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# The Army's Command Sergeant Major Problem

JOHN C. BAHNSEN and JAMES W. BRADIN

Frank fought along side me in Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> We shared a small tent with the squadron S-3, we ate C-rations together, we dodged enemy fire together, we were friends, and, although he was ten years older, I was the "old man." Frank was Catholic, and during religious services before an operation, he knelt and prayed in the front rank of the soldiers of that faith. He was a damn good soldier who knew the weapons of our squadron from A to Z. Best of all, he knew people—he knew soldiers and he knew the good and bad about most of them.

A close observer of the officers of the squadron, Frank was quick to praise the best of our leaders and never said a bad word about anyone unless he knew that I had to know. He never initiated comments about officers, except in praise. He felt strongly that officer business was just that, officer business.

Frank knew the other squadron noncommissioned officers like a book. He spent his time with the enlisted members of the squadron and he listened to them. When we talked I knew he was on the soldier frequency. Yes, he knew soldiers.

In today's Army, Frank would be classified as slightly overweight. But he was quick on his feet, never seemed to tire, was strong physically, and was absolutely fearless under fire. He carried a PRC-25 radio, an M16 rifle, lots of ammo, and web gear festooned with grenades. He had come up in the tanker ranks and had that great upper-body strength that comes from years of repairing broken track and humping 45-pound rounds. He was tough and he sweated a lot in Vietnam's hot, humid climate.

Frank got hit by enemy fire sitting beside me in a helicopter and never said a word. The crew chief got hit worse than he did, so when we landed Frank went to work putting a tourniquet on that youngster's leg. Someone else found out about Frank's wound and gave him first aid and evacuated him. He was a great Sergeant Major and he was invaluable to me. He is still a good friend and we drink a few beers at our annual reunion.

Henry was my tank battalion Command Sergeant Major in Germany. He was the best tanker in the battalion. He knew more about the M-60 tank than the best turret mechanic, the best track mechanic, and everyone else in the battalion. He could also fix any vehicle in our TOE. He was a master carpenter, exceptionally strong physically, and could whip any soldier in the battalion—something, unfortunately, he would do occasionally when a soldier got out of line.

Henry was the first true “master gunner” before that term was invented. When he inspected your tank and it was declared ready to shoot—it was ready! Our battalion qualified more tanks than any other in the theater during Henry’s tenure as Sergeant Major. Henry deserves most of the credit.

Henry only had about three years of formal education. A south Georgia sharecropper’s son and the youngest of 11 children, he had gotten his high school diploma late by passing the Army’s GED test. The Army was Henry’s home. Although he was married to a charming lady and had a beautiful daughter, Henry spent most of his awake hours in the battalion area with his soldiers. He had uncommon common sense and an uncanny ability to judge people. Yes, he knew soldiers.

The young officers in the battalion respected Henry and sought him out to learn about the tank. He was a soldier’s soldier but a little rough around the edges. He probably couldn’t make it through today’s Non-commissioned Officer Education System and doubtless could not qualify for the Sergeants Major Academy. But he was a great Sergeant Major and he was invaluable to me.

Do we have these types of men in today’s Army? Do we want them? Has the day passed when an overweight and undereducated but thoroughly proficient soldier can be a Sergeant Major in our Army? Tough questions, with too many caveats to give a clear answer.

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Brigadier General John C. “Doc” Bahnsen (USMA, 1956), who retired in 1986 after over 30 years of service, has known many command sergeants major. He spent his last eight years of duty at brigade, division, corps, and army level. He commanded a platoon, troop, and squadron in combat, and a platoon, company, battalion, and brigade in Germany or the United States. He was an Assistant Division Commander of the 2d Armored Division, Chief of Staff of the Combined Field Army in Korea, and Chief of Staff of III Corps at Fort Hood. He was wounded during each of his two tours in Vietnam and wears a Distinguished Service Cross and five Silver Stars among numerous decorations.

