

# ROLE OF THE NCO IN THE SADF

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## Introduction

Consider a highly successful olympic athlete who happens to be an equally successful and respected nuclear physicist by profession. Ignore, please, that this notion of a truly amateur sportsman may be rather quaint and old-fashioned. Returning to our veritable superman, we would expect to find him a highly intelligent, strongly motivated, extremely healthy and fit individual.

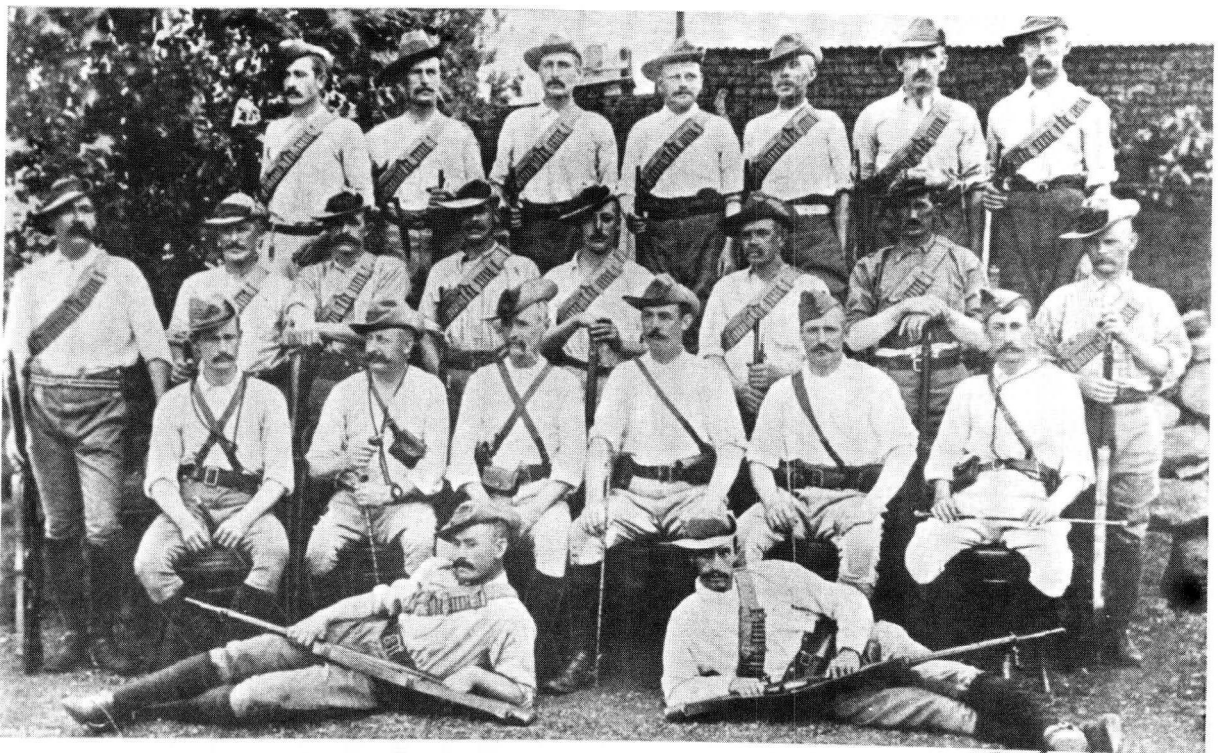
Let us now assume that he is stricken with some terrible disease that causes his bones to soften or disintegrate until they can no longer do their job. Neither his undoubted intellect, nor his equally undoubted brawn, nor his strong motivation, will be able to prevent him being transformed into a helpless, floppy, wheezing mound of tissue that will soon expire rather unpleasantly. Even external aid could not do much to help.

An army is quite often compared to the human body for illustrative purposes. Usually this does

involve oversimplification, but this can be a useful tool nonetheless. Considering an army in this way, we could with a good measure of logic equate:

- The "Rank and file" with the body's muscle and organ tissue;
- The officers in senior command and staff posts with the brain;
- More junior officers with the nervous system, translating the brain's decisions into action by the muscles and organs;
- The NCO corps with the skeleton, the framework that holds the rest together in the necessary form and allows it to function.

Let us now become more specific and look at our army. What has happened to the skeleton? Is the slackness on the part of some troops and the high rate of firearms and other accidents to be equated with the first flopping of "deboned" limbs, the first wheezes of a collapsing chest cavity?



OFFICERS AND NON-COMMISSIONED OFFICERS OF THE CAPE MOUNTED POLICE.

