

NCOs of the Lewis and Clark Expedition

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Student # 203

Outline

I. Introduction:

A. References:

Ambrose Stephen E., Undaunted Courage. Touchstone: Simon and Schuster. 1997.

Fritz, Harry. "Discovering Lewis and Clark, Charles Floyd Much Lamented". 5 Oct. 2002. http://www.lewis-clark.org/floyd_lamented.htm

"Lewis and Clark, Journey of the Corps of Discovery". PBS Online. 4 Jan. 2003. <http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/index.html>

Smith, Roxann G. "Patrick Gass of the Lewis and Clark Expedition". 29 Sep. 2002. <http://www.gessphoto.com/olden-daze/index17.html>

B. The purpose of this research paper is to identify the NCOs of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, to outline their responsibilities, and describe the role they played in the successful accomplishment of the expedition.

II. Body:

A. Preparing for the Expedition

- 1) Authorization from congress to enlist men for the expedition
- 2) CPT Lewis chooses CPT Clark as co-commander
- 3) Recruits from the frontier

B. The NCOS

- 1) SGT Ordway
- 2) SGT Floyd
- 3) SGT Pryor
- 4) SGT Gass

C. NCO Duties and Responsibilities

- 1) Role of the NCO
- 2) Discipline of the enlisted force
- 3) The NCOs as leaders

III. Closing:

A. Summary.

B. Conclusion.

NCOs of the Lewis and Clark Expedition

In the beginning of the 19th Century, following the end of the Revolutionary war, a young United States was on the verge of beginning its westward expansion beyond the Mississippi River. The first expedition to explore the recently acquired Louisiana Purchase was the Lewis and Clark Expedition. In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson dispatched a military expedition headed by CPT Merriwether Lewis to explore the Missouri River headwaters to find a western path to the Pacific Ocean. Historians generally agree that 33 members made up the core of the expedition, which made a roundtrip journey from St Louis, Missouri, across the continental divide to the Oregon coast of the Pacific Ocean. Miraculously, all the members but one completed this 2-½ yearlong adventure. While they traveled, they mapped their route detailing all aspects of their travels, including the discovery of new plants, animals, and Indian tribes.

Granted authorization from congress on “July 2, 1803, to select up to twelve NCOs and enlisted men from the garrisons on the western frontier, and any other man, that he may think useful in furthering the expedition” (Ambrose 100), CPT Lewis began putting together his expedition. The commanding officers of the frontier posts were notified in separate orders to furnish Lewis with assistance in selecting men to accompany him on an expedition to the West. Together with the enlisted men, Congress authorized one other officer to accompany Lewis on the expedition as a second in command. Lewis asked his longtime friend William Clark to co-command the expedition. Commissioned by Congress as a Lieutenant in the Artillery Corps of the time, Clark joined his friend on the adventure of a lifetime.

“Downsized after the Revolutionary War by a nation that could not afford the expense or upkeep of a large force, the Army numbered fewer than 3,000 enlisted men. Pay was poor or

nonexistent and illness was common. Living conditions on the frontier were primitive; travel over long distances was primarily by foot” (Lewis and Clark). The garrisons on the western edge of the United States at the time contained an abundance of hardy young men accustomed to the rigors of the frontier. As word spread throughout the frontier of the pending expedition volunteers were abundant. An opportunity to participate in this exploration of the frontier was very enticing indeed. Pay would be good and generous land grants were promised to all who completed the journey. Together, Lewis and Clark “selected men based on their general hardiness, their shooting and hunting abilities, physical strength, general character, and their suitability for a long journey in the wilderness” (Ambrose 117).

In the fall of 1803, Lewis and Clark enlisted nine recruits from Kentucky as the first permanent members of the expedition. Amongst them were Charles Floyd and his cousin Nathaniel Pryor. Lewis later enlisted amongst others, John Ordway and Patrick Gass, of the 1st Infantry, stationed at Fort Kaskaskia, on the Mississippi River in the Illinois Territory. The commanding officer of the fort, CPT Bissell, initially refused Gass’ request to join the expedition because he could not afford to lose his best NCO, and most skilled carpenter. After a personal interview in which Gass pleaded with Lewis to accompany him on the journey, Lewis used the authority provided to him by Congress to overrule Bissell. Enlisted as a private, appointed as chief carpenter for the expedition, “Gass formerly became a member of the Lewis and Clark expedition on January 3, 1804” (Lewis and Clark).

