

**A Brief History of the Noncommissioned Officer
from 1775 to 1865**

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OUTLINE

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Arms, L.R. A Short History of the NCO. NCO Museum Staff Article. Fort Bliss: U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, 1989.

Bland, Douglas L. Backbone of the Army, Non-Commissioned Officers in the Future Army. London: McGill-Queens University Press, 1999.

B. The purpose of this paper is to provide Soldiers with a portion of NCO history. It is important to know the history of the NCO so that Soldiers may take pride in the heritage of the NCO Corps and learn from historical mistakes and accomplishments.

II. BODY

A. Influences on Training and Duties of the Early American NCO.

1. Ethnic

2. Rank and Training

a. Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States,” the “Blue Book”

b. The Abstract of Infantry Tactics

B. Duties

1. Military

2. Expeditionary

C. Weapons of the Early American NCO

D. Heroes of the American Revolution

1. SGT Elijah Churchill

2. SGT William Brown

3. SGT Daniel Bissell

III. CONCLUSION

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The term “Backbone of the Army” has been given to the U.S. Army Non Commissioned Officer (NCO) because of the structure that the NCO provides to the overall concept of the U.S. Army. In order to understand how the NCO was given such high distinction throughout the Army, one has to understand how the NCO developed as teachers, mentors, and facilitator of U.S. military officer commands. “The history of the United States Army and of the noncommissioned officer began in 1775 with the birth of the Continental Army. The American noncommissioned officer did not copy the British. He, like the American Army itself, blended traditions of the French, British and Prussian armies into a uniquely American institution. As the years progressed, the American political system, with its disdain for the aristocracy, social attitudes and the vast westward expanses, further removed the US Army noncommissioned officer from his European counterparts and created a truly American noncommissioned officer” (Arms, pg. 1).

First, individuals must look at the basic ethnic makeup of the early U.S. Army NCO. During the early development of our nation, many different types of people, traditions, religious beliefs, and desires played a role in forming the population of what has become the United States. The same is true in the development of the early U.S. military, and NCO corps. In 1565, Spain began the first permanent European settlement in St. Augustine (Florida). In 1607 the English established Jamestown, Virginia. In 1624, the Dutch settled 30 families in the New York area. In 1682, large numbers of settlers began to arrive in Pennsylvania from Germany and the British Isles. In 1685 many French men and women made their way to America in pursuit of religious freedom. Additionally, throughout the 1700’s scores of Irish fled their country in route to America because of British oppression, and later because of the Potato Famine of 1845. These

are but a few of the examples of early settlement in America, which illustrates the influences of Spanish, English, Dutch, German, French, and Irish settlers (The History Place 2005). These differences contributed to the success of the U.S. Army, and NCO corps as a whole, as much was learned from both the successes and failures of varying nations.

Initially, the primary military experience for American troops came from British soldiering, where the importance of a strong NCO corps was beginning to develop, “the Crimean War highlighted the gruff colour sergeant in his great coat while the Victorian Wars of Africa imaged the stern Welsh sergeant who held the men steady at Isandlwana and Rorke’s Drift” (Bland, pg. 17). The British NCO duties had not changed much, but the respect of his subordinates was unprecedented as he voluntarily took on more of a leadership role. Additional influences from foreign nations are apparent with the contribution from a Prussian Soldier named Friedrich von Steuben. “In the early days of the American Revolution, little standardization of NCO duties or responsibilities existed. In 1778...Friedrich von Steuben standardized NCO duties and responsibilities in his Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States...” (Arms, pg. 1). His compiled work, commonly called the Blue Book, “set down the duties and responsibilities for corporals, sergeants, first sergeants, quartermaster sergeants and sergeants major, which were the NCO ranks of the period.” The sergeant major served as the assistant to the regimental adjutant, keeping rosters, forming details and handling matters concerning the “interior management and discipline of the regiment.” The sergeant major also served “at the head of the noncommissioned officers.” The quartermaster sergeant assisted the regimental quartermaster, assuming his duties in the quartermaster's absence and supervising the proper loading and transport of the regiment's baggage when on march. The first sergeant enforced discipline and encouraged duty among troops, maintaining the duty roster, making

