make an NCO overnight. You must first have quality NCOs who are motivated to get the job done." ■

The drawdown has overall benefitted the NCO Corps

LTG Theodore G. Stroup Jr.

The ax has stopped chopping, the scissors have stopped snipping, the troop-cutters have stopped cutting troops...for now. That's the message the Army's top leaders gave to the sergeants major gathered at the recent Senior Enlisted Leadership Conference.

"The drawdown is now over, for all intents and purposes," said LTG Theodore G. Stroup Jr., the Army's deputy chief of staff for personnel. "Clearly, we have just come through a revolution."

While Stroup admitted he doesn't know what the future holds for the already slimmed-down Army, he said he is "constantly optimistic, always looking for the best."

The Army's budget has constrained NCO promotions to 98 percent, he said.



However, he added, the drawdown has overall benefitted the NCO Corps. "We wanted to have a much richer leadership mix in the Corps once the drawdown was over and I think we've accomplished that."

Earlier in the conference, Army Chief of Staff GEN Dennis J. Reimer told the assembled sergeants major, "There's a great debate going on over how many soldiers we need in the active Army today...I've argued that the Army's

as low as it needs to go right now."

Under this year's budget, the Army is scheduled to hold steady at 495,000 active-duty members in 10 divisions.

While the level of NCOs in 1986's Army stood at 42 percent of the force, today it is closer to 50 percent. By 2000, Reimer said senior leaders can expect that number to drop to 47.5 percent — the same percentage of NCOs in the Army during 1989.

"How we do that (reduce to that number) is going to be very complicated and will require an awful lot of effort," Reimer said. "We'll have to go back and look at unit tables of organization and equipment (TO&Es). We can't just salami-slice this."

During his hour-long briefing, Stroup tasked the sergeants major to be more vigilant on personnel data accuracy at their major commands. "We have data accuracy problems throughout the whole system."

"Readiness of the Army is an enlisted issue — not an officer issue, not an equipment issue. To have a trained and ready Army, you have to have the combat boots on the ground. And for that, NCO leadership is the key." ■

Senior Enlisted continued

ford to have bad apples," he said. "But bear in mind that we get the melting pot of America when recruits report to basic training. Our drill sergeants do a wonderful job of turning out professional soldiers and so I think we really need to invest in that NCO who's going to plant the seed in the first 72 hours of basic training. You can do a lot in that short amount of time."

Zero Defects

The concept of a perfection-driven, faultless Army sparked an animated conversation a few hours into the conference.

"Some NCOs think disagreement (with superiors) is disloyalty," said CSM Gilbert F. Pacz of Training and Doctrine Command. "But that's not necessarily so. Disagreement can sometimes be healthy."

From his side of the table, CSM Franklin D. Thomas from Southern

Command added his angle on the subject: "The notion of zero defects can sometimes be good because it helps us to better evaluate an individual. The Army has designed certain systems to show us whether a task was performed correctly or not."

Finally, Reimer provided his views on the subject by saying, "I want to develop young leaders who are willing to take risks. In this post-Cold War Army, we sometimes find ourselves in uncertain waters. We have to have people who aren't afraid to reach out their hands for fear they'll get those hands cut off."

Discussion on these and other issues remained lively and passionate throughout the entire conference.

However, if there was one topic that concerned McKinney the most it was the subject of promotions — specifically the amount of time it takes for soldiers to pin on their rank.

"Promotion is the catalyst that keeps soldiers alive and well," he said. "It's their measuring stick to show how well

they're doing against their peers. The slow rate of promotions has a profound effect on both soldiers and their families. The more I travel around the Army, the more I realize that soldiers aren't in it just for the money. Promotions are all about self-worth."

