

Soldiers from the Roman Legions were the World's First  
Noncommissioned Officers

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by

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*Overall good work*



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Group Room M10, Class 55

28 February 2005

Information Briefing Outline  
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**I. Introduction.**

A. Books: Warriors of Rome and Soldiers of Rome (Praetorians and Legionnaires)  
Internet search: Roman Legionnaires

B. My research confirmed that Roman legionnaires were the civilized world's first noncommissioned officers (NCOs). Many of their duties and responsibilities mirror those of NCOs today.

**II. Body.**

A. How and where Rome came into existence.

B. Early Roman Armies and how they were structured.

C. Roman legionnaires, their duties, and how they are similar with the duties of today's NCOs.

D. Roman weapons and equipment.

**III. Closing.**

A. In summary, I informed you of how and when Rome came into existence, how early Roman Armies were structured, the Roman legionnaires duties and similarities with today's NCOs, and of their weapons and equipment.

B. The small unit leaders of the Roman legions were the world's first noncommissioned officers.

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Fowler 1

## **Soldiers from the Roman Legions were the Civilized World's First Noncommissioned Officers**

The Roman Army was the first structured and standing Army in the history of the civilized world. History shows that our modern Army, and more specifically our noncommissioned officer corps has been and still is influenced by these ancient warriors. Much of our current doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures mirror those from the earliest days of the Roman Army.

Rome came into existence hundreds of years before the coming of Christ (B.C.). Rome was formed by the amalgamation of two communities located in the west central hills of Italy along the Tiber River. One community was located in the Palatine hills and the other in the Quirinal hills. Around 600 B.C. the two communities decided to join together and thus began the creation of the Roman Empire (Sekunda, Nick and Northwood 3).

The Roman Empire soon became the dominate force in the eastern hemisphere and remained so for the next several hundred years. The empire and its <sup>possessive</sup> Army had many challenges during this time period and even suffered some defeats. The Army was very resilient however and always adapted or restructured as necessary to meet and defeat the enemy. Our modern Army operates much the same way. We continually assess ourselves, modernize, and adapt our doctrine, training, and equipment to meet all challenges.

The earliest Roman Army was established by developing a tribal system. At the time, three tribes made up Rome and each donated men to the Army. Each community created a tribal Army consisting of 1,000 men, and the equipment and supplies necessary to sustain it. Each of these tribal Armies fell under the control of the Roman Empire. The Armies were broken down

into smaller 100 man units known as gentes. The gentes were then separated into 10 man units called curiae.

At approximately 400 B.C. the Roman Army transformed into legions. By the year 311 B.C. the Roman Army consisted of four legions (Sekunda, Nick and Northwood 21). At this time each legion consisted of approximately 3,000 heavy infantry soldiers and 1,200 light infantry soldiers for a total of around 4,200 soldiers per legion. The total Roman Army, therefore, was made up of about 16,800 soldiers. The soldiers of the Roman Army were called legionnaires. The legions were broken down similarly to the tribes. The smaller units within the legions were led by Roman officers who were not officially commissioned. Today, these leaders are recognized as the world's first noncommissioned officers (NCOs).

Combined, the legions of the Rome constituted the first standing Army in the history of the world. By identifying the Roman Army as a standing Army it means that they were controlled and sanctioned by a nation. The legionnaires were regularly recruited and governed by rules and regulations. Much like our noncommissioned officers of today, the Roman NCOs conducted small unit and individual training. They devised battle drills and standards that had to be met. One example of modifications to techniques that the Romans implemented was when they changed from using a long sword with a sweeping motion to using a shorter sword and a stabbing motion. This was made necessary when the Romans faced an enemy that was physically larger and stronger than the typical legionnaire was. When the legions deployed, whether to conduct training or go into battle, the NCOs were the ones who were held responsible for accountability of their men. They were put in charge of establishing the camps or bivouacs. The camps were normally setup in a large square. The Romans felt this gave

them the ability to defend their camp from all four directions. The standard or colors were located in the center of the camp to afford it maximum protection. The legionnaires were supplied government rations, but as with today's soldiers, many found them lacking so they supplemented their government rations with food of their own. The legionnaires typically served in the Roman Army for around twenty years and then were offered retirement. They held grand retirement ceremonies and paid the retirees a handsome gratuity for their service.

