

OUTLINE FOR NCO HISTORY BRIEF (L579)
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I. Introduction.

A. I used the following books and internet reference for my research on the NCOs of the Ancient Roman Army, the Centurions: The Complete Roman Army, Rome at War and Roman Army.

B. The scope of my research focused on the efficiency of the who and what made a Centurion and the range of their influence on the soldiers they led.

II. Body.

A. Duties and discipline.

B. Training.

C. Weapons.

D. Formations.

III. Closing.

A. Summary: This brief provided information on the duties, discipline, training, weapons and formations of the Noncommissioned Officers of Ancient Rome, the Centurions.

B. A question and answer period.

C. Conclusion: The success of the Roman Army can be attributed to the Centurions that trained, motivated and executed the commands of Caesar with total devotion to duty.

THE CENTURIONS: THE ROLE OF FOREIGN NONCOMMISSIONED OFFICERS of the ROMAN ARMY

MSG M.M. PEREZ

Introduction

Rome was not built in a day; however to the peoples conquered by the Romans this conquest was swift. For no other armed force instilled such fear and respect as that of the Roman Army. From the first century BC to the third century AD Rome expanded from a city-state to an empire that controlled Europe, North Africa, the Mediterranean basin, and the Near East. They were able to do this because of the strength of their army. It was the first paid full time army in the world. The army divided its forces into 30 Legions of 5,000 men. Subsequently, each Legion divided into ten Cohorts with each Cohort divided into six Centuries (normally consisting of 80-90 men) which had as a commander a centurion – the backbone of the Roman Army. For when Caesar stated “I came, I saw, I conquered.” it was due in part to the professionalism of his centurions that trained, motivated their soldiers and executed his commands with total devotion to duty (Gilliver, Goldsworthy and Whitby 14). This paper will explore the range of influence a centurion had on the soldiers he led via duties, discipline, training, weapons, and formations.

Duties and Discipline

A centurion (59 per legion) was the senior noncommissioned officer in charge with the command authority of a modern day company commander. Becoming a centurion transpired in one of three ways; election through the ranks by one’s own troops, direct appointment, or commission by the regional governor of the cohort or through the old fashion way – nepotism. Rarely discharged from service preferring to die in battle; the centurion was an imposing figure

of strength and discipline on the battlefield. He was easily distinguished from the rank and file on foot as he rode on horseback by the side-to-side horsehair crest on his helmet and medals on his chest; he was the epitome of a soldier, a true professional, a noncommissioned officer, a leader. The most senior centurion was termed the *Primus-Pilus* or First Spear, he commanded the first (double size) Century of the Legion. The other senior centurions serving under him in called the First Cohort in descending rank the *Princeps*, *Hastatus*, *Princeps-Posterior*, and *Hastatus-Posterior*. These five senior centurions out-ranked the other junior centurions of the Legion and were known as the *Primi-Ordines* or First Order. The other more junior centurions each commanded one of the six standard size Centuries in the 2nd through 10th Cohorts. The attainment of the rank of *Primus-Pilus* was the aim of every centurion. Josephus the Jewish historian stated of centurions “by their military exercises they instill into their soldiers fortitude not only of body but also of soul...” (Goldsworthy74).

In charge of discipline and training the centurion carried a stick of very hard wood in which he would use to beat his soldiers into shape and obedience. Discipline was strict but not necessarily so strict as to diminish a soldier’s individual initiative. The centurion knew that intelligent, independent-minded soldiers who worked together as a unit posed a significantly greater threat to an enemy, than blindly obedient men (Army 1). During times of crisis (e.g. the war against Hannibal) a centurion to maintain discipline against a seemingly invincible foe would use severe measures. Measures such as execution and decimation (the most gruesome) acted as deterrents against desertion, mutiny, or insubordination. Although rarely used, centurions applied decimation to entire cohorts with every tenth man randomly chosen by lots and clubbed or stoned to death by his own comrades. To kill off one’s own ranks was fool hardy; after all, trained soldiers did not grow on trees.

