



PRESTON HAS LEFT THE BUILDING

The longest serving SMA retires

BY LINDA CRIPPEN

The NCO Journal caught up with Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth O. Preston after giving his final address at the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas, on Feb. 15. As poignant as those staff principals he has served alongside over the last seven years, Preston shared his thoughts about his development as a Soldier; his tenure as SMA, the historical transitions the Army has experienced during his service as well as the Army's future.

Why did you join the Army?

I was in my senior year of high school. Looking ahead as graduation date was coming up, I didn't have the grades to get a scholarship. I was an academic going

through school, but my grades just weren't scholarship-worthy. I was the oldest of four, and I knew my parents weren't going to be able to afford to send me to college. So, I was looking for a way to be my own man. Come graduation day, I wanted to be able to go out there and make it on my own, not live off of mom and dad.

I started looking at my choices. Of course, in the mountains of western Maryland, the industry up there at the time was farming and coal mining. My grandfather and all relatives were coal miners and farmers. I wanted something different. I wanted to get out of the small town in the mountains and do something different. The Army gave me that opportunity.

Background: Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth O. Preston speaks to Class 61 of the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, Fort Bliss, Texas, on its first day of classes in August 2010.

Photo by Spc. David M. Gafford

I went to see the recruiter in the January/February time-frame during my senior year, sat down with Staff Sgt. Underwood and talked about what the Army had to offer. I did a lot of drafting. My father was a draftsman. I was interested in attending college and being an architect. Entering the Army, doing four years and getting out with the Montgomery GI Bill would have been an opportunity for me to seek those goals.

But you never left the Army; you continued?

No, I stayed in. I took my oath at the military entrance processing station at Pittsburgh, Pa. You don't know what the military lifestyle is about. You're not sure if you're going to like it, and that's probably more true today. Not just in the military, but in the civilian sector, when the youth of today go out into the workforce, rarely do they remain at a job for more than three to seven years. Seven years is the maximum that people usually stay with a job, then they move on to something else.

For all our young people moving up, joining the Army entails a lot of the unexpected, but you see it as an opportunity. You make the best of it. You know that after four years, if it doesn't work out then that's the time to move on.

Can you share a little bit about your career, your development as a Soldier?

I went through eight weeks of basic training and eight weeks of Advanced Individual Training. I did both at Fort Knox, Ky. I still remember my drill sergeants: Sgt. 1st Class Daily in basic training and Sgt. 1st Class Underwood in AIT.

I finished training as a PV2, and my first duty assignment was 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division. First Cavalry Division in November 1975 was transitioning from air cavalry, as it was in the Vietnam War, to the ground cavalry division it is today. We were doing a lot of experimenting then with force structure, how our elements were organized. At the time, across the big Army, there were usually five tanks in a platoon. We tested three tanks in a platoon. Since we only had three tanks, we had motorcycles that we put on the platoon leader's tank.

I was assigned to the headquarters tank section, which had the battalion commander's tank, the S-3's tank

and the platoon sergeant's tank. We also had two armored vehicle launched bridges, which is a portable bridge that is carried on top of a tank and used during combat. As part of the section, we also had the scout platoon and the mortars. We had a separate combat service support company, which included the staff. The way it was comprised was a little different.

As the HQ Company, all the noncommissioned officers were hand selected. And being on the battalion commander's tank, I was the loader, driver, gunner — all as a specialist,

which is usually a staff sergeant position. I had a chance to work with great leaders, and they made a distinct impact on me.

Because we were just over 50 percent strength at the time, opportunities for early promotion were there. I was put in positions of increased responsibility, which allowed me to grow very quickly and learn a lot of things. The command climate and leadership I worked for were very positive. I was very happy with my job, and had a lot of fun doing what I was doing.

Even to this day, the analogy I use is that Soldiers re-enlist and stay in the Army for three reasons: command climate, job satisfaction and quality of life.

I got married early in life — getting out of high school, coming into the Army — and, we started a family. The quality of life we were able to provide for the family was as good as or better than what we could provide back on the farm, working the farm part time, going to school full time. So, I ended up re-enlisting and staying in the Army.

Who were some of the influential people who helped in your development and growth as a Soldier?

It goes back to leaders who influence you early in your career. At Fort Hood, Texas, my battalion commander, the 2nd Battalion commander, Lt. Col. Hamilton, was very influential; he did my promotion to sergeant. In Germany, it was 1st Sgt. Gary Pastine, my platoon sergeant, as well as Sgts. 1st Class Skip Ashton and Dick Morgan. They were the senior leaders, the role models who were good teachers. They were Vietnam War veterans, combat veterans, wounded in combat. They had a lot of experience, but perhaps most of all, they were good teachers. They took all those experiences, those lessons in life, lessons in the Army, technical expertise on the tank, weapons systems, setting up defensive positions, etc. — they were teachers.

