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from AUSA's Institute of Land Warfare

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Interview with SMA Hall

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(AUSA NEWS interviewed the new Sergeant Major of the Army, Robert E. Hall, on his new duties and goals as the Army's senior enlisted soldier. The interview, conducted in October 1997, has been edited for clarity.)

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AUSA: What is the greatest challenge facing soldiers now?

HALL: I think the challenge is that soldiers just don't know what the future looks like. It's like I told them at AUSA's Annual Meeting, they've got to have faith in the Army.

They've got to have faith in the leadership. They've got to have the faith in themselves. This is a really great Army. It's only when you see the headlines in the paper that you start to hang your head a little. But for every story, for every [negative] headline out there, there are 100 good news stories. We just have to emphasize the good that we're doing.

AUSA: In what way?

HALL: I had a chance to talk with about 300 NCOs and soldiers-of-the-year from major commands throughout the Army at the AUSA Annual Meeting. I had a chance to take questions, to see what their concerns were. And their concerns run the gamut . . . from promotions to pay and entitlements to awards, to quality of life, barracks, family housing, TRICARE, dental care . . . the entire spectrum. Every time they brought up their concerns, you could see that they were asking the questions for all the right reasons, and

you could see in them a tremendous pride in themselves as soldiers. That was reassuring to me.

AUSA: Two questions that Congress brought up in this last session were: "Was basic training tough enough?" and "Was advanced individual training tough enough?"

HALL: The soldiers that I received down at Central Command were motivated, dedicated and trained. Soldiers who are coming out of the training base are trained and ready to do the jobs that they were trained for. Are they trained in everything? Certainly not, because you've got to add the unit training. And that's when you get a totally trained and ready soldier. . . . From the talks that I've had with the drill sergeants, basic training is tough enough to produce a soldier that can meet and exceed Army standards.

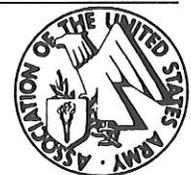
My philosophy of basic training is that basic training should not be easy, [but] we don't have to tear a soldier down to build him up.

AUSA: Is basic training different now?

HALL: I got asked a question the other day, "What do drill sergeants do now since they can't go out and beat the hell out of trainees?"

Well, I never saw a drill sergeant do that in 1968 when I went through basic training, and I

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didn't see a drill sergeant do that in 1979 when I was a drill sergeant. So I'm not sure that the "good old days" were ever really the "good old days."

I think basic training is tough enough to do what we expect them to do and I think, more importantly than that, drill sergeants have maintained the authority that they need to do the job.

When our challenges and the story about the training base first broke, I was a little worried that the first reaction would be that commanders in the field would start to pull back the authority that the sergeants, the noncommissioned officer corps, needed to do their job. I really feel good that that didn't happen. We've got the leadership of the Army to thank for making sure that that didn't happen.

AUSA: Why didn't it happen?

HALL: It's a belief that what happened at Aberdeen is not the norm for the Army, that that happened in one circumstance, that what happened there is not indicative of the noncommissioned corps today.

AUSA: What do you say to NCOs today about what they should be doing to work with the troops?

HALL: They need to do what the noncommissioned officer corps has done forever: They need to take care of soldiers. They need to take care of soldiers' families. Noncommissioned officers need to maintain standards. This Army really became better when we started talking about conditions and standards. And when we put the standards out there and when noncommissioned officers maintain the standard, that's when you have great soldiers. That's when you have great squads, great crews and great batteries. Also, I tell the noncommissioned officers not only to enforce standards on . . . subordinates, but also to maintain those same standards [themselves].

AUSA: What would you say to students at the Sergeants Major Academy?

HALL: I'm going to tell them to keep the faith. I'm going to tell them to maintain standards. I'm going to tell them to enforce the standards. I'm going to tell them to live up to those standards.

And I'm going to tell those students, those soon-to-be sergeants major, that as they see things that need to be fixed in the Army, [not to] look up — because they're part of the "they" that is our Army — [but to] look in the mirror, and then figure out how to fix their part of the Army. All of us working together, each of us fixing our share of the Army that's entrusted to us — then we'll be OK. This is teamwork. They're part of the leadership of the noncommissioned officer corps.

AUSA: Is there still a strong sense of teamwork among the NCO corps?

HALL: Yes, absolutely.

AUSA: What do you tell the NCOs about their leadership? How do they demonstrate that? How do they show that?