morning report to the company commander and keeping the company descriptive book. This book listed all Soldier's personal data and experience. The day-to-day business of sergeants and corporals included many roles. They instructed recruits in all matters of military training, including the order of their behavior in regard to neatness and sanitation. They quelled disturbances and punished perpetrators. In battle, NCOs had the responsibility of closing the gaps left in the ranks occasioned by casualties, ordered men to stand their ground—encouraging them to “fire rapidly and true” (Arms, pg. 2). The Blue Book also emphasized the importance of selecting quality Soldiers for NCO positions and served as the primary regulation for the Army for 30 years. In fact, the influence of Von Steuben's Blue Book is still found within FM 22-5, Drill and Ceremonies, and other military publications. Other steps taken towards developing NCOs within the Army came with the implementation of The U.S. Militia Act of 1792, which made reference to the establishment of a “Proper NCO of the Company.” Each Battalion was to have four sergeants, four corporals, and one sergeant major. “NCOs were responsible for dress, drill, and discipline. However, they did not have any role as yet in tactical decision-making” (Bland, pg. 17). In 1829, Major General Winfield Scott prepared the Abstract of Infantry Tactic, which further outlined roles and responsibilities of the NCO, under the topics of “School of Soldier, School of Company, School of Battalion, and Exercises and Manoeuvres for Light-Infantry and Rifleman” (The Drill Network, 2005). The importance of these tactics were not tested until the war with Mexico from 1846-1847, “where the regular Army [had] an opportunity to employ these tactics against an army organized and trained along European principles” (Fisher, pg. 59). As part of MG Scott's publication, the company commander was responsible for the training of company noncommissioned officers. At the conclusion of this training, “each noncommissioned officer was expected to have an accurate knowledge of the exercise and use of

the infantry weapons, ‘the manual exercise of the soldier and of firings and marchings’” (Fisher, pg. 60). In the 1850’s, NCOs utilized their training to mount numerous skirmishes against various Indian tribes. MG Scott later refined the initial publication with his 1861 publication, Infantry Tactics (The Drill Network, 2005).

The NCOs role as a leader/manager of men and equipment expanded during the national expansion westward. The military was often tasked with exploring, surveying, mapping, and guarding routes towards the west. One of the most well known expeditions of the type was that conducted by Captain Meriweather Lewis and Second Lieutenant William Clark (The Lewis and Clark Expedition). “Lewis and Clark selected the first enlisted members of the expedition. They included Sgts. Charles Floyd and Nathaniel Pryor...In their detachment order of 1 April 1804, Captains Lewis and Clark divided the men into three squads led by Sergeants Pryor, Floyd, and Ordway [to enhance the speed and range of the expedition and to run the keel boats]...Captains Lewis and Clark now commanded through the three sergeants...the senior sergeant was Ordway, who acted as the expedition’s First Sergeant” (Hogan & White, pgs. 6-10). NCOs were given more responsibility in the movement of goods and equipment, and in leading advance party and scouting duties. As troop advancements were made towards the west, relations with Indian tribes developed. The U.S. government sought to establish trade in the Indian regions (primarily fur), and constructed small outposts to oversee the relations. These posts were manned by a small number of troops, and mainly lead by an NCO (Arms 6). This experience began to develop the NCO as a diplomat, working as a representative for the U.S. Government in relations with Indian nations. This was also the beginning of the NCO’s role as a peacekeeper, working to maintain peace between local settlers and Indian tribes.