On the officer side ... Cpt. James E. Besler, I remember his name very well because I was the drug and alcohol education specialist, and I had to put his signature block on all the paperwork every time we did a urinalysis.

It was a very special time those three years I spent in that transition from sergeant to staff sergeant. It really laid the groundwork and set the foundation for who I was as a noncommissioned officer, as I moved up in the ranks.

What career achievements are you most proud of?

Every assignment I've had, there've been those successes, those achievements that really fueled my desire to do more — to push myself a little more, to learn a little more, to be a better leader, smarter subject-matter expert, etc. What I learned with the 1st Cav Division, that first two and a half years in the Army, there were a lot of successes during that time, for example, being the gunner on the battalion commander's tank. I gained a lot of technical expertise, was able to be a scout, navigate, take tanks out, etc.

The battalion commander never got on the tank, except for during gunnery, so really it was my tank, my crew. Those kinds

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of successes fuel you to try and be a little better. As you move up in the Army and go from a position of increased responsibility to the next position of increased responsibility, you build on those successes in previous assignments.

It goes back to those officers and noncommissioned officers who made those early impressions. They were good teachers, and they took those experiences they had and gave them back. By being a good teacher, by taking the experiences I've gained, it made me a better NCO. It made me a better leader, and it took me to the next level. Of course, those successes led to others — more knowledge, more information, more increased responsibility. You just become a good teacher.

Do you feel that being a good teacher is integral to being a good Soldier, a good NCO?

Absolutely. In fact, one of the things that I didn't get done, but it's in the process now of being worked ... as you look at the NCO leadership attributes — what we want noncommissioned officers to be, know and do — there are times in a Soldier's career, just like the officers, they have nominative assignments. There are times in officers' careers where they go in and sit outside of their mainstream career field to do something completely different.

We want those broadening experiences for NCOs, too. We want sergeants, staff sergeants and sergeants first class to be drill sergeants and recruiters. We want them to be Warrior Transition Unit squad leaders. We want them to be active component, reserve component advisors. We want them to be instructors at an NCO academy or another institution.

When you step outside of doing your mainstream occupational specialty, it's those broadening experiences that really set you head and shoulders above your peers. It gives you a different set of skills that you can use to build upon and make yourself better.

What were some of your broadening experiences?

When I left Germany, 1st Battalion, 33rd Armor, 3rd Armor Division, in Gelnhausen, that was my second assignment. I spent three years there with the family. When I left, I returned to Fort Knox, to the schoolhouse. It was one of those broadening experiences. Honestly, after the success I had in Germany as a tank commander and a company master gunner, I really thought that I was pretty high-speed in my profession. I knew my profession; I was a subject-matter expert on weapons systems, the tank system. But when you get back into the schoolhouse, you find out that you're not as smart as you thought you were.

It's those broadening experiences that really open up doors and opportunities. It's about the knowledge. You're able to take what you already have and expand your vision. I was able to take the M60A1 tank, which I had been on up to that point in

my career, go back to the schoolhouse. The new M60A3 was being fielded. The (X)M1 was also in the process of coming out, and I became one of the first triplicate-trained instructors in the weapons department. That was a broadening experience.

Standing up in front of students and teaching — even though it was small-group instruction and often inside a tank turret or teaching weapons systems on a tank table — makes you think through the process of taking complex subjects and breaking them down into simple tasks that people can understand.

The success in that particular job led to my selection to spend two years with the British Army as the third American to go on the exchange to the Royal Army Corps Gunnery School in Lulworth, England. I learned their tank systems: Chieftain, Challenger; their reconnaissance systems: Scorpion, Senator, Fox; and the guided weapons system: Striker, FV438 Swingfire.

I learned their systems, and taught their students coming through school for two years. It was a wonderful experience. It was a very challenging assignment. It was one of those assignments that really pushed me. For the first year there, I spent every night studying until midnight, prepping lessons for the following day. When you stand up in front of students, you want to be the subject-matter expert. You don't want embarrass yourself or the U.S. Army, because you're representing your country in an exchange position. It challenged me and pushed me to a whole new level. Those successes, assignment after assignment, are what drove me to continue.

How did you find out about your selection as SMA?

In July 2003, I was in Iraq with V Corps serving as command sergeant major. We had just transitioned from V Corps to Combined Joint Task Force 7. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez was commander of CJTF-7, and together we took over responsibility not just for V Corps, but also for the entire country of Iraq, including all coalition forces on the ground. It was a huge mission, always running around, and busy every day out on the road. I was always out visiting organizations and teaching — being a teacher and helping them understand what was expected, the commander's intent and what right looks like.

Gen. Peter Schoemaker came in as chief of staff of the



Photo courtesy Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army
In 1978, Preston was a 21-year-old sergeant in 1st Battalion, 33rd Armor Regiment, Gelnhausen, Germany.