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The answer to the first of these questions is surely to be found in large measure in that weird process of alchemy – perhaps borrowed from Midas? – whereby we are busily engaged in attempting to transmute bone into brain and nerve tissue. No doubt this is being done for reasons that are felt to be both excellent and sound but how far can we proceed along this extraordinarily perilous road before we go too far? For that matter, have we not perhaps gone too far along it already?

When we have reached a stage where at least one headquarters has issued instructions that sentries issued with live ammunition are not to be allowed to load their weapons but must keep the ammunition in separate, sealed magazines – and that at a time when we are being warned of increasing urban terrorism – the reply must surely be yes, we have gone too far.

The weakness is readily visible – the reader need merely consider just how many senior NCOs he has recently seen in active line posts. Consider, too, the average national service company on the border with those very nice youngsters wearing two hard-earned stripes and trying to do a platoon sergeant's job. There is probably nothing wrong with their training – in fact, it is quite likely that it is better than that offered in many other armies. Nor is there anything wrong with them as people or soldiers. The problem is quite simply that it takes more than a few months of even the best training to produce a platoon sergeant.

**A schoolboy can be transformed into a useable second lieutenant in a matter of weeks, if necessary.** Given that he survives a few months of action, he will then even make a quite competent company commander. A civilian with suitable experience or background can be transformed into a junior – or even a senior – staff officer even more quickly with considerable success. All of these things have been done by various armies at various times. A good senior NCO, however, takes years to produce and it is essentially long experience more than training that makes him what he is. Thus there can be no real short-cuts except, perhaps, intensive combat experience.

The writer does not for one moment wish to cast doubt upon the ability of those former senior – and some not so senior – NCOs whom we have commissioned after short courses, to perform well in their new careers. But is this an efficient, or even an effective way to employ these men?

Let us not forget the example of Midas, who wound up transmuted his daughter into gold in error. Gold was valuable even then but did it really replace his daughter?

We can do without junior officers as platoon leaders beyond those needed to grow into more senior posts and engaged in that activity as on the job training – many other armies have done and some continue to do so. We can certainly do without some of our staff, specialist and administrative officers. We can NOT do without senior NCOs. These men are not some inferior species of officer as their designation might appear to indicate, they are an entirely different career branch. Arguably, they are also the most valuable specialists in the entire army – the men who hone, maintain and operate our most expensive, intricate and vital weapons system, what we usually call the “troep”.

**Without our senior NCOs, without the army's skeleton, we might as well shut up shop and move into another line of business.** Wars fought by an army without them cannot but go badly, no matter how good the troops, officers and equipment. The defence of this military self-mutilation will, no doubt, be based on a shortage of officers that needs to be made up somehow. Be that as it may, we cannot expect to tinker with the ratio of senior NCOs to troops too much with impunity. We would do better to slow the growth of the army until it can be officered by normal means than to continue with this course of action which, if taken to an extreme, can only result in our army being replaced by a loosely controlled horde along the lines of those that roamed Central Asia a long time ago. Whether that form of military organisation would be of any use to us, seems very much open to doubt.

Then, too, the question must be asked whether there really is a shortage of officers. The writer has personal experience of at least one element of the Army that ran quite effectively with four officers (3 PF, 1 NS) in 1978. Doing the same job and with much the same CF element backing it, it now boasts no fewer than 13.

The German Army – which gave us a good run for our money – ran on two officers per rifle company with a total of thirteen in the battalion on good days and it ran well. It did not, however, try to operate without its senior NCOs until combat attrition had run down even the number of those younger soldiers who had won the necessary experience in the hardest way possible. To

the Germans, the NCO has long been “das Rückgrat der Armee” – the backbone of the army.

**Far from continuing to strip our NCO corps in a vain attempt to fill supposed officer vacancies, we should be seeking ways to revitalise and enhance this essential element of our defence.** To start with, we must make it clear in all our minds that the regular NCO is a man who has chosen a particular – and particularly challenging – career pattern and not someone who did not quite make the grade as an officer but could be commissioned if we become sufficiently desperate.

We must, therefore, offer the prospective regular NCO a career pattern that is sufficiently challenging, interesting and satisfying – and financially sound – *on its own* to attract the right calibre of recruit. The possibility of an ultimate commission should not be allowed to become a part of the calculation – if a man wishes to become an officer, he should choose that career in the first place, realising that an entirely different set of challenges and responsibilities awaits him. If we allow the commissioning of NCOs to become a matter of course, we only serve to strengthen the misconception of the NCO as some sort of inferior officer. To allow the NCO career to be so devalued could not but lead to a further decline in the number of suitable candidates to the eventual grave detriment of the Army.