The Roman Army used a myriad of weapons and equipment. Much of the equipment used by the legionnaires is still in use today in one form or another. They continually sought out new ways to protect their warriors, update their equipment inventory, and invent new weapons. However, since all of their weapons and equipment were hand-made modernization took time. Some pieces of enduring equipment, such as the brass helmets most likely stayed in service for up to two hundred years.

The Roman Army was equipped with body armor soon after it was established and much like our soldiers, the legionnaires requested many modifications. The basic chest piece of the body armor was originally made from iron and weighed about 16 pounds (Simkins 23). To lighten the weight, the Romans began using mail. Mail consist of many metal links woven together to make a metal fabric. Mail was lighter and cooler than iron armor. Other modifications made to their body armor were cut-outs at the hip area for cavalry soldiers and attachments for shoulder, shin, and knee protection. The legionnaires also developed armor protection for their horses. They used metal blankets made from mail to cover the heads and trunks of their steeds. Armor has changed drastically over the years, but today's soldiers still want lighter and cooler armor that will protect them in battle.

Roman soldiers wore helmets made from iron and brass. Their helmets evolved many times over the years. However some of the brass helmets, due to their durability and the fact that it took a long time to manufacture new ones by hand, remained in service for generations. The helmets were constructed with cut-outs for the ears to enable the legionnaires to hear on the battlefield. The metal helmets were heavy and uncomfortable. The early helmets did not have any webbing inside, but that was soon corrected with leather straps and cloth headwear that fit inside the helmet. As the helmet evolved it did a better job of protecting wearer. A heavy metal frontal peak was added to absorb some of the shock from a blow to the head. In the back they added a metal shield to cover the neck. The legionnaires recognized the need for identification on the battlefield. Once inside their suit of armor, it became difficult to identify the NCOs from the rest of the soldiers. One of the earliest methods used for identification was the plume. Plumes were usually made out of leather and horse hair. The plume was fixed to the top of the helmet by a small metal loop. The horse hair could be dyed different colors to denote unit and or rank. The length of the plume also made it distinguishable. Some were closely cropped and ran from the front of the helmet to the back. Others were longer and stood straight up from the center of the helmet similar to a pony tail.

Individual weapons of the legionnaires consisted of long and short swords, thrusting spears, javelins, and clubs. One particular type of short sword, named the "Gladius" brought about the earlier mentioned change in fighting techniques. The sword allowed the smaller Roman to react more quickly than a warrior with a long heavy sword. Of course it meant that fighting was really up close and personal. The noncommissioned officers were in charge of individual training and as is evidenced by their many victories, they must have done it rather well.

Legionnaires maintained their own personal equipment. Depending upon the type of soldier and the weapon the soldier carried, their equipment might consist of a shield or scutum, scabbards for their swords and knives, their body armor, and mess tins. The early scutums were tall and oblong in shape. They were designed to cover most of the legionnaire's body while standing or to provide total cover when kneeling behind it. The scutums were constructed out of wood and covered in hide. The edges were banded with either metal or leather. Scutums also became a way of distinguishing identity on the battlefield. As the scutums evolved colorful markings were placed on them.

Later, the Romans developed more sophisticated weapons. These weapons were the world's first pieces of artillery. The artillery gave the legionnaires some stand off distance and they were able to inflict heavy losses without closing in. Some of the artillery pieces included bows and arrows, composite or compound bows, and catapults (Simkins 34). Highly trained legionnaires using well built catapults were greatly feared on the battlefield. The catapults were capable of tossing up to 60 pounds for great distances. They were relatively accurate also. The load or ammunition often differed. Sometimes they used large stones or maybe a single heavy stone to break down the heavy wooden doors of the fortresses or crumble the sides. They were also known to use burning materials soaked in fuel.

In summary, I detailed how Rome and the Roman legions came to be and the many different similarities between today's NCOs and soldiers and those from the long ago legions of the Roman Army. The Romans developed tactics, techniques and procedures that lasted for hundreds of years. Some of their basic fighting methods are still in use, such as preparation of the battlefield using artillery and the need for some type of body armor to protect the warrior

during battle. There is no doubt that within the Roman legions the world's first noncommissioned officers were produced.

## Works Cited

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