Army July 2003. Around August 2003, they announced that SMA Jack Tilley would retire and would select a new sergeant major of the Army. Around mid-September, I received a phone call asking why I had not submitted a packet for the position. My response was, "I'm a little busy; I'm in the middle of a war." Plus, we had just transitioned, and I was loyal to stay with Sanchez and see the mission through.

They were very insistent, so, I told them, "The boss gets a vote." I went to discuss it with Gen. Sanchez, and really, it was his decision. He was very complimentary and supportive, but he advised me to call my wife, Karen, who was still in Germany since we deployed from there to Iraq. I called and asked her about it. One thing he did suggest to me was to never go through life thinking, "What if?" He thought I was very qualified to serve as sergeant major of the Army. So, I talked with Karen, and we made the decision that I would support the Army and submit a packet.

In comparison to all those other sergeants major who had made the list, I really didn't see myself as being as qualified as they were. I submitted a packet but didn't really think anything more of it.

At the end of October, I had to go do the interview. There were 16 of us who interviewed, and the panel of six general officers narrowed that

group down to the top six. The following day, those top six interviewed with Gen. Schoomaker. During my interview, we talked a lot about what was ongoing in Iraq and my observations for a lot of our units and organizations. He thanked me, and, basically, I left and went back to Iraq. This is the same process we went through to choose my replacement, Command Sgt. Maj. Raymond Chandler.

It was just before Thanksgiving 2003 that I got a phone call indicating that the chief of staff would be calling us to deliver the news, so we should stay near the phone. Later, the chief's executive officer, then-Col., now-Maj. Gen. John Campbell, called and said, "Stand by for the chief."

Gen. Schoomaker got on the phone and asked if I was ready to come back and be sergeant major of the Army. I was very shocked, honored and humbled that I was chosen to be the next sergeant major of the Army. I stayed in Iraq until the end of December. First Corps was coming in from Fort Hood

to replace V Corps, so we were going through that transition process. I went to Germany Dec. 21, and outprocessed there. I took four days leave and reported to the Pentagon on Dec. 28. It's been very fast; it's been a bullet since that time.

What were some of the most challenging aspects about serving as SMA?

Probably the biggest thing goes back to the underpinnings of everything: transformation. The Army that we were on Sept. 10, 2001, was not the Army that we needed on Sept. 11, 2001, and the weeks, months and years that followed. The transformation of the Army includes the second, third and fourth orders of effects. It's adapting our institution, the policies, regulations, procedures, everything to support a modular Army, one that's on a cyclic Army Force Generation model: deploying, resetting, training. Back then, our system just didn't support that cyclic model.

When we started in January 2004, it was literally the largest transformation of the Army since World War II. And it included the entire Army, all 1.1 million. It was all three components — active, Guard and Reserve. Essentially, we took pieces of the Army offline, restructured them, reorganized them, and then put them back into the deployment cycle. Then, we had to work

through the second, third and fourth orders of effects.

For example, look at what happened at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, the aftermath of Walter Reed, Building 18. The outpatient population we had at Walter Reed, really the outpatient population at all of our posts and camp stations around the country, had a high number of wounded Soldiers coming back home and going through rehabilitation. That was a challenge for us.

Of course, those rehabilitation hospitals that we had in place during the Vietnam

War — when literally we had thousands and thousands of Soldiers injured, coming back out of combat every month back then — those rehabilitation hospitals, when you're a peacetime Army, all that structure went away. So, getting adequate treatment structures in place was part of the transformation.

While we were trying to fight two wars, transforming the Army into a modular force to support what we were doing in those engagements, we also had to contend with the second,



Photo courtesy Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army
Preston tandem-jumps with a member of the Golden Knights, the U.S. Army Parachute Team, in January.

third and fourth orders of effects in transforming the institutional generating Army, which includes the generating force that supports the Army at war. There were a lot of challenges involved within these transformations.

Aside from the historical seven years, what do you hope your legacy is for the Army and the NCO Corps?

It's not just me or my legacy. I really want the legacy for the Army over the last seven years to be transformation. Again, it goes back to the underpinnings; it's adapting the institution and all those institutional systems to support an Army at war.

When you take apart an organization and put it back together, there's a window of opportunity when resources are available — time, money, people — to change things for the better. It's taking things we weren't happy with, yet we couldn't change in the past, and with the window of opportunity open, taking advantage to make the Army better.

Everything we've done, from the schoolhouse and the institution to our professional military education, all NCO education has been transformed, and it's continuing to evolve. From basic training and AIT, we've done a lot of work restructuring that and getting it set to what we need Soldiers to “be, know and do” when they get to their first duty assignment. We also transformed the Warrior Leader Course so first-line supervisors can “be, know and do.”

In the Advanced and Senior Leader Courses, we wanted to groom those leaders for success when they move into those positions of increased responsibility. At the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, we started a brand-new program of instruction with Class 60 in 2009.

