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Drexel GPS "Outside the Wire"

How Russia's Poor Performance in Ukraine Accentuated the United States'

Superiority and NCO Corps Dominance



Prior to the most recent invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces, the prevailing notion was that the superior Russian forces would overwhelm the Ukrainian army's forces within a matter of a few weeks if not days.

Fast forward to today, Russian forces have not only failed to secure targeted major objectives such as the city of Kyiv, but they have been forced to retreat and regroup, amid a myriad of tactical and strategic failures compounded by devastating losses of men and materials. All of this at the hands of a Ukrainian military that at the onset of hostilities, on paper, appeared to not have a chance.

This begs the question- what happened? Why is a nuclear superpower, regarded (often self-promoted) in the geopolitical landscape as having one of the best conventional armies, failing so demonstrably? The reason for Russia's military failures in Ukraine are numerous. However, when attempting to isolate and identify the most dominant and important reasons for the Russian failures in Ukraine, it is that the Russian military lacks the core component which makes the United States military the most formidable fighting force in the world- a developed and sustainable Non-Commissioned Officer Corps (NCO's).

This edition of "Outside the Wire" will highlight the often overlooked and underappreciated principles that guide the United States military's NCO corps. NCO's are the driving force that makes our military so formidable. Using the United States Army's "NCO Creed" broken down into 3 sections, we perform a comparative analysis of how the lack of a professional NCO corps has contributed to the Russian military's failures in Ukraine. We will use examples of Russian failures in Ukraine, viewed against the backdrop of the principles and tenets that the United States military's professional NCO corps adhere to and live by every day.

The NCO Creed (US Army)

No one is more professional than I. I am a noncommissioned officer, a leader of Soldiers. As a noncommissioned officer, I realize that I am a member of a time-honored corps, which is known as "The Backbone of the Army". I am proud of the Corps of noncommissioned officers and will at all times conduct myself so as to bring credit upon the Corps, the military service and my country regardless of the situation in which I find myself. I will not use my grade or position to attain pleasure, profit, or personal safety.

Competence is my watchword. My two basic responsibilities will always be uppermost in my mind—accomplishment of my mission and the welfare of my Soldiers. I will strive to remain technically and tactically proficient. I am aware of my role as a noncommissioned officer. I will fulfill my responsibilities inherent in that role. All Soldiers are entitled to outstanding leadership; I will provide that leadership. I know my Soldiers and I will always place their needs above my own. I will communicate consistently with my Soldiers and never leave them uninformed. I will be fair and impartial when recommending both rewards and punishment.

Officers of my unit will have maximum time to accomplish their duties; they will not have to accomplish mine. I will earn their respect and confidence as well as that of my Soldiers. I will be loyal to those with whom I serve; seniors, peers, and subordinates alike. I will exercise initiative by taking appropriate action in the absence of orders. I will not compromise my integrity, nor my moral courage. I will not forget, nor will I allow my comrades to forget that we are professionals, noncommissioned officers, leaders!

Section I

"No one is more professional than I. I am a noncommissioned officer, a leader of Soldiers. As a noncommissioned officer, I realize that I am a member of a time-honored corps, which is known as "The Backbone of the Army". I am proud of the Corps of noncommissioned officers and will at all times conduct myself so as to bring credit upon the Corps, the military service and my country regardless of the situation in which I find myself. I will not use my grade or position to attain pleasure, profit, or personal safety."

The United States military is a 100 percent all-volunteer fighting force. The average term of service for initial contracts is 4 years along with an 8-year military obligation which if reenlistment does not occur can be fulfilled through a period of inactive reserve status/service (included in the 4 years). All soldiers regardless of component status (active duty, national guard, reserves) attend the same basic training and MOS schools (Military Occupational Specialty). The initial length of enlistment allows time for highly technical training and for soldiers to develop proficiency on advanced weapons systems and tactics.

The U.S. system of centralized training provides an environment with a higher baseline standard for the average recruit even before they are sent out for specialized individual MOS training. All NCOs in the Army receive quarterly performance ratings which are used as metrics for advancement and promotions. All training at centralized reception centers (basic training) is performed by cadres of NCOs. These NCOs are not only experts in their respective MOS's, but when they are assigned to training commands they too are graded on their individual and collective ability to conduct high-quality training, while providing and maintaining a safe environment for the trainees assigned to them.