“On March 31, 1804, CPT Lewis divided the expedition into three squads and appointed Floyd, Pryor, and Ordway, as sergeants, each in charge of a squad” (Ambrose 131). They would be the NCO Corps of what historians now call the “Corps of Discovery”. Pryor was the only

married man selected to participate on the journey and Floyd would be the only member who would die during the mission. Interestingly his death was not due to misfortune or trouble with Indians but was a result of illness. Through descriptions of his illness by Lewis, historians believe that he died from a ruptured appendix, resulting in peritonitis. This event was historical in that “on August 22, 1804 two days after Floyd’s death, the first election by U. S. citizens west of the Mississippi was held. The men elected Patrick Gass, originally a private in Floyd's squad, to assume Floyd's rank and responsibilities as sergeant in charge of one of the three squads of enlisted men” (Fritz).

The NCOs of this expedition shared many things in common with NCOs of today. All three were responsible for the care of the men appointed under them. Appointed equal responsibilities of command as prescribed by CPT Lewis, these responsibilities came in the form of detachment orders published for all to follow. No one NCO had authority over the other except on special occasion when directed by CPT Lewis. Assumption of command in the absence of an officer was an NCO responsibility much as it is today. Throughout most of the journey, the NCOs shared responsibilities for daily tasks such as posting of the guard, fire watch, drill, target practice and general discipline of the soldiers.

Despite attempts to maintain discipline, as in today’s Army, the privates would occasionally transgress and commit disciplinary infractions. The majority of the infractions came early on while the expedition was still preparing to depart. Punishment was swift and sure. On one occasion during CPT Lewis’ and Clarks’ absence, two privates failed to obey SGT Ordway’s command to mount guard, they stated they would not take orders from anyone but CPT Lewis. Upon his return, CPT Lewis placed these men into confinement, and reiterated the NCOs

authority in his absence. Throughout the remainder of the journey, disciplinary problems were rare.

Historical references to the leadership of the expedition by Lewis and Clark are all too familiar. What historians often overlook are the leadership contributions made by the NCOs. On numerous occasions, Lewis split the expedition into different parties in which an NCO assumed sole leadership of a separate element for an extended period.

On the return trip from the Pacific Ocean, SGT Ordway was given the task of leading a party of 10 men to the head of the Jefferson River, where the Corps had left its canoes before crossing the mountains. After repairing the canoes, Ordway would lead the men down the Jefferson to the Great Falls of the Missouri, portage around the falls, and then proceed to the mouth of the river to reunite with the groups led by Lewis and Clark. This was done successfully and without incident. On another occasion, Lewis and Clark divided the Corps into three separate commands. With three men, Lewis traveled north to determine the source of the Maria's River in order to establish the northern extent of the Louisiana Purchase. Clark led a detachment that explored the Yellowstone River from near its source to its confluence with the Missouri. Entrusted with command of the remainder of the men, SGT Gass led them on an overland portage around the Great falls of the Missouri River. All three parties would rejoin near the mouth of the Yellowstone River nearly two weeks later. (Lewis and Clark)

These two examples demonstrate the trust the officers had in their NCOs to accomplish the mission. Without this trust, the expedition would not have been the success it was. As is today, it was then; the officers entrusted their NCOs with responsibility of command in their absence. The contributions made by these NCO leaders to the expedition may be transparent to the average historian, but are not transparent to any one who has had the responsibility of leadership. Their efforts and contributions were just as important as the leadership contributions made by Lewis and Clark. Sergeants Floyd, Ordway, Pryor and Gass cared for their men and supervised the daily tasks carried out by all the members of the expedition. Their attentiveness, courage, and selfless service ensured the success of the expedition. History would record the expedition much differently without their management and leadership skills.

This was truly a remarkable journey. Together, officer, NCO, and enlisted, these men accomplished one of the greatest challenges ever taken on by a military unit. They crossed the continental divide and returned, nearly intact to the last man. Accomplished in a time when the military had nothing but what they carried on their backs and their rifles in hand. Without any support from the rear for 2-½ long years, these NCOs held their squads together. They crossed half a continent and returned, in the face of the greatest possible imaginable dangers and physical difficulties proving there is nothing that man cannot do, if they stick together as a team.

Teamwork was the essential ingredient, which made the journey a success. The author and historian Stephen Ambrose stated in an interview presented by PBS Online that, “the number one lesson of the Lewis and Clark expedition is Teamwork. Here you have 32 men who had become so close, so bonded, that everyone of them could recognize a cough in the night and know who it was. They could hear a footstep and know who it was. They knew who liked salt on their meat and who did not. They knew who is the best shot on the expedition, who is the fastest runner, who is the man who could get a fire going the quickest on a rainy day. They knew, because they lived and worked together as a team. They sat around the campfire, talking about each other’s parents and loved ones, each other’s hopes and dream’s. They learned what it took to motivate each other and developed a bond, which ensured the mission’s success and ultimately their own survival. They had become a team, and together they were able to accomplish feats that are almost unimaginable to us today as we look back at their journey.”

Works Cited

Ambrose Stephen E., Undaunted Courage. Touchstone: Simon and Schuster. 1997.

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