No one is more professional than I. I am a Noncommissioned Officer, a leader of Soldiers. These first two sentences from the NCO Creed have been our mantra ever since a group of senior noncommissioned officers wrote the letters N-C-O on a blackboard and struggled to vocalize what it meant to be enlisted leaders shortly after the Vietnam War.

Now, almost half a century later, we reflect on 10 years of war and the changes we’ve seen in our Army and the NCO Corps. There is no question that we are a more versatile, adaptable and resilient force. These last 10 years have demanded more than just the traditional role of NCOs—caring for the welfare of our soldiers and accomplishing the
mission. We now ask our NCOs to be warrior leaders, resource managers, leader developers and, at the same time, culturally astute. These same demands have been placed on our junior soldiers. We must take a hard look at ourselves to truly understand the meaning of these changes and how this affects our role in the Army profession.

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.” The NCO Corps has long been the envy of all other armies in the world. Personal courage, integrity, loyalty and devotion to duty have long been our hallmarks. You see these attributes throughout our history, from SGT Audie L. Murphy and SGT Alvin C. York to SSG Robert J. Miller, SSG Sal A. Giunta and SFC Leroy A. Petry; and these Medal of Honor recipients are just the tip of the iceberg. Unfortunately, the American public doesn’t always hear the story of the soldier sacrificing himself to save a buddy’s life or going above and beyond to accomplish a mission.

For example, SGT Joshua R. Labbe, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry), is credited with saving the life of one soldier and protecting numerous others during a complex attack that lasted more than six hours last year in Afghanistan. For his actions that day, SGT Labbe received the Silver Star. His valor and courage are tremendous but not necessarily uncommon. Those of us in the Army hear this type of story once a week. It’s uncommon, however, for the American public to hear of these amazing warriors and what we are asking them to do on the battlefield every day. I ask that everyone serving the Army, whether you are a retired CSM or a DA civilian, tell our soldiers’ stories and those of their families. The American people need to hear about the sacrifices and heroics of those who volunteer to serve our country.

My two basic responsibilities will always be uppermost in my mind: Accomplishment of my mission and the welfare of my Soldiers. Our NCOs and soldiers continue to perform admirably in the harshest of conditions. I saw this firsthand during my first trip to Iraq and Afghanistan as the SMA. I saw cooks serving as convoy commanders, legal clerks serving as intelligence analysts, tankers conducting dismounted patrols, cannon crewmen guarding perimeters and infantrymen going on patrol, knowing they could be hit by an improvised explosive device. Our soldiers and NCOs, regardless of military occupational specialty, have proven time and time again to be the most lethal force in the world and continuously amaze while serving in harm’s way.

As good as our soldiers are in combat, we still have much work to do while at home station. Too many of our returning soldiers are committing suicide, using drugs, abusing alcohol and behaving recklessly, and our Army is working hard to combat these serious issues. I think we can best address these problems by encouraging unit-level leaders to take an active role in the lives of their soldiers. We need to get back to the basics: Oak Tree Counseling once a month, Sergeant’s
Time every Thursday, daily training schedules, and health and welfare inspections. We will only be able to combat these issues with our NCOs providing engaged leadership.

**I will strive to remain technically and tactically proficient.**

Tough, demanding and realistic training has been an Army standard for decades. As NCOs, we must understand how to plan, prepare, execute, and assess individual and small-unit training. Now, as we begin to wind down operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, we are focusing our efforts on full spectrum operations.

We have incorporated full spectrum operations in our combat training centers with a renewed emphasis on combined arms maneuver and wide area security. Part of this new training is found in Field Manual (FM) 7-0 and the Army Training Network (ATN), two new tools to help our NCOs train future leaders. It is important that NCOs understand and use these tools to help build our next generation of NCOs, and I expect NCOs to serve as the primary trainers at the small-unit and individual level.

The Army has several means to keep us technically proficient. Professional military education serves as the backbone of our continuous learning cycle. It is the foundation of growing leaders who can think critically and who are adaptive, agile, and capable of leading and building working relationships among all partners.

Structured self-development (SSD) brings the operational and institutional domains of Army training together and sets the conditions for continuous growth. SSD is required learning that continues throughout a soldier’s career, beginning with SSD 1 before Warrior Leader Course and ending with SSD 5 for a nominative sergeant major. This continuous learning allows soldiers to take these courses at their leisure. It’s an NCO’s responsibility to see to it that their soldiers are getting this training.