As part of their training, noncommissioned officers had to be aware of the weapons of the day, to include the care, loading, firing, and performance. The most common weapon of this time was the smoothbore flintlock musket. These were muzzle-loading rifles in the caliber of .62 or .75, and commonly allowed for the attachment of a bayonet. These bayonets were not originally designed for use in close combat, but rather used against charging cavalry, replacing the traditional pike (Valis, 2005). Because these were smoothbore weapons, the shot was generally a few calibers smaller than the rifle bore, causing compression to be lost through the barrel. This was a problem for estimating projectile drop rate, and accuracy of the round. The NCO had to provide orders of fire to the Soldiers knowing that the shot would curve after 40-50 yards in non-constant direction, making it difficult to hit a man sized target at distances above 50 yards. NCOs had to also assure that Soldiers maintained their weapons, including muskets, and gunpowder used, as neglect could easily cause these weapons to misfire, or accidentally discharge. NCOs had to later learn the particulars of the Springfield Musket and the Spencer rifle. The Springfield Muskets significant improvements were its rifled bore, interchangeable parts and percussion cap ignitions. The Spencer rifle used an all-metallic cartridge with a built in primer, and the integrated magazine allowed Soldiers to rapidly fire rounds through the use of its cocking and trigger mechanism (Randolph, *Those Prolific Pains* 2005). The improvements in the rifle caused a change in battlefield plans, since the accuracy allowed for Soldiers to fire in smaller groups of extended lines instead of larger compact lines. The advancements of weapons and tactics did not stop there. In the mid-1800s the development of the first machine-gun type weapon was under way. Known as the "Williams breech-loading rapid-fire gun," it could actually be considered a light artillery piece, firing a one pound projectile 2000 yards. This weapon was a hand-cranked operated gun that could fire at a rate of 65 rounds per minute. It

required a team of three individuals to operate efficiently (Randolph, 2005). In addition to knowing small arms and machine gun requirements, the NCO had to be familiar with the particulars of canon weaponry. Most canons fired 3, 4, or 6-pound rounds, but were occasionally build for 12-pound rounds. Like the muzzleloaders, these were smoothbore weapons, so the limitations had to be noted in order to utilize the weapon to its full effect. Additionally, NCOs had to know the capabilities of the enemy artillery in order to protect the troops while attacking artillery positions without their own artillery support. With the incorporation of such weapons into the arsenal, NCOs were given even more responsibility in leading troops and squads.

As the responsibility of enlisted Soldiers grew, so did their notoriety. In 1782, General George Washington established the award known as the Badge of Military Merit, to recognize enlisted Soldiers for any singularly meritorious action. This badge, the precursor to the Purple Heart, was only awarded to three individuals—all three being NCOs (USA Center for Military History, 2005). Sergeant (SGT) Elijah Churchill was the first recipient of the award for his actions during two separate events. In November 1780 he led a party of dismounted dragoons in a raid against a supply depot on Long Island. After crossing Long Island Sound at night in whaleboats, he marched his party to the highly fortified fort of St. George at Mastic. SGT Churchill's party was one of three attacking parties, which overtook the fort and captured 300 prisoners. During the second event, which occurred in October of 1781, SGT Churchill led 100 men across the sound from Compo Point in Westport to Fort Slongo (near present day Northport), where his men successfully attacked the stationed Tories and Loyalists. The attack resulted in the destruction of artillery, small arms, and ammunition, and the capture of 21 prisoners. SGT Churchill was wounded during the attack. The second recipient of the award was SGT William Brown for his actions during the Battle of Yorktown in October 1781. SGT

Brown led an advance party of infantrymen through British defenses, securing key positions. The mission was given the name “a forlorn hope” due to its danger, which required the party to progress with weapons unloaded, and bayonets fixed, securing the positions by way of hand-to-hand combat, as to not reveal the surprise attack. During the attack, SGT Brown received injuries from bayonet. The third and final recipient of the award was SGT Daniel Bissell, for his actions as a spy for General Washington. SGT Bissell posed as an American deserter and enlisted in the British Army where he served for 13 months in Benedict Arnold’s British Infantry Corp. SGT Bissell subsequently provided valuable information, including detailed drawings and maps of key enemy positions, all from memory (USA Infantry Homepage, 2005).

This paper has illustrated a small portion of NCO history spanning the era of 1776 to 1865. Today’s NCO has made great strides within the areas of responsibility and leadership, but still deals with the challenges of yesterday; such as the ethic make-up of the Army, doctrinal and battlefield changes, expanded duties and missions, weapons advancements, and living up to the warrior ethos. The history of the NCO further acknowledges the contributions, sacrifices, and leadership that NCOs have provided, making the U.S. Army the strongest Army in the world. With the knowledge gained from the study of NCO history, Soldiers can learn valuable lessons of adapting and overcoming internal and external obstacles for the benefit of all Soldiers, and for the successful completion of the missions. NCO history provides examples of mistakes made, corrections administered, and professionalism obtained, which legitimately leads all to recognize the United States Army Noncommissioned Officer as the “Backbone of the Army.”

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