

Noncommissioned Officers/ Petty Officers: Who They Are, What They Do

As we finished another evening meal at this forward operating base, I was drawn to a familiar commotion. A U.S. Army gun truck team led by a staff sergeant arrived barely in time to catch a late dinner. It was obvious this team had just returned from another grueling combat mission on the road. They looked tired, tattered, and hungry. Still wearing full body armor and carrying their rifles properly slung and secured, they made their way to the meal line. The NCO stayed back, allowing his team to get their meals and eat first. As the most junior ranking member, a private first class, passed him, the sergeant placed a comforting hand on the young man's shoulder and asked, "Hanging in there, Adams?" "Hooah, staff sergeant," the Soldier replied reassuringly as he grabbed a tray and utensils. The staff sergeant was the last to join his team at their table. They enjoyed a brief time of comradeship as he quickly scooped down his meal, and within minutes, began gathering his equipment. Standing back up, he informed the men that he was off to brief battalion, placing his next ranking sergeant in charge, and leaving in a hurry.

I often find myself thinking back to that deployment and to that evening. I admired the solidarity and cohesion that existed among that gun truck unit and the comportment of that NCO. It was apparent to me that he was the mainstay of that team. He demonstrated competence, confidence, and a tireless

sense of duty to his cause, his command, and his comrades in arms. He placed the needs and well-being of his team ahead of his own, without sacrificing established standards, discipline, or ethical behavior. He served not only as a leader to his men, but a follower to his leadership. He embodied the strength, versatility, selflessness, grit, and dedication of the enlisted military professional, and he personified the reason why noncommissioned officers and petty officers are, indeed, the Backbone of the U.S. Armed Forces.

This personal account from a senior noncommissioned officer who observed the scene is just one depiction of the noncommissioned officer/petty officer in action, as seen through the eyes of a fellow Servicemember. Similar stories of NCO/PO dedication are found in the memories of veterans of World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and other conflicts of the 20th and 21st centuries. Not all of these stories unfold in a war zone; some occurred in stateside barracks, on ships in homeport, and at airbases around the globe. But what do they have in common?

Regardless of Service, every NCO/PO shares a core essence and ancestry grounded in ready obedience, selfless dedication, and uncompromising integrity. As stewards of the enlisted force, NCOs/POs serve as protectors, guides, and guardians to America's sons and daughters who have committed themselves to defending the Constitution, as well as the Nation's values, freedoms, and way of life. They are responsible for developing, preparing, sustaining, and advancing the enlisted force to meet the challenges of the 21st-century global security environment. Whether viewed through the eyes of a fellow enlisted Servicemember, commissioned officer, retired veteran, citizen of a foreign nation, parent, spouse, or child, today's NCOs/POs are the quintessential leaders to their subordinates, loyal followers to their leaders, and an inspiration to all.

The Servant-Leader

The Armed Forces preserve a legacy of loyalty, honor, commitment, and perseverance that has stood the test of time and the hardships of conflict and chaos. A deeper look reveals the rich history of the NCO/

PO in shouldering immense responsibility as trusted leaders and serving proudly at the forefront. The trust, granted by their commands and witnessed by the American people, relies on their conduct and character to ensure that the members of the Armed Forces perform to the standards expected of them. As empowered leaders of the enlisted force, NCOs/POs are in the most advantageous position to influence, motivate, and develop their Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, Airmen, and Coastguardsmen so that they enthusiastically *want* to work toward and achieve the goals established for the common good. As disciplined and devoted professionals, they follow orders and faithfully carry out responsibilities while ensuring that they themselves, and the men and women in their charge, comply with all laws and regulations and exercise sound moral reasoning to ensure highly ethical conduct.

From the most junior NCO/PO to the most senior enlisted advisors across the five Service branches, NCOs/POs are skilled and professional leaders, critical to all levels of military organization and command. While all those who have successfully completed initial military training have proudly earned the title of Soldier, Marine, Sailor, Airman, or Coastguardsman, NCOs/POs are the specially trusted leaders who provide an indispensable and irreplaceable linkage between command guidance and mission execution. They are the competent, credible, and capable servant-leaders who influence and impact every aspect of an organization's operations, administration, and climate. They embody and enforce high standards and live by an austere code of conduct, maintaining an ethical and moral high ground and unwavering dedication to duty. A true and devoted NCO/PO is the embodiment of responsibility and accountability, never shirking his duty.

