

William G. Bainbridge (1925-2008)

by **Kayson Wang**



INTRODUCTION

William G. Bainbridge was the fifth Sergeant Major of the United States (US) Army (SMA) and is remembered as one of the pioneers in contributing to the NCO (Non-Commissioned Officer) education system. SMA Bainbridge held firm in his ideas to improve the lives of NCOs by carrying out his job in an outstanding manner.

EARLY LIFE

Bainbridge was born in Knox County, Illinois on 17th April, 1925 to James Lyle Bainbridge, who was a fireman and Beatrice Wells, who was a housewife. During Bainbridge's early life, he lived with his family on a farm south of Elmwood, Illinois and was educated in one-room schoolhouses. He helped out his family by taking care of the gardening and worked in the fields, which became his biggest hobby throughout his life. On 7th December, 1941, Bainbridge first heard about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and eventually decided to volunteer for the army and fought in World War Two (WWII).

WORLD WAR II

Enlistment

Bainbridge enlisted in the army in June 1943 and had his basic training in Camp Wallace, Texas. Bainbridge received 17 weeks of anti-aircraft artillery training, but later decided to sign up to be an Army Air Corps Cadet because he wanted to become a 'hot pilot' as it was what everyone wanted to be.¹ Unfortunately, before Bainbridge could finish his cadet training, he was assigned to the 106th Infantry Division, 423rd Infantry Regiment in Camp Atterbury, Indiana due to lack of ground forces during the time. In Camp Atterbury, Bainbridge received his pre-deployment training that prepared him for the replacement of the 2nd Infantry Division in Germany. By fall 1944, Bainbridge had become a sergeant and was the leader of a 12 man squad patrolling along the Siegfried line, which was the German's line of defence against France. In early December 1944, German troops had already secretly built up a strike on the US troops, which later became known as the Battle of the Bulge.² The US army was clearly not ready to fight back

due to the severity of rain, snow and fog that prevented aircraft from aiding the ground troops. On 18th December, 1944, German troops launched their offensive attack on the 423rd Infantry Regiment, which Bainbridge was assigned to, by isolating them from the rest of their division. Although Bainbridge's squad suffered fewer casualties since they were placed in the Siegfried Line, which was further away from the war zone, the regiment suffered continuous bombardments from the Germans; which forced the regiment to eventually surrender as they were extremely outnumbered. It was significant because Bainbridge's regiment held off the German onslaught for four days, even though they were planning to surrender after one. Bainbridge fought valiantly with his bayonet and rifle even when it was his first time on the battlefield.³

Prisoner of War

After Bainbridge was captured by the Germans, he was marched to several stations with his regiment where he was separated from his men and interrogated. Bainbridge was given no food along the way and ended up at Siegenheim, where he was put in with 500-600 men in a barrack.⁴ According to Bainbridge, he had soup once a day which contained barley and

dehydrated sugar beets with rarely a piece of meat and on Sundays, Prisoners of War (POWs) would get a piece of German black bread which POWs would extract solids from their soup a few days in advance in order to make a 'spread' for the bread.⁵ POWs living in the environment also suffered from hygiene and health problems as they were only allowed to bathe once a month and agonised from bedbugs hatching and biting them during their sleep. After months of living in captivity, the American 6th Armored Division managed to carry out a successful operation as Bainbridge and his fellow NCOs were liberated on Good Friday, 1945. According to Bainbridge, he weighed 140 pounds at the start of his captivity and by the time he weighed himself after being sent to a repatriation military camp, Camp Lucky Strike, he weighed a mere 89 pounds while also suffering from severe vitamin deficiency. In Camp Lucky Strike, Bainbridge received treatment which helped him and fellow POWs to gradually restore their health status and body condition.

End of WWII and Discharge

Bainbridge remained in Camp Lucky Strike for around ten days before he was loaded onto a ship that eventually conveyed him and his fellow ex-POWs back home.

After Bainbridge's short return, he was assigned the duty of company armorer-artificer in July 1945, in which he was in charge of the maintenance and issuing of weapons. That was also when he got married to his childhood friend, Hazel, who joined Bainbridge's posting at Camp Maxey, Texas. Victory over Japan (VJ) day came on 14th August, 1945 and Bainbridge was eventually discharged in December 1945.

