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Abstract

In 1775 the history of the NCO began. Not copying the British in blended traditions from the Prussian, British and French Armies. A unique form of noncommissioned officer was invented through years of progression. Changes in social attitudes and expansion westward form a truly American noncommissioned Officer.

In the Beginning

Early on in during the birth of a new nation, NCOs had few if any duties and responsibilities. Standardization of these duties and responsibilities would be the key to success in the war against the British. The NCO ranks of the period were governed by the Blue Book in which General Frederick von Steuben standardized these duties and responsibilities. For 30 years these rules governed the corporals, sergeants, first sergeants, quarter master sergeants and sergeants major.

Von Steuben designed the following duties and responsibilities:

The sergeant Major served as the assistant to the Adjutant. His duties were to form rosters, details and disciplined the unit.

The Quartermaster Sergeant assumed duties of the quartermaster in his absence and supervised accountability and transportation of supplies.

The First Sergeant enforced duty rosters, gave encouragement, maintained the unit personnel roster and enforced discipline.

Sergeants and Corporals conducted training, maintained order and discipline, performed field sanitation and quelled civil disturbances.

Victory was always the result of a strong NCO corps. The nickname “The Backbone of the Army” was given by von Steuben. The regulations he established were at the center of the NCO duties and responsibilities.

The victory at Yorktown meant independence for a new nation. The nation was poor and could not sustain a full time Army. A fear of military reprisal kept the government from funding a full time Army during peace time. During times of peace the numbers of the military were kept

to a minimum. During times of war the army would be expanded. Volunteer troops would be used during civilian disturbances or Indian problems. Regulars were used as the corps of the volunteer units. The true test of this system came during the Indian uprisings which resulted in two units being defeated by the Indians. The “Legion” was formed. The Army grew from 800 to 1500 men. These professional soldiers were properly trained and equipped which resulted in a well-disciplined group. During the Battle of the Fallen Timbers the group was tested and their training and drills proved successful.

1812

During the war of 1812, the defense of the nation relied on the militias. The central control of the militias belonged to the states. These militias would not fight outside their counties or even the United States. The US was a poor nation and could not sustain or field a full time army. Most units that were called to fight would go on short notice then return to their homes after the fighting was over. Most of these troops were inexperienced and untrained and would usually run at the first shot fired. Kentucky volunteers were called and trained; soon they were to engage the British and the Indians at Lake Erie where they were victorious. After the battle was over the troops from Kentucky returned home after a short three months and after one major battle. These soldiers proved the worth of the “Citizen Soldier”. The Louisiana Purchase produced an unexplored frontier. Enlisted men and NCOs were an integral part of the exploration and settlement of the lands out west.

“Go West”

An expedition headed west comprised of two officers, four NCOs, and 23 privates. Lewis and Clark were sent to explore, map, and establish an overland route to the west coast. In their travels they encountered 50 different Indian tribes, with whom they established friendly ties. Most of the men who went on this mission turned to trading and trapping and established the fur trade. The fur trade was highly lucrative. The Indians would be able to acquire guns, blankets and traps. The Army was in charge of controlling the fur trade ensuring that trappers had the right licenses and that peace treaties with the Indians were kept. Small factories had to be manned by US troops to keep the peace. This changed the face of daily army life. The NCO would monitor troop's actions and attendance regularly throughout the day and conducting inspections.

Soldiers worked closely with a government employee known as a factor, ensuring the smooth operation of the fur factory helping unload and load cargo, build and repair the factory. After the factories were closed the soldiers would continue to monitor traffic and enforce the laws of the frontier.

Chevrons

The first reference to the chevrons of the NCO was in 1821. Sergeants Major and Quartermaster Sergeants were ordered to wear a chevron each arm just above the elbow. Corporals were ordered to wear one chevron on the right arm below the elbow. These orders were superseded in 1829. The first Artillery school was opened in Ft. Monroe, VA, instructing units instead of just individuals. The first system to be put in place to promote NCOs was in 1825. The Company Commander would recommend an NCO for promotion and the regimental commander were expected to respect the company commanders decision. If there were other

considerations then the regimental commander could override the company commanders' recommendation. In 1829 Training of noncommissioned officers was accomplished with tactics from the Infantry. All NCOs were to be knowledgeable in the operation of their firelocks and drill and ceremony. Noncommissioned officers were tested regularly by the field officers in their training and the adjutant would regularly inspect the field officers to ensure that the training was being accomplished. The Sergeant major was responsible to ensure that the Sergeants and Corporals of the regiment were trained.

The rank of Ordinance Sergeant was created in 1832. The duties and responsibilities of the Ordinance Sergeant were receiving ordinance, arms and ammunition.

Rations for the soldiers included beef or pork, flour ore bread, whiskey, rum vinegar, soap, salt and candles. Daily rations were supplemented by growing vegetables in the post gardens. This was another duty of the enlisted men. Hunting also supplemented the daily food ration in the frontier.

Leisure time was spent playing cards, racing horses and playing pool, still a pastime in the military today. Larger sized posts had libraries for reading, writing letters and prayer groups. Separate rooms were used for the officers and enlisted and were given different reading times.

Indians were to be removed from the Mississippi river in 1830. The Army assumed the role of maintaining the peace between the eastern and western tribes. More mounted troops were needed upon the opening of the Santa Fe Trail. A battalion of mounted rangers was created to complete this task. Elite troops were called Dragoons. In order to demonstrate their elite status the chevron was brought back to be used by the NCO. Chevrons at the time were worn with the point down. In 1840, the NCO was given a ceremonial sword to give the corps greater distinction. The sword is still used today for special ceremonies.

1846

The war with Mexico began in 1846. Texas had been annexed and the US wanted California which led to a large number of regular troops being needed. The Army asked for more volunteers and promised them 160 acres after they completed their enlistment. The volunteers would elect who were to be their officers and NCOs which led to numerous discipline problems. The volunteers had been hardened in battle and were in high spirits. The volunteers marched up to 35 miles a day and captured Santa Fe with out firing a shot. After the Mexican American War the Army concentrated its efforts to protect the Oregon and California emigrant trails. Small detachments led by NCOs discouraged Indians from attacking settlers.

Chevrons changed in 1840-1860. Being worn at first with V inverted, a few years later it was turned point down, remaining in the V shape until 1902. Noncommissioned officers led lines, carried flags and regimental colors, during the Civil War. As tactics changed the combat leadership of the noncommissioned officer changed. The soldiers life was hard in that he was required to build or repair housing, fortifications, roads, bridges and perform duties to self sustain. It was during these times that the role of the NCO was fully tested. NCOs were still required to maintain their units ready to fight. At one time they were even discouraged from getting married.

Summation

The NCO of today has a long and proven heritage. Conflicts and mobilizations have greatly increased the number of NCOs. The success of the Army rests on the NCO corps the “Backbone of the Army”. Its traditions and warrior ethos will carry the corps through what ever the world can throw at it.

