

Outline

Title: Non-Commissioned Officers in the American Army (1775-1865)

I. Introduction.

A. References: *A Short History of the NCO* by L.R. Arms; *The Story of the Noncommissioned Officers Corps-The Backbone of the Army* by Arnold G. Firsch, David W. Hogan Jr., and Robert K. Wright Jr.; *Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development Study: Final Report* by HQDA; *The NCO Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 3 by the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy. *The Continental Army in the Revolutionary War*. RWD Ploessl, 1996-2003, <http://www2.powercom.net/rokats/contarmy.html>., Silas, Casey. *U. S. Army Infantry Tactics for the Instructions, Exercises, and Maneuvers of the Soldiers, a Company, a Skirmishers, Battalion, or Corps D' Arme*. J. B. Lippincott & Company, Philadelphia 1861., William J. Hardee, *Light Infantry Tactics*, H-Bar Publishing Company, Oakman, AL. 1993. Winfield Scott, *Infantry-Tactics*, New York, Harper and Brothers Publishing, 1861.

B. The purpose of this research is to give a brief history of the roles, responsibilities, weapons, training and rank insignia of the Army's Noncommissioned Officer's (NCO) Corps (1775-1865).

II. Body.

- A. Table of Allowance
- B. Duties and Responsibilities
- C. Rank Insignia
- D. Weapons
- E. Training

III. Closing:

- A. Summary

B. Questions

C. Conclusion: The history of the noncommissioned officer began in 1775 with the birth of the Continental Army. Throughout the history of the Army the NCO led soldiers in battle and trained them in peacetime.

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L579 History of the Noncommissioned Officer

March 26, 2004

Noncommissioned Officers in the American Army (1775-1865)

The history of the United States Army and of the noncommissioned officer began in 1775, with the birth of the Continental Army. The roles and responsibilities of noncommissioned officers changed little from the Army's birth through the Civil War. The same roles apply. They trained, drilled formations, provided marksmanship guidance, and some became heroes. The NCOs of this time period had no official training as we do in today's Army. They learned from their peers and leaders. They developed their own NCO corps within each unit.

In 1778, Frederick von Steuben standardized NCO duties and responsibilities in his book, *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States* (printed in 1779), popularly known as the "Blue Book". In his book, Von Steuben established the principle that the noncommissioned officer was selected by and responsible to the company commander, subject to the battalion or regimental commander approval. Unfortunately, this close connection with the parent unit became one of the factors hindering NCO professional development.

A NCO was locked for his entire career into the one regiment that had accepted his enlistment. No NCO could transfer in grade from one regiment to another without the permission of the general-in-chief of the Army. (A Short History of the NCO)

The Blue Book outlines the authorized strength of the noncommissioned officer corps. NCO authorization was dependant on the type of unit and its combat mission. A typical infantry regiment's NCO staff consisted of four NCOs. A sergeant major, a quartermaster sergeant, and two senior musicians. A typical infantry company had one first sergeant, four sergeants, a fifer, and a drummer. During the Civil War, the NCOs staff serving on the regimental staff

consisted of a sergeant major, a quartermaster sergeant, a commissary sergeant, a hospital steward, and two musicians. An Infantry Company had five sergeants and a number of corporals determined by the total number of privates. (A Short History of the NCO)

The Sergeant Major served as the assistant to the regimental adjutant. He kept rosters, formed details, and handled matters concerning the interior management and discipline of the regiment. (A Short History of the NCO)

The Quartermaster Sergeant assisted the regimental quartermaster, whose duties he assumed during the quartermaster's absence. He also supervised the loading and transport of the regiment's baggage when on the march. (A Short History of the NCO)

The First Sergeant enforced discipline and encouraged duty among troops, maintained the duty roster, made morning report to the company commander, and kept the company descriptive book. (A Short History of the NCO)

The Sergeant was known as the covering sergeant. He stood in the second rank behind the company officer so he could protect or cover his captain or lieutenant when in danger. The sergeant also served as the color sergeant with five to eight corporals as the color guard. The corporal was used as a file closer, in the rear of the formation while in a file and the flank of the formation while in a line formation. (The Continental Army in the Revolutionary War)

The noncommissioned officer had the responsibility to ensure that the daily operations were conducted to standard. The average day started at 05:00 with wakeup. The NCOs posted soldiers performing guard duty and conducted morning drill at individual and squad level. They determined sick call for the soldiers at the same time. The soldiers ate breakfast and moved on to performing the daily requirements for running the camp. The sergeants would run a company drill session before the noon meal. The regiment would conduct formation drills after lunch.