We have also rolled out phase one of the Army Career Tracker (ACT)—an interactive leadership development tool that integrates training, education and experiential learning into one personalized and easy-to-use interface. ACT provides soldiers with a more efficient and effective way to monitor their career development and allows leaders to track and advise their soldiers on their personalized leadership development.

Civilian education is also very important to our NCO Corps. Though there is no positive civilian education requirement for our enlisted soldiers, we are seeing a significant increase of higher education degrees among our senior NCOs. These broadly skilled NCOs are the best and brightest in our Army and will be selected for promotion before their peers. I encourage all soldiers to use their tuition assistance to earn a degree while in the Army.

**I will communicate consistently with my Soldiers and never leave them uninformed.**

Right now, U.S. Army soldiers are deployed and forward-stationed to nearly 80 countries around the world, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait and the Horn of Africa. We continue to operate at a fast pace, but because of the Army Force Generation model and the sustain, prepare, reset and transform imperatives we set forth several years ago, we are regaining our balance. Now, 70 percent of our active force will have two years of dwell time for every year deployed. Eighty percent of U.S. Army Reserve and National Guard units have four years of dwell time for every year mobilized.

Over the next few years, we will begin to draw down the Army to pretemporary end-strength initiative numbers, which include an initial 27,000 soldiers by the end of fiscal year (FY) 2013 and 22,000 the year after that. The Army plans to meet this drawdown without the huge cuts that followed Desert Storm. We will lower accessions, lower retention control points for our mid-careerists, and institute a more stringent selected-early-retirement system to weed out our low-performing senior NCOs.

We will also be reenlisting fewer of our junior soldiers and mid-grade NCOs. There will be a time in the near future when leaders will be able to reenlist only a select number of individuals in their units. That is why it is imperative to conduct monthly counseling for our soldiers. This counseling cannot be: “You did well this month.” It must be a

SSG Jacob Ferrara, who joined the Army in 2003, currently serves as assistant operations sergeant with the 94th Army Air Missile Defense Command and is air assault qualified. Among his goals are earning an MBA and retiring as a command sergeant major.
complete assessment of a soldier’s strengths and weaknesses as this will be a determining factor that leaders use to retain soldiers.

**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.**

During my travels, I often hear statements about officers “stealing” an NCO’s authority. During my 30 years in the Army, I’ve never once met an officer who wanted to do the job of an NCO. He or she did the job because NCOs weren’t doing theirs.

Our high operational tempo has caused us to focus on those skills needed downrange. Now, as our dwell time is increasing, our mid-grade leaders don’t know how to conduct in-ranks inspection or counsel a soldier. I’ve asked our senior NCOs to show these soldiers what right looks like. Our CSMs need to hold first sergeants accountable for their soldiers, first sergeants need to hold platoon sergeants accountable, and this needs to continue down the NCO support channel. We will not fix this problem until our leaders take an active role in the daily lives of their soldiers.

**I will not compromise my integrity, nor my moral courage.**

Our Army is one of the most respected professions in the United States. This kind of respect does not happen overnight. Respect and trust break down, however, when our soldiers fail to meet the charge to uphold the Army standard and live the Army values. Loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and personal courage are not just a group of individual ideals but a collective ethic. These values are at the core of what makes us a profession and serves as our moral compass.

We cannot expect our soldiers to live by the Army values when their leaders and mentors are not upholding the standard. These values form the framework of our profession and are nonnegotiable. Values, plus the Warrior Ethos, guide the way we conduct ourselves as an Army and as a profession of arms. We must be the uncompromising standard bearer for our soldiers. Leadership is the key ingredient.

**I will not forget, nor will I allow my comrades to forget, that we are professionals, Noncommissioned Officers, Leaders!**

In closing, I want to stress the amazing work being done every day by our soldiers, civilians and families around the world. They represent what is best about our nation. Like their predecessors of generations past, our soldiers are making a lasting impact on our nation and the people of the world. Our soldiers are the best-trained, best-staffed, best-equipped and best-led force in our history. Every generation has its heroes, and this one is no different.

Army Strong!

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First Sergeant Catalina Lacuesta, Signal Company, Headquarters and Headquarters Battalion, 25th Infantry Division, U.S. Division-Center, answers a question as a panelist during an interactive discussion about women serving in combat held at Camp Liberty, Iraq.