HALL: I think if you take the Army values — and we're going to put out a values card, something that soldiers can carry in their pockets — if they live the Army values every day and do the three things that General Reimer talks about when he says: "You do what's right — lead morally every day; create an environment where soldiers can be all they can be; treat others as you'd want to be treated." If you take those three pieces of guidance, and you couple [them] with Army values and you train hard and you maintain standards, I don't know how you can go wrong. I do not want our noncommissioned leaders to feel that they're afraid to make corrections on subordinates. If corrections need to be made, they need to make them. And if they're doing what's right, legally and morally, every day, and if they make those corrections in that manner, we're going to protect them.

One of the dangers is that noncommissioned leaders will be afraid to make corrections. The other one is that perhaps some of our young female soldiers feel they have no outlet to go to in sexual harassment cases. If it's comments or words or something like that, they need to come on line first of all and say that that's inappropriate. And if it happens again, they need to report it with full confidence that the chain of command will thoroughly investigate it and will take the appropriate action.

AUSA: How do you think that this job differs significantly from the one that you were doing in Central Command?

HALL: I think the focus is a lot broader here. At Central Command I had a relatively narrow focus. I thought the platter was full down there, but I really had a relatively narrow focus. I had a 1,000-man headquarters in Tampa. I had a significant number of troops deployed in a 20-country area of responsibility, 7,000 miles away.

Down there I was responsible for soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines. But as I dealt with enlisted issues there, I found out we're more alike than we are different in how we take care of troops. But it was a narrow focus.

I woke up this morning and I realized we've got 406,000 enlisted soldiers in the active component. They're deployed in 71 countries. The focus gets a lot broader. But it's still taking care of soldiers. It's still taking care of soldiers' families. It's still maintaining standards. So those things are still a constant. And I've been doing that since 1969 when I was first promoted to sergeant.

AUSA: How did you come in the Army? Were you drafted?

HALL: No, I enlisted. I was regular Army. I came in on a four-year enlistment in air defense artillery. I went through basic training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and advanced individual training at Fort Bliss, Texas, and then was stabilized on a NIKE Hercules missile site at Fort Story, Virginia, for about a year. I was then sent to Fort Bliss, Texas where they were kind enough to put me in the field at a range in New Mexico for about six months, and then we deployed as a unit, a Chaparral Vulcan unit, to Korea.

AUSA: What are the qualities you look for in a soldier in training?

HALL: What I look for is a willingness, even an eagerness, to learn — just an eagerness to be able to master the skills that they came in to train for.

I love to see the fire in their eyes that they just really want to come out and conquer the world. And they do it in the right way.

AUSA: What would you tell somebody who was considering joining the Army?

HALL: The Army's a great place . . . to get experience. It's a great place . . . to learn. It's a great place to . . . get some maturity. And I don't think any of us will have a better boss, ever, than the Army is.

AUSA: Do you have goals for yourself as the Sergeant Major of the Army?

HALL: I'd love to walk out of here, at the end of my tour, and know that I have done my share, have done my part, ensuring that the Army leadership does not lose, never loses confidence in the NCO corps.

I'm a tremendous believer in the noncommissioned officer corps. I take pride in the fact that I turned down Officer Candidate School in 1969, because I wanted to be a sergeant.

And I've never lost that fire in my belly to be a noncommissioned leader. And I wouldn't do anything else. I can't ever imagine doing anything else.

AUSA: What is the status of retention of E-4s, E-5s and E-6s? What can we do to continue to attract and hold good young soldiers?

HALL: Retention is certainly one of those areas that we've got to keep on everybody's schedule. If we ever lost focus of those soldiers, we could lose them very quickly. But as long as we're working as we are now to bring them in to make them part of the unit and let them know that they're doing a very fine job in the Army, then they're going to stay with us. And we need them to stay with us.

AUSA: What about the U.S. Army National Guard and U.S. Army Reserve?

HALL: I need to do more studying on the [Army] National Guard and Army Reserve. General [Dennis] Reimer [Army chief of staff] tasked me to be the sergeant major for the total Army, all of the active duty, the [Army] National Guard and the Army Reserve.

Having come from an assignment at First U.S. Army before I went to U.S. Central Command, I

spent about a year dealing with the [Army] National Guard and Army Reserve and have a tremendous respect for what the reserve components bring to the table.

But specifically with retention, I just don't have the answer right now.

AUSA: Any other thoughts?

HALL: I think the thing I'll remember forever is on a tape that AUSA showed a couple of years ago.

You showed LTG (now retired) Jay Garner. And they asked him: "If you had to go back and do it all over again, would you do anything different?" And he said: "Yeah, of course I would. But the two things that I would never change — I'd still be a soldier and I'd still marry the same woman."

You know, I don't know how you add to those words.

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