**Two steps that will need to be taken if we are to achieve the desired aim in this regard, are to re-establish a respected image for the career NCO and to establish a formalised and recognised programme of training and further training.** The latter would to no small extent help achieve the former. Intelligent career planning and realistic pay scales would, of course, have to be applied.

A first step in this direction might be to establish an NCO academy to handle all general and NCO-specific training of regular NCOs and to oversee the training of national-service and citizen force NCOs insofar as this cannot also be conducted at the academy. Specialist and arm-specific training would, naturally, remain the responsibility of the relevant schools. In this regard, it might also pay to look back into history to those early NCO academies that took in boys who finished their basic schooling in parallel with their initial military training.

Thus, we might look at inducting suitable candi-

dates into such an NCO academy in the year after they write their Junior Certificate examination. They would then follow a two-year course which would terminate with their senior certificate examination and would also give them the basis of the junior leader training now offered during national service. Certainly, this would put a heavy workload on the students but it should not be impossibly so and the very fact that hard work would be required would help to ensure that only those really interested in the career would enter and only those likely to prove valuable, survive.

On graduation from the academy, these prospective NCOs would be posted to training battalions as “trained soldiers” for a period of six months. During this period they would, in effect, act as stiffeners to the national servicemen just beginning their training and also receive their first measure of authority in that they would be given a degree of responsibility for their sections. Given successful completion of this phase, they would be appointed lance-corporals and take on the duties of assistant section leader for a further period of six months, ideally on operations.

At the end of this total period of twelve months, those with the necessary potential would be promoted to corporal and would, ideally, then spend a full two year period training up (under supervision) and leading a national service section in their training battalion. At this stage, also, any of the cadets whom the academy staff and the officers and NCOs of their training battalion feel would make better officers than NCOs, would be withdrawn from the programme and put into an officer training programme. Any now deemed unlikely to become good NCOs – or officers – would now be transferred to other duties for a further twelve months in order to complete their national service and would then be transferred to the citizen force. Any now wishing to leave the programme would be similarly transferred but would have to buy their discharge.

The end of the two year section leader tour would bring the young NCOs to their first major career decision since entering the programme and choosing their arm of service. With a total of five years service, they could now choose to transfer to the citizen force should they wish to leave. Those electing to stay in the service, would be expected to sign a ten-year contract and would return to the NCO academy for a year of advanced training. Graduation would bring with it

appointment as a lance-sergeant and a posting as an instructor and/or acting platoon sergeant with their parent battalion. Two years of service in this capacity would be followed by – or, if necessary, interspersed with – a further year of specialised training prior to promotion to sergeant.

The further “theoretically ideal” career pattern can be seen from the table. It suffices to note here that the fourteenth year of service would potentially mark a divergence between those intending to continue in a “line” role and those preferring to opt for a future in a “staff” capacity. The final divergence would come in the eighteenth year of service with an appointment as RQMS.

#### **Promotion beyond the rank of sergeant would be dependent on:**

- Suitability for the higher rank and the posts and duties attendant thereon;
- Satisfactory performance in service and training;
- At least four years in the previous rank;
- Completion of any required further training;
- Existence of a suitable vacancy unless the current post is one that can also carry the next higher rank.

Where all of the qualifications are met but there is no suitable vacancy and the post held cannot carry the higher rank, suitable salary adjustment should be made. Advanced promotion should be avoided except in the most exceptional circumstances as these would undermine one of the system’s objectives which is to ensure long experience for the regular NCOs. Salary adjustments or one time bonuses might prove more suitable except in the case of promotion on the field of battle.

The first retirement option would come up at the end of the ten year contract after a total of some fifteen years service. This would not provide for a pension but would bring with it a cash gratuity, civilian retraining within reason and a guaranteed civil service post should this be desired. Not only should this serve to make a “short service” NCO career attractive, it would also help the civil service obtain high calibre recruits for many posts difficult to fill from the civilian labour market. Later retirement would, naturally, bring with it pension benefits in addition to those outlined above. Any involuntary honourable discharge – due to injury or sickness, for instance – would

bring with it at least the benefits of the fifteen years service plan in addition to any relevant disability grant and/or pension.

