



L579

History of the Noncommissioned Officers

Color Sergeant

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## History of the Color Sergeant

From the earliest times, warriors used a banner or other symbol to identify specific units and to serve as a rallying point for troops. In medieval days, the standard or banner was used to signal a general assault, which was generated by a cry of "Advance your banners" (FM 3-21.5). Later, this duty and responsibility fell upon the Color Sergeant – a sergeant in a color guard who carries on the colors.

However, before there <sup>were</sup> Color sergeants, the duty of carrying the colors were carried out by Ensigns. Ensign comes from the Latin word *insignia* that meant and still means emblem or banner. A warrior who carried his lord's banner or ensign became known as an ensign bearer and then just an Ensign. Ensigns also served in our Revolutionary War in infantry regiments where they were the lowest ranking commissioned officers (now replaced by that of Second Lieutenant). After the war, they also served in Regular Army infantry regiments from 1796 to 1814. It is the duty of the officers of this rank to carry the colors of the regiment ("Rank History")

Ensign also means a national flag displayed on ships and aircraft, often with the special insignia of a branch or unit of the armed forces; a standard or banner, as of a military unit. A



unit's flag served an important tactical function in spite of the major advances in weaponry. During the first years of the war, battles were fought according to the rigid discipline of linear deployment used in the Napoleonic Wars. Here, a unit's flag was often the soldier's only <sup>singular</sup> guides.

his way of knowing if he was where he was supposed to be when the thick smoke from cannon and muskets obscured the combatants on the battlefield.

Flags were not only used for identification purposes but served as a means of inspiring morale with your own army and reducing that in your opponent “*their battle flags looked redder and bloodier in the strong July sun than I had ever seen before*”, “*no such sight in all the history of battles had ever been seen. On they came regardless of the carnage among them, nearer and nearer until horse and rider, officer and private, standards and banners waving in the lead were plainly seen.*” So who were these men who carried these “*fiery red crosses*”, those “*damned red flags of the rebellion*”, this “*treasons flaunting rag*” (“The Colour Bearer”)? It was the Color Sergeant.

The practice of carrying Colors of Uniform design to identify a regiment or country goes as far back as anyone can remember. Since the United States was a product of Europe, we will start where they began to carry the colors, 1639. The main purpose of carrying the colors was to provide a rally point in the confusion of battle commenced in 1639 by the British. It also helps identify soldiers from each other in the chaos of battle. The Colors were carried in battle in the center of the front rank between the center companies where they could be easily seen and recognized. This had a highly morale raising effect on the spirits of the troops. It also meant that ~~the~~ once battle started the Color Party (A group of soldiers consisting of the Ensign, Color Guard, and Color Bearer) became an obvious target and the center would see the most bitter fighting (“Colour Sergeant.”).

During the Civil War, sergeants and corporals preserved order when troops massed in line and assisted the officers by leading small units deployed for skirmishing. The color sergeant, performing what had once been an officer's duty, became the pivotal point in battle around which the regiments advanced and wheeled. Visible through the smoke and dust of battle, the

sergeant's colors attracted the heaviest enemy fire and became the center of hand-to-hand combat. Each flag was borne by a color sergeant, a special duty position distinct from the company-level NCO. He was protected by the six corporals of the color party ("Dress on the Colors Virginia, 1864").

Color Bearers during the Civil War on both sides were targeted by the other side because



of their increased visibility. There was also a desire to humiliate the other side by capturing their flags. The most important item a Civil War Regiment possessed was their Unit's flag. Battles saw Civil War Color Bearers suffering tremendous casualties. The troops knew where their Regiment was in the battle line by looking for where their flags were. It was a great dishonor if the flag fell into enemy hands. The

Congressional Medal of Honor has been awarded to many Color Bearers for defending their flag to the point of death. These Color Bearers are true heroes. Even though it is dangerous, carrying a flag into battle is still a great honor.

