

PROUD TO BE A SOLDIER

Command Sgt. Maj. Jeffrey J. Mellinger, the last draftee on continuous active duty service, reminisces and shares his thoughts on leadership, education and Army equipment

By Angela Simental

It was April 18, 1972, in Eugene, Ore., when 19-year-old Jeffrey J. Mellinger, a drywall hanger, came home to find a draft notice. Skeptical, he went to the draft board and asked if, in fact, he had been selected to serve. It was no joke. He was determined to get out of the Army following the required two years of service but was persuaded by his company commander to re-enlist. That, as he describes, was the best decision of his life.



*Command Sgt. Maj. Mellinger
2007*

It has been almost 38 years since he was drafted, and today, Mellinger holds not only one of the highest achievable enlisted ranks as the 13th command sergeant major of the U.S. Army Materiel Command, but he is also the last draftee on continuous active duty service, the last of almost 2 million Soldiers drafted during the Vietnam era. “Somebody asked me one day, ‘Hey, you got drafted, didn’t you? How many draftees are there?’ and I said, ‘Well, it can’t be many,’” he said with a mischievous laugh. “I tell people when I hear all about that ‘all-volunteer’ Army, ‘Not so fast, there is still one of us left.’”

Throughout his military career, Mellinger has received more than 15 awards including the Legion of Merit with oak leaf cluster, the Defense Superior Service Medal and the Bronze Star Medal with “V” device. Among his many assignments, he also served as command sergeant major of Multi-National Force–Iraq for nearly three years. His office wall at the AMC headquarters in Fort Belvoir, Va., chronicles his time and experiences in the Army. The entrance greets guests with a small, scrapbook-like wall filled with plaques and memorabilia – a history told through photos, awards and commendations.

With almost 40 years of service, the obvious question remains: When will this “national asset,” as Gen. David Petraeus has called him, retire? Mellinger said he doesn’t want to think that far ahead, and retirement is not yet on his calendar. “When I was getting to 20 years [of service], I thought, ‘Pretty soon, I can retire,’” he said.

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It is hard to imagine Mellinger, a tall, imposing figure with a forceful and vigorous voice, starting his military career as a private; but he is proud of his beginnings and recognizes those who have influenced him. Mellinger said that in any Soldier’s career, one thing remains true: There is always somebody along the way who influences him or her. For him, it was a company commander by the name of Capt. Robert J. Myers during Mellinger’s first assignment as a unit clerk in Germany. Myers came into the company when it was lacking leadership and discipline. “He really came in with standards and discipline that got enforced, and there wasn’t any negotiating – you did it or you suffered the consequences,” Mellinger said. “None of us get to where we are because we are geniuses. We get to where we are because someone helped us along the way – leaders who have learned to grow better Soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines.”



Priv. Mellinger - 1973



Spec. Mellinger re-enlists - 1974

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Staff Sgt. Mellinger as a drill sergeant

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The Army Mellinger joined was different than the one that stands today, he said. “In 1972, the Army wasn’t in real good shape,” he remembers. Racial, gender and drug issues were as present in the Army as they were in American society. “The military is a reflection of society,” Mellinger said. “It’s hard to imagine what it was like if you weren’t there at that time. You look around now and, still, we are not without our issues. But as a whole, Soldiers are treated as Soldiers without regard to where they’re from, what they do, who their daddy is or how much money they have in their bank accounts.”

Mellinger believes the future of the Army and the NCO Corps depends on leadership and education. “I see the NCO Corps continuing to do well in leadership and its two basic responsibilities – accomplishing the mission and the welfare of the troops. I don’t see that ever changing. The other thing I see throughout our NCO development in the not-too-distant future: Soldiers will have a degree.”

On Leadership and Being a Soldier

“At the end of the day, Soldiers will always do well when they have good leadership,” Mellinger said. “Followers are a reflection of their leaders.” He firmly believes that leaders should approach their Soldiers and peers and teach them from their own experiences. “The best thing senior leaders can do is pass on [their experiences],” Mellinger said.

With 18 years of experience as a command sergeant major, Mellinger understands the importance of connecting with Soldiers. He advises senior NCOs to “put on their helmets, and go out the door.” He said it is easy to get too comfortable, sit back at the office, drink coffee and go to meetings instead of taking care of Soldiers. Staying true to this conviction, he spent several months in Alaska speaking to units and groups about his Iraq experiences after his 34-month deployment in 2007.

