

HISTORY OF NCOS (1775-1865)

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In 1775 with the birth of the Continental Army, began the history of the United States Army and the Non-Commissioned Officer Corps. The American NCO corps did not mirror the British Corp. American NCOs, like the Army itself, blended tradition of the Prussian, British and French into a unique style of their own. The United States Army Non-Commissioned Officer became further separated from his European counterparts over time as the American political system changed due to social attitudes and the movement into the west.

Early in the American Revolution there was little standardization of NCO duties and responsibilities. In 1778, Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben was appointed Inspector General of the Army. He standardized the duties and responsibilities of the NCO. The Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States Army was printed in 1779. His work commonly became known as the Blue Book, which for 30 years served as the primary regulation for the Army. Von Steuben's Blue Book specified the duties of the NCO.

Von Steuben set forth that the Sergeant Major would serve as the assistant to the regimental adjutant, responsible for record keeping, forming details and the "interior management and discipline of the regiment". The Blue Book also specified the Sergeant Major would serve "as the head of the Non-Commissioned Officers". As set forth by Von Steuben, enforcing discipline, encouraging duty among troops, maintaining the duty

rosters, as well as making the morning report to the company commander, and keeping a company history is the duty of the First Sergeant.

Von Steuben also set forth the duties of the quartermaster sergeant who assisted the regimental quartermaster and assumed his duties when he was gone. The proper loading and transportation of the regimental gear was also the responsibility of the quartermaster sergeant.

Von Steuben stated, "Each Sergeant and Corporal will be in a particular manner answerable for the squad committed to his care. He must pay particular attention to their conduct in every respect; that they keep themselves and their arms always clean; that they have their effects always ready; and put where they can get at them immediately and even in the dark, without confusion; and on every fine day he must oblige them to air their effects".

Before the standards set by Von Steuben, training was conducted or achieved primarily at the direction of each individual officer. As a result, the levels and quality of training differed greatly from unit to unit. No set standards for drill and training were in place. Battalions, companies and regiments each used their own methods.

Von Steuben's simplified drills and training methods repeated over and over along with the positive change in the relationship between officers and NCOs, which he encouraged, resulted in a more uniformly trained Army.

Sergeants and Corporals were responsible for the discipline of those recruits who caused disturbances among the ranks. Percival Lowe joined the Army in 1849. He proved himself to be a good soldier early in his career. Lowe was promoted to Sergeant in 1851, in a little less than two additional years, he was promoted to First Sergeant.

Whiskey was the major source of disciplinary problems among the enlisted soldiers according to Lowe. Lowe advised his Non-Commissioned Officers to pay special attention to ensure that the soldiers were not drinking excessively. Extra duty was issued as punishment. Lowe and the Non-Commissioned Officers of his company established the “company court martial” although this was not recognized by Army regulations. This allowed the NCOs to enforce discipline when minor regulations were broken without long drawn out proceeding. Prior to the summary court-martial it was effective to discipline using the company court-martial as to not ruin a soldier’s career by bringing him before regimental officers. An example where this type of court-martial could have been used, is in the case of SGT James Finley, who was accused of and found guilty of speaking disrespectfully of the Continental Army. Finley was put out of the Army just for raising his glass to the enemy.

The cannon along with the muzzle loading flint lock musket and bayonet were the main weapons used during the American Revolution. The musket had a smooth bored non rifled barrel; it fired both ball or shot ammunition. A combination of ball and shot could be fired from the musket as well. Black powder was used in these fire arms during this period. Paper cartridges were use to speed the loading of the muskets and reduce the risk of loose powder being ignited. Paper tubes were made by shaping paper around a wooden dowel about the diameter of a ball. The proper amount of black powder and ball were placed in the tubes and sealed with a string. The use of undersized balls allowed the escape of gases to be uneven, causing the ball to spin in any direction. This resulted in making it very difficult to intentionally hit a man-sized target beyond seventy-five yards. The soldiers fired volleys, sending a mass of ammunition toward the enemy to

make up for the inaccuracy of the muskets. The unit would act as a machine, led by the officer and assisted by the NCO, who would give orders to load, fire, and maneuver. A musket could be fired every fifteen seconds. It was important to time the volleys as to hit the enemy while he was reloading. Flint lock rifles were more accurate than muskets; however they took longer to load and could not be equipped with bayonets.

An important part of the musket system was the bayonet. The length of the firearm with a long bayonet could be used to defend against horsemen. By the use of a rectangle or square formation, with the bayonet facing outward, horsemen could not ride among them. Due to their mobility, a single cavalryman was equal to three to five men on foot. Prior to the bayonet, the pike was used to defend against the cavalry as a close range weapon. Early in the Revolutionary War there was a shortage of bayonets. When the French joined the war, they supplied great quantities of muskets and bayonets.

As mentioned previously cannons were also used during this era; however they weren't as important as muskets. Cannons were smooth bored, because rifling wouldn't grip an iron ball and lead was too heavy and expensive. They were often used on ships due to their size and weight. The use of cannons was slow; it took two minutes to reload and also need time to cool down. Major changes occurred in US Army weaponry in the 1850's. Rifled weapons were refined and the percussion cap was invented. The accuracy of these weapons was greatly enhanced.

As throughout the history of the NCO corps, heroic deeds were performed during this era. One such example of heroism came with the actions of SGT Ezra Lee who attempted the first submarine attack in history. In a one-man submarine he slipped through the waters of New York Harbor. He attempted to pierce the bottoms of enemy

ships. His powder charges proved not to be strong enough . However, he was brave in his attempt.

In 1789 SGT Elijah Churchill led an attack against Fort Saint George, a storehouse for the British. He and sixteen men journeyed by whaleboat through frigid conditions. His four hour journey landed him behind enemy lines. He led an attack where he destroyed the fort, along with a great many supplies. He captured fifty prisoners as well. For his outstanding leadership efforts he received the Badge of Military Merit. In 1781 during the siege of Yorktown, SGT William Brown was the leader of the advanced party against the British defenses. Brown did not wait for enemy obstacles leading to the British position to be cleared. Instead he led his men over these obstructions in a surprise attack. In ten minutes, only using bayonets, the Americans captured this position. Brown later received The Badge of Military Merit. SGT Daniel Bissell was the first to receive The Badge of Military Merit after posing as Tory for over a year, gathering detailed information on British operational methods and fortification placements, before escaping. The Badge of Military Merit was established by Washington in 1782 and presented to enlisted soldiers who had excelled in battle. This medal was a purple heart with a floral border with the word “merit” inscribed on it. The Medal of Honor has since replaced this. In 1932 this award was again used as an award for those wounded or killed in battle.

The history of the NCO Corp parallels that of the Army itself. With the development of the roles and responsibilities of the NCO Corp, came an understanding of what was expected of its members. The understanding that, as an NCO, one is no longer responsible for only there own actions, but for the actions of those serving under them as

well. With those responsibilities came the requirement to discipline, in a fair and just manner. Many NCOs of this era, demonstrated, regardless of the available weapon systems, it was personnel courage that allowed them to go above and beyond the call. This personnel courage, along with the uniformity in discipline and training that came about during this era resulted in a formidable Army and NCO corps.

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