

Selecting the Best for our Army's Future

By COL Charles Allen, USAWC

In the late spring of 2007, I was contacted by the "Army" via email to determine my availability to sit on a selection board for senior members of our Army Non-commissioned Officers (NCO) Corps. As with most queries for taskings, I was not eager to volunteer, but this was a unique opportunity to see the process firsthand. The nomination of board members is kept secretive and I was cautioned to only inform the members of my supervisory chain of command that I was being considered for participation. This cloak of secrecy ("I am going away for three weeks and can't tell you why or where") adds to the ambiguity of the process and the attending myths.

I, like many colleagues, have intently reviewed promotion selection lists over my nearly 30 years of service, checking for names of members of my commands as well as friends, former students, notables, and notorious Soldiers (both commissioned and non-commissioned). In general, the selection system seemed to work for the force where strong performers were recognized and selected. But there were questions about the one name expected to be on the list that was not and the one name that we hoped would not be but was. The

stories and myths centered on the guidance provided to the board, the perception of a quota system, and the concern that not enough time was provided to fairly assess the files of Soldiers who have done great service to our nation. This article is written to provide one officer's experience and address some myths about the selection process.

The U.S. Army Human Resource Command DA Secretariat maintains a very useful website for AC Enlisted Boards. The Board Information Guide

The U.S. Army Human Resource Command DA Secretariat website is located at <https://www.hrc.army.mil/site/active/tagd/msdsecretariat/enlistedboards/enlistedboards.htm>

claims that "the Centralized Enlisted Promotion Selection System has been described universally as the fairest most comprehensive selection system in the military." It further states that other foreign militaries have adopted a similar system for the selection and promotion of their senior NCOs. This is a pretty large assertion, so I was interested in participating in the process that has been cited for its effectiveness and efficiency. The 1999 RAND Report MR-1067, A Description of the U.S. Enlisted Personnel Promotion Systems, provides great detail on the process for lower enlisted grades (E-1 to E-6) for all Services, but is noticeably

sparse on the procedure for selecting the top NCOs of our military.

Prior to the consolidation of promotions, the selection for the most senior enlisted grades — Sergeant First Class (SFC), Master Sergeant (MSG), First Sergeant (1SG), Sergeant Major (SGM), and Command Sergeant Major (CSM) — were conducted at the installation level. Each of these positions has great responsibility as the senior enlisted advisor within key organizations of the Army. In tactical line units, SFCs are

the platoon sergeants for lieutenants; 1SGs provide the order and discipline for captains who are company commanders. SGMs are key staff assistants for battalions, brigades, and divisions. The top enlisted positions are held by CSMs who assist the commanders of battalions and higher headquarters in developing Soldiers into effective units.

In the past, Soldiers were promoted based upon position/rank vacancies (e.g., Platoon Sergeant/E-7), cancelled requisitions that left positions unfilled, and Department of the Army quotas. Under the old system, a Soldier could not compete for promotion at the local installation selection board unless a position/

grade vacancy existed at the unit of assignment. This created a "right time/right place" situation which did not afford equitable promotion opportunities for all Soldiers and did not ensure that the larger needs of the Army were being met. Promotions to SGM, MSG, and SFC were centralized at HQDA on 1 January 1969, 1 March 1969, and 1 June 1970, respectively.

The centralized promotion system affords promotion opportunities on a fair and equitable basis Army-wide and was designed to:

1. Fill the Army's requirement for senior NCOs with qualified Soldiers who have demonstrated potential for increased responsibility.
2. Provide for career progression and rank which is commensurate with ability and potential.
3. Attract and retain the high-caliber individual for a career in the Army.
4. Maintain the integrity of the promotion system by providing for a fair and equitable advancement opportunity to the proven Soldier, and to preclude from promoting the individual who is not productive or progressive.

(From <https://www.hrc.army.mil/site/active/select/SrProm.htm>)

The basic concept of the centralized system is to promote those individuals to SFC, MSG, and SGM who

compete equally with their contemporaries and are found to be best qualified. Promotion is not intended to be a reward for long honorable service in the present rank, but instead is based on demonstrated performance in present and lower ranks and potential ability to serve successfully at the higher rank. Personnel not selected for promotion are not precluded from consideration by future boards, provided they meet the eligibility criteria established for consideration.

