

The Profession of Arms: An Ancient and Honorable Tradition

The Profession of Arms is much older than our young country. The profession emerged over the centuries, arising from the need to defend a nation's territory, culture, ideals, and people. Its members were the noble few who stood for what was morally right and ethically just, who endured the burdens, and who fought to defend their nation's interests or to shield those who could not protect themselves:

From the beginning of man's recorded history physical force, or the threat of it, has always been freely applied to the resolution of social problems. The function of the profession of arms is the ordered application of force in the resolution of a social problem. It has evolved into a profession, not only in the wider sense of what is professed, but in the narrower sense of an occupation with a distinguishable corpus of specific technical knowledge and doctrine, a more or less exclusive group coherence, a complex of institutions peculiar to itself, an educational pattern adapted to its own specific needs, a career structure of its own and a distinct place in the society which has brought it forth.¹

Those who answer this call and embody the warrior spirit are the few who are prepared to give what President Abraham Lincoln described as their "last full measure of devotion" in order to serve a higher cause.²

The Profession of Arms in the United States

Those who proudly wear the uniforms of the U.S. Armed Forces are steeped in that broader history and tradition, but they are also the inheritors of the unique tradition of the Profession of Arms in the United States that dates back to the earliest days of the Republic, and in the case of the National Guard units, beyond. Before the American Revolution, colonial towns mustered a militia when needed. At the onset of the Revolutionary War, the 13 colonies had only militias comprised of more or less unskilled troops to defend against a professionally trained British army. Once the war began, the Continental Congress created a Continental Army on June 14, 1775, and established an initial enlistment of 1 year. Later, when the Founding Fathers wrote the Preamble to the Constitution, they identified the fundamental requirements of a national government. Providing for the common defense was fourth among them:

*We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.*³

Article I, Section 8, and Article II, Section 2, provide the constitutional framework for the Armed Forces of the United States. The Army, Marine Corps, and Navy predate the Constitution. The Coast Guard came a bit later, and the Air Force emerged in 1947 as a separate Service after World War II. Though young compared to some allied militaries, the U.S. military has formally existed for over two centuries. The U.S. Armed Forces have continually evolved through advancements in education, training, and professional development.

On his first day as the 18th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin E. Dempsey wrote a letter to the Joint Force in which he addressed his view on the Profession of Arms in the United States: “We must renew our commitment to the Profession of Arms. We’re not a profession simply because we say we’re a profession. We must

continue to learn, to understand, and to promote the knowledge, skills, attributes, and behaviors that define us as a profession.”⁴

But what constitutes a profession? A profession is made up of practitioners performing a kind of knowledge-based work in which the workers enjoy a high degree of independence in application of particular skills. A profession generally has four basic elements: a specialized practical expertise, an acknowledged responsibility to society, a sense of corporateness, and a professional ethos.⁵

First, a profession possesses a specialized body of theoretical and practical knowledge developed through extensive education, training, and experience. The military’s core expertise is in the ethical application of force on behalf of the Nation. This work of developing and conveying a body of knowledge takes place in military schoolhouses throughout a career. This learning journey is guided by an established or “doctrinal” plan of continuous education and professional development that unfolds as one advances in the profession. As the operating environment evolves and technology advances, the learning process must adapt.

Second, a profession has an acknowledged responsibility to provide an important and specialized service to the larger society. In the case of the medical profession, the service is preserving and enhancing the health of the population. In the Profession of Arms, it is providing for “the common defence” by prevention and deterrence of war and, if necessary, facing adversaries through kinetic and nonkinetic means in order to achieve national objectives. Every profession has, in effect, a compact with the larger society. Society grants the profession certain powers, privileges, and prerogatives not normally granted to others; in exchange, the profession provides reliable and longstanding service to society. Most particularly, members of professions are granted wide discretionary latitude in performance of their specialist duties.

Third, a profession generally has a sense of corporateness, a shared sense of mutual identity. This includes having a formally recognized role in determining, within limits, who may enter the profession and who may remain in it. Members of the profession certify and credential individual professionals at appropriate levels of competence within their specialized fields of knowledge. The levels of certification and expertise often reflect the progression within a profession. This

progression reflects the older notion of apprentice, journeyman, and master. This certification is seen at every skill level within military occupational specialties, as well as in professional military education institutions for both specialized and general skills.

The fourth and final element of a profession is that it generally has a commonly accepted ethos, an ethical framework or code that guides and governs the behavior of its membership. The ethos binds members together in a common calling. The Profession of Arms shares a warrior ethos. The fundamental ideals and virtues of the Profession of Arms transcend time and cultures. Among these, but not all inclusive, are discipline, courage, honor, loyalty, duty, integrity, and endurance. In the United States, the members of this noble profession are held to a higher standard of conduct than most of their fellow citizens. They are required to follow a unique set of laws and a code that guides them morally and ethically, while preparing for—and during—the heat of battle. This code is what separates them from mere criminals, savages, mercenaries, and terrorists. They bear arms and share risks out of necessity at the call of their nation, not out of enjoyment or uncivilized greed. For U.S. military personnel, the requirements of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, the six articles of the U.S. Armed Forces Code of Conduct, and the respective Service creeds and core values guide and govern professional behavior. The Oath of Enlistment formalizes the commitment each military member assumes:

I, _____, do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God.⁶

The Oath of Enlistment has endured the test of time as a public acknowledgment of an obligation to support and defend the Constitution at all costs. The first pre-constitutional oath was established by the Continental Congress during the Revolutionary War to enlist men into the Continental Army. Our forefathers saw the need for an oath

to renounce any residual obligations of allegiance to King George III and to ensure loyalty to the newly formed Continental Congress. Two oaths were established on June 14, 1775, one for enlisted and one for officers. The enlisted oath has slightly evolved over time, but the power within the message has remained consistent. Pronounced aloud, it is a public manifestation of the solemn commitment each military member makes to support and defend the Constitution. The swearing of the oath is done ceremonially. Traditionally, there is a U.S. flag at the site, and upon conclusion of the oath, there is a handshake of congratulations between the administering officer and the enlistee. The flag represents the Nation the new military member promises to serve.

