

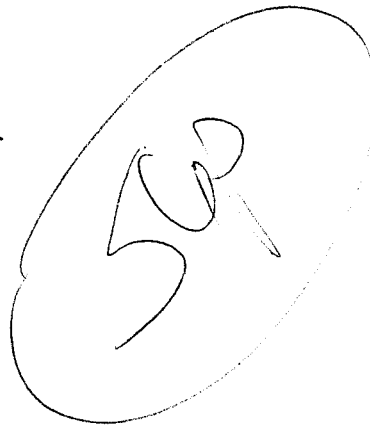
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NCOs in the Civil War

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NCOs in the Civil War

Getting interested in the Civil War was easy for me as I grew up in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, just down the road from Gettysburg. As a child, I often would dream what it would be like to be a soldier during this period. I dreamed of being a sergeant and galloping a muscular steed into battle. Since I was not born until 100 years later, I could only imagine this dream.

At the beginning of the Civil War the authorized strength of the regular Army was 16,000 men. These men were stationed mainly in the western mountains and high plains territories. On 29 July 1861, Congress increased this end strength to 22,714 which resulted in an increase of nine infantry regiments, one cavalry regiment, and one artillery regiment (Fisher 107). This increase resulted in hundreds of promotions for the Regular Army (RA) soldiers to the Officer and NCO ranks. The strength increase to the RA never intended to deal with the secession.

The two types of Army units were the Regulars and the Volunteers. There were some differences between the NCOs of the two units. The Civil War unlike the Mexican War was fought and won by volunteers and the NCOs of the volunteer regiments best typified the wartime NCO (108).

The Volunteer NCO was usually a successful, well established business man who wrote letters home and kept journals and diaries. This is where much of the history of the day to day activities of these units comes from. There are some problems with these accounts sometimes because they were written how the NCO saw himself or wanted to be seen.

In contrast to the Volunteers were the Regulars. Most of the correspondence written on these NCOs was in the form of official reports or through the eyes of their officers. Usually the Regulars were less educated and had severed ties with their families. Some of the soldiers were

even running from the law. For these reasons there is less history on them as compared to the Volunteers.

If I lived back then I think I would have preferred to be a RA NCO because they had a reputation of being ruff and tuff. The Volunteers were tighter knit not only because they knew one another prior to their military service and worked together within the communities, but because they grew up together as well. The friendly nature of the unit made the Regular Army's use of flogging as a disciplinary tool obsolete. Eventually, the RA followed the Volunteers lead and abolished it altogether.

In May 1861, President Lincoln issued a call for 42,034 volunteers to be raised by the states and organized into 40 regiments for three years' service. By August of that year there were 485,640 three-year volunteers in the service. Of that number about one in ten would become NCOs. Eventually, 700,000 men enlisted as volunteers in states making up 418 infantry regiments, 31 cavalry regiments, and 10 artillery regiments (108).

The Regular and Volunteer regiments were organized similar. They both consisted of ten companies. Each had three commissioned officers, a captain, and a first and second lieutenant. Both companies had four sergeants of which one was the first sergeant. They were also authorized four corporals, one wagoneer, and 64 to 82 privates. The regimental NCO staff consisted of a sergeant major, a quartermaster sergeant, a commissary sergeant, a hospital steward, and two principal musicians (109).

Even though both the volunteer and RA units had similar organization, there were important differences. The first was the length of service. The volunteers served from one to three years while the RAs were committed for five years of service. Second, most states offered the volunteers cash bounties. Some were as much as \$500 and the RA could never match this.

Further incentives for the volunteers were rapid promotions for the officers and NCOs which filled their units quickly with recruits. Finally was the difference in the take-home pay. The NCOs of the volunteers received \$17 per month, all of which they could keep. The RA NCOs also received \$17 per month, however, a deduction of \$2 per month was held and paid out at the end of their contract (109).

Civil War tactics included linear warfare in which forces tried to defeat each other by facing off in rows. As both lines approached one another the soldiers attempted to kill or wound as many opponents as possible in hopes their opponents would withdraw. This tactic exerted maximum shock caused by a volley of fire or bayonet charges. A typical Army company included four sergeants and four corporals. As the Civil War progressed attrition caused most units to fight with fewer NCOs. In battle, a regiment would line each company in two ranks. The captain stood to the right of the company with the first rank and the first sergeant stood with the second rank. The first sergeant also was known as the covering sergeant or orderly sergeant of the captain. The second sergeant, also called the left guiding sergeant, marched behind the second rank. The remaining NCOs and lieutenants took regularly spaced positions behind the line and served as file closers. Their jobs were to keep the line together and to help soldiers as problems arose (120).