Regimental Colors were protected by the Color Guard and carried by the Color Sergeant. The rank of Color Sergeant was created around 1813 to reward sergeants in good standing. The rank badge, as it evolved, usually included a single or two crossed Colors. That badge was eliminated for Color sergeants in 1915, but was taken up instead by Army Recruiters. Color Sergeant was then the highest non-commissioned rank, rating above sergeant, and below warrant officers. It <sup>was</sup> equivalent to Staff Sergeant in non-infantry units. The Color Guard was usually a group of less than a dozen soldiers. Their responsibility was to make sure that the flag boldly led the way into battle without being captured by the enemy. The cavalry, for obvious reasons,

carried much smaller flags than those serving on foot did. Cavalry and artillery units had much less need to identify themselves on the battlefield compared with the infantry units, not to mention that a 6'x6' flag would have been impossible to carry on a galloping horse ("Dress Center, Dress!").



**Sergeant William H. Carney, C.M.H**

**Civil War Hero  
1840-1908**



William Harvey Carney, famed for the words "The Old Flag never touched the ground!" and hero of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment in the Civil War, was born in Norfolk, Virginia, and attended a private school that was conducted secretly by a minister. Carney was the first black soldier to receive the Medal of Honor, although like Joshua

Lawrence Chamberlain, he would have to wait over three decades for it. His home, which is now officially called the "Sergeant Carney memorial House," has become a shrine. Carney himself is depicted in the Saint-Gaudens monument which immortalizes Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and his intrepid colored troops. Carney's features are represented on the face of one of the soldiers following his commander. The flag rescued by Carney is enshrined in Memorial Hall.



Born a slave in Virginia, he was studying for the ministry when he learned that the first regiment of black soldiers, the 54th Massachusetts, was being formed, and decided that he "could best serve my God by serving my country and my oppressed brothers." Early in 1863, William Carney, then 23 years old, enlisted in the Morgan Guards, which became part of the 54th Massachusetts regiment. In July 1863, the regiment was engaged in the disastrous battle at Fort

Wagner. When Carney saw that the color sergeant, the soldier who carried the flag, was fatally shot, he rescued the flag and carried it throughout the remainder of the battle. During the engagement by the all-Black



54th and 55th Massachusetts

Colored Regiments, Commander Robert G. Shaw was shot down. A few feet from where he fell laid Sergeant Carney. Summoning all of his strength, Carney held aloft the colors and continued the charge. Having been shot several times, he kept the colors flying high, he ended up carrying the flag to safety through a volley of enemy bullets when the 54th was driven back by a Confederate counterattack. When a soldier from another regiment offered to take the flag so Carney could seek medical aid, he replied, "No one but a member of the 54th should carry the colors!" Upon carrying the flag back into camp after the battle, he received rousing cheers from other units but simply replied, typically for a Medal of Honor recipient, "I only did my duty."



Delivering it to a squad of his own regiment, he shouted, "The Old Flag never touched the ground!" Then Carney fell to the ground in a dead faint, weak from the wounds that he had received. Although the citation reads that he was twice *severely* wounded, he actually suffered multiple gunshot wounds in the head, chest, legs and one arm. Mustered out of the army in 1864, he went to

New Bedford, Massachusetts before going to California. In 1870, he returned to New Bedford and became one of the four men employed as letter carriers.

Although he made it, many of his comrades did not. For in the deadly battle, over 1,500 Black troops died. On 23 May 1862, Sergeant William H. Carney was issued the Congressional Medal of Honor, making him the first Black to ever win the coveted award. It should be noted that sixteen other Black soldiers and four Black sailors eventually received the Congressional Medal of Honor for their heroics during the tragic epic in American history.



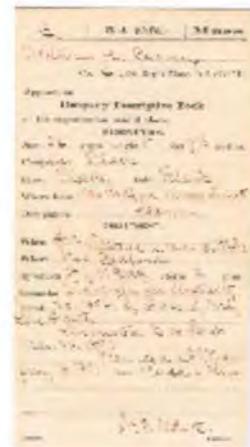
Carney was in great demand as a leader of Memorial Day parades and as a speaker at patriotic events. In 1904, he was the Memorial Day orator at the Shaw Monument on Boston Common (“Civil War Congressional Medal of Honor Recipient Sergeant William H. Carney”).