Historically, centralized boards convene annually to select a specified number of Soldiers for promotion to the senior ranks. Selections for promotion are made by Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) to limit the number of promotions and meet a specific select objective. The Soldier is considered for promotion using the "whole Soldier" concept whereby qualifications for promotion are judged by the entire record. No one item of information by itself is considered overriding in determining the best qualified for promotion. The promotion board cycle is fairly routine schedule. For Fiscal Year 2008, the MSG board met in October 2007 with results released in November 2007. The SFC board convened on 22 Jan 2008 and those results should be published by mid-April. So the cycle begins anew — CSMs and senior field grade officers, don't be surprised to receive an email

or phone call "inviting" you to participate in the CMS/SGM/SMC selection in June 2008."

It was my privilege to serve on the selection board for the most senior grades in our Army — promotion to Sergeant Major, appointment to Command Sergeant Major, and selection for attendance at the Sergeants Major Course. I arrived at the selection board site for the Active Component, the Army's Human Resources Command – Indianapolis (HRC – Indy), at what was formerly Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indianapolis, Indiana. The in-brief was very professional and complete. We met with the Board President (Major General) and staff of the Department of the Army Secretariat who set out to prepare us for this critically important task — one that directly influences the leadership of our Army for the next decade. There were several sources of guidance for the board, from the Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1 to the proponent branches for the career fields.

Everything is about process. Before we arrived, the initial task was to develop a representative composition of the board that would reflect the demographics of the Army. For this board there were 12 panels that covered two dozen career management fields (CMF) (see Figure 1). Each CMF has a varying number of military occupational specialties. For example, I was the Panel C

chief that was responsible for two CMFs, Field Artillery and Air Defense. Within the Field Artillery CMF there are several associated MOSs — cannon or missile crewmember, survey, radar, fire direction, etc. Thus, the composition of the selection board and its panels sought to provide senior levels of experience and expertise that matched the diversity of the force. My deputy was a Lieutenant Colonel serving as an Air Defense battalion commander. The Panel C senior enlisted representatives were a Regimental CSM and an Installation CSM — two very experienced professional Soldiers from the Artillery and Air Defense career fields. To protect the integrity of the board process and preclude external influence, board members perform their duties at a relatively remote location at HRC - Indy and all are cautioned about external contact.

To prepare for the task, the description from the Information Guide was followed to the “t”:

“Prior to looking at or reviewing any file, board members are given a comprehensive orientation on the board process, where to find key information on assignment and individual qualifications, the use of NCO evaluation reports (NCOERs), and detailed written guidance from the Army Deputy Chief of Staff, G-1. Each branch proponent provides a familiarization document to detail its career paths and critical assignments using the phrases of medium and high risk that are inherently challenging and important. This gives specific guidance on the unique qualifications Soldiers should possess to be the most competitive for selection. The G-1’s “Memorandum of Instruction” gives specific guidance on the conduct of the board.

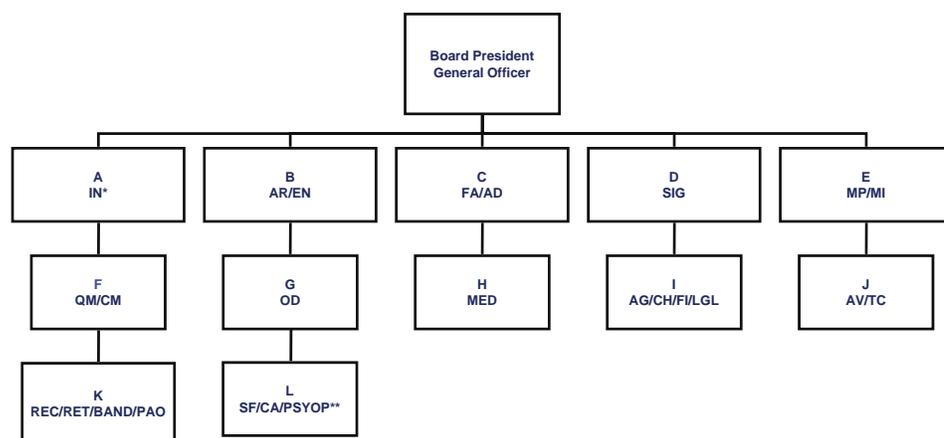
With this information and their own experience, the board members determine, as a group, what attributes make a Soldier best qualified for selection using a numbering system from a low of 1 to a high of 6. This set of standards is agreed to by each panel member and is the criteria used to vote each file throughout the board process.”