Colonel James W. Bradin, a product of the Citadel (BA, 1958) and Auburn (MA, 1977), retired in 1987 after 29½ years of service. An armor officer and aviator, he has commanded a platoon and troop in Vietnam, where he served two tours, a platoon and company in Korea, and a battalion in the United States. From 1982 to 1984, he was Commandant of Cadets at the Citadel, and concluded his career as Inspector General of V Corps in Germany. Colonel Bradin numbers among his decorations four Silver Stars, two Legions of Merit, the Distinguished Flying Cross, three Bronze Stars, and the Purple Heart.

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A better question is why were the minor faults of these two great soldiers overlooked? The answer is as clear today as it was then—*they knew their business!* They dealt in soldiers' problems daily and they cared about their soldiers. The young officers liked them, admired them, and trusted them. These young officers are now lieutenant colonels, and in visits with them the subject of the old CSM invariably comes up. They judge CSMs today by the same standard—*do they know their business?* But today a lot of our junior officers have an intense dislike and lack of respect for some of our CSMs. In many instances this disdain is shared by officers up through the colonel ranks. We'll see why in a moment.

**T**he Army has CSMs today who are equally proficient and even better educated. Rarely is an overweight NCO of any grade promoted. Many of the better-known CSMs are long-distance runners. Promotion boards have weeded out the undereducated, the fat, and the unfit. Rumor has it that in some circles, CSMs don't drink more than two beers except in their own backyards. Even if the commander wanted to promote anyone overweight or undereducated, he would not be able to under today's rules. Silver Stars and Purple Hearts and fighting skills don't compute unless you've got the education and physical appearance to go with them.

CSMs now are taught solutions to weightier problems than mere gunnery, maintaining equipment, small-unit tactics, and all the myriad other soldier skills essential on future battlefields. They are instead being groomed and prepared for service at brigade, division, corps, army, and even higher-level CSM duty—duty that is much harder to define and much more distant from the ranks.

Although the highest enlisted rank achievable is E-9, CSMs have established a "CSM chain of command" from battalion level up to Sergeant Major of the Army. The selection process for these positions is highly competitive; the positions carry with them increasing privileges and the trappings of higher responsibility. Yet, there are damn few greater responsibilities than taking care of soldiers and preparing them for battle, and our newly exalted CSMs don't do these things.

It's difficult to determine the specified duties of a CSM. For more than 20 years there was no official document on this subject. Now, there is AR 600-20, *Army Command Policy and Procedures*, which discusses the "NCO support channel" and describes the various NCO positions within that channel.<sup>2</sup> Also there's a little pocket-sized field manual (FM 22-600-20) titled *The Army Noncommissioned Officer Guide*, which discusses the NCO support channel and has some teasing things to say about "special considerations of NCO duties/responsibilities."<sup>3</sup> But neither of these references answers the 64-dollar question concerning the length of the CSM's leash. Indeed, Army policy is intentionally reticent on this score. In the words of AR 600-20, para. 2-3, it is left to the commanders themselves to "define

responsibilities and authority of their NCOs to their staffs and subordinates.” But in a great number of cases the actual commanders’ instruction papers for CSMs contain far too much about “rendering advice and initiating recommendations” (a favorite phrase in the AR and the NCO Guide) and assign very few hard-core responsibilities that do not overlap those of a lower commander.

The Army needs the skills and talents of its superb noncommissioned officer corp down with the troops. It’s essential that we have them teaching and training our young soldiers. There is no calling more important. Can the Army put up with a group of senior NCO advisers with the power to critique, inspect, and comment on the performance of commissioned officers at lower echelons? No. And by permitting such the Army is daily undercutting its officer corps without realizing it. The Army is endangering the discipline required in its officer-NCO relationships.

Problems generally start when an off-post CSM, obviously from a higher command, gets travel authority. You would think that the four-star general himself was coming if you were located in the billeting or messing area. If you happen to be a lowly battalion, brigade, or division CSM, then you are expected to escort this high-level visitor through *your* commander’s unit, knowing full well that all he sees may be reported to the higher-level commander—good and bad. This is damned objectionable. Command inspections are not sergeants’ business. They are officer/commander business. No other army in the world sends sergeants to inspect officers’ areas of responsibility excepting, of course, the various formal technical inspection teams, on which NCOs play an essential role. It is the commander who is responsible for his unit—including the training and care of the privates, even though his NCOs are a primary means by which he carries out that responsibility. When did all this start and why have the senior leaders given our Army’s sergeants an inappropriate officer mission?