All of this while maintaining the professional standard of the NCO corps. NCOs are tasked with observing and being held accountable for almost every aspect of the well-being of soldiers assigned to them. Soldiers receiving this type of training and care are much more likely to be highly motivated and prepared to follow these NCOs into combat situations.

Russian military conscripts officially make up at least 25 percent of the Russian military. Conscripted military service in Russia was a 2-year obligation (3 years for naval service) prior to 2008 (3 years for naval duty) at which time it was reduced to a 1-year term. In the Russian system, there is no standardized “basic training” to train and develop inductees. Conscripts simply report to induction stations, and then are transferred to their units where they receive initial training and then on-the-job training for their assignment. How that training takes place and what it is comprised of is ad-hoc and can vary in scope and methodology from unit to unit. The duties and responsibilities delegated to NCOs in the U.S. model are in many cases attempted to be performed in large part by Junior officers in the Russian model.

Along with rampant corruption in the form of ghost vehicle purchases, lower-quality equipment upgrades, food and fuel budget misappropriations; there is severe hazing prevalent throughout the Russian military. So much so there is a commonly used term for it in Russian society- “**Dedovshchina**”. Multiple accounts of incidents have been attributed to this practice of junior and senior officers, along with non-conscripted soldiers and NCOs commonly referred to as “contract soldiers” mistreating conscripts including extorting them for money, withholding rations, by the threat of physical violence and torture, and in many cases death.

The practice of **Dedovshchina** is so ingrained in the Russian military that it is often cited as one of the main fears potential conscripts use for avoiding military service. Prior to the 1-year reduction in conscription obligation, 2nd-year conscripts were routinely doing the same to 1st-year conscripts. The internal rift and lack of trust between conscripts, officers, and professional or “contract soldiers is a major factor in the degradation of unit effectiveness. On the battlefield in Ukraine these differences have translated into:

- Russian troops were widely reported at the onset of the invasion to not have proper winter clothing and supplies. U.S. NCOs are tasked with and given the authority to ensure their subordinates and units are properly equipped.
- Failures in logistics including broken supply lines and abandoned Russian military vehicles which simply broke down due to poor maintenance. NCOs in the U.S. model are held accountable for the readiness of all vehicles and systems assigned to them.
- Lack of trust and fear of desertion by conscripts led Russian leadership to hide that an actual invasion was going to occur. Troops were surprised in some cases that they were even involved in actual combat operations. In the U.S. model based on the care provided by the NCOs- troops have developed a trust in their abilities and have developed a bond with them that permeates across the battlefield.
- High numbers of Russian desertions on the battlefield. Mistreatment and poor training of conscripts result in even lower morale during combat operations. The U.S. model produces highly motivated and highly trained soldiers.
- Widespread reports of war crimes perpetrated by Russian troops against the civilian population inside Ukraine. Lack of discipline and no NCO corps to enforce and control behavior leads to rampant and undisciplined troop activities.
- NCOs in the United States military are tasked specifically with instilling and enforcing a value system that does not allow and would not allow for widespread abuses and war crimes by troops to occur in combat.

Section II

“Competence is my watchword. My two basic responsibilities will always be uppermost in my mind—accomplishment of my mission and the welfare of my Soldiers. I will strive to remain technically and tactically proficient. I am aware

of my role as a noncommissioned officer. I will fulfill my responsibilities inherent in that role. All Soldiers are entitled to outstanding leadership; I will provide that leadership. I know my Soldiers and I will always place their needs above my own. I will communicate consistently with my Soldiers and never leave them uninformed. I will be fair and impartial when recommending both rewards and punishment.”

American NCOs pride themselves on competence. That competence is developed and reinforced through an internal system of official military schools and academies and a focus on constant and continuous self-development courses made available throughout the year. The emphasis on constant training and retraining is a culture that NCOs in this system engrain in lower-level subordinates.

Often the purpose of the formal training modules is to not only teach and refresh skillsets to the NCOs, but they are also designed under a “train the trainer” concept with the goal of the NCO returning to his or her unit to teach other NCOs along with subordinates how to conduct the same type of training and knowledge sharing on their own at the small unit level.

The professional NCO in this system empowers subordinates by allowing them to lead training at times. This increases the competence and confidence of the rank-and-file soldier and those that move on to become NCOs are more effective as they already possess many of the skillsets and leadership capabilities to perform as effective NCOs.

The NCO corps in the United States Army teaches all soldiers that they should be able to operate “2 up and 1 down”. Meaning that at any time a soldier should be capable and competent at performing roles one rank below them and two ranks above their current pay grade.

