NCO History Brief Outline
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I. Introduction.

A. Fisher, Earnest F. Guardians of the Republic. New York: Ballantine Books, 1994.

B. Fisch, Arnold J. and Robert K. Wright. The Story of the Noncommissioned Officer Corps: The Backbone of the Army. Washington D.C.: Center Of Military History, 2002.

C. Arms, L.R. A Short History of the US Army Noncommissioned Officer. http://cgcs.leavenworth.army.mil.

II. Body

A. Indian Wars

1. Westward expansion.

2. SGT Charles L. Thomas.

B. Spanish-American War

1. Preparation of troops.

2. CPL Leland Smith.

C. World War I

1. Specialization.

2. SGT Patrick Walsh.

III. Closing

A. Summary: In summary, I have covered NCOs in action during the Indian Wars, the Spanish-American War, and World War I. I have addressed weapons, formations, duties, training, discipline and heroes.

B. Questions: What are your questions?

C. Conclusion: NCOs lead the way.

NCO History

1865-1925

Following the Civil War and a decade of Reconstruction in the South, a sharply reduced Army returned to its old task: enforcing treaties and trying to prevent fighting between Indians and settlers on the frontier. The Army would remain for the next thirty years at slightly under 25,000 troops, most assigned to twenty-five infantry and ten cavalry regiments. The Army garrisoned 255 posts in 1869, administered through three major territorial departments: Atlantic, Pacific, and Missouri. The postwar Army was broken up into small detachments and used both cavalry and infantry extensively to cover vast distances in pursuit of elusive adversaries.

Campaigns against the Indians were coordinated by the Department of the Missouri, headquartered at Jefferson Barracks near St. Louis. Although they sent soldiers into 943 engagements with the Indians in a thirty year period, many of the Army's senior leaders remained largely unconcerned with the operations they directed. Wars often consisted of numerous scattered skirmishes over wide areas, without any substantial battle being fought to determine the war's end.

This type of war led to the further enhancement of the NCO's role as a small unit leader. Often fighting in small detachments, troops relied heavily on the knowledge and abilities of NCOs. One positive result of the Civil War was the enlistment of black soldiers in the Regular Army for the first time since the Revolution. Though mostly officered by whites, the 24th and 25th Infantry and the 9th and 10th Cavalry were black units with a full complement of black NCOs.

The rise of the status of NCOs in the West grew directly out of the nature of the fighting they encountered. Besides keeping unit records, overseeing daily fatigue details, and supervising training, sergeants and corporals often served as small unit leaders without immediate supervision by officers. In the dusty expanses of the Plains or southwestern mesas, merely finding a hostile force could become a major undertaking, requiring patrols that lasted for weeks and covered hundreds of miles. To conduct patrols properly, infantry and cavalry squads and platoons often had to search independently and then reconcentrate promptly.

NCOs of course, led these squads and platoons, occasionally accompanied by a lone officer. If the reconnaissance encountered a hostile band, they then had to become combat leaders. Courage, skill, and brains were all requirements of the job. Just giving commands to their men was a problem in some units, where up to a quarter of the soldiers spoke little or no English.

One of the many outstanding soldiers of this period was Sergeant Charles L. Thomas of the 11th Ohio Cavalry. Late in the summer of 1865 the right column of the Powder River Expedition, containing 1,400 men, was lost. Unable to regain their lines and wandering hopelessly, the column began to despair. Rescue missions were sent out; Sergeant Thomas, with two Pawnee scouts, was among them. After 24 hours Sioux warriors attacked Thomas and the scouts and a running battle ensued. Near sundown Thomas sighted the lost column. Spurring his horse, he cut a path through the Sioux, reaching the column. He then rallied the men in the camp into a fighting formation and forced the Sioux to give way. Thomas pushed the troops onward for 150 miles to a

supply camp. This prevented the destruction of the column, which would have been a major disaster for the Army.

When the United States declared war on Spain in April 1898, the United States Army consisted of approximately 26,000 men, most of which for many years had been scattered in company sized-units in widely separated garrisons. Companies rather than battalions and regiments had been the rule. Consequently most noncommissioned officers experience had been limited to company duty. Although they were usually well-trained and disciplined units, few of these companies had ever formed integral parts of either battalions or regiments in tactical exercises. There were no brigades or divisions in the peacetime organization.

Lacking the troops to conduct a war oversees, the War Department asked for volunteers. National Guard units already formed, were allowed to volunteer and serve as units. In all the United States raised 275,000 men to fight against Spain. Using the Regular Army as the nucleus the United States created a fighting force. Major problems for deployment of this force consisted of preparing and transporting this Army to various theaters of war. The troops needed to be equipped, trained, and supplied before engaging the enemy. The pace of preparation was extremely slow and months passed before any action could be taken. Some volunteer units never reached the front in time to see action.

