

NCOs
Of The
“Corps of Discovery”

by
Donald L. Alexander
Student #55061
Class 55, Group R12
L579, History of the NCO

OUTLINE

I. Introduction.

- A. References: see works cited page.
- B. Two centuries after the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Americans, as a whole, still know little about the NCOs who not only participated but played a vital role in the success of this journey.

II. Body.

- A. SGT Charles Floyd.
 - 1. Life preceding the expedition
 - 2. Pays the ultimate sacrifice
 - 3. A nation honors a hero
- B. SGT Nathaniel Pryor
 - 1. Life preceding the expedition
 - 2. Contributions to the expedition
 - 3. Life following the expedition
- C. SGT John Ordway
 - 1. Life preceding the expedition

2. Contributions to the expedition
3. Life following the expedition

D. SGT Patrick Gass

1. Life preceding the expedition
2. Contributions to the expedition
3. Life following the expedition

III. Closing.

- A. In summary, many men participated in this historic event. Some received recognition and others didn't. This is a tribute to four NCOs who earned a level of recognition that is to date, unmatched.
- B. Question and answer period.
- C. This trek was so important that these NCOs were willing to allow others to become household names at their expense. Their priority was the success of the mission not recognition. Perhaps the highest honor I could bestow on them is to leave them as they lived-"Unmentioned Heroes".

Almost every American has some inkling of the Lewis and Clark expedition, but relatively few recognize that it was actually an Army expedition. Perhaps even fewer are aware that President Thomas Jefferson turned not only to his friend Captain Meriwether Lewis to lead the expedition, but also called to the Army's Noncommissioned Officer Corps to execute this most important mission. Lewis and Clark are common everyday household names but little is widely known of the four NCOs who volunteered to embark upon such an arduous undertaking. These NCOs; Sergeant Charles Floyd, Sergeant Patrick Gass, Sergeant John Ordway and Sergeant Nathaniel Pryor are what I would like to say are the "Unmentioned Heroes" of the expedition.

Sergeant Charles Floyd was born in 1782 in Kentucky and was a relative to Captain William Clark and was approved Sergeant on the 4th of April 1804. Sergeant Floyd is perhaps the most notable of all the NCOs to participate in the expedition as he was the first and only person to die on the expedition. He was also a cousin to expedition team member, Sergeant Pryor. He volunteered before any other member for the expedition. Because of his background as a farmer, he judged land quality. He took command of the second squad. His primary responsibility as cited on PageWise was "in charge of the Officers quarters and supplies." He also maintained an uninterrupted journal of the expedition's daily events for over four months until two days before his untimely death of ruptured appendix. He died in a location just outside of what is now know as Sioux City, Iowa. On his death Pagewise cites, "On the fifth of August, Floyd first took ill. It is believed that a ruptured appendix was the cause of the illness and death. The expedition was at a town this is called Sergeant Floyds Bluff today. After the journey resumed it was only one day later that Sergeant Floyd passed away on the twentieth of August 1804. He had suggested a warm bath to ease the pain; however before they could get him to the

water, he had died. Floyd was buried at the top of a high round hill overlooking the river. A cedar post has his name and death date upon it.” The accounts maintained in Sergeant Gass’s journal of Floyd’s demise states ““Wednesday 15th ... This day sergeant Floyd became very sick and remained so all night. He was seized with a complaint somewhat like a violent cholick. Monday 20th . Sergeant Floyd continued very ill. We embarked early, and proceeded, having a fair wind and fine weather, till 2 o’clock, when we landed for dinner. Here sergeant Floyd died, notwithstanding every possible effort was made by the commanding officers, and other persons, to save his life. We went on about a mile to high prairie hills on the north side of the river, and there interred his remains in the most decent manner our circumstances would admit; we then proceeded a mile further to a small river on the same side and encamped. Our commanding officers gave it the name of Floyd’s river; to perpetuate the memory of the first man who had fallen in this important expedition.”” (Gass, page 21) He also was the first United States soldier fatality west of the Mississippi River. Ambrose states, ““Clark provided a fitting epitaph in his journal: “This man at times gave us proofs of his firmness and Determined resolution to doe Service to his Countrey and honor to himself.”” (Ambrose, page 58)

After years of erosion by the Missouri River, the citizens of Sioux City, Iowa removed the remains of Floyd and put them in a walnut coffin. Today, Floyd enjoys the honor of having erected at his gravesite in Sioux City, Iowa, the most prestigious memorial of the explorers. This monolith memorial is a 100 foot high sandstone monument, second in size only to that of the Washington Monument. DR. Elliott Coues dedicated the monument on Memorial Day in 1901. In 1960 the Floyd Monument became the first National Registered Landmark.

