

Commentary

## What A Backbone Does

By SSG David R. Gayvert

The NCO Corps has long been called the "Backbone of the Army." We've all heard the phrase and perhaps have even quoted it a few times ourselves. But if this powerful metaphor is to be more than empty rhetoric — more than just another leadership sound bite — it's important that NCOs ask exactly what this characterization really means and what implications it holds for the way we ought to view our role, responsibilities and duties in our Army.

An obvious interpretation perhaps might be that NCOs are simply the source and coordinators of physical labor required by the Army — in other words, the workhorses of the organization. This view is too one-dimensional for an Army that is evermore dependent upon complex technologies, information and decentralized operations.

Today's effective NCO must be able, ready and willing to do more than merely supply the manpower for assigned tasks. He or she must not only demonstrate expertise in a chosen field, but also be a capable manager of people and resources, providing and maintaining the vital links between concept and actual execution of training and operations.

Under this light, the NCO Corps may be seen as perhaps the critical element of the Army's framework; an essential component of the human infrastructure without which the organization could not move — just as an individual body would collapse into paralysis if deprived of its spine.

Such an understanding of an NCO's role as the backbone of his or her unit has teeth and inherently charges us to do more than simply what we are told, but rather to be proactive in the planning, coordination and evaluation processes vital to the smooth and effective operation of our units.

Though this second, fuller interpretation of the metaphor is clearly better than the first, it still seems incomplete. This is because the idea of 'backbone' conjures up not only tangible, physical attributes, but moral ones as well. The test of a true leader, as opposed to one who is merely a good manager, lies in this domain. Courage, integrity and steadfastness are perhaps the most common traits brought to mind when the term is used to describe a person. These same qualities are imputed to the NCO Corps by our metaphor. We must be the ones who can be counted on to do the right thing, both by those appointed above us and by those whom we supervise. We must be willing to question and challenge them when they cease to move the organization forward. If we expect to deserve the title "Backbone of the Army," we must not only believe and act as though we can make a difference in its operation, we must accept it as our duty to do just that — day in and day out.

A smaller, increasingly sophisticated Army demands more of us now than at perhaps any other time in history. *Our success as leaders depends on how we interpret and how we live the metaphors and slogans created both to describe and to motivate us.* ■

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# UXO D

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**D**anger lies just under the feet of most soldiers deployed to the Bosnia theater. One wrong step and the threat of land mines becomes a deadly reality.

Used by all warring parties in the Bosnia-Herzegovina conflict, land mines are one of the biggest dangers facing U.S. forces. An estimated 4 to 6 million anti-tank and anti-personnel mines have been randomly laid in mountain roads, fields, forests and villages. Soldiers often don't realize what they're looking at is a deadly explosive until it's too late. Army officials have continually stressed one fact: mine awareness prevents mine casualties.

Now, thanks to the efforts of officials at Redstone Arsenal, AL, mine recognition just got a little easier.

Through the combined efforts of the U.S. Army Ordnance Missile and Munitions Center and School (USAOMMCS) and the Training Support Center of the Corporate Information Center-U.S. Army Missile Command (CIC-MI-COM), a set of seven ammunition recognition boards is now available to all Army personnel.

To effectively augment the current unexploded ordnance (UXO) identification training so that it would be easily understood by soldiers, the new training item was suggested by SGM Gary Sampson of the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Training Department, USAOMMCS.

Sampson's innovation was to take mine identification models off the flat page and make them three-dimensional.

"These are nice, but they're pictures, they're little line drawings," Sampson said as he flipped through a mine data pamphlet. "Why not show soldiers what the actual items look like?"

That's exactly what he and other officials at Redstone Arsenal have done with the new ammunition recognition

# Deaths

unacceptable...."

boards which use plastic, vacuum-formed, examples of ordnance soldiers might typically encounter on the battlefield.

The UXO issue became a greater concern to Army officials in the aftermath of Operation Desert Storm in which an estimated 20 percent of all GI casualties were caused by mines and unexploded munitions. The deaths of 26 soldiers were attributed to UXO.

"These are totally, totally unacceptable casualties," Sampson said. Most of the incidents in Desert Storm involved soldiers picking up material they naively planned to bring home as souvenirs to hang on the rear-view mirrors of their cars, he added.

UXO was identified as a battlefield deficiency. An Army-wide training program was put into effect. Videotapes, a plastic ordnance training aid kit, field manuals and graphics training aids were distributed. Still, Sampson felt there could be more — something to make identification even easier.

The new recognition boards illustrate grenades, rockets, projectiles, submunitions, mortars and a variety of mines in their true-to-life colors and sizes. Through the combined efforts of USAOMMCS and CIC-MICOM, a collection of regional mines, mine fuzes and delay firing and booby trap devices were obtained from U.S. and foreign sources, making the models on the boards even more realistic.

As troops deployed to Bosnia are uncomfortably familiar with, land mines can take on a variety of shapes and sizes and can be hidden anywhere. "We're talking tens of hundreds of thousands on a battlefield," Sampson said. "The trouble is, they don't look like pieces of ordnance. They're literally everywhere. This is probably the biggest hazard our U.S. soldiers face."

Production of 229 sets of ammunition recognition boards (DVC-T 05-50) began in December 1995 and production of mine recognition boards (DVC-T 05-51) began in February 1996. Both items can now be requested through local training support centers. ■

For more information, contact Sampson at DSN 746-4654 or (205) 876-2796.

Samples from ammo and mine recognition boards

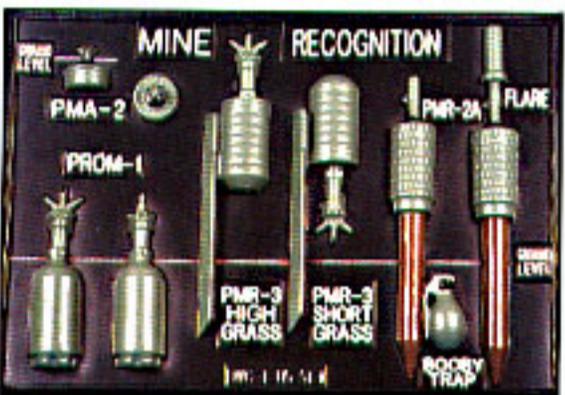


Photo by Joint Combat Camera

