



DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE  
HEADQUARTERS UNITED STATES AIR FORCE  
WASHINGTON, D.C.

REPLY TO  
ATTN OF: Your Supervisor


SUBJECT: The Noncommissioned Officer

TO: A New Lieutenant

Some of the most important people in the Air Force are those who wear their rank on their sleeve instead of their shoulder e.g., the Noncommissioned Officer (NCO). I have met some people who view NCOs as being less important than commissioned officers and some who actually consider themselves to be "better people" than NCOs. The differences between commissioned officers and noncommissioned officers are due to such things as formal education, differences in economic opportunities, and differences in personal life styles and goals. Under no circumstances should you ever consider yourself better than the NCOs with whom you serve. If you are honest with yourself you will learn very quickly that many NCOs are at least as smart as you. Some have more formal education than you and some even surpass you in common sense.

Now let me get to the point about NCOs. As a lieutenant, you will work with NCOs who are older than you, (some perhaps old enough to be your parent) and, in every case, they will have more military experience than you. All this notwithstanding, if you are assigned as their supervisor, you are the person in charge, and most importantly, you are the person responsible for your own actions and theirs. When dealing with NCOs, you should always listen carefully to their advice, evaluate their views and respond based upon your best judgment. This is not to say that you simply acquiesce to their positions and do exactly what they say. Their opinions are valuable, based upon years of experience, and offered with the same degree of professionalism as you would offer to your superiors. Listen and decide.

NCOs are often referred to as the backbone of the Air Force. If we consider the function of the backbone, that is, to hold the body erect so that the rest of its parts can function properly, then we have an accurate description of the critically important role our NCOs play in fostering mission accomplishment. They deserve your attention, support, and leadership; don't let them down.

  
Paul G. Patton, Colonel, USAF  
AN OLD LIEUTENANT