



A Study of the Occupational Education of the Non-Commissioned Officers of the US Army

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Abstract. As an important component of the US Army, the non-commissioned officers undertake vital responsibilities. The cultivation of the non-commissioned officers meets the need of the military's construction and development, as well as winning the future war. As the information construction deepens, the duties and missions, development opportunities, functions and status of the non-commissioned officers have transformed historically. It is pointed out that the non-commissioned officers have already become a decisive factor that would both affect the development of the army and influence the war situation in the future. The talent preparation is the toughest. Without the high-quality non-commissioned officers, there will be no high-quality army. This thesis discusses the occupational education system in the US Army by exploring the historical change of education, the modern cultivation mode and the characteristics of the non-commissioned officers. This thesis also offers expectations on the future training and education system.

Keywords: Occupational Education; Non-Commissioned Officer; Talent cultivation

1 Introduction

The Occupational Education in the US Army was a result of learning from Pluto. Although the non-commissioned officers are the “backbone of the Army” these days, they were not considered as vital as the commissioned officers in the beginning. It was commonly considered that the non-commissioned officers would learn from the real-combat situation and did not need the “occupational study” and thus, unlike the commissioned officers, did not have a systematic institution for career development and occupational education. Little did the non-commissioned officers have a well-defined career development and guidance. Over 100 years since the US Army established, the non-commissioned officers undertook the “On the Job Training” to improve the skills and capabilities needed in the battlefield. However, as the duties endowed upon the non-commissioned officers diversified, the educational and cultivation system have gradually established, developed and perfected.

It is universally acknowledged that the modern professional non-commissioned officers' team was originated in the Army in 1775. In 1778, the US Military Order and Discipline Regulations written by a Pluto commissioned officer, Friedrich von Steuben, divided the non-commissioned officers into five ranks [1]. The missions and responsibilities of each rank were specified and regulated for the first time and the education towards the non-commissioned officers was clarified. As the training pattern in this book was carried out and recognized, an "enclosed school" was founded to train the non-commissioned officers. In 1829, the Infantry Tactics promulgated by the US government further regulated the role that the non-commissioned officers playing in the army and formulated a training schedule for the non-commissioned officers for the first time. The knowledge and the techniques to master, practice, and operate the weapon were specified in the book [2]. As the US Army developed, the education of the non-commissioned officers was paid attention to by the government. In 1824, the first Military Academy that specified on teaching non-commissioned officers was founded in Fort Monroe, Virginia, under the command of the Secretary of the Army, John Calhoun, marking the beginning of the education for non-commissioned officers. [3]

However, the purposes and the methods of cultivating a non-commissioned officer have always been a debate. Some agree that the essence of becoming an outstanding non-commissioned officer lies in the accumulation of the real-combat experience instead of school education, while others argue that only through a systematic education can a non-commissioned officer goes further on one's career development.

This debate came to an end at the end of 19th century. The rapid development and application of scientific technology revolutionized the Army's construction. The emerge of the new weapons such as tank, submarines, etc altered the structure of the Army. Skilled non-commissioned officers, who are capable of operating these new vehicles and weapons proficiently were crucial of winning the war. The non-commissioned officer was assigned to all kinds of posts, shouldering responsibilities as much as a commissioned officer. Therefore, an outstanding team of non-commissioned officers that were skilled in operating, training and managing are required urgently.

In 1952, the US Army established the "Training Plan for the Non-Commissioned Officers", encouraging the non-commissioned officers to pursue higher education and training. The career development of the non-commissioned officers made a great leap when the Army established the "Non-Commissioned Officer School" regulations, which standardized the educational system for the military academies. In 1971, the NCO education system was formed and to this day, the occupational education of the non-commissioned officers have always been integrated, systematic and profound.

2 The Education and Training of the Non-Commissioned Officers of the US Army

2.1 The Education System

The US Army attaches great importance to improving the efficiency of education and training, and strives to achieve the best results in the shortest time with the minimum

consumption. It is believed that training and education are the keys to achieve modern construction of the Army. The US Army have a total of 113 military academies, 14 of which are directly under the lead of the Ministry of National Defense, 107 of which are responsible for the non-commissioned officers' education and cultivation. 16 military academies are responsible to train non-commissioned officers only, including 4 advanced non-commissioned officer schools and 3 independent non-commissioned officer schools of respected armed services [4]. Through the long-time development, the US Army have formed an occupational education network that concludes various majors, posts and armed services ensuring that each non-commissioned officer can easily acquire a corresponding education based on one's career requirement and development.