As technical and functional experts, specialized practitioners, and advisors steeped in tactics, techniques, and procedures, NCOs/POs carry out both the art and the science of the Profession of Arms. Subordinates and commanders alike draw upon enlisted leaders' expertise and experience to achieve mission objectives and depend on them as leaders and managers. NCOs/POs are expected to acquire and employ applicable resources efficiently and effectively, to think critically to prevent and solve problems. Moreover, they must be able to communicate continually up, down, and across Service, joint, and coalition chains of command. They accrue extensive practical

experience and specialized training, professional military education, and mentoring, all of which further enhance their capabilities. It is through this dynamic process of development and maturation that NCOs/POs emerge from the ranks as the most seasoned Servicemembers capable of not only leading the enlisted force of today but also developing military leaders for tomorrow.

Heroic and righteous acts of selfless physical and moral courage highlight the history and fidelity of the NCO/PO—sometimes incredible deeds performed for the sake of their fellow Servicemembers, their nation, and its vital interests. But NCOs/POs contribute every day, in ways small and large, obvious and subtle, in war and in peace, overseas and at home. Each action, decision, and behavior is a reflection of that individual military member's character and professionalism. NCOs/POs cultivate the virtues of decency, fairness, honesty, humility, integrity, and valor through their own actions—by walking the walk, not simply talking the talk. They play a vital role in upholding the tradition and image of the Profession of Arms by instilling its noble qualities in others. It is the skill and character of NCOs/POs that earn the admiration, trust, and respect of their subordinates, peers, superiors, and the American people.

The will to serve in the U.S. military is ignited by an unmatched desire to safeguard the life, liberty, and freedom that all Americans cherish, and others may envy. The patriotic flame that burns within every Servicemember is sometimes threatened and can occasionally flicker from the rigors and realities of the arduous lifestyle in the U.S. military, but it will never be extinguished. America's military serves around the world, often in uncertain and dangerous situations far from the comforts of home. Such circumstances test resilience, will, and wits. Commanders and subordinates alike count on the expertise and perseverance of their NCOs/POs to ensure that the enlisted force is physically and mentally prepared to face the rigors and challenges of high-tempo operations and expeditionary environments, as well as seeing to the more routine yet important work of providing training, maintenance, and professional development of subordinates. NCOs/POs nurture individual and organizational well-being by genuinely caring for their subordinates and promoting morale and esprit de corps within their units. They demonstrate compassion, empathy,

and support for fellow Servicemembers and their families who may be struggling with adversity and loss. They foster programs and activities that promote camaraderie, a healthy social support network, and a sense of belonging within and beyond their organizations.

NCOs/POs in the Organization

Noncommissioned officers/petty officers are the leadership cadre that ensures the mission of the unit or organization can and will be accomplished. They do so by sustaining and motivating the enlisted force. By teaching, coaching, and mentoring the force, and by instilling a sense of unity, purpose, good order, and discipline—and demanding compliance with standards, tradition, culture, customs, and courtesies—they are looked upon as the organization's pillars of strength and loyalty. They are professional servant-leaders who are undeterred by the chaos, complexity, uncertainty, fog, and friction that can infiltrate the formations. They have presence. When young military members look up from a difficult task for purpose, strength, and guidance, it is the NCO/PO they see first. NCOs/POs continually strive to attain ever higher levels of personal, professional, and technical competence in order to be more effective, and they inspire confidence and esprit de corps both in those appointed over them and in those who look to them for leadership. NCOs/POs influence and develop their subordinates through personal example and engaged supervision. NCOs/POs relish taking on challenging tasks—that is what they are developed for and trained to do, and it is one of the many reasons they are acknowledged and respected throughout the world.

The traits, qualities, and competencies that NCOs/POs develop within their respective Services enable them to carry out their fundamental roles and responsibilities as the team-builders, force-multipliers, problem-solvers, implementers, and enforcers who take plans and orders from concept to completion. They lead and execute assigned and implied tasks competently, without hesitation. The collective capacity of the NCO/PO ranks, junior to senior, represents a formidable leadership cadre that adds value to the organization. Because they are the leaders closest to the force, NCOs/POs have the greatest effect on accomplishing organizational goals and achieving mission success.

They help to keep the organization functioning by maintaining open and effective support channels, while efficiently conducting day-to-day operations within the framework of prescribed policies and directives. Most importantly, they prepare the organization for its wartime mission. NCOs/POs neither relinquish what is right nor allow deviations from law, policies, command guidance, and established standards. At the same time, they are expected to display insight and exercise sound judgment and common sense, as well as ingenuity and innovation. They take the necessary risks and are confident in seeking out the inputs of the team, realizing that at times the most effective ideas can come from a subordinate closer to the problem.

