

## Introduction

### *The Backbone of the Armed Forces*

To be a member of the United States Armed Forces—to wear the uniform of the Nation and the stripes, chevrons, or anchors of the military Services—is to continue a legacy of service, honor, and patriotism that transcends generations. Answering the call to serve is to join the long line of selfless patriots who make up the Profession of Arms. This profession does not belong solely to the United States. It stretches across borders and time to encompass a culture of service, expertise, and, in most cases, patriotism. Today, the Nation's young men and women voluntarily take an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States and fall into formation with other proud and determined individuals who have answered the call to defend freedom. This splendid legacy, forged in crisis and enriched during times of peace, is deeply rooted in a time-tested warrior ethos. It is inspired by the notion of contributing to something larger, deeper, and more profound than one's own self.

Strengthened by the diversity of its citizens, the United States remains a global vanguard of freedom, democracy, human rights, and opportunity. The monumental task of keeping the Nation secure, protecting its citizens, and assisting in crisis across the globe often falls on the shoulders of the United States Armed Forces. Comprised of Active-duty, Reserve, and National Guard components, today's all-volunteer Total Force is led by committed and trusted leaders—officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs)/petty officers (POs) who embody the discipline, intellect, and fortitude needed to support our national security strategy and help achieve its national objectives. Theirs

is a solemn obligation fortified by the sacred trust of the American people. This trust looks not only for well-planned execution of military operations and responsible management of national resources, but also for the care of its most precious treasure—America’s sons and daughters.

At the beginning of this project, the writing team crafted a paragraph to define and characterize NCOs/POs. The book drew its shape and focus from this original paragraph:

*As an enlisted member in the Armed Forces of the United States, you are a member of the Profession of Arms and have taken an oath of enlistment to support and defend the Constitution. When you become a Noncommissioned Officer or Petty Officer, you are then an empowered and trusted leader in America’s all-volunteer force. As a leader and technical expert, you enhance organizational effectiveness and directly contribute to mission success. Innovative, adaptive, and resilient, you are the indispensable link between command guidance and execution, ensuring that each task is fully understood and supervised through completion. You are responsible and accountable for the development and welfare of your subordinates. You teach, coach, and mentor them. As a steward of the institution, you enforce its standards and are its ambassador to the world.*

The writing team concluded that NCOs/POs are the bridging leaders within every Service branch. The dual roles of NCOs/POs may be best described as “complement the officer, enable the force.” How both are done by the NCO/PO is much more art than science. The collective capacity of the NCO/PO ranks, junior to senior, forms a distinct and invaluable leadership cadre that balances artfully between mission and people. NCOs/POs possess professional qualities, competencies, and traits that complement the officer corps and enable the enlisted force. They are trusted and empowered leaders in the Profession of Arms—the Backbone of the Armed Forces.

This book aims to define and illustrate who NCOs/POs are, what they do, and why they are a critical enabler within the Armed Forces.

Each chapter builds upon concepts and foundations from other chapters, offering a continuity of core ideas. If the authors have been successful, the audience should conclude not only that NCOs/POs are bona fide members of the Profession of Arms, but also that, given their extraordinary roles and responsibilities, NCOs/POs are quintessential leaders within the profession.

The clear evolution of NCOs/POs, from traditional supporting figures to empowered and integrated leaders, spans all five military Services. It is a product of thoughtful institutional investment and the remarkable accomplishments over centuries of service. Today's NCOs/POs benefit tangibly from the legacy of those who served before. As a result of their predecessors' deeds and remarkable successes, today's NCOs/POs serve both in ways their predecessors would still recognize and in ways almost unimaginable only a few decades ago. With one eye on the past and one on the future, the Armed Forces have re-evaluated the knowledge, skills, and abilities of enlisted leadership and adapted them for current and future requirements, yielding today's professional enlisted force. As an outcome of this evolutionary effort, NCOs/POs are now empowered to assume added roles and responsibilities—with commensurate accountability—once reserved for the commissioned officer corps in each Service.

American NCOs/POs are distinctive in the global Profession of Arms. This is a result of their common professional education, training, and development. *NCOs/POs are expected to do the right thing for the right reasons, irrespective of influence, complexity, or urgency.* This high degree of trust and confidence is institutionalized within the Armed Forces by both superior officers and the enlisted men and women whom NCOs/POs are responsible for developing and leading.

General James N. Mattis, USMC (Ret.), aptly described why the Nation needs its Armed Forces: “We’re going to have to fight to defend this experiment we call ‘America,’ to see if a government of the people, by the people and for the people can survive in an inhospitable environment. If we want the values that grew out of the Enlightenment to survive, we’re going to have to fight.” This means to fight for the Nation and to maintain the honor and reputation of the Profession of Arms. The lineage of the Profession of Arms and the Armed Forces of the United States has been fortified by millions of uniformed men

and women. Many have paid the price of anguish, pain, blood, limb, and life. And many others carry invisible scars from the weight of war, conflict, and service around the globe.

America's corps of enlisted leaders and its longstanding reputation have been forged by patriotic men and women maintaining unwavering standards during extraordinary times, and by those who have carried the colors forward into past battles, campaigns, and wars on behalf of the Nation. The "Gold Star" mother, who has endured the immense burden of sacrifice within her family, must find comfort in the knowledge that her country's Armed Forces will continue to protect the Nation from tyranny and oppression, and that her son or daughter was entrusted to and led by the finest leaders, the noncommissioned officers and petty officers.

Ultimately, this book belongs to the U.S. military's noncommissioned officers and petty officers—past, present, and future. With great respect and admiration to those who have ever worn—and to those who aspire to wear—stripes, chevrons, or anchors, the dedicated writing team humbly presents this book as an inspiring testament about the Backbone of the Armed Forces.