**D**on is another old war horse of a Sergeant Major, and another close acquaintance. He was a running mate of Frank and Henry—all three, incidentally, now very successful in their second careers. They grew up together in the Army and their paths crossed many times all over the world. They often served in the same unit. What Don had to say about CSMs kind of “shoved the round home.” No tape-recording of our conversation exists, of course, only notes, but his words are accurately paraphrased as follows.

“When I came into the Army in 1945,” Don began, “there was no mention of anyone called Sergeant Major. Most of the NCOs I met were either pre-World War II or from World War II. In fact, it was the early 1950s before I ever heard of a Sergeant Major. The sergeant that held that position in those days was usually an old soldier assigned to help the adjutant run the S-1 shop. The real power bloc rested among the First Sergeants, and in those days that was what all the good NCOs wanted to

be—a First Sergeant. They wanted to be near soldiers and to help teach and lead young soldiers. We loved what we were doing. We were happy just to be allowed to serve.

“But some smart folks in Washington decided that we needed the ranks of E-8 and E-9. They never asked us what we wanted, they just sat up there in Washington and decided that we needed our image enhanced. Hell, all we First Sergeants wanted was our own permanent rank so that we didn’t have to take our First Sergeant chevrons off and then sew them back on every time we PCS’d.

“More money was appreciated, of course, but in a way it was a bribe, an insult to us. But it did one thing for the Army; it smoked out all the bums and slackers that were in it for personal gain. They had been hiding in ROTC, recruiting, and reserve advisor duty for years. These clowns saw a quick pay raise before retirement, and they flocked back to fill the newly created Command Sergeants Major slots.”

The old soldier stopped a moment, lost in his memories, and then continued. “The real problem with all this was with you officers trying to build us up, to help our morale. So you decided to call these new positions Command Sergeants Major. And the dumb ones believed in the title. They began to act like commanders. They began issuing orders like commanders and holding meetings and such, and later they copied you officers and began to hold conferences. But the cold, hard facts are that they don’t command squat; never have, never will, and they need to be told that once a day.”

Don was beginning to get worked up. “Take the ‘command’ out of the title. They should be called Battalion Sergeants Major or Brigade Sergeants Major, but not ‘command’ anything. Hell, most of the ones I know today think they are too important to salute a lieutenant, but by regulation, in the pecking order of legal rank, they come right behind a warrant officer.

“And another thing. The Sergeants Major Academy ought to be teaching them that they are still NCOs. I met one recent graduate of that place, all pumped full of himself for having successfully acted as the Division Ammunition Officer during some map exercise he had been through out there. The poor dummy doesn’t know diddly about training young soldiers, about killing the enemy and surviving to kill the next, but he can handle the division’s ammo. One of these days all this foolishness is going to catch up with us—the pendulum is going to swing back and smack us all in the butt.

“I watched this thing from the beginning. In fact, I was on the first CSM list and the position was fielded with *no* instructions. They put this position in units and never trained the battalion commanders or the CSMs on their relationship. My first battalion commander never spoke to me, never gave me instructions, so I just did what I could to help the First Sergeants. Everyone assumed that the CSMs knew what to do. But the

battalion commanders didn't know, so why should they have expected us to know? The Army ought to spell out what it is this CSM fellow is supposed to do. They didn't and still haven't. Sure, there was a lot of talk about being the commander's advisor on enlisted matters, but soon many CSMs began to twist that from advise to command. I knew one thing that many of my fellow CSMs refused to consider: the First Sergeant worked for the company commander, not for me. That First Sergeant's efficiency report was going to be written by his captain, so I had no right to be down there ordering him to do anything."