The sergeants and corporals would have to maintain formation integrity throughout the practice. The NCOs had to ready the troops for a dress parade before the evening meal. The soldiers ate supper and then had personal time. The lights out began at 2100. The routine remained the same for the most part. (The Story of the NCO Corps-The Backbone of the Army)

In 1775, there were not enough uniforms in the Army to distinguish NCOs from their men. The Continental Congress tried to standardize a uniform of brown, but without any authority to raise money this was easier said than done. The enlisted men wore their work or hunting clothes. Many had no coats or shoes and wore handkerchiefs for hats. When General George Washington took command of the Army at Cambridge, Massachusetts, he was obliged to develop badges in order that rank would be indicated at sight. One of General Washington's first order read,

"As the Continental Army has unfortunately no uniforms, and consequently many inconveniences must arise from not being able to distinguish the commissioned officers from the privates, it is desired that some badges of distinction may be immediately provided; for instance ... that the corporals may be distinguished by an epaulette or stripe of green cloth sewed upon the right shoulder, the sergeants by one of red. The subalterns may have green colored cockades in their hats, the captains yellow or buff." (Short History of the NCO)

After 1779, sergeants wore two epaulets, while corporals retained a single epaulet. The sergeant major wore silver lace and a white epaulette. NCOs carried a halberd (typically a battle ax and pike mounted on a handle about six feet long) or sword to signify ^{his} their rank. In fact, a variety of visual systems were adopted before chevrons became the norm. From 1779 to 1865, NCO insignias or indicators of rank changed a number of times due to growth in the NCO Corps and

the need to clarify NCO duties and responsibilities. Epaulets gave way to chevrons and the NCO was given a unique device to display rank. (Noncommissioned Officer Professional Development Study)

The American Army had large variety of firearms in use by the infantry, cavalry, and the leadership. The infantry used over seventy-nine different shoulder fired rifles and muskets. Weapons were in short supply early in the Revolutionary War. Many soldiers brought their own firearms to camp. The diversity of weapons increased the challenge ^{to the} for NCOs' ability to train their soldiers. The government purchased numerous weapons from Belgium and Austria to make up for the shortages. These weapons were of poor quality, heavy, and terrible ⁱⁿ accurate. Each unit would have two to four different types and caliber of rifles on average. The early weapons design was smooth bore. This type of weapon had a very low accuracy rate and very short range. During the Civil War, the Union Army began to purchase newer and better rifles to replace the old and outdated weapons. The new firearms were designed with a rifled barrel. The rifling increased the range from one hundred yards to five hundred yards. The rifle accuracy increased greatly. The government decided on two long rifles of outstanding quality of that time. The Springfield model and American made proved to be the best. The Enfield rifle from England was a very fine weapon also. These two rifles became the stable for the Army. The government purchased 1,472,614 Springfield rifles and 428,092 Enfield. The Springfield could penetrate eleven inches of pine boards at one hundred yards and six inches of pine at five hundred yards. The weapons made up over forty percent of all rifles used by the Union. These improvements eased the job of marksmanship training requirements of the NCO corps. (The Story of the NCO Corps-The Backbone of the Army)

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The cavalry in the early days of the war had a very limited role. The ability to fire

and reload from the back of a horse other than a pistol really did not exist. The number of cavalymen remained low because of this limitation. The armories began to develop new rifles as the Army realized the effect of cavalry on the Battlefield. The role of the cavalry unit changed drastically from the beginning to the end. The cavalry trooper would have over nineteen different pistols to choose from throughout the war. The weapons developers managed to produce over twenty-three types of carbine rifles. The Sharps and Spencer rifles were two of the standouts. The carbines allowed the cavalry to become a shocking and forceful asset to commanders. The NCOs of the cavalry had to ensure good horsemen skills and marksmanship from the back of a horse. These two challenging tasks proved very difficult. The majority of new recruits had little skills as a marksman and even less as a horseman. (The Story of the NCO Corps-The Backbone of the Army)

The NCOs used three different manuals throughout the Civil War. The veteran sergeants had experiences from the Mexican War and the fights with the Indians out west to draw upon. The manual written by Major General Winfield Scott, *Infantry Tactics*, established the standard early in the Revolutionary War. The manual required 64 drum rolls or bugle calls to begin the movements of the soldiers. This required a lot of practice and time for soldiers to learn. The sergeants and corporals had to work and train their units very hard to perform these drills. The development of better and accurate weapons required changes to the formations. Colonel William J. Hardee wrote *Light Infantry Tactics* to adjust to the new need of the Army. The sergeant's job to train the troopers became easier with the new manual. Colonel Hardee reduced the commands and required the sergeants to learn and train the recruits in the updated tactics. The role of the noncommissioned officer grew dramatically with the new manual. The third manual *U.S. Army Infantry Tactics for the Instructions, Exercises, and Maneuvers of the*

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Soldiers, a Company, a Line of Skirmishers, Battalion, Brigade, or Corps D'Arme' written by Major General Silas Casey. General Casey reduced the commands and required the sergeants to learn to give commands and take charge in the absence of officers. Major General Emory wrote a supplemental manual to General Casey's. He placed a greater importance on simpler tactics. The new instruction shortened training and made it easier to train new recruits. (The Story of the NCO Corps-The Backbone of the Army)

In the late 1800s, Noncommissioned officers were called the "vertebrae of the Army," not because of their ability to train soldiers, but because they maintained good order and discipline within the unit. It has only been within the past 100 years that sergeants and corporals assumed the individual training role from officers, and it has only been in the last 10 years that senior NCOs have been given the responsibility by regulation to plan and conduct training of soldiers, sections, squads, teams, and crews. This is not to say that NCOs in good organizations before this guidance was issued did not train soldiers, because they did. It only made sense. But in many organizations they did not, because it was the officers' prerogative to plan and conduct training of their organizations.

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