I related to Class 60 that my own experience at the academy in Class 46 was the first 9-month class. My class was the first to transition from a 6-month course to a 9-month POI, which was built on lessons learned from Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, and the idea of what we needed a senior noncommissioned officer to “be, know and do.” That 9-month POI was about standing up the fictitious 52nd Infantry Division, so we could learn what went into standing up an organization, to train it, prepare it, deploy it, fight it in combat, redeploy it, and then you stand it down. That was the life cycle of that division over that 9-month POI.

With Class 60, we changed the entire POI. We've come to a new level for senior NCOs and operations sergeants major coming out of the academy. We want them to form command teams, to match up with their field-grade officer counterparts and lead battalion-, brigade-, division- and corps-level staffs.

What we were teaching as part of the Battle Staff Course and part of what we were teaching at the academy just didn't measure up to the skill sets that we needed those senior NCOs to have. I'm very proud of what we've done with this evolution. Again, it was a window of opportunity that, while the Army was

transforming, we transformed the systems to support the ARFOGEN model and a modular Army at war.

Additionally, if you look back to photos from 2003-2004 — the uniforms, equipment, body armor, vehicles — it's like looking at pictures of Soldiers from the Korean War versus Soldiers on the battlefield today. We've come a long way, but we want to continue that evolution. It's not a matter of putting a new piece of equipment out there and saying, “OK, we're done now for the next 30 years.” You've got to continuously go back and look at how missions on the ground change and how that piece of equipment needs to evolve to better support the warfighter on the ground.

I think one of the great attributes of Gen. Schoomaker,

who was chief of staff at the time and Gen. George W. Casey was vice chief of staff, was saying that Soldiers are the centerpiece of our formation. It's imperative to focus the Army and the Army's energy on making sure that the warfighter on the ground had everything he or she needed to be a success in the missions that we had given them. Uniforms and equipment have continued to evolve and change.

What about the changes implemented for selection of command sergeants major and sergeants major?

Looking at management of senior NCOs was another opportunity. Because of the ARFORGEN cycle, with a life cycle of three years, you had senior NCOs who were, in many cases, trapped within an organization. If they missed the window of opportunity during reset to get selected to move up to a position of increased responsibility or just get reassigned to a new location, if they missed that opportunity they were trapped in that lifecycle. Of course, if you were the senior NCO in the schoolhouse, it was hard to get out of the schoolhouse and get back into the operational force. Again, it was the transformation of the Army, an opportunity for us to go in there, take something and make it better.

What were some of your pet projects?

All of them were. They were important, and we had to change. But, there was no silver bullet. It was a multifaceted approach. And, it wasn't that it was my pet project; it was something that was broken and needed to be fixed. Uniforms and equipment, we had to fix that. We had to get Soldiers body armor. We had to have the outer tactical vests and the small-arms protective insert plates. We needed M4 rifles instead of the M16s; we needed up-armored humvees.

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CASEY & PRESTON

For more than half of his tenure as sergeant major of the Army, Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth O. Preston served under Gen. George W. Casey Jr., the Army's chief of staff. As Casey prepares for his own retirement this year, he paused to reflect on his friendship with the Army's top enlisted Soldier.

What was your relationship like with SMA Preston?

Ken Preston is a role model for our Army. I have known and valued his leadership abilities since I selected him to be my division command sergeant major at the 1st Armored Division in Germany. Later, when I was the vice chief of staff, I did not hesitate to recommend him to Gen. Schoomaker as the next SMA. He is what we want our NCOs to be. I value Ken's professionalism and advice, and I asked him to stay on as SMA when I became chief of staff of the Army. My wife, Sheila, and I consider SMA Preston and his wife, Karen, personal friends.

How would you describe SMA Preston personally?

SMA Preston is and always has been the epitome of a professional noncommissioned officer and leader in our Army. He is a problem-solver and has tackled some of the toughest issues our Soldiers face. Whether he is working on a car or improving the combat



Photo courtesy Office of the Sergeant Major of the Army
Gen. George W. Casey Jr., right, take the stage with then-Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth O. Preston during an event at the Pentagon in February.

equipment we issue to our Soldiers, Ken Preston makes things right. He always thinks ahead to the next problem. Above all, he loves our Army and especially our Soldiers.

What were a few of the biggest issues or projects that SMA Preston's advice proved instrumental to you in accomplishing the objectives?

I sought SMA Preston's advice and perspective on a wide range of issues affecting Soldiers and their families and am especially proud of his accomplishments and how far the NCO Corps has come during his tenure. He is the architect of the greatest renovation in career development for our NCOs since the Vietnam War. Specifically, he revamped the NCO Education System, making it

more functional and relevant to the needs of today's Army. He was instrumental in improving our Soldiers' uniforms and equipment. His focus on warrior-leader training and critical thinking skills made the NCO Corps what it is today. SMA Preston also restructured the NCO management system to help get the right leaders in the right jobs and enhance individual self-development.