Due to the untimely death of Sergeant Floyd, Sergeant Patrick Gass was unanimously voted by his peers and approved by the officers to fill the position of Sergeant

Floyd. He was the only man promoted to the rank of Sergeant on the expedition. Of Irish ancestry, Sergeant Gass was born in Pennsylvania and learned the trade of carpentry from his father. He enlisted in the Army in 1799 after serving as a volunteer in a ranger unit. The captains recruited him as a member of the Corps of Discovery from Fort Kaskaskia of Captain Russell Bissell's company of the First Infantry. Captain Bissell denied Sergeant Gass' transfer two times because of his invaluable carpentry skills. It was not until Captain Lewis intervened that Captain Bissell allowed the transfer.

. Because of his carpentry skills, Sergeant Gass was perhaps the most valued member of the team. Without his abilities in woodworking, the expedition would almost certainly have failed. On two separate occasions, he salvaged the expedition by designing and building two forts during the two winter encampments. He diagrammed and supervised the construction of Fort Clatsop at the foothills of the Rocky Mountains (what is now known as North Dakota) and Fort Mandan at the Pacific coast (Oregon) as winter approached and the team had to halt their moves. Had it not been for his skills, the men would have either had to turn back or would have become casualties due to exposure of the elements. He also applied his talents toward the hewing of dugout canoes for the men to descend down the west side of the mountainous waterway because the boats they had used were too heavy cross the mountain-pass. He also fashioned wagons to portage the canoes 18 miles overland around the series of falls on the Missouri River in Montana.

Taking off from where Sergeant Floyd had ended, Sergeant Gass maintained the daily journal of the expedition and was the first person to publish his works following the expedition. Sergeant Gass' published his journal in 1807. According to PBS, "As his most lasting literary

legacy, Gass holds claim to popularizing the explorers' proudly coined "Corps of Discovery" name, featured boldly on the title page of his 1807 published journal."

He stayed in the Army and served in the War of 1812, but left as a result of a disability after he lost an eye in an accident. He married at the age of 60 and settled in Wellsburg, West Virginia. As the last survivor of the expedition, he died in 1870 at the age of 99 and is buried in the Brooke County Cemetery at Wellsburg, West Virginia.

Sergeant Nathaniel Pryor was born in Virginia in 1772. His mother was a daughter to the sister of Pocahontas. He moved to Kentucky with his parents in 1783, where he lived until he joined the expedition 20 years later. He had taken a wife in 1798 and therefore, unqualified to enlist in the expedition. However, Captain Clark received an exception to policy allowing him to join the team as the only enlisted married man. As the cousin of Sergeant Floyd, he received the personal effects of his deceased cousin to retain until they returned home.

Sergeant Pryor was considered a man of character and ability. Pryor assumed the responsibilities of Army Administrator and Presiding Authority for Courts martial. He became the first United States judge to preside over a case west of the Mississippi River. Numerous Court martial took place as a result of some lower enlisted soldiers who violated rules and regulations, such as drunk on duty and breaking curfew. Sergeant Pryor presided over their cases, found the men guilty, imposed punishment, and administered the sentence himself. The penalty typically imposed was flogging from 50-100 lashes on the back of each of the violators.