The Russian military suffered heavily in Ukraine due to many instances of soldiers simply not knowing what to do when communications were lost/disrupted. Often groups of these Russian units were clustering and using poor combat tactics resulting in them being targeted and destroyed en masse by Ukrainian forces. The discipline required to maintain proper battlefield dispersion and spacing of troops and equipment that should have been reinforced by NCOs at the unit level simply did not occur and many Russian units suffered major losses from this shortcoming. The lack of small unit training, expertise, and competence at the NCO level is glaringly apparent as this conflict continues.

Section III

“Officers of my unit will have maximum time to accomplish their duties; they will not have to accomplish mine. I will earn their respect and confidence as well as that of my Soldiers. I will be loyal to those with whom I serve; seniors, peers, and subordinates alike. I will exercise initiative by taking appropriate action in the absence of orders. I will not compromise my integrity, nor my moral courage. I will not forget, nor will I allow my comrades to forget that we are professionals, noncommissioned officers, leaders!”

In the United States, Military Commissioned officers focus on strategic planning. Officers act as managers for soldiers, planning missions, giving orders, and assigning soldiers to tasks. The soldiers that these officers are assigning tasks to are the NCOs. The NCOs are responsible in most cases for executing and carrying out those orders. There is a special relationship that exists between commissioned officers and NCOs in the American military that is time-honored and built on an incredibly high degree of mutual respect.

NCOs have faith and confidence that the officers they work under will put them in the best position to succeed through proper mission planning analysis, and procurement of equipment and items needed to properly conduct and complete the mission.

Officers have faith that once orders are handed down to the NCOs they will be completed and have a high

degree of confidence in the capabilities of the NCOs they lead to carry them out successfully. Even though they are tasked with and have the final say on the task, mission, and purpose of missions, officers routinely incorporate NCOs into briefings and planning of missions.

The free flow of information and trust between these entities (NCOs & Officers) is vital once combat operations begin. NCOs on the ground have confidence that orders coming down are valid and trust senior leadership is putting them in the best position to succeed. Officers have complete confidence that orders given will be executed by NCOs and can focus on managing the strategic landscape of the battlefield as events unfold. In the event of C2 (Command & Control) disruptions or unforeseen challenges, NCOs are trained and given the authority to take initiative and problem-solve without constantly needing to ask for permission or guidance from above. Officers trust that any changes to plans made by NCOs on the battlefield are necessary and legal, and even in the absence of communications, instead of second-guessing the NCO, they will adapt strategic plans to support the change.

By contrast, the lack of a competent NCO corps in the Russian army has resulted in a leadership vacuum on the battlefield. This lack of leadership and trust at the unit level has resulted in high-ranking Russian officers who should be observing and directing the strategic battlefield and from a secure headquarters area- being forced to move down toward the front lines in order to attempt to take control of situations and direct unit movements.

Combined with the technical and tactical incompetence exhibited by the Russian military of numerous cases of Russian troops and officers using unencrypted radios and cellphones to communicate between units to coordinate movements this is a recipe for disaster on the battlefield.

At least 12 Russian generals have been killed on the front lines of Ukraine, many of them able to be identified and targeted through their use of unencrypted communication systems. This is a remarkable number of high-ranking officers to be lost and again highlights the lack of trust the Russian military has in subordinates to carry out orders- another among many failures associated with the Russian army having a hollow and ineffective NCO corps.

In conclusion, the poor performance of the Russian army in Ukraine highlights the fact that spending money alone does not make for a great fighting force. At approximately \$65bn Russia has consistently been ranked as having the fourth largest military budget in the world. The superiority of the United States' model for developing its fighting force is evident by comparing how the much smaller and much less funded (~5.9bn in 2021) Ukrainian military that is built upon the U.S. model, which emphasizes the core competency of an NCO corps, can and has leveled the playing field against an enemy force that on paper- it should have had no chance against.

For the last 8 years prior to the most recent hostilities, the United States has been training and retraining the Ukrainian army in that very manner and the results on the battlefield so far speak volumes for themselves. Yes-at approximately \$750bn (USD) the United States has the largest military budget in the world. The ability to leverage that amount of spending and resources goes a long way towards building a superior fighting force. But what places the United States military light years ahead of its rivals and allows it to maintain its global dominance from a military standpoint is pairing those enormous resources with a military system that centers itself around its professional and highly capable NCO Corps.