On a personal note, what is your assessment of SMA Preston's historical 7-year term as sergeant major of the Army?

Ken Preston helped build the most professional NCO Corps the world has ever known. Together, NCOs have held the Army together in the face of a decade at war.

Any parting words for SMA Preston?

I will have (or have had) a number of opportunities to publically honor SMA Preston on his 36-plus years of service to our nation. I congratulate him on his retirement and wish him and Karen the best of luck. Sheila and I look forward to joining him in retirement — they have been our valued partners and friends in leading this great Army for the last four years. As SMA Preston reflects on the changes he has spearheaded in the last seven years, he can retire with the satisfaction that he has made the Army a better place.

As the enemy evolved and improvised explosive devices became the weapon of choice out there, we needed mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles. Of course, as more forces started going into Afghanistan and the threat of IEDs transitioned there, we needed the MRAP all-terrain vehicle.

I wouldn't call them pet projects. Rather, it was part of an effort to ensure Soldiers were, in fact, the centerpiece of our formation. It goes back to that original foundation: transformation and Soldiers as the centerpiece.

One of the things that all of our NCO studies indicated was that noncommissioned officers wanted the education needed to be successful in a particular leadership position before they were put into that leadership position. So, the high-speed staff sergeant, who was appointed as platoon sergeant, wanted the leadership attributes that were taught in ALC before he filled the position.

In many cases, that staff sergeant went in and did the job of a platoon sergeant, spent 18 months to two years there, and had

a combat deployment with the platoon. Then, we finally get him to ALC, and we teach him what right looks like. By then, he's already had one or two NCO Evaluation Reports. And maybe as a staff sergeant, he was a great sergeant, great squad leader, but now as a platoon sergeant, he was just mediocre. He was just OK, when he could have been great with some of the educational tools that he would have gained had he the chance to go through the course.

I have always believed that education is the underpinning of not only the leaders in our Army, but also in our society. I spent a lot of time out there with recruiters, and I really understand the challenges of getting the right education for those recruits we bring into the Army each and every day. Education was very much on my mind. I really wanted to take noncommissioned officer education, and all the different organizations and staff principals that had ownership of NCO education, and make it cohesive. It was really spread out ... all these entities had a piece of NCOES. One of the things I really wanted to focus on was pulling them together and gaining the synergy of all of them working together to advance NCO education.

It took us five years just to get the structure right for the master sergeant and first sergeant population out there, get them

into USASMA, then afterward assign them as operations sergeants major to serve some time out there in operations as staff. This was a developmental assignment that many command sergeants major missed out on in years past, so they never really understood staff functions, how staff operated, how staff principals worked in conjunction with a commander, or how you achieve commander's intent.

The system we have out there, it's continuing to evolve. It's not complete yet. There are still pieces that we've got to continue to build on. That's five, six years' worth of work. That's probably one of the advantages of having been in this assignment for as long as I've been, to be able to get in there, dissect things and understand the system, as well as be part of the laying out and identifying the way ahead.

Of course, there are a lot of other things out there, like the Army Congressional Fellowship Program on Capitol Hill. The program entails NCOs completing a master's degree and spending time working there as a congressional fellow on a congressman's or senator's staff. The four senior NCOs as part of the Office of the Congressional Legislative Liaison working over on Capitol Hill have been a huge success. It helps members of Congress not only see how talented our officers are, but also really understand the value of the noncommissioned officer.

The Year of the NCO in 2009 was a huge success. As I look back, the secretary of the Army, the chief of staff of the Army and I talked about 2009 being designated as The Year of the NCO, and we discussed the task and purpose. We tried to pinpoint what we wanted to gain from it. It was another one of those windows of opportunity, not to just put a bunch of stuff on

the "wish list," but to really take those things we were building and put the spotlight on them, as well as accelerate those initiatives and move them forward.

The Year of the NCO allowed us to focus on many initiatives and improvements, everything from how we manage our senior NCOs to NCOES transformation, the Army Career Tracker, and Structured Self-Development levels 1 and 2 (which went into effect in October and levels 3, 4 and 5 will come online this year). The Army Career Tracker will also launch this year. Those are all things that came out of The Year of the NCO. They probably would have come to fruition eventually, but The Year of the NCO allowed us to put the spotlight on them and accelerate them a little faster. It also gave us the opportunity to sell those initiatives to our senior leaders, so we could get the resources to make them a reality.

Was the length of your term circumstance-driven, or did you know early on that you would serve longer than the typical three or four years?

Historically, the position of sergeant major of the Army is a three- or four-year assignment. If you go all the way back to Sgt. Maj. of the Army William O. Wooldridge, the first sergeant

major of the Army, Sgt. Maj. of the Army George W. Dunaway, the second SMA, their tours were only two years. Over time, the tour grew to be three years and eventually four years. It's generally been three- to four-year tours.