Those who take this oath share a bond of dedication and service in which they legitimately take great pride. The first Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Command Sergeant Major William Gainey, USA, spoke of this pride in remarks to a group of noncommissioned officers: “You are the people who give this country and its people their freedoms. . . . Always remember when people ask you what you do for a living to hold your head up high, look them square in the eye, and say with pride ‘I’m in the military.’ Pride is contagious.”⁷

Out of our entire nation and its territories, only a small percentage of citizens answer the call to enlist as members of the Profession of Arms. Since 1973, they have done so voluntarily. Servicemembers near the end of their contract, if the nature of their service warrants it, have the ability to re-enlist and renew their commitment. This usually has a reinvigorating effect on the Servicemembers, their comrades in arms, and their families. The individual Services re-enlist their members, but they *retain* their families. Re-enlistment is a reciprocal display of trust and cohesion between the military family and the Service, as both of them share the member.

NCOs/POs play an important role in the re-enlistment process. They act as moral guides and help junior enlisted Servicemembers balance the demands of life, family, and the continuous commitment to the Nation. They are the eyes and ears of their commanders and have a responsibility to the readiness of the organization. They have a relevant say in who is best qualified for continued service. This is another dimension of the special bond and relationship between the NCO/PO

and officer. NCOs/POs mentor junior enlisted Servicemembers and participate in the retention decisionmaking process.

Re-enlisting and renewing the commitment is a very special occasion. Servicemembers traditionally get to pick where and how they want to re-enlist. Some have held their ceremonies aboard aircraft and then rappelled or parachuted out, some re-enlist underwater, others on the battlefield, and some even at sports arenas in front of thousands and perhaps millions. The honor and privilege of re-enlisting is just as sacred to the re-enlisting official as it is to the re-enlisting member.

The Oath of Enlistment is the public agreement that allows one to enter or re-enter this age-old profession. Since the beginning of the Nation, millions have publicly professed, sworn, or affirmed the Oath of Enlistment. The oath is a legal and binding agreement that is the prerequisite to becoming a member of the Armed Forces. Service is a calling, a vocation that only a small percentage of our nation will accept in their lifetimes. Noncommissioned officers/petty officers fully understand what it means to be a member of the Profession of Arms and the Armed Forces of the United States.

The Journey in the Profession

Former Sergeant Major of the Army Kenneth Preston described his profession aptly: “Just as other professions have entry level or apprentice, mid-level or journeyman, and senior or expert levels within their professions, we have levels of competence within our Army.”⁸ After swearing/affirming the Oath of Enlistment, one has legally provided a verbal and written commitment to the U.S. Government and its people. Certification and testing to become a full-fledged professional member of the Armed Forces are achieved upon completion of specific basic training/boot camp where one earns the prestigious title of Soldier, Marine, Sailor, Airman, or Coastguardsman. Upon graduation and attaining that military-specific professional designation, individuals have earned the basic certification as members of the Profession of Arms. The next step in the journey is to progress to military occupational specialty/rate training, after which apprentice professionals move onto their first duty stations or ships, or if they are members of the U.S. Armed Forces Reserve component, into a Reserve/National

Guard unit where they will complete skill training and begin to build experience that will lead them to become journeymen, and potentially masters, in the Profession of Arms.

Achieving credentials and certifications for military specialties through either formal schooling or on the job training is challenging. The profession demands it be that way because excellence is the standard. A vital part of reaching that standard is the presence of engaged NCOs/POs at all levels. They are the leaders empowered by their chain of command and trusted by the American people to uphold and enforce the standards of the Profession of Arms.

Notes

¹ General Sir John Winthrop Hackett, *The Profession of Arms* (New York: Macmillan, 1983), 9.

² Abraham Lincoln, "Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Cemetery at Gettysburg, 19 November 1863," in *Abraham Lincoln: Great Speeches* (New York: Dover Publications, 1991), 104.

³ The Constitution of the United States, available at <www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution.html>.

⁴ General Martin E. Dempsey, "Letter to the Joint Force," October 1, 2011, available at <www.dodlive.mil/index.php/2011/10/general-dempseys-letter-to-the-joint-force/>.

⁵ The first three elements are borrowed from Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985), 8–18.

⁶ Oaths of Enlistment and Oaths of Office, available at <www.history.army.mil/html/faq/oaths.html>.

⁷ William Gainey, "SEAC Visits Goodfellow," *Air Force Print News Today*, July 2007, available at <www.goodfellow.af.mil/news/story_print.asp?id=123063260>.

⁸ Kenneth O. Preston, "We Are Professionals," *The NCO Journal*, February 2011, 4.



Aneshea Yee

Marine Staff Sergeant Shakisha Traynham, Platoon 4032, Oscar Company, 4th Recruit Training Battalion, Recruit Training Regiment, Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, Eastern Recruiting Region, looks left to right to make sure there are no corrections that need to be made before continuing on to the next drill movement during initial drill, August 29, 2011, aboard Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island