

Artillery NCOs in the Civil War

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Artillery Noncommissioned Officers (NCO) were key to the success of Civil War artillery. After the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, southern states begin to secede from the Union. The Civil War began in April 1861 with the Confederates firing on Fort Sumter, South Carolina. Union forces numbered around 2,100,000 and Confederate forces numbered around 850,000. The war resulted in around 620,000 total dead (McPherson 202). The Civil War ended when General Robert E. Lee surrendered to General Ulysses S. Grant in April of 1865.

The Field Artillery played a vital role in the Civil War and underwent significant equipment changes during the war. The basic unit for the artillery was the battery. A battery normally supported one brigade of infantry and usually contained four to six guns (McPherson 188). Commanders would often position several batteries together on line to form a deadly defensive position. As the enemy troops advanced towards these batteries, the guns would fire case shot (shells with lead or iron balls inside) and shrapnel shells. Many veteran troops would throw themselves to the ground just as the weapons to their front fired. Once the weapons fired, these troops stood up and rushed towards the guns hoping to capture or kill the crew before they could reload. Commanders used the artillery to fire at enemy troop concentrations and enemy artillery during the attack (Melton).

To fully appreciate the Civil War Artillery NCO you must understand the battery composition, rank structure and duties, weapon systems, training and resulting crew drills used during the war. The structure of the field artillery battery was similar to what we use today with the exception of the absence of a Fire Direction Center. Each battery consisted of a captain as commander, three lieutenants, a first sergeant, a quartermaster sergeant, four sergeants and eight corporals. The number of privates varied greatly depending on the individual unit (Hansen).

The lowest ranking NCO was the corporal. The corporal performed the duties of either Gunner or Chief of Caisson. As a Gunner, the corporal was directly responsible for the care, maintenance, aiming and firing of one gun and its limber. The Gunner was also responsible for the gun crew, normally consisting of six to ten cannoneers. The Chief of Caisson normally was junior to the Gunner. The Chief of Caisson was responsible for the care and maintenance of the limbers and caissons and their crews. Limbers and caissons were the ammunition carriers for the artillery. The Chief of Caisson was also responsible for the storage and care of the ammunition. He and his crew moved ammunition forward to the gun during battle as needed (Hansen).

The sergeant, also known as the Chief of the Piece, was responsible for the men and equipment of the platoon. Under his control were one gun and one caisson and associated crews. He was also responsible for the 9 to 13 horses. The sergeant was essentially a platoon sergeant and therefore was responsible for the training and assignments of his men. The sergeant checked the Gunner's aim and made sure the Chief of Caisson transferred ammunition to the gun as needed during battle. Seniority dictated the sergeant's title i.e., second sergeant, third sergeant, fourth sergeant, etc (Hansen).

The quartermaster sergeant (QMS) was essentially the supply sergeant. He worked directly for the first sergeant and commander. The quartermaster sergeant was responsible for the pickup of and issuing clothing, individual combat gear, rations, and small arms ammunition to the enlisted men of the company. The QMS was also responsible for the supply wagons and drivers. The supply sergeant normally traveled several days to a central depot or storage site for supplies. The QMS had no combat assignment during battle. He usually stood guard over the baggage and supply wagons. Some larger batteries, especially Union six gun batteries, had a separate commissary sergeant to handle rations (Hansen).

The first sergeant, also known as the orderly sergeant, was the ranking staff NCO and reported only to his commander. He was responsible for the administration of the entire battery. He assisted the commander in supervising the battery's operations and prepared reports, called roll, maintained duty rosters, and made recommendations on personnel actions. He also assigned, assisted, supervised, and checked the various details such as: posting guards, equipment repair, stable call, and horse grooming. He monitored training and discipline, and instructed the sergeants on their NCO duties. During battle he had no combat station, but stayed near the captain and carried out any orders issued him. If the battery happened to be short an officer due to leave, sickness, or death, the first sergeant took up the duties of the Chief of the Line of Caissons as required. He remained assigned at this position until a replacement arrived (Hansen). The soldiers of the battery sometimes elected the first sergeant for promotion to lieutenant and he retained the position permanently (Shannon 159).

The sergeant major was normally only assigned to the larger heavy artillery regiments and coastal artillery units. The number of artillery sergeants major was significantly fewer than other branches of service because the Union and Confederate armies configured most of their artillery as separate battery size elements only (Hansen).