The execution of the selection board allayed many of my prior concerns. Each panel establishes its own set of standards that are briefed and approved by the board president. The panel members have ample opportunity to validate standards during practice rounds or “mock boards” with real files from past boards. This permits the panel to ensure the standards are clearly understood and agreed upon by its members. It also supports the “fine tuning” and calibration of the standards to ensure a consistent assessment of the files against the accepted standards.

Boards consider the Soldier's performance record in the official file and electronic extracts from the personnel qualification record. The board's analysis of the file included careful evaluation of many factors:

1. Scope and variety of assignments with record of performance.
2. Estimate of potential (as reflected on evaluation reports) expected of an NCO at the next higher grade.
3. Trends in efficiency.
4. Length of service and time in critical positions.
5. Awards, decorations, and commendations.
6. Education - both military and civilian.
7. Adherence to Army Values.
8. General physical condition.

Figure 1.
Senior Enlisted Selection Board Organization



* SF/CA/PSYOP CMFs are added to A Panel for SFC Boards

**L Panel is currently only used for the CSM/SGM/SMC & MSG Boards

During actual conduct of the board, there is immediate feedback that identifies when the ratings are out of tolerance among the panel members. The panel chief calls a quick huddle to inform members of the discrepancy and reinforce what was agreed upon as the standards for assessment. In all cases, the deviations are resolved. The technical details of how this process works is available from the DA Secretariat. The results of the panel assessments are compiled into a general order of merit for each military occupational specialty.

There is another detailed process that develops the selection objective for each career field to meet the needs of the Army. The selection objective was predetermined before the board convened and unknown to the board members, therefore was not a factor in the assessment of the Soldier files. Likewise, demographics were never presented or discussed as part of the criteria for selection. Plainly stated, there was not a quota for ethnic groups or gender for any CMF or MOS. Each Soldier was evaluated on the information in the official files and those scores generated the ranking of the personnel fully qualified to meet the needs of the Army.

After three weeks on the board and at its close, I left with great confidence in the process and its inherent fairness. I, like many others, had heard about the number

of files and the pressure to complete so many files per day that only allowed a scant amount of time to review each Soldier's record. What I found is that there was enough time to conduct a comprehensive review of each file according to the standards. There was also an effective system of checks and balances to ensure consistency in the assessment of the files. Most importantly, I also took pride in the professionalism of my panel members and that of the entire board. Each understood the gravity of the task at hand and its long-term implications for our Army. Prior to certifying the results of the FA and AD panel, I asked each of the panel members to look at the names and evaluation scores of those senior NCOs that were selected. I then asked them if there were any reservations about the Soldiers that we selected and concerns about those Soldiers (all strong professionals) who had not made the cut based upon the selection objective. Our panel was extremely confident that the best qualified were chosen based on the high standards that had been set by the panel. With that, I was able to report to the Board President, "Mission Accomplished."

When the board results were released in late August 2007, I was willing and able to address concerns about the process. In fact, the DA Secretariat provided a comprehensive briefing packet to present the transparency

of the selection boards and their procedures. For those NCOs who are in zone for promotion and selection for the next grade, your record will speak for you, so heed the recommendations in the Board Information Guide and of your branch proponents. To those who will receive the call to participate in an upcoming selection board in 2008, seize the opportunity to be part of shaping the future success of our Army — your time cannot be better spent.

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