Training and Weapons

Before a young soldier could be taught the basic training fundamentals there were certain things the centurion needed to ensure they understood; first of which was the march. The only way to ensure exactness and correct form was through exhaustive practice marches. Through practice ranks who maintained correct stance and form were in less danger of defeat. Next was running in order to advance on the enemy with agile speed and force. The last fundamental building block would be leaping; to help the young soldier cross ditches or scale difficult objects without trouble. Once a centurion believe that their young soldiers had successfully accomplished these parts of initial training they would prepare them for the following, sword practice, bow, sling, and javelin training (Goldsworthy174). It was vital for each centurion to assure that their soldiers achieved a high level of skill in the use of their weapons in order to be an efficient killing machine. Centurions conducted sword practice with wooden swords that were twice as heavy as the *Gladius hispaniensis* or Spanish sword. Such training transferred into quicker reactionary movements and greater thrust force in battle. Additionally, NCOs used the javelin (light spear) and trained with it in much the same way, using a heavier spear than the one used in battle. Archers focused their energies on eye hand coordination and a steady hand. Lastly, new soldiers learned the use of a sling to throw stones. All ancient armies included slingers; the stones were useful because they would kill without mangling the body and the wound was fatal without loss of blood (Army1). Once trained each soldiers armament included the *gladius* , a dagger, and javelin. Wearing armor and carrying shields protected the NCO from the enemy. This combination of individual weaponry was deadly in battle. On order by their centurion soldiers would first hurl their javelins at the enemy. Next, as the enemy drew near,

soldiers raised their shields, held out their swords and charged making the roman soldier a force to be reckoned with (Goldsworthy 179).

Formations

Centurions knew that a soldiers training required not only bravery and strength but also coordination, cunning, and intelligence, which would, formed the basis of their military formations. Terrain dictated the formations; the wider a line was, the more likely it was to encounter obstacles. Every second man of the line would step forward a few paces, doubling the amounts of ranks. Gaps created by this formation, known as a skirmishing formation, overlapped the next line to follow. These wide spaces allowed greater mobility and swifter attacks. Narrower, deeper formations could move troops quicker. This however limited the use of weaponry to only the men in front of the formation.

For open field conflict as shown in figure 1, the centurion would place their infantry in the middle with auxiliaries on the right and left sides. Cohorts of calvary formed the rear flanks, and there would always be a large reserve of infantrymen behind the main force (Gilliver, Goldsworthy, and Whitby125).

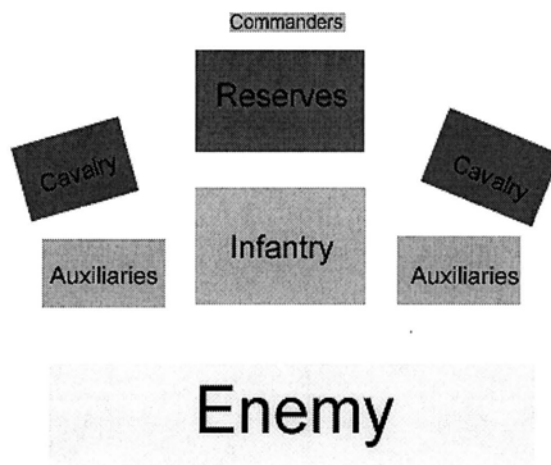


Figure 1 Open field conflict formation

Figure 2 depicts another formation known as the pig's head. Centurions would place the infantry into a wedge shaped formation and would push into the enemy with a wall of shields.



Figure 2 Roman pig formation

When surrounded, the Romans formed a square formation as shown in figure 3 with interlocking shields.



Figure 3 Roman square formation

The Romans used a formation called the tortoise in siege operations. Soldiers in front and sides interlocked their shields. Those soldiers in the back lines placed their shields over their heads to form a protective covering or “shell” over the top of the men. So strong was this particular formation that in training centurions would ride chariots over the tops of the shields without structural damage to the formation (Goldsworthy194).

Conclusion

Competently led, the Roman soldier demonstrated a tactical flexibility, which made them superior to all other soldiers of their time. The Roman historian Polybius wrote, “for who is so worthless or indolent as not to wish to know by what means...the Romans...have succeeded in subjecting ...the world to their rule.” They succeeded because of the centurions’ single-minded purpose, dedication to its soldiers and devotion to Rome.

Works Cited

Goldsworthy, Adrian. The Complete Roman Army. New York, NY: Toppan, 2003.

Giller, Kate, Goldsworthy, Adrian and Whitby, Michael. Roman at War. New York, NY:
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