Notation Card for  
Sergeant William Carney

**His citation read:**

**When the Color Sergeant  
was shot down, this soldier  
grasped the flag, led the  
way to the parapet, and  
planted the colors thereon.  
When the troops fell back  
he brought off the flag,  
under a fierce fire in  
which he was twice  
severely wounded.**



Company Descriptive  
Book for Sergeant  
William Carney



**KARPELES, LEOPOLD** (1838-1909). Leopold Karpeles,

Jewish Medal of Honor winner and merchant, was born in Prague, Bohemia, in 1838. In 1849, he immigrated to Texas, settling with his older brother Emil in Galveston. He worked as a merchant, making trips to Mexico and the western territories of the United States. In 1861, his opposition to slavery and secession led him to leave Texas for

Massachusetts. He enlisted in Company A of the 46th Massachusetts Infantry on August 15, 1862, and served in the regiment in the North Carolina campaign. He rose to the rank of color corporal before mustering out. After serving the ten-month term of his enlistment in North Carolina's battle zone, Karpeles was honorably discharged in July 1863 after showing great courage. "In the battles of Kingston, Whitehall and Goldsborough," Karpeles' superior wrote, "he bore the State colors. The promptness with which he came upon the line of battle, and the firmness with, which he stood his ground, though, his flag was several times pierced by the bullets of the enemy, were so conspicuous as to be the subject of remark and recommendation." By the spring of 1864, he was back in Massachusetts working as a clerk. He enlisted in Company E 57th Massachusetts Infantry, which was part of the 9th Army Corps, at Springfield and was appointed color sergeant. On May 6, 1864, at the Battle of the Wilderness in Virginia, the 57th lost 262 of its 548 men. At several crucial stages of the battle, Karpeles exposed himself to enemy fire by climbing up on stumps and rallying the regiment around its colors. In 1870, he was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions that day. He fought at Spotsylvania Courthouse on May 10, 12, and 18, 1864. At the Battle of the North Anna, on May 24, Karpeles was badly wounded. He refused to relinquish the flag and be evacuated until he fainted from loss of blood ("Civil War Medal of Honor Recipient Leopold Karpeles").

**CITATION**

“In the Battle of Wilderness, the Confederate forces had charged the Union lines many times and the woods were full of smoke. Sergeant Leopold Karpeles was entrusted with the colors, which he kept waving, as it was the only visible thing the Union soldiers could see. General Wadsworth rode up and down the Union lines on his horse shouting to his disarrayed soldiers "rally around the flag boys!" Risking his life, Sergeant Karpeles kept waving the flag as Confederate gunfire kept missing him. The Confederate Army was checked and defeated, as the Union soldiers were able to reform their lines and fight back. For his bravery in face of the enemy fire, Sergeant Karpeles was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.”

**Today's Color Sergeant**

It is an honor to be selected as a member of the Color guard. Depending on the size of the ceremony, the Color guard consists of two or three Color sergeants and two specialists or privates. The senior Color sergeant carries the National Color and commands the Color guard. He gives the necessary commands for the movements and for rendering honors. When battalions or brigades carry their organizational Colors in a ceremony as part of a larger command, the battalion or brigade Color is carried four steps to the rear of the staff. A sergeant acts as Color bearer and two experienced specialists or privates, selected by the battalion or brigade command sergeant major, act as members of the Color guard. Traditionally, the command sergeant major is responsible for the safeguarding, care, and display of the organizational Color. He is also responsible for the selection, training, and performance of the Color bearers and Color guards.

Today, Color sergeant responsibilities have evolved. They continuously train the Color guard on ceremony discipline, formations, and weapons handling. Color sergeants are no longer standing in front of the troop lines nor are they wounded and/or killed as often as they were in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Color sergeants, Color bearer, and Color guard duties and responsibilities are largely ceremonial and are no longer used for combat purposes.

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