As will be seen from the table, the regular NCO’s career pattern would include three one year periods of further training at the academy after the promotion to sergeant, each falling just prior to the next promotion. These are intended not only to provide the necessary future-post-specific and updating/refresher training but also to offer some more general further education. Thus, some of the available time might well be spent on short courses or seminar series at civilian educational institutions such as universities and technicons or even on foreign travel. Before laughing this idea out of court, the reader is asked to remember the calibre of man that we would be trying to attract to this career. Any broadening of his educational frame of reference will not only serve to refresh his intellect but will also directly enhance his value to the service. We are, after all, looking at people with a good measure of intellectual capacity and not the stupid, boorish NCO of the comics.

The concentration of the training into a number of one year periods is intended not only to make such options as outlined above feasible, but also to combat the problem of having key NCOs drifting off on courses more or less at random and leaving their posts vacant. The one major exception is to be found in the specialised training foreseen for the period prior to promotion to sergeant. The problem here lies in the fact that this would consist of a variety of courses offered by various schools and units working to their own training cycle geared to the requirements of the army as a whole, rather than to the NCO development programme.

The introduction of the “trained soldier” designation (rather than rank) is intended to provide a measure of practical experience of what it is like to be an ordinary trainee as well as easing the task of the instructors and the adjustment of the trainees by having a number of trained soldiers in their ranks. The lance-sergeant rank is introduced in order to allow visible and financial advancement without running the risk of producing excessively young and inexperienced senior NCOs. Thus, reference to the table will show that the platoon sergeants and CSMs will tend to be older than their respective commanders and have rather more service and experience – which is as it should be. From RSM upwards, the

NCOs will tend to be of an age with their commanders, which is also as it should be as here they are more an extension of the commander than his mentor.

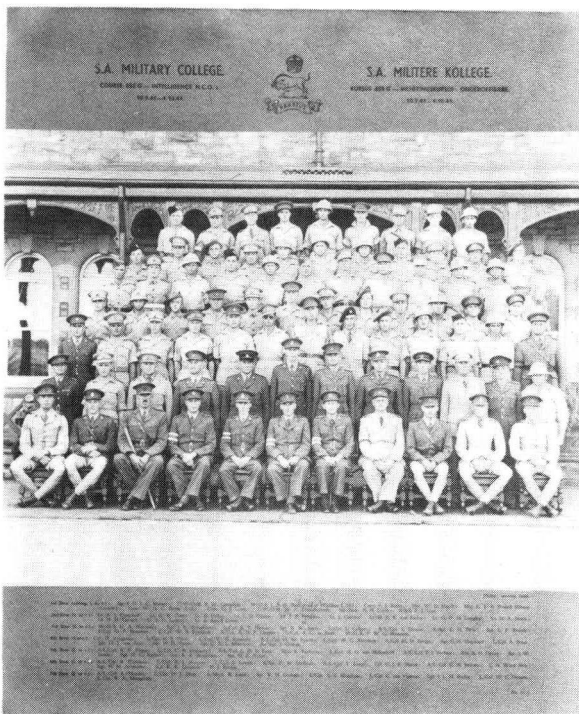
Persons wishing to enter the regular NCO career after completing their civilian schooling or even some years of civilian employment, could be accommodated into the outlined career pattern quite readily. In principle, they would be inducted as national servicemen and complete their first year as such. Then, if judged suitable, they would be posted to the NCO academy for a six month NCO course before returning to their battalions as lance-corporals and assistant section leaders for a further six months. Satisfactory service would then bring promotion to corporal, whereafter they would follow the same career pattern as the academy entrants except inasmuch as they would be older. We are talking here of "line" or general duties NCOs, of course. Persons with relevant training and intending to follow a "staff" or specialist career might well be handled differently on a case by case basis.

Future citizen force NCOs would be trained similarly to the late entering regulars, being promoted to corporal on completion of their twenty-four months national service. Ideally, they would then go over to their future parent unit as section leader of the section of which they have spent their last six months of national service as assistant leader. Promotion within the citizen force

would also be dependent upon successful completion of courses at – or supervised by – the NCO academy. Of necessity shorter, these would have to be supplemented with training evenings and weekends as well as home study. Naturally, citizen force NCOs would tend to be older for their rank than their regular counterparts and the CSM and RSM and equivalent posts would be held almost exclusively by volunteers serving beyond their basic period.

In the long term, such an NCO Academy as discussed above, might with advantage be co-located with a similar training establishment for Army officers. With the present Military Academy having developed into a de facto military university rather than a military academy per se, such an institution should, in any event, now be receiving serious consideration. The co-location of these two future training establishments would allow the sharing of some of the more costly facilities without them being anything other than entirely distinct institutions. In the shorter term, the NCO Academy might well be co-located with the Infantry School.