As for young NCOs starting their careers as leaders, he advises they face leadership challenges by spending time with their Soldiers to better understand them. “Those in leadership positions who don’t spend some time of their day trying to pass things on to their subordinates or their peers, they’ll see things sliding the other direction,” Mellinger said.

He advises every Soldier to be an expert in their military occupational specialty and go beyond the call of duty. “Take the hard jobs,” he said. “Too many people focus on what they need to do next. Get good at where you are right now. If you can’t do the things that your MOS says



Mellinger (right) with Sgt. Stirret in Iraq, 2007



In Abu Ghraib, Iraq - 2007



you are supposed to do – why are you worried about what’s next? Worry about what’s now and next will come.”

On Education

Mellinger said he foresees education becoming the biggest change for the Army’s future. “The days of somebody finishing a career as an enlisted Soldier without a degree are probably going to be few and far between, because the opportunities will exist to [finish a degree] while taking care of your Soldiers and accomplishing your mission,” he said. This is possible, he

explains, because Soldiers can now continue their education with online courses even when deployed.

The career maps, structure and assistance offered to Soldiers give them an opportunity to find a balance and achieve an education while maintaining responsibility as a Soldier and warrior. Mellinger leads by example. He has three years of college education and will soon earn his bachelor's degree in business and English while still maintaining his responsibilities as AMC's command sergeant major.

"If you focus on your bachelor's degree and not on the next deployment or helping your peers, or if your focus is on just being the best squad leader in the world and say, 'I don't need any civilian education,' then your focus is still wrong. You've got to find balance," he said. "If you look at the things that we [NCOs] do nowadays, a high school diploma or a bachelor's degree isn't good enough to do a counterinsurgency operation or nation building. You have to understand people and the dynamics of interaction – you don't get that in [the Warrior Leader Course]. The key is finding a balance to continue to learn and grow."

Mellinger points out the importance of Soldiers developing the academic skills needed to succeed in their military career. "Going back to [the Baron] von Steuben, he talks about the choice of NCOs – none can be qualified that cannot read or write in a tolerable manner – that's pretty important; I have read some pretty atrocious things," Mellinger said, rephrasing von Steuben's words. "If you can't communicate clearly, you have a problem. You can learn through those self-development courses and college courses. Continue to develop yourself. Take courses and continue your civilian education."

In reference to the overhaul of the NCO Education System, Mellinger said, "Every Soldier needs to know how to do basic Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills, and that's the importance of NCO education and leader development we've done over the years. If you look at what we ask sergeants to do now, that is at par with what we expected from a sergeant first class or a captain, maybe a major, not too many years ago."

Mellinger said that 2009 was the second time the Year of the NCO has come around during his career. He said this time around, a better job was done highlighting

the contributions of NCOs and looking at what can be done to enhance the Corps. "The educational opportunities are the key," he said of what the Corps needs to keep growing. "A lot of my peers never got their degrees. In the future, I think every sergeant will have an opportunity to complete one degree and maybe more by the end of their [military] career. So, that life-long learning notion is really going to come to fruition; I think we are doing so much better this time around."

On Toys and Retirement

As AMC's command sergeant major, a position he has held since 2007, his job requires

him to provide Soldiers the best equipment, a job he takes very seriously. Mellinger knows firsthand the importance of having reliable equipment and through his military career has seen it evolve, develop and become more sophisticated. His familiarity with Army equipment stems from serving as a machine-gun squad leader, rifle squad leader, rifle platoon sergeant, weapons platoon leader. He has accumulated more than 33 hours of freefall in more than 3,700 jumps.

"No kidding, our toys are a lot better now," he said. "As Soldiers, we are much more survivable. You think about some injuries Soldiers sustain now in combat; there's no way that even 10 years ago a lot of them would have survived."

Although Mellinger believes the Army's equipment is better than ever, he said that at the end of the day, the most important resource is the Soldier. "Boots on the ground are necessary to secure things," he said. "I think that the ability of [the military] to survive and recover from encounters and be able to deliver a helping hand or a lethal blow really is the biggest thing."

Mellinger will leave the Army with nearly 40 years of service. "I love what I do; that's why I'm still here. I could have certainly retired years ago," he said. "There's plenty of other things I can do, I'm just not interested in doing them yet. And, if they never come, I'll be OK, because I'm pretty proud of having been a Soldier." ❏

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