When Gen. Schoomaker left in April 2007, I was barely transitioning. I had a little over three years in the position. I figured with the new chief of staff coming

in, I'd lay out the transition plan. And when Gen. Casey came in, he asked me to stay on another year.

There were a lot of things happening at the time, a lot of unforeseen circumstances. He asked me to stay on for another year. We were changing out vice chiefs of staff (Gen. Richard A. Cody was leaving and Gen. Peter W. Chiarelli was coming in).

So, I went through the end of that second year with Casey, 2009, and the elections were coming up. The entire undersecretary, the assistant secretary had left to prepare for the upcoming elections. Then, after the elections, the secretary of the Army didn't change. Of course, there was a long period before the undersecretary, the five assistant secretaries and the comptroller were appointed and put into place. So, because of the vacuum of vacancies, Gen. Casey asked me to stay. Of course, there's no way I would ever say no. I'm very loyal to the commander, and I'll do whatever he needs me to do to make the Army a success.

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Do you feel like there is any unfinished business?

I can't say there's any one thing that I'd want to accomplish. There are a lot of things that are being worked right now. The Army is like a big ship, a big truck. And, big things don't turn around very quickly. They're very slow, very gradual, very deliberate. I think right now there are a lot of things that are in the process of changing and evolving, and it's going to be a natural transition for the Army.

When you look at the five focus areas, the priorities that Gen. Casey laid out for us to focus on this year, one of them is to adapt our institutions and the generating force. Of course, there are a lot of things out there — policies, regulations that no longer make sense — and every day we bump up against a policy or regulation or doctrine that says we can't do something. It was something that was written back during the Cold War. So, we still have some work to do, and some of those things are challenging.

The ARFORGEN model and maintaining our combat edge needs to remain our clear focus, especially considering that we met the presidential mandate of reducing the force in Iraq last year and the agreement between Iraq and the United States calls for a complete exit by December, and believing we're going to have success in Afghanistan and be able to draw down there. A lot of units and organizations, over their life cycle according to the ARFORGEN, won't be needed for deployment. For those units on that two- or three-year life cycle, if they're not needed for a deployment, how do we maintain that combat edge? We don't want to slip back into what we were before 9/11.

On a personal note, during your tenure as SMA, what moments were exceptionally happy or rewarding for you ... and disappointing?

The disappointment is easy. It's all the little bad things that come up in the news. It's Walter Reed, the whole prisoner abuse stuff. Those are the sad faces.

Walter Reed is one of those things that happened, and also Abu Ghraib. Still, we wonder what happened and why did it happen. A lot of it was, I believe, putting an ad hoc unit together at the last minute, collecting individuals, throwing them together as a unit and then deploying them without proper training, certification or giving leaders time to get to know their Soldiers.

All those intricacies tied to transformation have been tough challenges that we've had to work through. I think all of us, now, can be very proud of the Army, the Army leaders and what they did to take us from where we were to where we are today. They've also set the path for where we need to go in the foreseeable future.

Alternatively, there are a lot of happy faces, too. Every day saw progress. It was satisfying to see that, as an individual, you're contributing and seeing your efforts make a difference. It's all about giving back, having the opportunity to travel, to talk to Soldiers and to teach. You get to see the value of your contributions every day because you're giving them something they need. As I've always referred to it, I've tried to be a force provider who goes out there and links with the commander, the senior NCOs and the

Soldiers and provides something that helps them be a success in the missions they've been given. So, being a force provider has been the most rewarding. It's what keeps you going, and it's also why it's not just one specific agenda.

There are many things going on in the Army; it's like football. You want to keep possession of the ball. The goal in football is to advance the ball down the field. We're the team that's on the field right now, and we're advancing step by step in all these venues. At some point, you've got to hand it off to the next team. When special teams comes on, you've got to hand the ball off, and then they can continue to advance the ball. That's how I visualize what we've been doing.

What was your working relationship like with Gen. Casey? How was the personal rapport?

We're very close and spent a lot of time working together. He's been a great mentor. I am a product of a lot of senior NCOs. But as you become a sergeant major and get up into those senior ranks as a master sergeant and first sergeant, you spend a lot of time matched up with a field-grade officer counterpart. Those officers out there are mentors to NCOs. My first battalion commander and I had a very close working relationship. I would have done anything for him. I built a very close relationship with all the officers in that battalion.

I've seen battalion executive officers and command ser-



Photo by Staff Sgt. Tyrone Basnight

As part of his schedule of near-constant traveling, Preston speaks to service members at Rhine Ordnance Barracks, Germany, in March 2010.

geants major bump heads and clash with each other. But, we had a very close, personal relationship. We're good friends, even to this day. It's about partnering and looking to them as mentors, learning from them, understanding commander's intent, and really dedicating yourself to the unit and its success.