REJOINING THE SERVICE AND SERGEANT MAJOR ROLES

After returning to the US, Bainbridge left active duty and joined the Army Reserve from 1946 to 1950. However, he eventually returned to active service during the mobilisation for the Korean Conflict in 1951. Bainbridge took on the appointment of Platoon Sergeant in the 5012th Army Service Unit and was later deployed to Germany as an Operations Sergeant which he was in charge of secret document control. After a series of assignments and promotions in the US and Germany, Bainbridge became a Battalion Sergeant Major with the 1st Infantry Division and was deployed to Vietnam, where he became Sergeant Major of II Field Force, the largest corps command in Vietnam.

Upon returning from Vietnam, Bainbridge had a series of high-

level Sergeant Major assignments including taking charge as Sergeant Major for the Infantry Training Center, First Army Headquarters and Pacific Command.

During Bainbridge's time as the Sergeant Major of United States Army, Pacific (USARPAC) at Fort Shafter, Hawaii, he worked closely with General Ralph E. Haines, Jr., who was the USARPAC commander. Bainbridge took on the job of traveling to different US military and allied bases in order to set up a more sophisticated and organised communication system between USARPAC and the different bases. Bainbridge worked closely with senior NCOs stationed in different countries such as Thailand, Korea, Australia, New Zealand and Indonesia. Bainbridge eventually left USARPAC in 1972 as he was chosen to be the first Command Sergeant Major of the newly formed Sergeant Major Academy at Fort Bliss, Texas.

Enlisted soldiers who attained the distinction of being selected to be Command Sergeant Major are the epitome of success in their chosen field, in this professional of arms. Except for the rank of Sergeant Major of the Army, there is no higher grade of rank for enlisted soldiers and there is no greater honour.

As the Command Sergeant Major, Bainbridge carried out policies and standards of performance, training, appearance and conduct of enlisted personnel. The Command Sergeant Major advises and initiates recommendations to the commander and staff in matters pertaining to the local NCO support channel.

BAINBRIDGE AND HIS NCO BELIEFS

A NCO, also referred as a non-com, is a military officer who has not been given a commission. NCOs usually obtain their position of authority by promotion through the enlisted ranks. In contrast, commissioned officers hold higher ranks than NCOs are paid more and are often given more education opportunities such as a university degree. Commissioned officers are usually given their commissions without having risen through the enlisted ranks. NCOs in the military history were provided less funding and their training programmes were not emphasised. During the term of Bainbridge's service as the Command Sergeant Major of the Sergeant Major Academy, he strengthened the NCO's education system by securing permanent funding for the Sergeant Major Academy to develop a better curriculum for NCOs in the US army.

NCOs serving in the top three enlisted grades (E-7, E-8, and E-9) are termed senior non-commissioned officers and usually holds the rank of Sergeant Major. Sergeant Majors are expected to lead larger groups of service members, mentor junior officers and advise senior officers on matters pertaining to their areas of responsibility. A few senior NCOs in paygrade E-9 serve as Senior Enlisted Advisors to senior commanders in each service (e.g., Bainbridge working as the Sergeant Major for USARPAC). Thus, as an experienced NCO officer that served many senior appointments, Bainbridge was the perfect candidate for the Command Sergeant Major of the newly formed Sergeant Major Academy in 1972.

During Bainbridge's appointment as the Command Sergeant Major in the newly formed Sergeant Major Academy of the US, he implemented policies and greatly assisted in the creation of the curriculum especially for the education of Sergeant Majors.

To Bainbridge, NCO corps is often referred to as 'the backbone' of the armed services, as they are the primary and most visible leaders for most military personnel. Additionally, they are the leaders primarily responsible for executing

a military organisation's mission and for training military personnel so that they are prepared to execute their missions.

Sergeant Majors as senior NCOs are leaders on all issues affecting operational missions and the readiness, utilisation, morale, technical and professional development and quality of life of the enlisted forces, which it was exactly how Bainbridge wanted every NCO to strive to become. Bainbridge was not only the pioneer on the education of NCO officers, but he also took care of every little detail there was in order to promote the positive image of NCO corps. For example, Bainbridge served on the Army Uniform Board and designed the insignia for the Sergeant Major rank of the army that was used until October 1994.

SERGEANT MAJOR OF THE ARMY

After a three-year tour at the academy, Bainbridge was selected as Sergeant Major of the Army in 1975 and served in that capacity during the Chief of Staff tenures of General Frederick C. Weyand and Weyand's successor Bernard W. Rogers. As the Sergeant Major of the Army, Bainbridge accompanied the Chief of Staff to different congressional hearings, taking

care of issues on operations, troop strength, housing, salary of soldiers as well as handling personnel policies. Aside from that, Bainbridge's position as the Sergeant Major of the Army was also essential as his words and actions highly affected the morale of the soldiers as the Army's most senior enlisted soldier.

