

*Good Content*

Sergeant Patrick Gass

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## NCO HISTORY BRIEF

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## SGT PATRICK GASS

Patrick Gass loved a good adventure. He enlisted to fight the Indians, volunteered for the Lewis and Clark expedition, and volunteered again for the War of 1812. He earned his fame on the Lewis and Clark expedition, gaining notoriety by publishing a journal of the events of the expedition. However it was his courage and skills proven in the War of 1812 and the battles with the Indians that earned Patrick Gass his image as one of the first true professional Noncommissioned Officers.

Patrick Gass was born on 12 June 1771 near Falling Springs, PA. His parents moved around several times in the first years of Patrick's life until finally settling down in western Maryland. In 1780, the Gass family again picked up roots, moving westward several more times until they finally settled at Camp Catfish, now Washington, PA. The next eight years Patrick spent helping his father farm the land there. Patrick showed his spirit of adventure at an early age by volunteering to make several trips across the mountains to western Maryland. These trips were to pick up much needed supplies for his family. Although he was under 18 years of age, the danger and peril did not stop his yearning for adventure. Instead, these trips just made Patrick even more eager to set out on his own and begin his own incredible adventures.

In 1792, at the age of 21, Patrick left home and joined Captain Canton's Company of Rangers of the Frontier. He went on to fight the Indians who often attacked settlers in the western frontier of the colonies. He served at Bennett's Fort in Wheeling, VA, and in August of that year fought in the offensive that virtually ended the confrontation with the Indians in the area. After that battle, Gass returned home in 1794. Just months after his return, Patrick moved to Mercersburg, PA and became a carpenter's apprentice for two

years. During that time he worked on a variety of projects, including the home of James Buchanan. He became friends with Mr. Buchanan's oldest son, James Junior. Little did Patrick realize that he had made friends with the future President of the United States of America. At the end of his apprenticeship, Gass went to the western territories to work as a carpenter until 1799. Then the threat of war called him to the Army again.

In 1799, Patrick Gass enlisted in the Tenth United States Infantry under General Alexander Hamilton. But the threat of war with France soon dissipated and he received his discharge papers in June 1800. As soon as he could, Gass re-enlisted and in May 1801 joined Captain Russell Bissell's Company of the First Infantry stationed at Fort Kaskaskia, Illinois. He served there until the fall of 1803. That was when SGT Patrick Gass was given the opportunity to go on the adventure of a lifetime.

Patrick had just been promoted to Sergeant when, in the fall of 1803, Captain Meriwether Lewis came to Fort Kaskaskia, IL. Captain Lewis had come in search of volunteers for an expedition of the land to the Pacific coast. Such a journey appealed to Gass' adventurous spirit. Patrick and his good friend John Ordway were among the first to volunteer for the trip. Captain Bissell released Ordway from duty, but refused to let Gass leave. Gass was a good soldier and a first rate carpenter, and Captain Bissell felt that he couldn't afford to lose such a valuable man. Gass' determination won out, however, and after a private interview with Captain Lewis, Captain Bissell's decision was over-ridden. Patrick Gass became the newest carpenter of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. This did not come without a cost as Gass had to sign on as a private, thus costing him his Sergeant stripes.

Gass' journey began on May 14, 1804, the day the expedition left the winter camp at the mouth of the Wood river. This is the junction of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. As the expedition made its way up the Missouri, one NCO, SGT Charles Floyd fell ill with what modern medical authorities believe was peritonitis. They believe this came from a torn or burst appendix. He just lasted the night and died the next morning. He was buried near Sioux City, Iowa on a bluff overlooking the river. Six days later, with a vote among the men, Patrick Gass was elected to take SGT Floyd's place. This is believed to be the first election held west of the Mississippi river. Patrick had become a Sergeant again.

