

SGT Daniel Bissell: A Patriot and a Soldier during the Revolutionary War.

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During the Revolutionary War noncommissioned officers (NCO) played a vital role in the discipline and training of soldiers, but some NCOs went above and beyond; Sgt Daniel Bissell was one of these NCOs. SGT Bissell's time as an NCO is very interesting. He was an NCO for the Continental Army later for the British Army, only to return as an NCO for the Continental Army. Sgt Bissell was also one of only three soldiers to be awarded the Badge of Military Merit, the precursor to the Purple Heart and the Medal of Honor.

The Continental Army was formed when the Continental Congress recognized a need to coordinate all the militia into one fighting force. Daniel Bissell enlisted in the Continental Army in July of 1775, one month after it was created by Congress. To lead the newly formed Army, Congress appointed General George Washington as the Commander-in-Chief.

When Daniel Bissell enlisted, the Continental Army had no standard for discipline, training, or drilling. The training was varied because the army was composed of former militiamen from eleven different colonies, each with their own varying backgrounds of military experience and training. These differences in training meant the understanding and execution of commands where sometimes performed or understood differently, leading to confusion on the battlefield (Resource).

Due to the inconsistencies in training, General Washington would use the element of surprise and avoid open battles when fighting the British. Although his strategy had limited success, it was not a strategy that would win independence for America. Next to training, lack of Discipline across the Continental Army was also a major factor. Most of the commanders of the Continental Army, from the Commander-in Chief to the lower officers used the traditional European methods of fear to achieve discipline.

This tactic had very little effect during the early days of war because the soldiers were fighting for their own ideologies. The soldiers saw themselves as volunteers and would leave the battlefield when they felt it necessary. They also knew it wasn't a requirement to serve, and that a soldier would not be disgraced for not serving or leaving the army. General Washington knowing his untrained and undisciplined men were no match for the British had to find a way to correct this problem. It was at Valley Forge where General Washington realized he had his answer.

In the winter of 1777, SGT Daniel Bissell and the Continental Army marched into Valley Forge. The Continental Army would remain here until the end of winter. General Washington ordered a Prussian volunteer named Frederick von Steuben to publish a book. The book was titled, *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*, also known as the Blue Book. This book established the principle that the noncommissioned officer was selected by and responsible to the commander, subject to the battalion or regimental commander's approval (Story). Steuben's book aided the growth of NCO's as instructors. It stressed that NCO's have the responsibility of care, discipline, and training of the men. The men spent the next six months drilling, training, and improving their fighting skills using lessons from within the Blue Book.

As stated earlier in this paper, the army was consisted of different militias, each with their own style of fighting. While at Valley Forge a standard for tactics was established. The soldiers would form into units of two or three ranks (lines) deep, shoulder to shoulder. The unit would operate like a machine, lead by an officer assisted by his NCO, who would give the orders to load, fire and maneuver. Units could turn their lines, form into columns or squares, advance or turn about at the direction of their officers or NCOs. This system was to compensate for inaccurate shooting. By lining up side by side the men would fire volleys sending a mass of

balls toward the enemy, some of which should hit the enemy (Tactics). The main weapons used were muzzle loading flintlock muskets. The French musket (the Charleyville) was the weapon supplied to the Continental Army. They were about 42 inches long with a long barrel and a mount for a bayonet. The length of the musket, with the long bayonet, was designed to be used to defend against horsemen. The French provided a hundred thousand muskets and bayonets during the war. An interesting note regarding the weapons was the theft of continental muskets was a serious problem. When a soldier's enlistment expired he went home, often taking his musket with him. On February 4, 1777, the Board of War recommended to Congress that all continental arms be stamped with "United States." On February 24th, the Continental Congress resolved: *"The arms and accoutrements, belonging to the United States, shall be stamped with the words 'United States', all arms already made to be stamped on such parts as will receive the impressions, and those hereinafter to be manufactured, to be stamped with the said words on every part comprising a stand."* General Washington implemented this resolution and on April 18, 1777 issued a general order from his headquarters that all arms in stores and in the hands of troops be marked immediately (Tactics).

After six months of training the Continental Army left Valley Forge in June 1778, emerging as a much more disciplined and effective fighting force.

SGT Daniel Bissell served through the war with credit and fought at the battle of White Plains, and also at Trenton and Monmouth. In the summer of 1781, he was selected by General Washington to obtain information of the enemy's force and plans in the city of New York and on Long Island. SGT Bissell posed as a deserter in the city from August 14, 1781, to September 29, 1782 (Genealogy). In August 1781, Lt. Col. Robert Harrison, Washington's aide-de-camp dispatched Bissell into New York to gather intelligence. SGT Bissell was entered into the roles as a deserter. In New York deserters were protected as a way to promote soldiers to leave the

Continental Army. When he arrived under the cover of a deserter, Bissell discovered that General Clinton had ordered that deserters were not to be protected. Press gangs were rounding up reluctant recruits for the British Navy (Society). While avoiding capture, Bissell became extremely ill. To receive the medical attention needed he had only one option; to join Benedict Arnold's Loyalist Army. He joined the Loyalist Army, was cured, and lost his chance for escape. He later became a quartermaster sergeant, moving supplies to various British units. For over a year he gathered intelligence, committing it to memory. SGT Bissell escaped in September of 1782. He spent two days writing down the information he had gathered. His report listed British Fortifications, intelligence gathered from others, and a 12 month analysis of the British method of operation. He personally presented his report to General Washington. SGT Bissell's self-service to the nation can best be described by his actions upon his return to the Continental Army. Here's what happened in SGT Bissell's own words taken from a sworn affidavit:

When I returned from the British Army to the American Head Quarters, and after being there two days committing to paper the information which I had obtained, Col. Humphrey informed me that his Excellency (General Washington) said that he could not reward me in the way and manner he intended when I went in; my being detained there so long, also there being so many supernumerary officers, Congress had ordered there by no more commissions given; and asked me if I wished to be discharged from service. I told the Col. I had been in every campaign of the War (and out of health) that my wish was to continue through. I was then asked to join the Invalid Corps and receive a pension. This I declined on the ground, that my Country was poor and it would be of no advantage to me. He said I might do duty or not as I pleased. I went to my Regiment and did orderly sergeant duty until May

following, when I obtained permission from his Excellency to go to Susquehanna. And on my return to the regiment I found the last division of the army had been furloughed the day before; my clothes which I left in the regiment were all stolen. I found there had been a General Order for me to attend at Head Quarters and receive an honorary certificate and a badge of military merit.

Bissell's ideological motivation became clear when he refused both an honorable discharge and a pension for his work as an intelligence agent for Washington; he felt the nation could ill-afford the loss of his services, and he believed the nation should not be tasked with the pension payments (Remarkable).

General Washington formally presented Sergeant Daniel Bissell with the Badge of Military Merit on June 8, 1783. The Badge of Military Merit is considered to be the first official military combat badge of the United States Armed Forces. It was intended as a military order for soldiers who displayed exceptional meritorious service in battle. The badge is now called the Purple Heart (Badge). The American Revolutionary War was won in part due to the brave Soldiers like SGT Bissell. His selfless service, patriotism, and loyalty have left today's NCOs a singular example of a NCO living the 7 Army values in 1781.

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