

Blacks make up 40 percent of command sgt. maj. ranks

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STAFF WRITER

Only one out of every thousand soldiers becomes a command sergeant major.

Of the few who make it, 40 percent are black, according to the Office of Army Demographics.

It's a surprising number, considering only 23 percent of enlisted soldiers are black.

"I really had no idea how well minorities are doing," said Command Sgt. Maj. James Dale, sergeant major of the Sergeant Majors Academy at Fort Bliss. "If it's at 40 percent, it means the opportunities are there."

Several experts, including Dale, said they thought the number of blacks who are command sergeants major might be high because black soldiers tend to join support units, and they presumed there are more command sergeants major in support roles than in combat arms roles. But that explanation doesn't pan out.

First, 16 percent of combat-arms soldiers are black, according to recent Pentagon statistics. But in the ground-troop ranks, black sol-

diers make up 31 percent of command sergeants major, according to statistics released by the Pentagon this month.

And, according to those Pentagon statistics, 569 command sergeants major come from combat-arms fields, while 769 are in support jobs — not enough to tip the statistics significantly.

The numbers show other trends:

■ In the infantry, 120 command sergeants major are white; 34 are black; 19 are Hispanic; four are Native American; and 10 are "others."

■ There are 60 black command sergeants major in field artillery; 32 whites; 12 Hispanics; and three "others."

■ One Special Forces command sergeant major is black; one is Hispanic; and 45 are white.

In support roles, blacks outnumber whites in every field except aviation-related jobs, engineers, military police and Criminal Investigative Command special agents and psychological operations, recruiting, explosive ordnance disposal and intelligence jobs. But no one seems to know the reasons for the numbers.

"Do you know what these numbers tell me?" asked retired Command Sgt. Maj. Harold Hunt. "Nothing. I have no clue."

If anyone would know, it would be Hunt. Fifteen years ago, he decided to write about all 9,000 blacks who have served as sergeants major. To get the 9,000 figure, Hunt dug through yearbooks at the Sergeants Major Academy and looked for brown faces. To celebrate their accomplishments, he wrote a book: "100 Sergeants Major of Color." A book of the same name includes all 9,000 soldiers.

His best guess for why so many blacks have risen so high in enlisted ranks is that those who chose to stay in the Army knew they had to prove themselves to move up.

"I feel like I work harder," said Sgt. Maj. Allison Smith, top enlisted soldier at 12th Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment, at the U.S. Military Academy. "It's part of our cultural background. We did not come from suburban America."

She spoke of how many blacks join the Army to leave behind crime and poverty, and then work hard to prove their worth.

"We had to perform better than the folks we worked with," said Smith, the subject of one of Hunt's stories. "That survival mentality really helped me. Every time there was something to do, I just wanted to be the best."

She earned her bachelor's degree and her master's. She went to every school the Army offered.

She tells soldiers that if they work hard, they can go far.

Hunt agreed. "You can excel," he said. "My concern would be, 'Are you in the right position to institute and organize change?'"

Officer ranks still a challenge

Not all the numbers mirror the achievement of black command sergeants major. Only 12 percent of officers are black — a mere 2 percentage point increase from 20 years ago. Hunt and Dale cite two reasons for that:

■ College-educated black men have plenty of opportunities in the corporate world that involve higher paychecks and fewer bullets.

■ Military science professors tend to encourage minority students to enter combat-support career fields

so they can use their skills after they get out of the Army. "There are more opportunities to move up in the officer corps if you're in a combat specialty," Dale said.

According to Lt. Col. Anthony D. Reyes' report, "Strategic Options for Managing Diversity in the U.S. Army," only 7 to 8 percent of combat arms officers are black and 59 percent of general officers are combat arms. Of the 318 generals filling the ranks in 2006, 26 of them are black.

Dale said it's a Catch-22 for black soldiers: Do they choose a skill that will help them on the outside, or do they chose combat arms and a full career in the military?

"We need good leaders in combat support," he said, "but we should be encouraging young soldiers toward the upper levels."

Dale, who trained as a cavalry scout, also praised the value of mentors. One of his, Sgt. Maj. Ed Tucker, made sure Dale made it into Hunt's book.

"I think it's good," Dale said. "I think years and years from now when soldiers are looking to decide on their careers, they might think, 'Maybe I can be like Sergeant Major Dale or Sergeant Major Hunt.'" □



Dale



Smith

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