Sergeant Pryor had a talent for acquiring food and other items from the Indians that no one else possessed. One account cited by Holloway with Sergeant Pryor's dealings with Indians "As the party reached the mouth of the James river, an Indian swam out to one of the boats and told them that a large party of Yankton Sioux were camped nearby. On 27 August, Sergeant

Pryor and two men were sent with an invitation to hold a council. The Yankton, a more peaceable race than their Teton cousins, received the sergeant with great honour. They proposed to carry him into their village on a buffalo robe – the highest honour they could offer – but he refused it because he was not an officer. He accepted, however, the gift of a whole roast dog. Whatever doubts he may have had when he started on it, he set them aside and reported that the meat was well flavoured. A grand council was arranged for two days hence, and Pryor set off, accompanied by five chiefs and seventy warriors. This was the first big Indian village that the expedition had come across. SGT Pryor was charged with starting it.” (Holloway, pg 44)

After Sergeant Pryor returned and fulfilled his duties as a member of the expedition, Lewis and Clark helped him obtain a commission as an officer in the U.S. Army. In 1807 he led an expedition up the Missouri to return Chief Big White to his people, the Mandans. A rival tribe, the Arikaras, attacked his party and wounded or killed several of his men. Following this event, he decided to resign from the army and become an Indian trader. He fought in the War of 1812 and served as a Captain under General Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans. After the war he went west to what is now Oklahoma and continued his skill as an Indian trader. With his first wife now deceased, Pryor remarried an Osage woman and remained with her until his death in 1831.

One of ten children, Sergeant John Ordway was a young soldier from Hebron, New Hampshire. A major contributor to the expedition's success, Ordway was one of the few well-educated men recruited for the expedition. Recruited from Fort Kaskaskia from the First Infantry, he was the only member of the team who was a Sergeant in the Army before the organization of the expedition. Due to his level of academic achievement and knowledge, the

officers elected him as third in the succession of command and assumed the role as commander of the team in the absence of Lewis and Clark.

His many responsibilities included issuing provisions, appointing guard duties, keeping all registers and records, and commanding the group during the absences of Lewis and Clark. For the trip before them, he requested and received 15 prototype Model 1803 muzzle-loading .54 caliber rifles, knives, 500 rifle flints, 420 pounds of sheet lead for bullets, 176 pounds of gunpowder packed in 52 lead canisters, and one long-barreled rifle that fired its bullet with compressed air, rather than by flint, spark, and powder. Sergeant Ordway became the most faithful journalist of the expedition as he updated entries in his journal daily for over two years without exception. After the expedition, due to the fact that he maintained such a detailed account of the expedition, Lewis and Clark purchased Sergeant Ordway's journal for \$300 and incorporated his writings into their own book.

At the end of the expedition, he accompanied Captain's Lewis and Clark and a party of Indians to Washington D.C. Upon his discharge, Sergeant Ordway returned to New Hampshire, married, and soon moved to Missouri to farm the 320 acres of land he was awarded for his service in the Corps. He also received double pay, on Lewis' recommendation, as did most of the men in the Corps. Sergeant Ordway lived the remainder of his life as a successful landowner of two plantations until his death in 1817.

Ambrose states, "Lewis' directions to Clark for recruiting expedition members called for "good hunters, stout, healthy, unmarried men, accustomed to the woods and capable of bearing bodily fatigue in a pretty considerable degree.'"(Ambrose, page 37) Little did he know that he would get much more than he ever anticipated and exactly what he would need to aid in the expedition's success.

This trek was so important that these NCOs were willing to allow others to become household names at their expense. Their priority was the success of the mission and not personal recognition. After much thought, perhaps the highest honor I could bestow on these four Noncommissioned Officers is to leave them as they lived-“Unmentioned Heroes.”

Works Cited

PageWise Sgt. Charles Floyd: A Short Biography.

<http://mt.essortment.com/sergeantcharles/rwnm.html>

PBS, Lewis and Clark – Inside the Corps

<http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/inside.html>

Ambrose, Stephen E. Lewis and Clark Voyage of Discovery. National Geographic Society, 1998.

Hosmer, James K. Gass's Journal of Lewis and Clark Expedition by Sergeant Patrick Gass
Lone Wolf Press, 1999.

---. Undaunted Courage. New York: Touchstone, 1997.

Hollaway, David. Lewis and Clark And the Crossing of North America. Saturday Review Press,
1974.