

From the SMA



Photo by Spc. Serena Hayden

Sergeant Major of the Army Kenneth O. Preston talks to Soldiers about where the Army is going during a recent visit to Fort Sill, Okla.

We must have the NCOs to transform our Army

When I became Sergeant Major of the Army, I agreed with the folks at the NCO Journal to turn it into the Popular Mechanics of the NCO Corps. I wanted the magazine to not only inform you, but also to serve as a tool for our professional development. I wanted a forum for leaders to share thoughts, ideas, and concerns in an honest dialogue with all our NCOs. My comments are no exception.

In this edition, I would like to cover the specialist to sergeant automatic promotion policy. It is an issue that has people talking. Some agree with it, some don't. I'd like to explain why we had to institute the policy and challenge you to fix the problem that forced the policy into existence.

I'd like to start with a little history of this issue. The percentage of fully eligible Soldiers recommended for promotion has dropped from 31.5 percent in 1996 to 10.6 percent as of January 05. During the past seven years, we have seen peaks and valleys in STAR MOSs. The numbers of STAR MOSs have bounced between a high of 70 in January of 1998 to a low of around 21 in January of 2004. The numbers increased since that low. Currently we sit at about 32 STAR MOSs, but trends show this number is

increasing. We have seen the greatest dips when DA-level leadership intervened. For example in April of 2000, the 34th Chief of Staff of the United States Army, Gen. Eric K. Shinseki, sent a personal "For" message to all his senior officers directing them to find ways to lower the numbers of STAR MOSs and the number of fully eligible, non-recommended Soldiers.

Immediately thereafter, there was a significant dip in both of those areas. In January of 2002, SMA Tilley sent a similar letter with similar results.

The most current data on supply and demand for promotion eligible Soldiers shows a staggering drop-off rate which tends to coincide with the first OIF/OEF rotations returning home. Since then, the percentage of those Soldiers has maintained a downward slope. As of January 2005, the Army required almost 4,000 promotions to sergeants in the grade of E5. It was only able to fill approximately 2,000.

What does this data mean? Plain and simple, we're not providing enough promotion eligible specialists to the Army inventory to purposefully fulfill our War Time and Transformation goals.

To immediately fix this problem, we instituted the specialist to sergeant automatic promotion policy. It allows a specialist in good standing to become automatically promotable at the 48-month mark. The Soldier will become promotable with a default 350 promotion points. The commander will still have the final say as to the promotable status. The policy will allow STAR MOSs to dip into that pool of newly eligible promotable specialists to fill the voids. This initiative is a “catcher’s mit,” a failsafe initiative to stop the downward spiral of not growing sergeants to fill these critical areas.

What I need you to do is to find innovative ways to get your Soldiers to the board. The board doesn’t have to happen in a conference room back at battalion headquarters. When I went to the board, I was in the field and reported to the president of the board in a GP-small tent. My performance during the two-month deployment validated my supervisor’s recommendation, and the president of the board simply congratulated me on becoming a promotable specialist. We are an Army at war, supporting a nation at war. Our units are either preparing to go to war, or deployed already. This is not business as usual, so we must as an institution change to meet the Army’s and the Soldiers’ needs.

Also, over 90 percent of reenlistments require four years of service. I know we are reenlisting our best Soldiers. Why would we not expect these Soldiers to continue moving forward in rank and responsibility? Our Army leadership can grow a captain in approximately three years, we must be able to grow sergeants in four.

This issue truly belongs to us. Most of the MOSs in a STAR status are in Combat Support and Combat Service Support occupational specialties. It is that lone chemical specialist that sits in your NBC room that no one takes under his wing and develops or the small independent fire support team that no one watches over. Those are the guys and gals we’re hurting. I hold first sergeants personally responsible as they have the responsi-

bility for the company’s, troop’s or battery’s coaching, teaching and mentoring.

Hold your subordinate leaders accountable for not recommending promotion eligible specialists and corporals on time. If there is paperwork to substantiate a promotion eligible specialist or corporal not being recommended, then their NCO’s should be coaching, teaching, and training those Soldiers to correct whatever deficiencies are present. Remind your subordinate leaders that recommending a Soldier for promotion to sergeant is saying the Soldier has the “potential” to work at the next higher level. It is the NCO’s responsibility to prepare his promotable Soldiers for the responsibilities inherent with becoming a Noncommissioned Officer.

As we get better at preparing our Soldiers to take our place, this policy will become obsolete and will be self-eliminated. We must have the NCO’s to transform our Army and fight for freedom in the Global War on Terrorism.

I invite you to read this edition of the NCO Journal from cover to cover. It has stories on what the Army is doing to keep amputees in the uniform along with sidebars on those Soldier amputees who are trying to stay in and those who have succeeded and new first aid warrior tasks to treat extremity wounds; a great in-depth article on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and how commanders and NCO’s can recognize and help their Soldiers; also in this edition, what former SMAs see as the leadership challenges facing Today’s NCO. Our legacy is something we should be proud of and strive to learn more about. We are the greatest enlisted force in the world; this article will tell you why. There are many other stories, thoughts, concerns and ideas in this issue. I encourage you to read them all.

HOOAH!

*Kenneth O. Preston
Sergeant Major of the Army*



Photo by Staff Sgt. Reeba Critser

Sergeant Major of the Army Kenneth O. Preston speaks to new recruits at this year’s Daytona 500 in Daytona, Fla.

“[The] Warrior Ethos has been the common thread that ties us as Soldiers together for the last 229 years. From Valley Forge, to the battlefields of Gettysburg, to the Argonne Forest, to the shores of Normandy, to the mountains of Afghanistan, the streets of Baghdad—that Warrior Ethos is the fiber of which we as Soldiers live by, and an enduring value for all of us that wear the uniform.”