I was Gen. Casey's division sergeant major at the 1st Armor Division. We took the division to Kosovo for a year, so we spent a lot of time together. He and his wife, Sheila, my wife, Karen, and I have all known each other now for a long time. We have a very good relationship. Even now, he's a great commander and mentor. He's been a great asset to the Army over the last four years, and we owe him a great debt of gratitude for his service. He spent 32 months in Iraq as the Multi-National Force-Iraq commander. To come out of that and then take on the job of chief of staff of the Army is rather unique.

Rumor has it you plan to return to the farm?

I am. I'm going back up there; that's home. I'll be honest, everybody asks me what's next, or what's my next job. I've intentionally stayed very busy and on the go. I have not gone out there to peddle people for a job. I figure that when it's over, it's over. So, I'm going to go back to the farm. I've actually got a place to go to. A lot of people don't have that.

My mom and father-in-law are getting older, and it'd be good to get back and spend some time with them. It will also be a good opportunity to get caught up with the kids — get out and travel, visit with them and the grandchildren. That's the plan right now.

At some point, I'm probably going to get bored, so I'm sure there will be some opportunities out there. A while back, one of the professors at Frostburg State University in Maryland asked about my interest in teaching leadership. That would be a unique opportunity, and I would definitely think about doing something like that. I'm a teacher.

I also want to stay close to the Army. For all of us, as Soldiers, whether you serve two years or 40 years, staying close to the Army is important. There are a lot of ways to still contribute.

Just like the president stated in his State of the Union address: There are about 300 million Americans living in the United States, and 1 percent of the population serves in our armed forces. One hundred percent of the population needs to support them. So, I want to be one of those who supports and stays close to the Army in some way or another. 🇺🇸

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FACT FILE

Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth O. Preston served as the 13th sergeant major of the Army from Jan. 15, 2004, to March 1, 2011. SMA Preston has held a variety of leadership positions throughout his career ranging from cavalry scout to command sergeant major.

As sergeant major of the Army, Preston served as the Army chief of staff's personal adviser on all enlisted-related matters, particularly in areas affecting Soldier training and quality of life. He devoted the majority of his time to traveling throughout the Army observing training, and talking to Soldiers and their families. He sat on a wide variety of councils and boards that make decisions affecting enlisted Soldiers and their families and was routinely invited to testify before Congress.

Preston is a native of Mount Savage, Md., and was born Feb. 18, 1957. Preston entered the Army on June 30, 1975. He attended basic training and armor Advanced Individual Training at



Fort Knox, Ky. Throughout his 36-year career, he has served in every enlisted leadership position from cavalry scout and tank commander to his final position as sergeant major of the Army.

Other assignments he held as command sergeant major were 3rd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division, Fort Hood, Texas; 3rd "Grey Wolf" Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, 1st Armored Division in Bad Kreuznach, Germany; and V Corps in Heidelberg, Germany.

His assignment before being named the Army's top enlisted Soldier was as the command sergeant major for Combined Joint Task Force 7 serving in Baghdad, Iraq.

His military education includes Basic Noncommissioned Officer Course, Advanced Noncommissioned Officer Course, First Sergeant Course, M1/M1A1 Tank Master Gunner Course, Master Fitness Trainer Course, Battle Staff Noncommissioned Officer Course, and the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy. Preston holds a master's degree in business administration from Trident University International.

His awards and decorations include two Legions of Merit, the Bronze Star medal, the Defense Meritorious Service Medal, four Army Meritorious Service Medals, five Army Commendation Medals, three Army Achievement Medals, Southwest Asia Service Ribbon, Liberation of Kuwait Ribbon (Kuwait), Kosovo Medal, the NATO Medal and the Joint Meritorious Unit Award.

THE ARMY'S FAREWELL

Editor's note: The following excerpt is from Army Chief of Staff Gen. George W. Casey Jr.'s remarks at the retirement ceremony of Sgt. Maj. of the Army Kenneth O. Preston at Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall, Va., on March 1.

Welcome, everyone. Thank you for coming out today to help us farewell a great Soldier and his lady — Ken and Karen Preston.

It's been nearly four decades since Ken and Karen left Mount Savage, Md., on a course that would not only change their lives, but also the course of our Army's history. From his teenage years, when he loved to work on mechanical things, to his early days in the Army working with tanks, Ken has always been good at what he did. He learns and studies his craft and becomes the best at whatever he touches.

Ken's outlook on the world was first shaped by his family's military service. Both parents as well as his father-in-law served in the military. It was that call to duty (as well as the need for a little money for college) that inspired Ken to enlist in 1975 as a cavalry scout.