The NCO had four primary combat duties. They were guides who marched units to and on the battlefield, replacements for killed or wounded officers, line closers, and as carriers and protectors of the regimental colors. As company guides, the first and second sergeants helped communicate the officers' orders. They were more assistants than leaders in this role. A less defined but equally important role was NCO leadership by example.

The NCOs enforced standards by dress parades and drills practiced in camp which reflected actual movement on the battlefield. The regiment aligned the flags in the front rank as sergeants on the ends of the line maintained positions of right angles to the flag, regardless of the direction the flag was moving. Without this alignment, an infantry unit would disintegrate and thus have any capacity to provide shock in the battle line.

Adjustments were constant. In the absence of officers, the ranking NCO assumed those duties. As file closers, NCOs and junior officers tried to keep battle formations and assist with weapons fire. The manuals of that time often allowed the file closers to kill deserters from the line, if necessary to preserve order. The file closers carried special tools such as bullet extractors to help unclog rifles.

The NCOs also carried the flags and regimental colors of their units. This deadly task was crucial to maintain regimental alignment and in order for commanders to define the locations of their units on the field (Arms 1). It is hard to imagine the significance to carrying colors into the battle as did the soldiers of that time. It seems now to have been a waste of men. Regiments went into battle with regimental and national colors. Some companies also had state colors which were usually not carried on the battlefield.

The NCOs also had occasional leadership duties on the battlefield. One was supervising picket duty and the other was on the skirmishing line. During the Civil War, NCOs led the lines of skirmishers which preceded and followed each major unit (1).

Firing was an early problem in the war. Benjamin McIntyre observed first-hand that “a company of soldiers fired volley after volley at a like-sized company at a distance of 15 steps and caused not a single casualty” (Grossman 11). Test on these weapons showed that there should have been a 60% hit rate at 75 yards, at 45 feet death should have been certain. If the

truth be told, I don't believe these soldiers wanted to kill each other. I say this because after the Battle of Gettysburg, 27,574 weapons were picked up on the battlefield and 95% (24,000) of these were loaded. Statistics show that trained soldiers of this time spent 95% of their time loading their weapons and 5% firing it. If these soldiers were really trying to engage the enemy only 5% of the weapons should have been loaded. The soldiers tricked the NCOs because 12,000 weapons were multi-loaded. This means the soldiers were going through the process of acting as though they were firing and reloading just to keep the NCOs off their backs (21).

When the Civil War finally came to an end, the NCOs found themselves leading yet a different type of mission. The officers of the Volunteers elected to take immediate discharge to go back to their civilian jobs. This left the NCOs marching the troops, often across multiple states, to muster out of service.

With the storm of the Civil War past, the citizen armies disappeared and the RA reverted back to as it was before. Back to the isolated frontier post with dirt roof log cabins enclosing parade grounds. Back to pacifying Indians engaging in 943 battles over the next 33 years. Unfortunately, in some cases, back to the brutal NCOs known as the "tough old sarges" (Fisher 127).

The officers were leaving the company affairs in the hands of the first sergeants. Who in turn relied on the duty sergeant and corporals. The enforcement of discipline and awarding company punishment was left to the NCO. Punishment was usually humiliating and illegal. The NCOs enforced discipline on their soldiers with their fists. The ability of a scrapper was a prerequisite for appointment to sergeant and a really tough NCO would sometimes be busted for a violation of regulation, but be reappointed because he could handle the hardest cases without having to call official assistance (129).

Discipline by the NCOs got so bad that in 1871 alone, 8,000 soldiers or one-third of the enlisted rank decided they could not take it anymore and left. The bad relations between the NCOs and the soldiers that did not desert would often turn to violence. The first sergeants would come up missing and later be found dead, victims of assaults from their own men (140).

I am not saying that all first sergeants were bad. Many would help their men with all kinds of problems, including teaching them to read. These first sergeants were the keepers of the company descriptive book and advisors to the captain. Unfortunately, these good NCOs did not get the press coverage that the bad NCOs did.

If I would have been born early enough to serve during the Civil War, I would have been proud to be an NCO during this period. The NCO Corps had problems during this time but has always been and always will be the backbone of the Army.

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