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## **Early American Army Noncommissioned Officers**

### **Introduction**

The noncommissioned officers of today can trace their lineage back to the earliest armies in history. The noncommissioned officers of America's army were forged by the commander of the continental army, General Washington and General Von Steuben, the inspector general of Washington's army, based on their experience and knowledge gained from the English and Prussian armies. These men understood the need for a strong noncommissioned officer corps and their efforts established the training, duties, discipline, pay, and uniforms for America's first army noncommissioned officers.

### **Training**

The level of training among the military members that would make up the first American Army varied. Many had some experience with the British military. The doctrine that was being used was split along geographic lines. Training among the Colonial Militia prior to the Revolutionary War was inconsistent and often based on either *Treatise on Military Discipline* by Humphrey Bland or *A Plan of Discipline* by George Townsend. The Militia in the southern colonies based their training on *Treatise on Military Discipline* and they had clear lines of separation between the Officers and NCOs. The Northern Colonies based their training on *A Plan of Discipline*, but Officers often appointed friends or relatives to serve as NCOs (Fisher 26). In some cases the companies elected their own officers and noncommissioned officers. When General Washington

assumed command of the army in 1775 he imposed the standards similar to those used by the British regulars. General Washington wanted a clear distinction between the officers and noncommissioned officers. He felt it was paramount for everyone to know their place and that they should be punished for failure to maintain it. During the formation of the Continental Army General Washington and his staff modified their organization to include noncommissioned officers within the organization of the regimental or battalion headquarters. Noncommissioned officers were to be appointed by the regimental commander and the positions included sergeant major, a quartermaster sergeant, a drum major, and a fife major. There was always a shortage of noncommissioned officers within the Continental Army and this proved to be an on going source of concern. In 1778 General Von Steuben was appointed as the second inspector General of the Continental Army. General Von Steuben brought with him a rich Prussian military background and knowledge of English Military tradition. He used this knowledge to create a drill manual tailored to the Continental Army. This manual was popularly known as the "Blue Book" and was the first army wide standard for training, tactics, and organization. Until this time the level or extent of training a unit received was based on the knowledge of the officers in charge of the unit. General Von Steuben's goal was to create a professional noncommissioned officer corps. He viewed it as a function of the officers to train recruits and that the noncommissioned officers would be responsible for them in all aspect of military service to include sustainment training. He also felt that it was important for noncommissioned officers to know their men and to take care of them. He did caution them not to become too familiar with the soldiers.

## **Duties**

During this time period Sergeants were expected to make sure their men had their clothing, weapons, and equipment organized and in good working order. The sergeant major was responsible for tracking down the absent soldiers and making sure those that were sick made it to the hospital. The sergeant major was to be the head of the regiment's noncommissioned officers and served as the adjutant's assistant. He was to be knowledgeable of how the regiment operated, its discipline, maintenance of rosters, and formation of details. The quartermaster sergeant was to assist the regimental quartermaster and fill in during his absence. He was also responsible for oversight of the wagoners. The first sergeant was viewed as being a key figure. He was to know all of his soldiers, to maintain a fair duty roster, make a morning report to the captain each day and to be knowledgeable of everything that happened to the company. He was not to lead from the front, but to be the file closer. Serving as file closer was an important task and involved having the men keep their proper interval when on the march, maintaining silence in order for the soldiers to hear orders, encourage the soldiers, and to prevent anyone from breaking ranks unless they were severely wounded. Military engagements during this time period involved multiple ranks of soldiers standing across from each other on the battle field. They would fire into each others formations and as the ranks were depleted the noncommissioned officer, serving as file closer, would reform the soldiers or close the ranks.

### **Discipline**

Noncommissioned officers were also responsible for the behavior of their men. If a noncommissioned officer did not perform his duty he was subject to reduction in rank and punishment. The normal form of punishment consisted of receiving between 10 and 20 lashes. In one instance Sergeant James Finley was found guilty by a general court marshal for being

disrespectful. He was stripped of his weapons and other items, placed in the back of a horse drawn cart with a rope around his neck, and drummed out of the camp and out of the Army never to serve again (Fisher 29).

## **Pay**

On October 31, 1775 General Washington issued an order outlining the monthly pay for noncommissioned officers. Sergeants were to receive 48 shillings, Corporals, drums, and fifes were to receive 44 shillings. This compared to the pay of 40 shillings the privates received. In 1776 the Continental Congress increased the pay for sergeant majors, quartermaster sergeants, Drum and Fife Majors to 1 dollar a month (Fisher 30).

## **Uniforms**

The Continental Army did not have a standard uniform and this made it difficult to visibly distinguish who were officers, noncommissioned officers, and privates. The temporary solution to this problem was to have the noncommissioned officers sew a strip of red cloth on their right shoulder and for corporals to sew a green strip of cloth on their right shoulder. A more permanent solution was to have the strips of cloth replaced with white worsted knots. The quarter master was instructed to purchase white worsted knots for wear by the noncommissioned officers and corporals. The plan was to have noncommissioned officers wear white worsted knots on each soldier and for each of the corporals to wear one on the right shoulder. Until these items could be purchased a piece of white cloth would be used in its place (Fisher 30). One of the other methods that Washington wanted to use to distinguish noncommissioned officers was to equip them with a sword. The problem with this was the lack of swords available, but

eventually a small number of noncommissioned officers in each company did receive swords. There was a period of time that noncommissioned officers carried the halberd. The halberd was about the length of a modern guidon. It had an axe face on one side, a hook on the other, and a spike on the top. Soldiers who served honorably for more than three years of uninterrupted service were authorized to wear on, their left sleeve, a narrow piece of cloth and it was to be the same color as their regimental facing. An additional stripe could be added after six years of service. These were the first service stripes. The Badge of Military Merit, a purple heart with a narrow lace edge and made of silk or cloth, was awarded for unusually meritorious service. It was worn above the left breast and allowed the bearer to proceed past the sentries unchallenged. There were only three of these awarded and they were to Connecticut volunteers Sergeant Elijah Churchill, Sergeant William Brown, and Sergeant Daniel Bissell Jr. Sergeant Bissell Jr., under direct orders from General Washington, spent almost a year posing as a deserter in New York to relay information back to the Continental Army. The Badge of Military Merit, although not intended to be a badge recognizing wounds received in combat, is what we now know of as the Purple Heart (Moran 3-6).

### **Summary**

General Washington and General Von Steuben created a military that was unique to America and they understood the need to have a noncommissioned officers corps that was disciplined, responsible, and devoted to taking care of the soldiers. The standards of the first noncommissioned officers of the army are the foundation for the noncommissioned officers of today's army. The uniforms have changed, the pay has improved a little, but the duties, responsibilities, and discipline are still the foundation of the noncommissioned officer.

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