From the very beginning, Ken

Preston made a name for himself as an accomplished leader and model noncommissioned officer. After only two years in the Army, Spc. Preston was promoted to sergeant. Next, Sgt. Preston took his expertise to Fort Knox, where he became a master gunner instructor, and ultimately to Dorset, England, the British armored school. It was during this time that he developed his passion for teaching Soldiers, a passion that has continued for over three decades.

As a platoon sergeant at Fort Knox, he led a young platoon that had responsibility for maintaining the tanks and ranges for our Officer Basic Course. Many of the colonels and brigadier generals out there in the Army today probably fired their first round from Sgt. 1st Class Preston's tank.

Later, en route to Germany in spring 1990, an energetic colonel with an eye for talent snatched him to be the regimental master gunner for the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. From there, after a brief stint at the Sergeants Major Academy, Ken was promoted to sergeant major and went on to serve as a sergeant major at every level of command before he became sergeant major of the Army.

And that brings me to one of the best decisions I ever made. Back in 2000, I was picking a new CSM for the 1st Armored Division, and I asked for the list of potential candidates. As with every sergeant major selection process, they brought me the names of three or four really good sergeants major. And it was really hard to differentiate who would work best with me.

And so after a long interview, I asked them the same question, "What are you most proud of having done in your life? Not in your career, but in your life."

Everyone had different answers, but Ken thought for a minute. And then he looked at me and said, "You know, what I am most proud of is my family." And I said to myself, "I can work with a guy like that." So I picked him, and we have been friends with the Prestons ever since.

What he accomplished over the last seven years is to take the most professional NCO Corps in the world and make it better. Our Army will be better for his efforts for decades to come.

As both Ken and Karen would want, we are here today to do something even larger than say farewell to them. Today gives us a chance to thank you and to tout the accomplishments of our non-commissioned officers and their families.

(At this point in Casey's remarks, four Soldiers in uniforms from 1975, 1981, 2004, and 2010 came out onto the parade field.)

I don't normally do show and tell during a retirement ceremony, but I wanted to show you how Ken's contributions to the way we outfit and equip have been so significant.

The first Soldier represents the uniform of the Army in 1975 when Ken came [into the Army]. The uniform the

Kenneth O. Preston (center right), the 13th sergeant major of the Army, conducts his final pass and review during his retirement ceremony at Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall, Va., on March 1.

Photo by Linda Crippen





Army was wearing when Ken became the sergeant major of the Army was the Battle Dress Uniform. But when Ken came in, we were still wearing green uniforms and black boots.

With the precision of an engineer and a capability to understand what a Soldier needs, Ken was the driving force in fielding the Army Combat Uniform and associated equipment. Not much difference between [2003] and 1975. But, just to show you [that] we never stop, and that Ken never stops trying to make it better for Soldiers, we fielded in Afghanistan just last year a Multi-Cam uniform and all its associated devices. The difference between that last uniform and the one on the right [2004] in the terrain of eastern Afghanistan is 50 meters [of standoff before detection by the enemy] over the ACUs. That means the enemy can see our ACUs 50 meters closer. That is the difference he has made, and that is why our Soldiers are the best equipped of any Army in the world.

What hasn't changed are the bedrock values and qualities of our Noncommissioned Officer Corps. Our noncommissioned officers remain committed to their

Soldiers, their Army and their country. Despite the repeated deployments, they demonstrate a commitment to be a part of something larger than themselves — a band of brothers and sisters that remain Army Strong and that have provided the glue that has bound us together as an Army over the last decade of war. They remind us how lucky we are to have generation after generation of Soldiers who are willing to fight for this country and the ideals that it stands for.

We continue to attract and retain the finest America offers because we are committed to educating and training our noncommissioned officers for increasing responsibility in today's world. Today, our Noncommissioned Officer Corps is getting the education, the equipment and quality of life that is commensurate with the quality of their service. From the Army Family Covenant, to the Army Career Tracker, to the improvements in our combat equipment, Ken Preston has responded to the needs of our NCO leaders and their families.

Ken, you have had a huge impact, not only on the NCO Corps, but on the whole Army. And you have indeed taken

As part of his remarks at Preston's retirement ceremony, Gen. George W. Casey Jr. showcased the different uniforms worn throughout Preston's 36-year career.

Photo by Linda Crippen

the best in the world and made it better and more ready for the 21st Century. Thank you very much.

I'd like to close on a final thought. In fact, it comes from SMA Preston himself. It's a thought he shares everywhere with the Soldiers that he speaks to. But more than anything else, I think it speaks to who he really is:

"The knowledge that you gain is not solely yours to keep, but yours to take and pass on to the Soldiers of your organization. Use what you learn to teach your Soldiers and make them better."

That's why we have the best Noncommissioned Officer Corps in the world.

Ken and Karen, Sheila and I have been proud to walk side-by-side with you across our Army over the last decade. On behalf of the Soldiers, civilians and families that you have served — and served so well — we thank you for making us better. Good luck to you and Godspeed.