

Military

1st sergeant major of the Army dies at age 89

By Daniel Borunda
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William O. Wooldridge, who was the first man chosen as sergeant major of the Army and who had retired in the El Paso area, has died, military officials said. Wooldridge was 89.



Wooldridge

Wooldridge, who lived in Santa Teresa, died overnight Monday at Beaumont Army Medical Center. Funeral services are pending.

He was described as an innovator who holds a spot in U.S. Army history. In 1966, he was named the first sergeant major of the Army, a Pentagon-level position that is the Army's highest enlisted rank.

Wooldridge is credited with sowing the seeds of the Army's non-commissioned officer (NCO) education system, creating the command sergeant major position and helping establish the Sergeants Major Academy, which now operates at Fort Bliss.

Sgt. Maj. Raymond F. Chandler III, the former commandant of the

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Sergeants Major Academy, described Wooldridge as an inspiration.

"SMA Wooldridge was a one of a kind noncommissioned officer, selected to be the first Sergeant Major of the Army because of his initiative, intelligence, experience and drive to excel," Chandler said in a statement on his official Facebook page.

"His lasting impression lives on in the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy, the centralized NCO promotion system, and our professional NCO Corps. He was an innovator; a true inspiration to soldiers, and the epitome of a professional warrior," he wrote.

Wooldridge was born in Shawnee, Okla., in 1922. He joined the Army in 1940 and fought in World War II and Vietnam.

An official Army biography stated that Wooldridge was wounded and earned a Silver Star for gallantry in action as an infantry soldier during the battle for the fortress city of Aachen and then earned a second Silver Star during the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944.

Wooldridge once told the El Paso Times about the inescapable cold during the Bat-

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tle of the Bulge. He recalled that "the snow was hip deep at times, and we had trouble with frostbite. We had blankets then, not sleeping bags."

During a 2006 interview with the El Paso Times, Wooldridge spoke about how he was serving in Vietnam when he was selected to be the first sergeant major of the Army, a post that gave him the ear of the Army's top decision-makers.

Wooldridge was serving at a command post in Vietnam near the Cambodian border in mid-1966 when he was called for an interview with a one-star general working for Gen. William Westmoreland.

Wooldridge said he was initially not interested in the new

position because he had never been away from a troop unit and felt the new slot would be a glorified public affairs officer. Despite his objections, Wooldridge was selected.

"So I thought that maybe I can make something out of it," Wooldridge said in 2006. "As it turned out, I had more to say than I thought."

As the sergeant major of the Army, Wooldridge sat in on daily briefings with President Lyndon B. Johnson that included mostly three-star generals. Wooldridge was there to give advice on enlisted matters and the status of enlisted soldiers.

As a seasoned combat soldier with the opportunity to improve the Army he loved, Wooldridge said he was not afraid to speak up among the Pentagon brass.

"I knew what I wanted, and I wasn't afraid to say it," Wooldridge said.

The recommendations Wooldridge initiated would eventually evolve into the command structure for enlisted soldiers in today's Army. After his term ended in 1968, he returned to Vietnam. On his return to the U.S., Wooldridge was assigned to the White Sands Missile Range in 1969.

He retired in 1972 after more than 30 years of service.

Daniel Borunda may be reached at dborunda@elpasotimes.com; 546-6102.