

The American Noncommissioned Officer: 1775-1865

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In their 225 year history the United States Army's Non-commissioned Officer (NCO) Corp have established themselves as technical experts, small unit leaders, trainers and the guardians of Army standards. It is hard to draw a comparison between the NCOs of today and the NCOs of this formative time in our nation's history. The NCOs of this time drew most of their traditions and organizational structure from the old world European armies. The American NCO had a fusion of traditions to draw from. Depending on his unit of assignment and his background there was a large mix of Prussian, French, and British army NCO traditions as well as duties and responsibilities. In this European army model the NCOs mostly served as the go between between the officers and the lower; usually conscript enlisted men. The officers of the time were almost always from large aristocratic families; royalty so to speak, and never associated with the common men. The NCOs were from upper-class families but not royalty and; therefore, served as the perfect way to bridge the gap. Under this European model the NCO had little to no authority and the pinnacle of his duties was maintaining the fire discipline of his squad. It was not until Inspector General Friedrich von Steuben first standardized the NCOs duties and responsibilities at Valley Forge; during the American Revolution, with his publication of the "Blue Book" that NCOs began to increase in importance. The Blue Book described and standardized the rank structure and duties and responsibilities of corporals, sergeants, first sergeants, sergeants' majors and quartermaster sergeants.

NCOs were already common to this point in American history. During this colonial time towns, counties and states formed militias. These militias were formed and based on the structure of the European armies. NCOs were the appointed leadership of the squads that these militias were broken down into. These colonial militias started with the earliest organized

settlement of America and continued up to the point of the Revolutionary War; at that time, these colonial militias rolled into and made up the backbone of the Continental Army.

The Revolution was to be a very important time in the formation of the NCO corp. It was during this time that von Steuben would standardize the NCO's roles and responsibilities. Von Steuben; for the first time, gave the Army a written standard. This standard covered everything from rank structure and training to organizational structure and tactics. Von Steuben's work not only established and stressed the importance of the NCO Corp to the leading and organization of the Army, but would come to serve as the standard by which the United States Army would run by for some 30 years following the Revolution.

Von Steuben set forth and defined many duties and responsibilities for NCOs that before this time were unheard of. For example, the Quartermaster sergeant would be fully trained and prepared to take up the duties of the Regimental Quartermaster during his absence or in the event of his death. He would be an expert in the supervision of transport and of up loading the regiment in preparation for movement and down loading the regiment at garrison. Von Steuben's work established the duties of the First Sergeant (1SGT). The 1SGT was the main NCO charged with the discipline, motivation and duty assignment of all the soldiers assigned to their companies. The 1SGT was also charged with the maintenance of all records pertaining to these soldiers. At the time, the 1SGT would maintain record of each soldier's name, height and weight, occupation before the Army, place and date of birth. Von Steuben charged the corporals and sergeants with the training of the troops. Corporals and sergeants were the first line supervisors of the enlisted men. They were responsible for the initial and sustainment

training of all soldiers assigned to them. They designed and ran the troops training programs as well as acted as their leaders on the battlefield. It was during this time that these corporals and sergeants were to become responsible for marksmanship training. Most of the Continental Army was equipped with French made muskets that were inherently more accurate than the British muskets. The corporals and sergeants recognized that with training they could be decisively more effective on the battlefield. Throughout von Steuben's work he expressed the importance of the sergeant major. Von Steuben established the assignment of a sergeant major to every level of command from the company up through the regiment. He described the sergeant major as an expert soldier who was responsible for all the administrative duties required to run effective fighting units. Also, the sergeant major had to be a tough disciplinarian. He was charged with ensuring that the orders of the commander; whom he was attached, were completely and efficiently carried out as directed.

Von Steuben's work established the standard and duties of the NCO Corp of his time. Little of what he wrote some 200 plus years ago has changed. The Army today still recognizes the NCO Corp as the primary leaders and trainers of soldiers and sergeants majors as the experts charged with implementing the commander's guidance. These simple guidelines established during the Revolution still carry over today.

Though von Steuben's ideas about the NCO Corp may have lasted a couple of centuries his tactics, techniques and procedures would barely survive 20 years. During the war of 1812 Brigadier General (BG) Winfield Scott set to the task of reforming von Steuben's work. BG Scott would concentrate on reforming the continental tactics. The tactics of the time mainly centered

on linear warfare. Basically, troops of men would line up across from each other and shoot at each other until someone charged or someone ran away. BG Scott would concentrate on Napoleonic tactics. Napoleon was well known for his army being able to maneuver on the battlefield. His army could transition from the march to fighting very quickly and could move to reinforce or attack just as quickly. During this time of linear warfare these tactics were revolutionary and could mean quick victories over an opponent not using them. This new style of fighting would serve to enhance the roles and duties of the Army's NCO corp. BG Scott's tactics were highly mobile and required quick and effective communication; a task that fell to the NCOs. Fighting elements established color guards. The color guards were groups of NCOs responsible for signaling the maneuver units during a fight allowing for quick communication and maneuver. BG Scott's new tactics would not be proven effective until the Mexican-American war. During the long years of relative peace after the war of 1812, the NCO Corp had established themselves as a professional, disciplined Corp of expert leaders and trainers. Their professionalism and ability to apply the tactics they had trained were directly responsible for the short duration of the Mexican-American War.

During the years following the end of the Revolution and the short duration of the Mexican-American war the United States Army and the NCO Corp changed a lot. It was during this time before the Civil War that shaped the NCO Corp into professional soldiers. Because there was a lot of time for training the NCOs became expert trainers and really began to establish themselves as well disciplined professional soldiers. NCOs began to be more specialized and most would become specialists in only one or two military specialties or disciplines. The changes to the Army in general were just as great. Prior to the Civil War, BG

Scott's tactics were only just beginning to take hold, but most of the larger units in the Army still followed linear tactics. At this time there were revolutionary advancements in soldier's individual weapons as well as artillery. These things would make having a strong NCO Corp essential at the outbreak of the Civil War.

The American Civil War would become the deadliest war of its time. Weapons were more accurate and could reach greater distances. There were thousands of new volunteers to fight in the war that had never had any kind of military experience. These factors made the NCOs essential. A solid NCO Corp was needed to turn the thousands of new recruits into a fighting force as well as hold them together on the battlefield. The NCOs were the primary trainers as they had always been, but their leadership on the battlefield would become their greatest contribution to the Civil War. The NCOs were mostly professional soldiers who were each experts in their field. It would be these professional that would serve to hold together their units when things got challenging on the battlefield. NCOs would be the inspirational leaders on the battlefield as well. NCOs were always chosen to carry the unit's colors on the field of battle. The colors always lead the unit from the front and the man carrying them had to have extreme courage.

NCO's duties and responsibilities would change during this time as well. Gone were the days when the NCO would simply control his squad's rate of fire. NCOs would become leaders of small specialized groups that would often be on missions for long durations on their own. On the larger battlefield, the advancement in weaponry would cause the Army to adopt new more open and mobile tactics. The NCOs would become crucial to these tactics. The NCOs with the

colors were critical to keeping the unit together and organized as well as marking their location so the chain of command could track the progress of the fight. With the huge increase in casualties caused by the weapons advancements, NCO would be looked to on the battlefield to take charge. If an officer were killed or injured the NCO would be expected to take over his leadership responsibilities without a decrease in the unit's effectiveness.

From the time of Frederic von Steuben; who first spelled out the duties and responsibilities of Noncommissioned Officers, to the time of the Civil War; where Noncommissioned Officers truly became individual leaders and professional soldiers, the NCO Corp has grown in responsibility, established itself as Army leaders and true guardians of our nation.

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