

Steward of the Institution

The scene is a grand ballroom. All eyes are glued to the center stage where a cake, on a cart, is marched forward between two columns of sword-carrying honor guards. The cake is beautifully decorated. Those in attendance are in their most ceremonial uniforms. Around the cake is a diverse mix of personnel, young and old, junior and senior. A Marine produces a sword from the cart and uses it to slice the elegant cake. The first piece is presented to the guest of honor. He takes a bite and smiles in appreciation. As the next piece is sliced off with the sword, the narrator announces, “The next piece is presented to the oldest Marine present. . . . Tonight the oldest Marine is Master Gunnery Sergeant Johnson. Master Gunnery Sergeant Johnson was born 48 years ago in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He enlisted in the Marine Corps 30 years ago and is currently assigned to Headquarters Marine Corps.” The oldest Marine present then passes his piece of cake to the youngest Marine present. The narrator continues, “The passing of the cake from the oldest Marine to the youngest Marine symbolizes the passing of history and traditions from one generation to the next. . . . The youngest Marine present tonight is Private Jones. She was born 19 years ago in San Diego, California. She enlisted in the Marine Corps one year ago and is currently assigned to Headquarters Marine Corps.”

The U.S. Marine Corps birthday cake-cutting ceremony represents a larger, deeper sense of unity and purpose inherent in the Profession of Arms, which spans generations. It also exemplifies a lineage

of service to the Nation that embodies the unique culture and identity of the Corps. Additionally, it draws on the ethos of the Profession of Arms, which instills in its members a sense of pride and camaraderie, and inspires them to undertake endeavors that may require the “last full measure of devotion,”¹ which President Lincoln saluted in his Gettysburg Address.

The entrusting of history, customs, traditions, and standards by one generation to the next is a sacred duty. The institutions of the Armed Forces are given to the current generation by the proud warriors who came before. But these institutions do not belong to any one generation. The hallowed traditions of each Service branch belong to all the generations that came before, those who serve now, and those who will follow. The present generation simply preserves these treasures in trust for the future members of the force. This makes each and every member of the Armed Forces a *steward of the institution*. A steward is a guardian, a caretaker. Stewardship refers to a responsibility to take care of and improve something one does not own. In medieval times, a steward cared for a lord’s household. In the end, the household is not the steward’s to keep. The steward is expected to return the household in as good or better a condition than when he received it.

Joining the Armed Forces is a significant event for every young adult who dons the uniform. New members are expected to learn the history and the way of life that define their respective Service branches. Traditions are a defining part of the Profession of Arms, and they transcend the life cycle and career of all military members, officer and enlisted. Some traditions are presented at the time of entry into the Armed Forces. Others are passed on and practiced later. As members progress in their careers, they will be exposed to more traditions that commemorate specific events, promotions to specific ranks, and professional milestones. For example, one of the most celebrated and significant events in the Navy and Coast Guard is the advancement to the chief petty officer ranks in which the “Chiefs’ Mess” welcomes new chiefs through a series of tasks and challenges. When petty officers become chief petty officers, not only do their responsibilities and duties grow, but their uniforms and social networks change as well. As members of the Chiefs’ Mess, they have significantly greater responsibility, as well as the support and counsel of all the senior enlisted members

of the command. At this point, each chief selectee has traditionally received intense orientation and indoctrination into many proud and storied traditions of the sea, thereby carrying on continued leadership development and nurturing of the newest formation of chief petty officers.

Traditions

Each of the Services that comprise the Armed Forces contributes to the defense of the Nation, its values, and its way of life. While the sum of these Services together is greater than any of the parts, it is important to maintain the remarkable flavor of each unique, individual Service. *E pluribus unum* (Latin for “Out of many, one”) was the unofficial motto of the United States until 1956.² This simple phrase captures the sense that America as a nation is derived from many sources and traditions. It is this unity out of diversity that makes the Nation great, and it is the same unity out of diversity that makes the U.S. military a powerful, unified, and effective all-volunteer force.

In these early decades of the 21st century, NCOs/POs are more likely than their predecessors to serve in joint and multinational organizations. They may even find that they are the senior enlisted representatives of their respective Service branches, and as such it is their responsibility to represent their Services’ traditions and standards. In other words, individual histories, lineage, customs, and courtesies of each Service bring unique capabilities, strengths, and pride to the greatest and most rewarding profession in the United States. Joint assignments require developing an understanding and respect for differences while learning to exploit the unique strengths of each Service to accomplish the mission. The same consideration holds when working with foreign military services.