The non-commissioned officer schools of the US Army are dual led by the services and the arms. The schools were originally founded based on the majors of each arms, with the principle of "what is needed is what is learnt; what is learnt is what will be needed." Therefore, the education management system of the US Army is an organic combination of usefulness, management and training.

2.2 The Cultivation Pattern

The US Army divide the non-commissioned officers into six ranks: corporal, sergeant, staff sergeant, sergeant first class, master sergeant and first sergeant. The non-commissioned officer schools are divided into three levels: elementary, medium and advanced. The duties and obligations of each rank are distinctive. The corporal serve as headman, the sergeant serve as squad leader and the platoon leader. The staff sergeant serve as the company sergeant, the master sergeant from the first class to the third class serve as the master sergeant of battalions and even to the sergeant general of the armed services and the Ministry of National Defense [5]. Therefore, the standards of techniques, combat skills, leadership and management vary on each rank. (Table 1) It is specified that what kind of cultivation, which educational institute should one go to and what courses should one take for each non-commissioned officer. The five-rank cultivation system is implemented, providing an opportunity of self-development step by step for all non-commissioned officers.

2.2.1. Junior Leadership Courses

Most recruits have the opportunity to take the Junior Leadership Course, which lasts 4 weeks, providing basic leadership training for soldiers selected to be promoted for sergeant. The knowledge, skills, leadership and management abilities needed to lead a team-unit are taught and the course lays the foundation for training and education in the next level. This course emphasizes on occupational skill, leadership methods, self-discipline, the ability to train and cultivate soldiers, caring for soldiers, etc. Through leaning this course, the corporal is intended to be capable of thinking creatively and critically with the capability to train and lead the unit.

2.2.2. Basic Courses.

The Basic Courses of the non-commissioned officers have to be taken for a sergeant to be selected and promoted to be a staff sergeant with the purpose of training tough squad leaders and platoon leaders so that they can lead and train the soldiers effectively. Upon Junior Leadership Course, this course bring the abilities to a next level, that is, challenge the students to think critically and manage to solve complex problems. The students are required to enhance the oral and writing skills and participate in the process of military decision.

2.2.3. Advanced Leadership Courses.

This course emphasizes on the subjects that related to the military occupation and profession taken by a staff sergeant to be selected and promoted to Sergeant First Class. As the students taken this course have already possess a certain ability of leading, training and managing, students would cooperate and communicate on the leadership capability and cultivation innovation methods. The students are asked to make training plan for the soldiers, analyze the mission command system, and provide suggestions for the commissioned officers. At the end of this course, each student would fully comprehend the significance of being a sergeant first class, which is, the non-commissioned officer is not only an outstanding soldier, but also a decisive commander.

2.2.4. First Sergeant Courses.

This course is the highest among all the course taken by non-commissioned officers. Serving in the battalions and above, the sergeant major and the first sergeant take this course to improve the ability of team construction, communication skill, troop management, support operation, etc. The ability to conduct a joint forces operation is the highlight of this course.

3 Characteristics of Occupational Education of the US Army NCO

3.1 The Integrated and Systematic Training of the Non-Commissioned Officer

The non-commissioned officer schools in the US Army outnumber those in other countries, implying the training schools determine the route of education development. With the NCO schools covering all majors and posts required of a non-commissioned officer, the whole education could be formed into a systematic training network [5]. This solves the long lasting problem that the education of the non-commissioned officer is the attachment to the commissioned officers' education. On the other hand, the training and education characteristics and patterns of the non-commissioned officer could be researched thoroughly and profoundly only under the support of the amount of the NCO training schools. These schools and institutes not only undertake the responsibilities of training and education, but also conduct the scientific research with the purpose of

forging a world-class non-commissioned officer talent troop. With the accumulation of the training and education experience and the scientific research, the training schools and institutes apply the practice results on the following training and education, perfecting the training quality in a circle.