NCOs/POs are a commander's treasure, a source of seasoned perspectives that transcends place in the organizational hierarchy, a place neatly balanced between mission and people. They provide the commander and officer corps with unique insights and actionable perspectives while also providing an enlisted voice in matters concerning operations, administration, readiness, and the well-being of the force. They contribute directly to the development of organizational goals, objectives, and courses of action that enhance operational effectiveness. Furthermore, NCOs/POs convey an essential element of experience (art) as well as skills and competencies (science) on all matters concerning organizational capacity and command climate. They are the trusted counselors for the commissioned leaders, enhancing the officers' abilities to lead and/or command effectively.

The officer-NCO/PO relationship is one of the hallmarks of the Armed Forces and a key element in unit effectiveness. Examples include:

- pilot and crew chief
- division officer and leading petty officer
- platoon leader and platoon sergeant
- section officer-in-charge and chief petty officer
- flight commander and flight chief
- company commander and first sergeant
- maintenance officer and superintendent
- cutter commanding officer and collateral duty unit command chief

- submarine captain and chief of the boat
- regimental commander and sergeant major
- brigade commander and command sergeant major
- wing commander and command chief master sergeant
- fleet commander and fleet master chief petty officer
- combatant commander and command senior enlisted leader
- Service chief and Service senior enlisted advisor
- Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman.

Empowered

NCOs/POs across all Services and domains are accountable for their personal actions, as well as for the actions of their subordinates. They are empowered with responsibilities and authorities to maintain good order and discipline at all times. Even after normal duty hours, on weekends, and on holidays, when NCOs/POs are out of uniform, they remain NCOs/POs. They must carry out all obligatory and entrusted responsibilities to ensure that standards, obedience, and discipline are upheld *at all times*, both by themselves and any Servicemember within sight or hearing. Furthermore, they are never “off duty” when it comes to the well-being of their subordinates. Even at 0200 hours on a weekend, the NCO/PO does not hesitate to respond to a subordinate’s crisis.

NCOs/POs are provided certain legal authorities that support their abilities to maintain good order and discipline of the force supporting the command’s mission. Under the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), Article 91 provides for punishment for insubordinate conduct toward any warrant officer, noncommissioned officer, or petty officer. Additionally, Article 92 provides for punishment for failure to obey an order or regulation. The NCO/PO may also be delegated authorities by the commander, which are dependent on Service doctrine, organizational position, and predetermined levels of responsibility and accountability. For example, a Coast Guard master chief petty officer, while serving as an officer-in-charge of a river tender, would have non-judicial punishment authority over the crew unless it is withheld by a superior authority. The *Manual for Courts-Martial* allows commanders to empower NCOs/POs with administering extra-military instruction

(also known as extra training) to subordinates who need additional tutelage and development.

Regardless of Service branch or category, the UCMJ authorizes all noncommissioned officers/petty officers in the official performance of their duties to place any individual under military apprehension who appears to be in violation of the code. These examples of empowerment and authority are not taken lightly and are one of the many tools that make the U.S. enlisted leader unique from other nations' militaries.

While there may be profound differences among the Services in doctrine, culture, and identity, the various enlisted creeds all convey the key qualities of leadership, allegiance, competency, and responsibility to the profession, to the organization's senior leadership, and to the men and women under their charge. The various Service creeds charge NCOs/POs to lead, develop, and inspire others to support and defend the Constitution, keep the Nation secure, and uphold the standards of their charters (see appendix C).

The formal chain of command is a foundational feature of any military organization. It establishes lines of authority and communication at each echelon and assigns requisite levels of responsibility and accountability for the conduct of day-to-day operations for the organization's garrison and wartime mission. The chain of command promotes unity of purpose by facilitating an efficient communications process for commanders to convey their guidance and intent (statement of purpose) to the members of the organization, thus ensuring their orders are passed down accurately and carried out effectively. It provides a means for members of the unit to raise their concerns, achieve clarity in complex issues, and resolve problems. NCOs/POs are an invaluable and essential link in the chain of command. They add value and purpose at every level, and as a leadership cadre they ensure the organization remains strong and responsive.

Accountability is a keystone principle of the Profession of Arms. It is intrinsic to each echelon of the chain of command. It ensures that orders will be carried out and mission objectives will be achieved. Integral to unity of command, accountability is related directly to positional responsibility and is deeply rooted in trust and confidence. Each Service places extraordinary trust and confidence in its NCO/PO corps, knowing that mission accomplishment and the lives of others

are at stake. Trust and confidence can be observed commonly in the synchronized and professional relationships between officers and NCOs/POs. In the absence of a commissioned officer in charge, the experienced NCO/PO is assumed to possess the positional authority, qualifications, and ability to step in and lead the mission. This concept is an essential component of U.S. military doctrine and is vital to each Service's expectations for its NCOs/POs. If the platoon leader becomes incapacitated, the platoon sergeant assumes command through mission completion or relief by higher authority. The trust and confidence that officers have in NCOs/POs can be seen in countless instances when a mission, operation, activity, or effort must continue in the absence of the otherwise responsible officer.