**D**on spoke for over an hour. He had thought much about the subject. He felt strongly that the reputation of the NCO corps is at risk, and he's right. The Command Sergeants Major program is in need of a mid-course correction. Make no mistake about it, there is growing resentment among officer leaders at all levels, leaders who perceive that they and their soldiers suffer at the hands of CSMs who are guided by the three Ps—Perks, Privileges, and Politics.

When a commander stands before a commanders' conference and announces, "When the Command Sergeant Major speaks, he speaks for me," you can bet that organization is in for some trying times. One large command recently endured such an experience. The problems all centered on the personality of its CSM and a lack of understanding of command responsibility on the part of the commanding general. There are many CSMs in the Army who with such license would still conduct themselves properly—but some cannot and do not. The CSM in this case immediately became a three-star tyrant. Every officer in that conference room knew the commander meant what he said and every one of them learned to resent it.

The Sergeant Major set about to spend his new-found power in a very disruptive manner. He became *the* greatest training distractor in the command. He moved into quarters built for senior officers, and maneuvered the post commander into creating reserved parking spaces for "CSM" in already-crowded PX and commissary parking lots (right between those reserved for general officers and the handicapped). He then caused a command regulation to be written that gave him virtual veto power over every action concerning NCOs: hiring, firing, and Enlisted Evaluation Reports all had to have his approval. It soon became easier to relieve a captain company commander than to relieve a CSM. This placed brigade commanders in the situation of having their actions reversed if the CSM nonconcurred.

The business of relieving and firing a CSM has now been written into regulations in a very strange manner. If a commissioned officer has been selected for command and then is subsequently relieved, he is not going to command again. Although not formally removed from a "program," his chances of being selected to command are slim to none. The simple act of

relief is all it takes. Not so for a CSM. After a Sergeant Major has been selected for the CSM program, his protection is far greater than that offered his commissioned commander. If he is relieved, he is not automatically removed from the CSM program. A formal request must be submitted, and it takes at least a major general to approve the removal action.

Another indication of the dual-command mentality was seen at a division review a couple of years ago. As each battalion passed the reviewing stand, the announcer would state, "The 2d Battalion commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Jones and Command Sergeant Major Smith!" On this particular occasion, the corps commander happened to be present and did not take well at all to the shared-responsibility theme, later asking the division commander to have another look at who was commanding what in his battalions. Every time we hint that NCOs are the exclusive link between the soldier and the Army, we further isolate the junior and senior officers from their essential troop-leading know-how.

But what about training? What does the CSM program do for the training of young soldiers and NCOs? Don said it very forcefully: "There is no damn need for a CSM above brigade level. If Sergeants Major were doing what is really needed in our Army, they would be in battalions and brigades, leading and teaching. Above that level they are not in touch with people, and CSMs ought to be in the people business. Say what you want, there aren't any people above brigade; divisions and corps are not in the people business, they're in the things business." Today in the trenches we need all the mature enlisted talent we can get! What a boon to the battalion and brigade to push the senior enlisted soldiers now in sedans back onto the firing ranges and training grounds of the Real Army!

**M**any officers who have served at division, corps, and army level have reached the same conclusion. The CSM at division and corps level is more ornamental and ceremonial than functional. If the wrong man is placed in the position and his commander gives him free rein, the chances for disruption are almost assured. Obviously, there are many exceptions to this generalization; however, it takes only one knuckleheaded NCO (as it does with officers) at a high level to turn the entire command upside down.

What does the CSM program cost the Army? Under close and tough analysis could a convincing case be made that it is cost-effective? That's doubtful. The fact is that considerable cost is involved in the maintenance of a CSM at division, corps, major command, and higher level, most of which is hidden and is therefore seldom called into question.

By table of organization, the CSM is not authorized a personal staff; yet almost every CSM has one. At a minimum, he has a driver to operate the unauthorized vehicle "assigned" to the CSM. At division or higher level, there is usually a clerk/typist added to handle the CSM's official correspondence. At higher levels, the support can get even plusher.



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Aggregate these off-line staffs for all the CSMs across the Army, and the total of unauthorized people and assets becomes considerable. Further add travel expenses of CSMs assigned to major commands, and CSM conference costs, and the tab builds even more. Further add to this the costs for the time and energy expended each time the CSM from “higher” comes to post, and the dollar figure becomes downright alarming, especially in this time of diminishing resources.