The Spanish-American war provided a rigorous test for the Hospital Corps. Though the quality of corpsmen trained in the companies of instruction was excellent, the quantity was insufficient. The Army had no choice but to go back to its old system of detailing men from the line and trying to train them quickly. By the end of the war, 6,588 corpsmen, of whom 608 were NCOs, had served in the combined regular and volunteer

force. In the years that followed, additional reforms again sought to standardize performance and grade structure. In 1903 the medics expanded to a five-rank grade progression, from private to private first class, corporal, sergeant, and sergeant first class.

The hard core of the Army that crossed the seas to do battle with the moribund (at or near the point of death) Spanish empire and later with Filipino insurgents was essentially a regular force composed of companies whose cement was the noncommissioned officer. These ~~were the~~ men in spite of the admitted shortcomings in their selection and training, ~~had~~ held the company-sized units together during the lean pre-war years and would continue to do so during the coming war itself. With these old-time regular noncommissioned officers have left us virtually no record of their wartime service, their moral articulate and literate colleagues, the volunteer noncommissioned officers—those who volunteered solely volunteered for the duration—have left numerous vignettes (short scene or incident) of the regulars at work.

One vignette of the Spanish-American War was recorded by Corporal Leland Smith, then a volunteer serving with a U.S. Signal Corps photographic detachment in the campaign against the Philippine insurgents. Smith's detachment accompanied a company commanded by a young lieutenant appointed directly out of civilian life. The company was in pursuit of an insurgent band and was in march column as it approached a bamboo thicket in which the insurgents were suspected to have taken refuge. As the company drew near the thicket, the lieutenant ordered the men to form a company front and to "fix bayonets." While the men did so, the company commander placed himself in front of the line preparatory to leading a bayonet charge into the jungle. Corporal Smith watched in fascination as the company's grizzled old First Sergeant, aware of the hazards

of moving into dense vegetation in this manner, gave the lieutenant a caustic look, then growled to the men, "take off those bayonets." Smith was uncertain whether the lieutenant overheard the First Sergeants order. In any case he said nothing, and the company, with bayonets sheathed, moved with greater caution through the bamboo.

Medal of Honor recipients during the Spanish-American War were many, to name one is honorable. Sergeant Major Edward L. Baker Jr., 10th U.S. Calvary, place and date: Santiago, Cuba, 01 July 1898. Born in Laramie County, Wyoming, Sergeant Major Baker's Medal of Honor citation issued on 03 July 1902 reads: left cover and, under fire, rescued a wounded comrade from drowning.

World War I required the first massive training of men the US had seen. NCOs trained four million men; one million of whom would be sent oversees. A typical training day started at six o'clock, with breakfast at seven o'clock. Training assembly started at eight o'clock and ended at four o'clock. Corporals were the primary trainers during this period, with lessons emphasizing weapons and daytime maneuvers. Twelve hours of training were devoted to proper use of the protective mask, with a trip to the gas chamber included. The First World War proved a brutal struggle, with technology coming to the forefront. Gas warfare was introduced, the machine gun ended mounted charges, and airpower came of age. Victories were measured in yards gained per thousands of men lost.

No single invention had a greater impact on the Army than the internal combustion engine, which promised to free troops from the slow pace of horses and mules. In 1906 the Quartermaster Corps bought its first six automobiles, and experiments with trucks soon followed. In 1907 the Army formed an "aeronautical

division" in the Signal Corps and two years later bought its first experimental powered aircraft from the Wright brothers. Before and after America entered the war in Europe in 1917, specialization was increasing. Long-established technical functions required more personnel. In 1913 the first air squadron was formed and became the 185-squadron Air Service in 1918. Other specialized units were formed during this time frame as well. In 1916 the Motor Transport was formed, in 1917 the Medical Service Corps was formed, and in 1918 the Tank Corps was formed.

The "square" infantry division formed the main American tactical unit of World War I. Its basic structure demonstrated how deeply dependent the Army had become on noncombat specialists. Each division deployed tactically in four infantry and three field artillery regiments, supplemented by three machine gun battalions. Supporting them were a field signal battalion, and engineer regiment, and a variety of headquarters and trains units. These wide ranging changes in the Army had a profound impact on the NCO corps.

From colonial times, American NCOs had filled certain well-defined roles as trainers, enforcers of discipline, small unit leaders on the battle field, and keepers of company-level records. As NCOs became specialists in new technologies, a split started to emerge between specialists and traditional troop leaders. Once the Specialists NCOs set the stage and troop leading NCOs then took over leading the offensive. NCOs leading these assaults might not have been well versed in the fine points of the staff briefing, but they knew what had to be done. With a disregard for their own survival that inspired their countrymen, these NCOs and their troops pressed forward.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, Sergeant Patrick Walsh already had thirty-one years of service and was eligible to retire. Instead, he chose to remain with his unit when it left for France. On 01 March 1918, near Seicheprey, Sergeant Walsh followed his company commander through a sever barrage to the first line of trenches to attack. When the company commander was killed, Sergeant Walsh assumed command and initiated as assault that resulted in heavy enemy losses. He received the Distinguished Service Cross for his demonstration of leadership.

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