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Corporal takes on challenges of noncommissioned officer ranks

By Mark Heeter

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SCHWEINFURT, Germany -- The rank is synonymous with leadership. It was one of the original five ranks of the noncommissioned officer corps in 1775, the year the United States Army was born.

While much has changed in the Army in the since 1775, the corporal endures.

Ask a corporal, ask a command sergeant major, what a corporal's fundamental role as an NCO is, and the answer might be the same.

“(It’s) making sure that their Soldiers are well equipped and they’ve got everything they need to have,” said Cpl. John Mayhle, a human resources specialist with the 1st Battalion, 77th Field Artillery Regiment here who has been a corporal since November 2007.

“As far as the NCO in general -- they take care of the Soldiers. They train the Soldiers and keep them mentally and physically fit,” he added.

Fast forward 20 years into his career, and Mayhle's answer might be the same.

“Once you pin on that rank of noncommissioned officer, the responsibilities are the same -- from corporal all the way up to command sergeant major,” said U.S. Army Garrison Schweinfurt Command Sgt. Maj. Ernest Lee. “The bottom line is you need to take care of Soldiers.”



COURTESY U.S. ARMY GARRISON SCHWEINFURT
Cpl. John Mayhle is a human resources specialist with the 1st Battalion, 77th Field Artillery Regiment in Schweinfurt, Germany.

While some Soldiers may not know what specifically goes into wearing a corporal's two stripes, during 2009 -- the Army's "Year of the NCO" -- the Army's Year of the NCO Web site lays it out: corporals are responsible for individual training, personal appearance and cleanliness of Soldiers, and are frequently small team leaders.

Sounds pretty straightforward, but corporals have to step out from the junior Soldier ranks to learn new roles and responsibilities while developing personal leadership styles - and that can be a delicate trick, Mayhle said.

"It is a little bit complicated, if you will, being the same (pay grade as an Army specialist), but at the same time being an NCO," Mayhle said.

Not to Lee, who says the line dividing a specialist and a corporal is clear.

"A corporal is taking on the responsibilities of an NCO. A lot of Soldiers ... really don't know the job of a corporal," Lee said. "Yes, you are an NCO. The Soldiers you select to be a corporal, you know their potential to be a good NCO," he said.

Lee said that potential means corporals have the basic framework that motivates them to learn from their experiences and be better sergeants one day.

"They already have that experience that you need to teach, mentor, coach the Soldiers," he said.

Under the guidance of his leaders, Mayhle said he has learned a lot about leadership styles, and is testing himself to find his own style. Some are "softer" and some are "stronger," he added, and while he hasn't fully formed his own approach, he leans toward taking the middle ground between the two.

Lee seized that opportunity to offer Mayhle a bit of on-the-spot mentoring of his own.

"Whenever you tell a Soldier, a subordinate, that you are going to do something, even if you can't do it, you need to follow up," the sergeant major said. "Don't ever leave a Soldier hanging out there."

It's the kind of basic advice a corporal can pass along to another generation of junior NCOs some day.