3.2 The Emphasis on the Distributed Leadership Courses

The US Army divide the leaders into three interrelated levels: direct level, organizational level and strategic level. In order to cultivate the leadership of the non-commissioned officers, the training schools divide the leadership courses into junior leadership course, basic leadership course and advanced leadership course. This “step by step” cultivation pattern distributes and corresponds the training institutions, training objects and training courses, completely designed to meet the students’ requirement and accord with the education concept of “student-centered”. The training schools’ curriculum is actually a series of leadership training courses designed to train non-commissioned officers in leadership positions at different levels, from corporal to the sergeant first class.

The US Army emphasizes the improvement of the comprehensive leadership ability of non-commissioned officers. The concept of “professional training” is relatively weakened in the Training Academy of the Chief Sergeant. Instead, the “curriculum-centered” concept is highlighted, and the distributed learning institution is strictly implemented. The training of the students’ leadership is not only the single “leadership” itself, but also the cultivation of comprehensive capability, include learning ability, communication skill, organization and coordination ability, critical thinking ability, leadership skills, etc.

3.3 The Embodiment of the Concept of Lifelong Education

The occupational education of the US Army is not limited to the training schools, but through the soldier’s whole career. The US Army encouraged the non-commissioned officer to pursue the lifelong education to promote the continuous growth of the military talents. Based on the job requirements and the long term development, the US Army embraces the academic training and education, self-training, and the non-traditional education into the educational systematic construction, forming an all-round, comprehensive and dynamic occupational education system.

The military academies offer online courses, correspondence courses, special learning, and other learning platforms for the students to have a self-awareness ability to better comprehend the orientation and value of oneself. Thus, a non-commissioned officer is clear about what to learn, where to learn, how to learn and could formulate the self-education and self-cultivation plan and strive for the upper level according to the professional objectives of one’s career development.

3.4 The Emphasis on the Construction of Teaching Staff

“The foundation of teaching lies in the teachers.” When selecting and inspecting teachers, the US Army adopt the combination of active service teachers and civilian staff,

the full-time and the employment to form a comprehensive teaching staff. In the military academies, the active service teachers account for about 70%, who are mainly transferred from the army with a duration of 2 to 3 years in rotation [7]. Regular rotation makes up the shortage of the teaching staff unfamiliar with the army, and thus provide targeted teaching for the students. Teachers who are “from the army and to the army” could design the teaching content centering the “the real-combat” to ensure “what is learnt is what will be needed.” The civilian teachers account for 30%, who are selected based on requirements of the military academies. Professors and experts from local universities are often invited to teach at the military academies. The civilian teachers are able to bring the latest theories and development to the military academies and apply them to the scientific research and teaching practice. Through this combination, students are available to acquire knowledge both from the real-combat army and from local lasted scientific achievements. Students are able to broaden the academic view, widen the knowledge and reconstruct the knowledge structure. The mechanism of teaching staff construction ensures the stability in the mobility, and enhancement in the stability.

The construction of the training and education of non-commissioned officer is based on the real-combat situation. Although integrated and systematic the training system seems, it is constantly altered and improved based on the real-combat experience and requirements. The fundamental purpose of the occupational education is to cultivate talents for winning the war in the future. The courses that the non-commissioned officers take in military academies were set based on the real-combat requirements. Under the background of “joint interdependence warfare”, the abilities and skills needed in a non-commissioned officer are more complex and comprehensive, which put forward higher requirements for the military academies’ curriculum design, professional construction, blended learning design, etc to meet the real-combat needs.

4 Conclusion

This thesis concludes the basic situation and characteristics of the US Army occupational education for non-commissioned officers. The idea of multi-domain warfare and information warfare have put forward higher requirements than ever for all armed services to implement the “joint operations.” Therefore, the optimization of the NCO’s comprehensive management becomes essential so that the non-commissioned officers of all armed services could cooperate and coordinate effectively under the background of “multi-domain warfare”. Non-commissioned officers, as a vital component of the army, should improve the all-round comprehensive capability in the joint operation. The military academies should combine training, education and application more closely, cultivate the talents form the cognitive altitude to application dimension. The gap between the non-commissioned officers and the commissioned officers would be narrowed as joint operation requires all commanders capable to join all armed services as a team. The occupational education system will continue to be improved and enhanced based on the real-combat situation and feedback from the army, so as to serve the non-commissioned officer and the real-combat to the next level. The occupational

education and training is of vital importance to the improvement of combat effectiveness of the armed forces.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

Y.L. conceived the idea of the study. Yj.H. performed the literature search. D.W. analyzed the documents and wrote the paper.

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