Gass helped Shepard lead the men across the continent and back. Despite difficult conditions, SGT Gass helped lead the crew to complete the journey with no further loss of life. On more than one occasion Sergeant Gass' actions allowed the expedition to continue. This was most notable when arrived back at camp in time to decide the outcome of a battle between the main group and Indians. The expedition explored the upper Missouri River and the Northwest Territories, recording the people, animals, and plant life they found in the area. Sergeant Gass kept a detailed journal of their expedition. The expedition returned to St. Louis, Missouri on September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1806 to crowds cheering them along the riverfront. Gass' friends encouraged him to publish his journal. Understanding that he lacked the skill to make it readable to the general public, Gass approached a schoolteacher named David McKeehan, to help him prepare the journal for printing. McKeehan agreed and the pair decided Gass would receive 100 copies of the final print and own the copyright of his journal. The balance of the printed editions would belong to McKeehan. The timing of the publishing of the journal couldn't



have been better. The Gass edition of the Lewis and Clark Journals enjoyed several printing in the United States as well as Germany, France, and England. The editions from the Lewis and Clark papers would not be published for another seven years.

Once again Gass set his sights west and went back to the Army at Fort Kaskaskia, Illinois. He was working there as the commissary assistant when the War of 1812 broke out. During 1813, Sergeant Gass was stationed on the Illinois frontier near St. Louis to hold the Indians in check. But in the spring of 1814, Gass and his men were ordered to the Niagara frontier to fight the British. They didn't arrive until July and just missed the Battle of Chippewa. Sergeant Gass and his men did not miss the next battle, which was at Lundy's Lane. Now Patrick got to hear the roar of the "Big Guns" in combat. SGT Gass was qualified in artillery and was used to firing 6 and 12 pound guns, or cannons. The 12 pound guns could easily out distance the British guns and were very valuable to Gass and his men on the battlefield. As the battle wore on, Sergeant Gass was one of the 300 men that charged and captured a British company after fighting hand-to-hand all night. Gass was wounded in this battle and lost the sight of his right eye as a result. Later that year, he rejoined the fighting and fought in Pittsburgh and Niagara to protect the country against a potential invasion from Canada.

SGT Patrick Gass was discharged in the spring of 1815 at Sachetts Harbor, New York, a little more than a month after America and Britain agreed on a peace treaty at the signing of the Treaty of Ghent in February 1815. He traveled to Wellsburg, Va, then to Pittsburgh, Pa, then finally settled in Mansfield, Ohio. He held odd jobs during this time, working as a ferry operator and then in a brewery. Gass eventually found himself hunting stray horses and working in a mill. Patrick continued to roam until the death of

his father in 1827. In 1829, Gass moved in with a judge and his family. It was there that Patrick met his wife, Maria Hamilton. She was 20 years old and he was 60 years old. They courted for almost two years and were married at Plummer's Mill, Va on March 1, 1831. The newlyweds bought a tract of land at Pierce's Run, about six miles from Wellsburg, and settled down to a life of farming. During there life together, Maria gave birth to seven children in fifteen years, but lost one to stillbirth and another to smallpox. men. They lived there until Maria died in 1846. This left Patrick to raise five children at the age of 76. Gass was a hard worker and never asked for help. He managed to raise his family on 160 acres and \$96.00 a year. This was his pension from the Army. Patrick eventually lost his land because of back taxes he owed. He also felt slighted by the Army because the pension was insufficient for his and others service in the War of 1812. In 1856, Patrick Gass called a meeting in Washington to lobby for better pensions for soldiers and families of dead soldiers who fought in the War of 1812. This effort proved to be futile as the Army and the government rejected all resolutions his group created.

Even though he lost his effort for a better pension, Patrick Gass never begged or asked for help. He managed to feed and house his family. Yet, instead of being bitter toward the Army, he offered to re-enlist in 1858 at the age of 87 years old. Sergeant Patrick Gass, the last of the gallant band that followed Lewis and Clark to the Pacific Ocean and back, died at his daughter's home on April 2, 1870. He was 98 years and 10 months old.

Patrick Gass' adventurous spirit led him to travel and adventure that was not heard of in those days. He fought in one war and enlisted to fight in another. He took a reduction in rank to go on what was the greatest expedition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His life skills and courage were never questioned. His leadership ability and coolness under extreme



difficulties earned him the respect and admiration of not only his peers and subordinates, but his superiors as well. His courage and bravery under fire led to many victories over the British forces in the War of 1812. Sergeant Patrick Gass showed the value of a good NCO, to the future of an entire nation.

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