While forged in the fires of battle and cemented over time, the traditions of the Services continue to grow, as new traditions are born and added over time. Although one should never forget what came before, there are chapters yet to be written. Servicemembers will add their own stories to the history of the Armed Forces. The Marine Corps cake-cutting ceremony mentioned above was not formalized until 1952. It had been an informal tradition conducted in various formats for decades

before that. Today the cake-cutting ceremony exists as a polished part of a formal sequence with many symbolic elements.

Ceremonies are one aspect of tradition. Indeed, they are an integral part of the Profession of Arms. Young enlisted Servicemembers may be genuinely surprised at the ceremonies and trappings of their first promotions, while veterans after long careers may feel humbled by the idea of formal retirement ceremonies. However, these events are not only for the members being honored; they belong to the institution or organization. They celebrate the life cycle of the Servicemember and the vital continuity of the story. Just as the cake is passed from veteran to novice in the cake-cutting ceremony, so is the mantle of responsibility and leadership passed to new leaders as they rise within the organization.

The retirement ceremony of senior noncommissioned officers and chief petty officers is a time to reinforce the reality that the Services they leave behind are as devoted to duty and honor as they were the day the retiree entered. They have done their part to preserve—and to advance—the honor of their Services. They have done their part to build on the proud traditions. This is a time to reflect on the state of the Service and the Nation. Retirees may justifiably feel proud that they have kept their honor. Their successors stand ready to assume responsibility, to stand the watch, to carry on a proud tradition within the Profession of Arms.

Customs and courtesies serve many functions for NCOs/POs. They practice these customs not simply because they enjoy the pageantry, but for deeper reasons. Repeating these traditions at prescribed times and in precise detail is the practice of discipline. One example is rendering honors to the colors at “Reveille” and “Retreat.” As Servicemembers of units internalize these traditions, a bond grows with those who also hold these traditions dear and thus learn why it is necessary to preserve them. To preserve an idea, members must protect those who value the idea. Their fellow Servicemembers share with them a love and belief in these values, and these values build bonds that last. This is the heart of *esprit de corps*, or spirit of the unit, which is the sense of unity that leads warriors on the battlefield to believe that the lives of those around them are more important than their own. The Oath of Enlistment speaks of defending the Constitution against all

enemies foreign and domestic³ because the Constitution is the written manifestation of the values they cherish. Article I of The Code of Conduct states, “I am an American, fighting in the forces which guard my Country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense.”⁴

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in the first decades of the 21st century continued the long story of this nation and its men and women in uniform. Those who fought will join the rolls of honor with the great warriors of the previous centuries. From these battles, and from the heroes who fought them, will spring new traditions and new chapters in the history of the Armed Forces.

Standards

Remember, too, that the company which takes pride in the snap and accuracy with which it does things on the parade ground is also most likely to be the company that will conform strictly to the requirements of discipline in garrison and in the field.

—*Noncommissioned Officers’ Manual, 1917*⁵

As members of the Profession of Arms, all Servicemembers are stewards of the profession and its unique body of knowledge, the individual and collective commitment to service, and the obligation to maintain the integrity that defines the profession. Noncommissioned officers and petty officers do not simply ensure the continuity of this knowledge. They also advance the art and science of the Profession of Arms by expanding that knowledge, especially about the ultimate activity of a military—waging war. The ancient military philosopher Sun Tzu said of war: “It is a matter of life and death, a road to safety or ruin. Therefore, it is a subject that must be thoroughly studied.”⁶ The security of the American people, and the protection of their values and their way of life, demands that the Armed Forces aspire to the highest levels of professionalism.

As in every societal profession, there are those who are appointed to ensure that their members have the required knowledge to meet the established standard. Unique to the Profession of Arms, all NCOs/POs

are traditionally charged as the torch bearers who maintain and enforce its standard. They are teachers, coaches, and mentors who pass on that knowledge. By learning to inspect and correct the imperfections in their subordinates, young enlisted leaders become accustomed to giving orders and holding their subordinates accountable. Those subordinates in turn become accustomed to following orders and looking for guidance from their mentors. If NCOs/POs deviate from standards, surely their subordinates will follow. Rather, NCOs/POs must embody the standards they wish to enforce, and thus become living examples. This is what is meant by *leading by example*.