Being in charge as the highest level of Sergeant Major, Bainbridge visited US troops in Europe, Korea and many countries annually. He was also receiving complaints from enlisted soldiers which Bainbridge tried to resolve all of them as he believed he was the "voice of the army."⁶

Bainbridge served as the Sergeant Major of the Army for four years from 1975 to 1979, which ended the previous tradition of a two year term. General Bernard W. Rogers, former US Army Chief of Staff whom Bainbridge worked closely with, personally asked him to remain in the office after his two-year term and encouraged Bainbridge to continue to serve as the Sergeant Major of the Army until his own term of Chief of Staff was over.

LATER LIFE

Bainbridge served on the post as Sergeant Major of the Army

from 1st July, 1975 till June 1979 when he retired after 36 years of military service. His retirement ceremony took place at Fort Myer on 18th June, 1979.

Bainbridge's awards and decorations include the Distinguished Service Medal, Legion of Merit (with Oak Leaf Clusters), Bronze Star, Purple Heart Medal (with Oak Leaf Cluster), Air Medal, Army Commendation Medal (with Oak Leaf Clusters), Good Conduct Medal, American Campaign Medal, European-North African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal, WWII Victory Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Army of Occupation Medal, Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Prisoner of War Medal, Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal and the Combat Infantryman Badge (Second Award).⁷

Even after Bainbridge's retirement, he continued to remain active in the Association of the United States Army and the NCO Association. On top of that, Bainbridge served as the Secretary to the Board of Commissioners of the Soldiers' and Airmen's home for three years and nine years respectively, as its first director of member services.⁸

Bainbridge passed away on 29th November, 2008 in Palm Bay, Florida and was interned with full military honours at Arlington National Cemetery. Besides his family and senior members of the military in attendance, many former Sergeant Majors of the Army came to pay their final respects to him.

CONCLUSION

Throughout Bainbridge's life and his military career, he defined the values of a NCO officer that he sets every enlisted soldier to have: professionalism, leadership and discipline. As a leader of enlisted soldier, Bainbridge was truly the 'voice of his soldier' by listening to advice and complaints as he personally attempted to resolve and improve the welfare of every soldier.⁹ Bainbridge's military career highlighted the tri-role of senior NCOs as fighters, administrators and advisers to his officers. Bainbridge not only consistently sought feedback from his subordinates, he was also not afraid to tell his superiors the truth as he believes. This is the life of a man who served both his country and himself well.¹⁰

Bainbridge's most important job in his career was tending to the welfare of his soldiers. Being the

leader of the NCOs and an enlisted soldier is all about doing what a good leader does best—attending to the needs of his men—and what it takes to be a great NCO is to walk the talk and be the leader that you want your men to be:

"The core of a soldier is moral discipline. It is intertwined with the discipline of physical and mental achievement. It motivates doing on your own what is right without prodding. It is an inner critic that refuses to tolerate less than your best. Total discipline overcomes adversity and physical stamina draws on an inner strength that says 'drive on'."

-SMA William G. Bainbridge¹¹ 

5. Ibid, 39.
6. NCO Historical Society, "William G. Bainbridge", 2008, <http://www.ncohistory.com/files/Bainbridge.pdf>.
7. NCO Historical Society, "SMA William G. Bainbridge, 4th SMA passes", 2008, <http://www.ncohistory.com/Bainbridge.html>.
8. Ibid.
9. William G. Bainbridge and Dan Cragg, *Top Sergeant: The Life and Times of Sergeant Major of the Army William G. Bainbridge* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 153.
10. NCO Historical Society, "SMA William G. Bainbridge, 4th SMA passes", 2008, <http://www.ncohistory.com/Bainbridge.html>.
11. Association of the United States Army, "The Army Values-Integrity", <http://www.ausa.org/RESOURCES/NCO/TRAINING/QUOTESFORWINNERS/THEARMYVALUES/Pages/Integrity.aspx>.

ENDNOTES

1. William G. Bainbridge and Dan Cragg, *Top Sergeant: The Life and Times of Sergeant Major of the Army William G. Bainbridge* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 20.
2. Daniel K. Elder. Mark F. Gillespie. Michael B. Kelly. Glen R. Hawkins and Preston E. Pierce. *The Sergeant Major of the Army* (Washington, D.C., Centre of Military History United States Army, 2003), 111-119.
3. William G. Bainbridge and Dan Cragg, *Top Sergeant: The Life and Times of Sergeant Major of the Army William G. Bainbridge* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 33-34.
4. Ibid, 38.