Given their experience and ability to influence and guide others, NCOs/POs are a decisive factor in the force's ability to forge ahead through friction points, adversity, and uncertainty in order to accomplish the mission. They do so by maintaining a high degree of situational awareness and by keeping the force informed of mission purpose, unit contribution, and overall effect. NCOs/POs understand mission objectives and are adept at clarifying and accurately conveying the commander's guidance and intent in the face of changing conditions. They do this in meaningful words with a self-assured manner that in turn instills confidence in the force and provides an azimuth to success. Effective organizational communications (vertical and horizontal) require openness, inclusiveness, approachability, and an ability to translate abstract issues into concrete and meaningful terms. Their distinctive know-how also enables NCOs/POs to make sound recommendations and develop and convey effective courses of action vital to any high-performing organization. Perhaps the essence of NCO/PO organizational communication may be summed up in the answers to three questions: "What do I know? Who needs to know? Have I told them—with a sense of urgency?"

The noteworthy contributions of NCOs/POs fully support and sustain the standards of the Profession of Arms. They are competent, credible, and capable leaders who pledge themselves to the profession, embody its ethos, and develop and influence others to adhere to a selfless calling of service. With commissioned officers, NCOs/POs lead the force to provide for the common defense. They are particularly

responsible for the lives and welfare of their most precious charge—the men and women they lead. NCOs/POs preserve the integrity of the profession by keeping a discerning eye on compliance and discipline, and they perform a critical role in policing the ranks as well as developing future leaders.

Force development and sustainment are paramount leadership priorities for NCOs/POs. They impress upon the force that the principal requirement of the Profession of Arms is the ethical and effective application of the military element of national power. They teach, coach, and mentor their subordinates in the art and science of armed conflict. NCOs/POs help maintain a high quality force by ensuring that a healthy and positive environment exists for all members. They are intimately involved in appraising the performance of the enlisted personnel under their supervision and, when appropriate, recommending them for retention, grade advancement, increased levels of responsibility, or even discharge. They also advance the enlisted force by contributing to the individual development of subordinates, conducting enlisted professional military education programs at each level, and fostering a continuous learning environment for both professional and personal development. While their primary focus and efforts are placed on leading and developing the enlisted force, NCOs/POs do contribute significantly to the development of junior and midgrade officers as well because of their knowledge, experience, and insights.

The Profession of Arms is unique in the sense that even the longest military career is short compared to most other recognized professions. Relatively young NCOs/POs lead a dynamic force that includes a disproportionate share of even younger, less experienced men and women. As the stewards of the institution, NCOs/POs ensure continuity of military traditions, culture, identity, standards, and methods of operating as new generations fall into formation. By exercising the principle of bridging the basics, the NCO/PO perpetuates the legacy of service by the increasingly bright, committed, and capable future generations who will proudly wear the cloth of the Nation. No matter what their age or experience, all members of the Profession of Arms will follow an engaged NCO/PO who works tirelessly to enhance the effectiveness of the organization—and who genuinely cares for and appreciates the contributions and sacrifices of its members.

Few volunteer to serve the Nation in the Armed Forces, and even fewer are selected to be its trusted leaders. NCOs/POs carry out this enormous responsibility by maintaining a unique balance between mission and people, along with steadfast commitment and vigor that neither waver nor yield in the face of uncertainty or complexity.

Serving as an NCO/PO is not for the faint of heart. It is a daunting responsibility and a way of life that calls for substantial sacrifice and unfailing loyalty. Despite all this, the men and women who wear these ranks do so with boundless discipline, obedience, commitment, and enthusiasm. From the inception of the Continental Army in 1775 to the collective capacity of the interoperable Armed Forces today, America's NCOs/POs have established their legacy as servant-leaders. An indispensable link between mission command and execution, they serve as force enablers leading by example. Our nation's citizens look to the Armed Forces as the vanguard of freedom and to its noncommissioned officers/petty officers as the Backbone of that force.



James R. Evans

Captain Bruce H. Lindsey, left, commanding officer of the USS Carl Vinson (CVN 70), administers Oath of Enlistment to Sailors during a ceremony at the USS Arizona Memorial in Joint Base Pearl Harbor–Hickam, Hawaii, June 9, 2011. The Sailors are, left to right, Quartermaster 1st Class Reed T. Gonzales, Aviation Ordnanceman 3rd Class John C. Anthony, Information Systems Technician 2nd Class Sarah M. Peachey, and Aviation Machinist's Mate 1st Class Jason C. Evans