There are many ways that NCOs/POs set the example for subordinates to follow. One is the wearing of their uniforms. NCOs/POs take pride in their appearance. Their uniform is the physical embodiment of their esprit de corps. The uniform regulations of the Navy, for instance, point out that “uniforms are distinctive visual evidence of the authority and responsibility vested in their wearer by the United States.”⁷ The uniform worn by Servicemembers communicates at least three things to an observer: the branch of Service to which they belong, the rank or grade to which they have been appointed, and the name of the wearer. But the smartness of the uniform is also an indicator to the observer of the discipline and pride of the men and women who wear it. Throughout history, units that are effective on the battlefield have also excelled at maintaining discipline in matters of uniforms, grooming, and personal appearance. NCOs/POs ensure that their own uniforms are beyond reproach, leading by example, and thus they are able to positively demand the same of the personnel they lead.

Another longstanding tradition in the Armed Forces of the United States is the salute. The origins of saluting are unknown. It may be that the tradition goes all the way back to ancient Rome where it was customary to show an open hand before approaching a public official. Medieval knights would raise their visors when greeting a friendly comrade. The practice of the salute is a sign of respect. In modern times, the hand salute is one of the most visible and important military courtesies, common to all Service branches.

One of the most important duties of an enlisted leader is to inspect personnel and to enforce standards. Once NCOs/POs have shown by personal example what they expect out of their subordinates, it is

equally important to inspect those personnel to ensure that the example is followed. In combat, inspecting subordinates is a life or death business. By ensuring that the members of a unit have all of the equipment required for the mission—and that it is in good working order—NCOs/POs ensure the effectiveness of the unit and enhance the safety of its members. This attention to the needs of their teams strengthens the bond among them all. As esprit de corps grows, so does the morale of the unit, and in turn so does its effectiveness. The desire to accomplish the missions that NCOs/POs have been given—and to succeed in the tasks they have trained so hard for—becomes a powerful force.

The duty of all enlisted men and women is to observe and follow the example set by their leaders. Great leaders live the standards they enforce. So in that leader, subordinates have a living model for how to lead, support organizational goals, and enhance their professional and personal lives.

Responsibility to the Unit

The foundation and driving force of the Profession of Arms are its leaders. They provide an incalculable competitive advantage against our adversaries. They are the builders and maintainers of trust; they inspire others to achieve what they thought was beyond reach; they teach and mentor their subordinates to develop experts; and they uphold and enforce our ethical and moral standards regardless of the situation. . . . Today we have the finest officers and non-commissioned officers on the planet.⁸

—General Martin E. Dempsey

Noncommissioned officers and petty officers are the caretakers of their units. They are especially responsible for sustaining what is known as the command or organizational climate. Command climate encompasses esprit de corps, that is to say, how the members feel about their unit. The leaders of the unit nurture it through inspiration, personal example, and on-the-spot correction. Command or organization climate includes the members' perceptions of the commander, senior enlisted, others in the chain of command, and unit policies. A positive

command climate yields the trust, pride, commitment, and unity that enable positive action and the ability to deal with uncertainty and change. Conversely, a negative or degraded command climate hinders productivity, and it generates mistrust, frustration, low motivation, and fragmentation. A negative command climate too often results in the emergence of informal leaders who may be influential but are not aligned with organizational goals. These disruptive voices may undercut the effectiveness of the appointed leadership and create additional morale and discipline issues. The NCO/PO is best positioned to anticipate these problems and best equipped to deal with them.

One role of the enlisted leader is to monitor the command climate. NCOs and POs know their people intimately; they know them as subordinates—but NCOs/POs also know how their subordinates feel about sports, current events, pop culture, and certainly the command. Enlisted leaders work constantly to shape, improve, maintain, and report the status of command climate. Enlisted leaders are the commander's eyes and ears. They are also the voice of the enlisted force to the commander. They regularly report on the state of morale, welfare, and discipline within the command. This is not just a litany of minor offenses. It requires context, experience, and judgment to inform the commander of indicators of low morale, such as spikes in discipline issues, or indicators of a high state of discipline, such as excellent appearance and proper maintenance of equipment and resources throughout the command. Commanders are not only looking for details. They are counting on enlisted leaders to employ critical thinking, provide judgment as to the degree of any potential problems, advise on how to rectify minor issues before they develop into problems, and recommend courses of action to keep the unit operating at its peak.

Command climate is also about how the members feel the command supports their needs. This is not only about food, mail, and pay, although those elements are important. Command climate refers specifically to commanders and the policies that they and the chain of command enact. While the role of commanders is central, in many ways enlisted leaders have much more influence over the command climate. It is also the duty of NCOs/POs to ensure that the members are receiving realistic and challenging training, which will prepare them for success in their assigned missions. NCOs/POs show that they

care for the members of the command by holding them to the standard. They show that they care enough to inspect them and correct any deficiencies they find. This kind of professionalism is a consistent reminder to all the members that they are part of a proud organization. They can be confident of the men and women around them in the most perilous missions.

