

NCOs of the American Army (1775-1865)

NCOs of the Lewis and Clark Expedition

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#313

R04

28 Feb 06

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I. Introduction.

A. References:

1. http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/LC/Explore/Army_Talk/at2.htm
2. <http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/>
3. <http://www.lewis-clark.org/>
4. Ambrose, Steven E. Undaunted Courage. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

B. The five NCOs of the Lewis and Clark expedition were vital to the western exploration's success.

II. Body.

- A. Expedition Background.
- B. The NCOs of the Expedition to include background and training.
- C. Common Duties of the NCOs.
- D. Weapons and Equipment of the Expedition
- E. Why the NCOs are National Heroes.

III. Closing.

- A. Summery: The five NCOs were critical the mission's success.
- B. Questions and Answers
- C. Concluding statement: NCOs from the formation of this country have supported the missions and officers of the Army. Without them, the United States of America would not exist as it is today.

It would have been impossible for U.S. Army officers Lewis and Clark to explore the west without the support and contributions of five special participants. The five noncommissioned officers (NCOs) of the Lewis and Clark expedition were vital in the western exploration's success. These four sergeants and one corporal helped change the history of this nation. They did this by leading small groups, training the men, handling discipline, and supporting the two officers in charge.

In order to support this premise, I will discuss the NCO's backgrounds, duties, training, weapons, and how they all became national heroes. Each of these NCOs had a different life before the expedition. Some had the Army in common. Some were farmers and woodsmen who lived off the land. Their shared experiences and their differences were equally important in their collective accomplishments. Each NCO brought important skills and experiences to this huge undertaking.

Who were these men? Sergeants Charles Floyd, Patrick Gass, John Ordway, Nathaniel Pryor, and Corporal Richard Warfington were citizen-soldiers who volunteered for this assignment. All left their families and homes to participate in history. They could not have had any idea how their efforts would affect the direction of western expansion for centuries to come.

In order to understand and appreciate the NCO's roles of the expedition, one must have some background information on the expedition itself. Westward expansion of the country is what President Jefferson wanted when he commissioned Lewis and Clark to lead a small expedition beyond the Mississippi river. Jefferson had a vision for "50 years" to have a country that went "from sea to shining sea" (Ambrose 68).

The official mission of the expedition was “for the purpose of extending the external commerce of the United States” (Ambrose 78). There were other projects to be achieved, but the explorers were looking for water routes to the Pacific Ocean. Lewis and Clark pursued scientific endeavors also. They would map, research, and catalog people, plants, animals, and places along the trek. This small exploration party succeeded amazingly. Here are the members of the Corps of Discovery.

According to the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) web page on the expedition, the two captains, Lewis and Clark, led the “38 permanent member” exploration party. Temporary members helped along the way, but primarily there were “23 privates and nine civilians who composed the corps” (The Journey of the Corps of Discovery). The civilians were fur traders, interpreters, Indians, and a slave. And finally there were the five NCOs.

Charles Floyd was one of the first who volunteered for the expedition in 1803. He was a member of the “Kentucky Nine” (The Journey of the Corps of Discovery). These men were a cluster all recruited from the same area. He was a farmer and a woodsman who could read and write. This was an important factor because Floyd kept an uninterrupted journal during the expedition until his death. He is the only person to die during the exploration and the “first U.S. soldier to die west of the Mississippi” (Ambrose 160). After Floyd’s death, Private Patrick Gass was voted to become the next sergeant.

Gass had several years of service as a soldier. The U.S. Army stated, “He belonged to a volunteer ranger unit for ten years before joining the Army in 1799” (Corps of Discovery, the US Army). His company commander refused to release him when he

volunteered for the expedition “on the grounds that he was his best noncommissioned officer.” (Ambrose 100). In addition to being an excellent soldier, Gass was a carpenter by trade. These building skills were critical during the following years when winter forts, canoes, and wagons had to be constructed. Another skill he brought to the group was literacy. His journals were the first to be published (*The Journey of the Corps of Discovery*).

John Ordway was probably the most educated sergeant on the expedition. He was a major contributor to the expedition’s success in many different areas. His service would be related to today’s First Sergeant. His responsibilities included issuing provisions, appointing guard duties, keeping all registers and records, and commanding the group during absences of Lewis and Clark. He was also instructed to keep a journal, and his descriptions about the Native American life provide a valuable historical account. He was the only one of the original sergeants to come from the regular army (*The Journey of the Corps of Discovery*).