Artillery guns and howitzers of the Civil War looked and functioned very similar to the guns used for hundreds of years. The majority of the field artillery used at the beginning of the war were the same guns used in the Mexican War. Advances in metallurgy, manufacturing techniques, powder and fuses improved the artillery throughout the war. The Army used the term "pounder" to identify the bore size of the artillery during the Civil War. The term "pounder," abbreviated as "pdr.," referred to the weight of the solid shot fired by the gun. Later

guns used the same terms to denote bore size even though the rounds fired by them were of differing weights (Morgan).

The artillery of the Civil War was originally made of brass and had a smooth bore. There were several attempts at manufacturing guns made of iron but with limited success mainly because cast iron guns were more likely to split or burst when fired due to their brittle nature. The model number denotes the year of design or improvement (Morgan).

The Model 1841 6-pdr Gun was a leftover from the Mexican War and fired a softball size shot out to 1500 yards. Most considered the gun as light and fairly mobile at 900 pounds but its small shot did little damage. This gun was prevalent on both sides at the beginning of the war but most units replaced it as soon as possible (Morgan).

The Model 1841 12-pdr Gun was the “big brother” to the M 1841 6-pdr and was also prevalent at the beginning of the war. It could shoot out to 1700 yards and packed a bigger punch. The gun was not very mobile due to weighing 1800 pounds (Morgan).

The Model 1841 12-pdr Howitzer excelled at any range under 400 yards. Its large shells gave it firepower, while its light weight (less than 800 lbs) made it highly mobile and easy to position, even by hand. Because of its mobility, the piece was readily adaptable for close infantry support. The 12-pdr howitzer's great weakness was its effective range, not much over 1,000 yards, and made the piece an easy target for other artillery (Morgan).

The Model 1841 24-pdr Howitzer fired 5.82 inch shells and provided commanders with significant firepower against infantry. Weighing in at 1400 pounds⁶ made them a bit unwieldy in the field, and their 1300-1400 yard effective range put them at a disadvantage to other pieces. Nevertheless, infantrymen could not have relished the idea of charging a battery of 24-pdr howitzers (Morgan).

The Model 1857 Light 12-pdr Gun Howitzer, commonly known as the "Napoleon" is the best known gun of the war. It is not technically a howitzer, by definition, but most referred to it as a howitzer because it could fire both ball shot and shells. It had more firepower than the 6-pdr gun, weighed 600 pounds less than the old 12-pdr gun, and could fire out to 1700 yards. The nickname "Napoleon" came from the French Emperor Louis Napoleon, who in the early 1850's ordered his Ordnance Department to design something with which he could standardize his field artillery (Morgan).

Captain (Retired) Robert P. Parrott developed the Model 1861 2.9-inch and Model 1863 3-inch Parrott Rifles in an effort to provide a reliable cast iron gun with a rifled bore. The results for the Model 1861 were disappointing and its odd bore size caused logistical problems with obtaining the correct size ammunition. Parrott created the Model 1863 3-inch Parrott to alleviate this problem. The Parrott continued to have issues with bursting and the Army discontinued them after the war (Morgan).

The Model 1861 3-inch Ordnance Rifle was a wrought iron rifled gun that solved the problem of bursting. John Griffen designed the gun using new techniques⁵ in the production of wrought iron to create a gun that resulted in a very strong gun tube. The gun weighed only 800 pounds and had a greater range than the Parrott. It became the main gun for the Union until the 1880s. The Confederates lacked the technology to produce them (Morgan).

The artillery NCO received training first as a soldier in the School of the Soldier and later in the School of the Piece. The School of the Soldier was the Civil War equivalent to today's basic training. The School of the Piece taught soldiers the duties peculiar to the artillery. Each crewmember had specific duties to perform for each round fired. Most who watched the artillery drill was amazed the first time they saw it. There were so many men, horses and pieces of

equipment operating in unison when the crew sights, loads and fires gun, it's easy to see why (Hansen).

The firing crew drill is a complex string of events executed in a specific order. The drill incorporates the gunner and up to seven private cannoneers. The sergeant assigns each member of the crew, other than the gunner, a number from one to seven and each number has a specific responsibility. The firing drill began once the guns were unlimbered and the cannoneers were at their posts (Hansen).

Artillery was both an effective killer in the Civil War and an effective psychological weapon. No infantryman relished the charge toward an artillery unit. The required timing and efficiency of the artillery crew drill along with several changes in equipment required the artillery NCO to be a proficient leader. The drill required the artillerymen to often operate exposed to the charging infantry and they stood their ground and continued firing. Time and again, the artillery NCO proved himself as a competent and successful leader.

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