Even when command climate is good and things are going well, a significant event can challenge and affect the members of the unit. For example, unprofessional relationships may form within a command. They may take the form of fraternization, which might seem innocent enough as seniors and subordinates grow closer together, but that could result in roles becoming confused and discipline breaking down. It could also take the form of harassment or discrimination, which can produce a negative atmosphere within the command. If Servicemembers are the victims of racism or sexual harassment, for instance, and they believe the chain of command is not supporting them, they could lose faith in the chain of command. It is the duty of every NCO/PO to be constantly on the watch for these kinds of toxic situations, which must be addressed and corrected as promptly and effectively as possible.

Enlisted leaders care for the well-being of their personnel, which includes caring about their families. The service and sacrifice of military families are vital to the success of any unit. NCOs/POs are mindful that while the military members make tremendous sacrifices to serve the Nation, they can do so only with the support of their families. Frequent and extended separations due to deployments and duty create immense stress within families. In light of this reality, NCOs/POs play critical roles in ensuring that families are meaningfully supported and that quality support systems are in place during the absence of their military members. By doing so, NCOs/POs ensure that members can maintain their operational focus while remaining confident that their families will be fully taken care of. Families should find comfort in knowing that they too are contributing to a larger cause and are an integral part of the organization. NCOs/POs stay aware of potential home, personal, or financial problems that will distract from the mission. As the Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Chairman has pointed out, to maintain effectiveness while ensuring the welfare of the force and families, enlisted leaders must get better at “*problem-preventing*”

rather than our normal reactive mode of “problem-solving.”⁹ At times it may be necessary to ensure that personnel have time or guidance in order to take care of financial or medical issues within the family. This kind of personal investment by NCOs/POs sends a clear message to the members and their families that *all of them* are important.

NCOs/POs also nurture good command climate through effective communication within the unit. They must make sure subordinates understand how to forward productive suggestions up the chain of command and how to address legitimate grievances. Modeling how to provide productive feedback is another way NCOs/POs can lead by example. They may advise their superiors in private, always respecting the superior’s authority to decide and responsibility for outcomes. At the same time, they are unfailingly supportive and loyal in public and never undercut the chain of command, tolerate counterproductive speech and actions, or accept attitudes that degrade esprit de corps. If someone from outside the command is speaking disparagingly, the NCO/PO does not tolerate any kind of unprofessional degradation of his unit. On the other hand, losing trust and confidence that the chain of command will do the right thing can poison a command climate.

Noncommissioned officers/petty officers are the caretakers and stewards of the sacred traditions and history of the Armed Forces of the United States. These traditions have been forged in the fire of battles and honed by constant practice. Every generation of enlisted leaders has accepted the added weight of this charge and is worthy of it—and these leaders too will leave their Services and their professions better than they found them.

Notes

¹ 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.

² The United States of America did not have an official motto until 1956. “In God We Trust” was adopted as the official motto, although many still consider “*E pluribus unum*” to be a second, unofficial motto. See John D. MacArthur, “Latin Mottoes,” *GreatSeal.com*, available at <www.greatseal.com/mottoes/unum.html>.

³ Title 10 U.S. Code, Subtitle A—General Military Law, Part II—Personnel, Chapter 31—Enlistments.

⁴ Executive Order 10631—Code of Conduct for members of the Armed Forces

of the United States, August 17, 1955, available at <www.archives.gov/federal-register/codification/executive-order/10631.html>.

⁵ James A. Moss, *Noncommissioned Officers' Manual* (Washington, DC: U.S. Infantry Association, 1917), 17.

⁶ R.L. Cantrell, *Sun Tzu on the Art of War* (Arlington, VA: Center for Advantage, 2003), 76.

⁷ Navy Personnel Command, "United States Navy Uniform Regulations," available at <www.public.navy.mil/bupers-npc/support/uniforms/uniformregulations/Pages/default.aspx>.

⁸ Martin E. Dempsey, "America's Military—A Profession of Arms," 4–5, available at <www.jcs.mil/content/files/2012-02/022312120752_Americas_Military_POA.pdf>.

⁹ Bryan B. Battaglia, "Bridging the Basics," *Joint Force Quarterly* 68 (1st Quarter 2013), 6–7.



Lauren Jorgensen

Chief Petty Officer Kent Shafer of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy and Lieutenant Kristopher Ensley, operations officer aboard Coast Guard Barque Eagle, discuss the Eagle's approach into Greenport, New York, September 20, 2012. The Eagle is the Coast Guard's training platform for future officers