For at least one observer, the conference was an eye-opening experience. "I wish more people could see this," said SSG Joseph Lister, a court reporter with the Ft. Bliss Judge Advocate General who was recording the entire proceedings. "The perception from the junior enlisted ranks is that senior leaders are mainly worried about protecting their own interests and retirement benefits. But I think if a private sat in on this conference like I have, it would change his perception of the Army dramatically. It's not just what these sergeants major say, it's how they feel. You can see it in their eyes — they really care about helping all soldiers." ■

America's Army includes National Guard, Army Reserve, single soldiers, Department of the Army civilians, retirees and family members

While the top enlisted men from the Army's major commands were sitting around a conference table at the Senior Enlisted Leadership Conference, what may arguably be called the heart and soul of the gathering was meeting in the very next room. Here, 11 wives simultaneously discussed some of the same issues their husbands were debating at their roundtable.

Chaired by Wilhemina McKinney, the spouse group tackled issues like the Army Family Team Building program and the size of the average enlisted soldier's paycheck.

"One of our biggest concerns was defining what an Army team is," McKinney said. "The single soldier is part of that team, so is the National Guard, the Army Reserve, Department of the Army civilians, retirees and family members. When we talk about 'America's Army,' this is what we mean."

Those attending the spouse conference agreed the size of the monthly paycheck for "America's Army" is not what it should be.

"One aspect of the quality of life means your pay meets the standard of today's living," McKinney noted. "But for many enlisted soldiers, it's taking two paychecks to meet the standard of living. A lot of spouses feel they have to work even though they'd rather play a more active role in the Army family."

As a result, volunteering for Army organizations and programs suffers, she added. "I think more spouses would be involved with Army Community Services or AFTB if they didn't have to work just to keep up with expenses."

AFTB, initiated two years ago, is designed to educate families on the intricacies of Army life, starting with the first duty station and continuing through retirement. With three different levels of classes divided according to the spouse's military experience, family members can easily access the training at any point in their military career.

In a briefing to the spouse group, Army Chief of Staff GEN Dennis J. Reimer praised the success of AFTB as

well as other support he sees coming from the homefront. "We have sometimes not tapped into the talent that is sitting around this table," Reimer said. "You represent a lot of expertise and I assure you we won't do anything without getting input from people like you."

After briefing the spouse group on general Army topics like base closures, current military operations and Army mission statements, Reimer said it all boils down to one thing: taking care of soldiers. "Everything we do is done for our soldiers," he noted. "They're our core competency. The American people trust us with their most precious assets — their sons and daughters. All they ask is that we take care of them and train them right. That's a tremendous responsibility to put on your husbands' shoulders."

"However," he continued, "we have

to make sure that people realize that we can't so much make business decisions as we do decisions of the heart — especially when it comes to cutting programs and benefits. We'll continue to take care of people first, which may not always be the most cost-effective decisions, but we're going to do it anyway."

McKinney said she appreciated the Chief of Staff's concern for the Army family and said she plans to forward the after action report from the spouse conference to his office. Over the years, she said, she's learned that the Army family can make a difference, especially in quality of life issues. "Soldiers and family members must speak louder to those who are making the decisions," she said. "After all, if the family members aren't happy, then the soldiers aren't happy. Both team members must be happy if we want to have a successful Army." ■

USASMA Marks Milestone With SMC Class 46

By MSG Pete Durban

Two hundred senior noncommissioned officers set a new milestone for NCO formal education May 31 as they graduated from the first nine-month Sergeants Major Course at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, Ft. Bliss, TX.

The graduation ceremony at Biggs Army Airfield honored the graduates in front of an audience of more than 800 family members and friends. The guest speaker was Sergeant Major of the Army Gene C. McKinney.

Also graduating from the course were several Navy and Coast Guard senior NCOs, as well as international students from Botswana, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Japan, England, Canada, Singapore, Namibia, Brazil, Lebanon and Australia.

In his remarks, McKinney said, "I believe we are in a time of identity crisis...It's important to know

who we are and our responsibilities; before that, we must understand that our environment has changed and continues to change on a daily basis and maybe that's the reason for some of our loss of identity."

The Army's top enlisted soldier went on to urge the graduates to "think like your soldiers...I believe if we do that, then we are at the crossroad of having a better understanding of our operating environment and everyone's frame of reference. This will allow us to better guide our people to the successes of life."

Graduates of Class 46 were the first to attend the nine-month course. Previous classes graduated in six months.

The next class is scheduled to begin in August. Approximately 500 students are expected for Class 47. ■

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