Nathaniel Hale Pryor holds the distinction of being the only married soldier to be allowed to join the expedition (*The Journey of the Corps of Discovery*). He was one of the Kentucky 9 and was a cousin to Floyd. He had previous Army training and was called a man of character and ability by the Captains. Pryor was one of the three main squad leaders of the boat teams. He led a team of six men. He also served as presiding authority at a Courts Martial for two privates accused of drunk on duty (Ambrose 148). He was so trusted that he was often sent on missions to deal with Indian Chiefs (Ambrose 161). He saved the entire expedition one night while on guard duty. The sand bar the

party was camped on began to collapse. He woke all and they broke camp before sinking into the river.

In addition to the four sergeants, there was one other NCO on the Corps of Discovery. This was corporal Richard Warfington. He was a transfer from the Second Infantry Regiment. This corporal had a major impact on the expedition. During the expedition, Warfington's enlistment expired. Lewis and Clark asked him "not to take his official discharge, but to retain his rank and authority and command the return party to St. Louis in 1805" (The Journey of the Corps of Discovery). This mission was to return the current results of the expedition back to the president before the entire expedition was completed (Ambrose 211).

This professionalism and duty was simply a matter of daily business to the NCOs. How did the NCOs get to this level of competence? It was a combination to two factors. One factor was their lives before the expedition. The skills needed to survive during that time in history, along with Army training, contributed greatly to the NCO's abilities. The other factor was the training and preparation at the onset of the journey. The leaders had carefully selected their troops, now they had to train them.

The majority of the team's training occurred at Camp River Dubois in Illinois during the winter of 1803-1804 (Corps of Discovery, the US Army). The expedition had to camp for the winter, so the leadership used the time wisely. The officers analyzed the mission and prepared plans to support that mission. The NCOs supported that plan by executing individual and crew training.

This training consisted primarily of weapons and boat training. The NCOs were responsible for boat teams. These teams practiced river operations and drills. Load plans

were established and improved from the initial trip west. The Army observed on its web page describing the expedition that:

Clark experimented with cross-loading the keelboat and smaller pirogues, juggling the placement of food, equipment, and weapons to minimize loss of critical items in event of the inadvertent loss of one or more watercraft and also to provide for mutual defense should they become temporarily separated. The experiments were also designed to test the stability of the vessels after they were fully loaded (Corps of Discovery, the US Army).

The NCOs also conducted weapons training and marksmanship. The NCOs ensured logistics and maintenance were improved. This training and the NCOs hard work would prove vital in the years to come during the Corps' travels west and their return.

The duties and responsibilities of the NCOs of the expedition were virtually the same as today's NCOs. The Corps of Discovery NCOs were responsible for the direct supervision of the soldiers. They maintained the party's equipment, weapons, and boats. They were extremely loyal and supported the officers and the mission through incredible circumstances and adversity. The NCOs served as small team leaders by leading six-men boat teams. The NCOs served as mission multipliers by leading independent missions separate of the main party. They enforced discipline in the absence of the officers and advised the commanders on punishment (Ambrose 128). Finally, the NCOs of the expedition provided and supervised security. They executed this by building forts, hasty camps, and enforcing guard duties.

Security was also provided by the weapons of the expedition. There was a diverse collection of weapons brought for a variety of reasons. These weapons fall into

three main categories. There were the individual rifles and arms of the men. There were the large guns used on the boats. Then there were the axes and knives that were used as tools and for gifts to the Indians encountered along the journey. The majority of these weapons were procured during the early phase of the mission at Harpers Ferry (Discovering Lewis and Clark). Of interesting note is the fact that out of two years in Indian country, the expedition only fired weapons in hostility one time. This incident occurred at the two Medicine River (Ambrose 381).

That this expedition could work in peace makes this exploration more amazing. It makes the members of the expedition national heroes. Most people only recognize the captains, Lewis and Clark, but the NCOs made a definite contribution to this nation's history and destiny. One example of a grateful nation is the memorial to Sergeant Floyd. As the only member of the expedition to die during the journey, his memorial obelisk is the second largest in the United States. During the dedication in 1901, Dr. Elliot Coues said, "Every person in Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, South and North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Oregon and Washington – for the expedition passed through all these states – has an interest in the immortal achievements of these dauntless pioneers" (The Journey of the Corps of Discovery).

The five NCOs of the expedition are national heroes. These NCOs supported the Lewis and Clark expedition honorably. From their initial selection through the very end, these men were vital to the exploration's success. The careful selection of quality candidates and their subsequent training enabled the officers to complete this complicated mission with minimum personnel. The NCOs performed their duties extremely well. This served as a force multiplier for the officers. The weapons of the NCOs served to

protect and provide for the expedition. Without these NCOs, the United States of America would not exist as it is today.

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