An important point concerning such an NCO Academy would be to ensure that the instructing staff are drawn only from the best and most experienced (and widely experienced) Staff-Sergeants



**and WO Is.** Any tendency to employ younger instructors should be resisted, as their newness to authority could all too easily result in the future NCO corps being molded into an unacceptable pattern. WO IIs are excluded above in order to ensure a sufficiently wide spread of experience between the junior and senior instructors. A final point concerning the Academy is the suggestion that it might prove worthwhile to formally include adventure training – as employed by the British Army – in the syllabus of at least the first two years.

The writer is under no illusions that the ideas outlined above amount to a ready-made magic solution to the problem addressed, both his knowledge and his access to information are too limited for him ever to produce such. It is his hope, however, that this article will stimulate thought concerning this matter before the situation becomes irretrievable. The experienced senior NCO is our most important specialist. It is high time that we developed a career and training pattern that matches his importance – before he becomes finally extinct.

**TABLE 1**  
**Theoretical "Ideal" Career Pattern – "Tooth Arms" NCO**

Year of Service	Age	Rank	Position/Function	Unit	Remarks
01	16	Cadet	Student	NCO Acad.	Primus inter Pares among the trainees, partly responsible for his group.
02	17	Cadet	Student	NCO Acad.	
03	18	T/S	"Stiffener"/senior trainee in a section or platoon.	Parent Bn	
04	19	L/Cpl	Assistant Section Leader.	Parent Bn	Instructs under supervision. Now primarily Section Leader.
		Cpl	Instructor/Section Leader.	Parent Bn	
05	20	Cpl	Instructor/Section Leader.	Parent Bn	
06	21	Cpl	Student	NCO Acad.	
07	22	L/Sgt	Instructor/Acting Platoon Sgt.	Parent Bn	
08	23	L/Sgt	Instructor/Acting Platoon Sgt.	Parent Bn	Specialist Courses
09	24	L/Sgt	Student	Various Schools	
10	25	Sgt	Platoon Sgt	Parent Bn	
11	26	Sgt	Platoon Sgt	Parent Bn	
12	27	Sgt	Platoon Sgt	Parent Bn	
13	28	Sgt	Student	NCO Acad.	
14	29	S/Sgt	Specialist Instructor/Instructor at NCO Acad/Weapons Platoon Sgt/CQMS	Parent Bn or NCO Acad.	
15	30	S/Sgt	Specialist Instructor/Instructor at NCO Acad/Weapons Platoon Sgt/CQMS	Parent Bn or NCO Acad.	
16	31	S/Sgt	Specialist Instructor/Instructor at NCO Acad/Weapons Platoon Sgt/CQMS	Parent Bn or NCO Acad.	
17	32	S/Sgt	Student	NCO Acad.	As for 13
18	33	WO 2	CSM/RQMS	Parent Bn	
19	34	WO 2	CSM/RQMS	Parent Bn	
20	35	WO 2	CSM/RQMS	Parent Bn	
21	36	WO 2	Student	NCO Acad.	
22	37	WO 1	RSM or equivalent in "staff"	Parent BN or other unit	As for 13
23	38	WO 1	RSM or equivalent in "staff"	Parent Bn or other unit	

**TABLE 1 (Cont.)**  
**Theoretical "Ideal" Career Pattern – "Tooth Arms" NCO**

Year of Service	Age	Rank	Position/Function	Unit	Remarks
24	39	WO 1	RSM or equivalent in "staff"	Parent Bn or other unit	
25	40	WO 1	RSM or equivalent in "staff"	Parent Bn or other unit	
26	41	WO 1	Instructor at NCO Acad/RSM or similar post	NCO Acad	
27	42	WO 1	Instructor at NCO Acad/RSM or similar post	NCO Acad	
28	43	WO 1	BdeSM or equivalent in "staff"	Parent Formation	
29	44	WO 1	BdeSM or equivalent in "staff"	Parent Formation	
30	45	WO 1	BdeSM or equivalent in "staff"	Parent Formation	
31	46	WO 1	BdeSM or equivalent in "staff"	Parent Formation	
32	47	WO 1	DivSM or equivalent in "staff"	Parent Formation	
33	48	WO 1	DivSM or equivalent in "staff"	Parent Formation	
34	49	WO 1	DivSM or equivalent in "staff"	Parent Formation	
35	50	WO 1	DivSM or equivalent in "staff"	Parent Formation	

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