

American Noncommissioned Officers 1774-1865

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Abstract

The history of the American Noncommissioned Officers is long and rich in traditions. I have highlighted some of the titles and duties, equipment, uniforms, and compensation afforded the Noncommissioned Officer from 1774 to 1865.

The history of the America Noncommissioned Officer from 1774-1865 is full of significant events and changes that are still carry out today in our military traditions. The beginnings starts back in during the winter in Valley forge, PA. General George Washington need to improve the morale of the Continental Army and sought help form his allies in Europe. Through Thomas Jefferson in Paris, France, the Baron Von Stuben was hired.

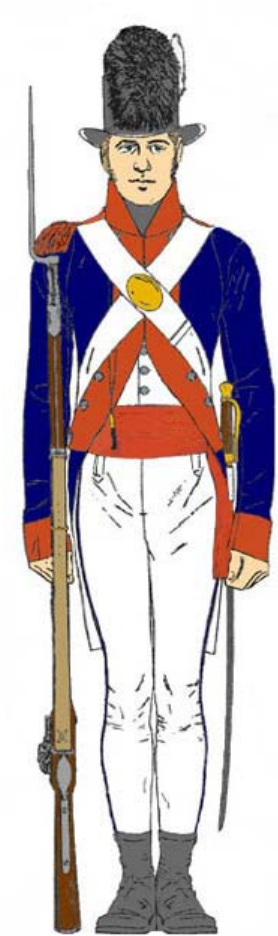
Although Von Stuben was only a Captain in the Prussian Army, Congress, thinking he was a retired lieutenant general, hired him and he arrived at Valley Forge 23 February 1778. Mixing French regulation with the British manual of Arms and his own 2 cents, Von Stuben drafted a simple and efficient system of maneuver and drill. *He stressed the importance of kind and considerate treatment of the troops and expected high levels of discipline in return.* Von Steuben standardized NCO duties and responsibilities in his *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*, known as the Blue book (printed in 1779).



Von Steuben specified duties of the noncommissioned officer as:

- The Sergeant Major served as the assistant to the regimental adjutant, keeping rosters, forming details and handled matters concerning the “the discipline of the regiment.”
- The Quartermaster Sergeant assisted the regimental quartermaster, assuming his duties in the quartermaster's absence and supervised the proper loading and transport of the regiment's baggage when on march.
- The First Sergeant enforced discipline and encouraged duty among troops, maintaining the duty roster, made the morning report to the company commander and keeping the company descriptive book. This book listed the name, age, height, place of birth and prior occupation of every enlisted man in the unit.
- Sergeants and Corporals instructed recruits in all matters of military training, including the order and discipline. They also regulated the neatness and sanitation of the camp. They quelled disturbances and punished offenders. They forwarded sick lists to the First Sergeant. In battle, NCOs closed the gaps occasioned by casualties, encouraged men to stand their ground and to fire rapidly and accurately. (Fisher, 1994)

Due to the confusion on the battlefield, there was a need to identify the noncommissioned officer on the battlefield. In 1775 a General order was issued, stating that "Sergeants may be distinguished by an Epaulette or stripe of red cloth, sewed upon the right shoulder; the Corporals by one of green. “ Additionally, some distinctive arms were authorized. In an effort to increase the status and prestige of the American Noncommissioned officer, In 1780 General Washington brought to the War Board’s attention the fact that by regulation, NCOs were authorized Esontoons and sword, in addition to their rifles, soon after money as allocated for the purchase of these items.



This soldier is a sergeant in the Continental Army. He is wearing a red tab on his shoulder and is has the noncommissioned officers sword. Additionally, he is wearing a red leader's sash. (American Military Heritage)

After the victory of Continental Army at Yorktown, the Army began to lose its support. The base pay was established for NCOs at: \$9.00 per month for Sergeants Major, \$8.00 for Sergeants and \$7.00 per month for Corporals.

The Congress was quick to downsize the Army. It reduced the Authorizations to 10,000. The bulk of this force consisted of eight regiments of infantry, ten companies each. Each company had a Captain, and two lieutenants, (one taking the place of the first Sergeant), four sergeants, four corporals, and sixty-eight privates. (Fisher, 1994)

Monthly NCO pay in 1792

Sergeants Major	\$9.00 per month
Sergeants	\$8.00 per month
Corporals	\$7.00 per month

The Army strength dropped below 10, 000 to a strength of only 8,200. In an effort to stimulate enlistments, Congress increased pay to: \$12.00 for Sergeants Major, \$11.00 for Sergeants and \$10.00 for corporals. These rates would remain unchanged until the 1830s. During this time, the War of 1812 showed the necessity of the return of the Company First Sergeant in 1818. General Brown, a commanding general on the Niagara frontier is quoted as stating, " The key to obtaining and retaining the talent and ability requisite in the station of the noncommissioned officer- in short is better pay. The social prestige attached to the commissioned ranks gave officers ready passport to the highest circles of society. This is not the case with the noncommissioned officer, who together with his commissioned counterpart share equal responsibility for the moral and physical efficiency of the rank and file. There is no individual of a company on who more depends for its discipline, police, instruction, and general well being than on the FIRST SERGANT." (Fisher, 1994)

Monthly NCO pay in 1812

Sergeants Major	\$12.00 per month
Sergeants	\$11.00 per month
Corporals	\$10.00 per month

The 1833-revised Pay table established pay as: \$17.00 for Sergeants Major, \$15.00 for First Sergeants, 12.00 for Sergeants and a reduction in pay for corporals to \$8.00. In the 41 years since the 1792 the pays scale just about doubled, but it was still barely enough to keep up with the increasing costs associated with a rapidly growing country. Of special note is the provision to give each enlisted man that served continuously for ten years 160 acres of land at their ETS, additionally an extra daily ratio for each five years of continued active service. These were the foundations of re-enlistment bonuses. (Fisher, 1994)

Monthly NCO pay in 1833

Sergeants Major	\$17.00 per month
First Sergeants	\$15.00 per month
Sergeants	\$12.00 per month
Corporals	\$8.00 per month

In the early 1800s, the insignia of the Noncommissioned officers change from the shoulder epaulets to chevrons. Colors of the chevrons were used to denote branch. Army

regulations of 1821 stated “Dark blue as the national color, when a different one is not prescribed. All uniform coats will be of that color.” (CMH, 2003)

These are just a few of the early developments that created the most professional noncommissioned officers corps in the world. CSM Cynthia Pritchett is quoted as saying:

“Understanding the history of our profession and our corps is at the heart of being a soldier. Every soldier needs to learn about our heritage and Traditions, it is the essence of who we are.” CSM Cynthia Pritchett

In closing, I firmly believe that the history of our great corps is all around us. From the Green Leadership Tabs noncommissioned officer leaders wear to the passing of the NCO sword during a Change of NCO Responsibility. It is our duty to pass on this rich history to our soldiers- Let us not fail them in this task.

References

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