Don now serves as the first Honorary Sergeant Major for his wartime regiment, a duty he takes very seriously. He has visited the regiment, which is still on the rolls, and come away with continuing concern over CSM issues. “CSMs are too powerful, and they still don’t know the fine line between being the commander’s advisor and the commander’s informer. The fault rests with the officers. Until the officers decide what they want the CSMs to do and teach them to do it—well, it’s not going to get any better.” Pressed for solutions, he came up with the following ideas to serve as starters:

- *The commander ought to be allowed to pick his CSM.* The commander and the CSM must be a team. Thus the commander needs someone he has professional confidence in. The shoe has to fit or we’ll wind up with lots of blisters. CSM reliefs and reassignment rates are way too high today partially because everybody but the commander concerned is picking his CSM.

- *There needs to be a program for CSM upward progression.* They should be allowed to go up or lateral, but down only when they agree. But the top of the pile ought to be brigade.

- *The Army needs to reach a consensus on CSM duties.* That consensus has to be taught to both officers and NCOs. Perhaps we need to study how other armies select and use Sergeants Major. Our British cousins have Sergeants Major, but none are Command Sergeants Major.

- *Commanders need to tell subordinates the limits of the CSM’s power (and there must be limits).* Until this is done, CSMs are going to exceed their charter.

- *CSMs should be required to be First Sergeants before selection for the CSM program.* This will slow down promotions to CSM, but those

unwilling to wait probably are not the type that would make good CSMs to begin with. We need the type who is *forced* to give up being a First Sergeant.

- *The power to fire an NCO should be put back where it belongs, with the responsible commanders!* Firing an NCO should result in reduction in rank. When contemplating relief and reduction in grade, officers must get over this business of whining, "But he was such a good soldier for 22 years."

- *Revise the Sergeants Major Academy's program of instruction so that the Academy produces Sergeants Major who are worth something to a battalion.* We need troop trainers and leaders. Colonels and lieutenant colonels, not NCOs, are supposed to be studying national strategy.

- *Provide an environment where being an NCO is a calling, not a job.* Make units a place where good NCOs want to serve and not just a way-station where they punch their tickets en route to higher levels. This is a key problem, and every officer in our Army should be thinking about it.

- *Make damn sure that commanders understand that the CSM's role concerns training NCOs and enlisted soldiers.* The training of officers is the responsibility of the officer corps.

The Army's Command Sergeants Major program is a soldier program that, if not broken, at least needs an awful lot of fine-tuning. There are hundreds of superb CSMs in the Army working their hearts out for their soldiers and their units. If we can get all of them working and pulling in the same direction, it will make our Army the best in the world. It cannot be done without NCOs and their proven dedication. But the basic task of fixing the program, and thus getting our senior enlisteds to sing from the same sheet of music, rests with the senior officer corps.

Our Army has been blessed by having soldiers like Frank, Henry, and Don. We are all better for having had them march among us. Their loyalty and love of service and mastery of soldiering have inspired all who have had the honor to serve with them. In our rush to accept the modern equipage into our ranks, we would do well to pause and reflect on the Franks, the Henrys, and the Dons. They provide a vision of an NCO corps which, despite its rough edges and imperfections, served this nation nobly. In our commendable effort to further professionalize the corps, it is vital that we not turn it into a legion of rarified and perfumed princes, fitter to carry a tale than a rifle or a wounded comrade.

#### NOTES

1. For rhetorical convenience, the authors refer to themselves in the first-person singular in scenes portraying their experiences with NCOs. However, the particular experiences as recounted pertained to only one or the other of the authors, not to both.

2. Department of the Army, *Army Command Policy and Procedures*, Army Regulation 600-20 (Washington: GPO, 1986). See para. 2-3 and 4-2.

3. Department of the Army, *The Army Noncommissioned Officer Guide*, Field Manual 22-600-20 (Washington: GPO, 1986). See particularly pp. 21-24, 47-49.