

What is an NCO?

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What is an NCO? Quite simply, an NCO is a small group leader. There are thousands of us within the ranks of the strongest and smartest fighting force on the planet protecting the greatest country on earth. We also know that some of the smaller groups are far more elite than others because they are strengthened by a chain of strong and motivated NCOs whose leadership and passion catapult their team into the forefront of the military machine we call the U.S. Army. They lead by example, by always doing the right thing instead of just doing what they need to do.

I believe that in the hearts of the best NCOs you will find the hearts found in great Americans like James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Omar Bradley, George Patton, Creighton Abrams, Colin Powell and Gen. David Patraeus — individuals whose hearts are rich with selfless service, a competitive spirit to always be the best, compassion for the less fortunate and passion for defending the freedoms and ideals of our great nation.

What separates good and great NCOs from the mediocre and uncaring who spent a year or so looking out for themselves so they could make the list and sew on the stripes? The truth is, anyone can be an NCO, but few rise to the level of leadership associated with the likes of Sgt. Elijah Churchill, Sgt. William Brown and Sgt. Daniel Bissell, who were awarded the Badge of Military Merit during the American Revolution. The badge was a purple heart with a floral border and the word “merit” inscribed across the center. This award served as the precursor to the Medal of Honor, which was introduced during the Civil War.

Though bravery can be found more in the NCO Corps than in any other ranks in the Army, good order and discipline should be found among its NCOs as well. Since the days of 1st

Sgt. Purcival Lowe, who viewed whiskey as a primary source of discipline problems for enlisted men, the responsibility to maintain order and discipline has fallen on the shoulders of the NCO. Lowe often talked with other noncommissioned officers about this and cautioned them to give personal attention to their men to assure that they were not drinking to excess. Sometimes drunken men brought before Lowe ended up locked in the storeroom until they sobered up. Offenders received extra duty as punishment.

Lowe and the NCOs of the company established the “company courts-martial,” which was not recognized by Army regulations. This allowed the NCOs to enforce discipline for breaking minor regulations without lengthy proceedings. In the days before the summary court-martial, it proved effective to discipline a man by the company court-martial and avoid ruining his career by bringing him before three officers of the regiment.

The best NCOs are those who constantly seek self-improvement, and are not afraid to apply education and critical thinking to think outside the box. They aren’t afraid to try what’s never been tried before. As a result of this quality, we have seen an explosion in the number of college-educated NCOs in our Army. Today’s best NCOs don’t seek to apply their education and knowledge to further their own career but to further and improve the careers and lives of those whom they lead. They push their Soldiers to be the best they can be because this is how to best maintain order and discipline while also maintaining the finest fighting force on the planet.

Today’s NCOs preserve a tradition — more than 234 years old — of constant improvement in learning, training, fighting and adherence to the Army Values and the Warrior Ethos. Those who don’t find themselves falling out of ranks and usually after they have infected, like a cancer, other potential great leaders.



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