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AMERICAN ARMIES :1795- PRESENT

The duties of the Noncommissioned officers in the American armies: 1795- present

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### Abstract

The duties of the noncommissioned officer are a time traced tradition. In this paper the researcher will review the duties of the noncommissioned officer over a period of the last two hundred years. Time tells us that as the army has evolved , so has the duties of the noncommissioned officers. This writer will look at the first duties of the noncommissioned officer from the early creation of the American army. Did the noncommissioned officer have a impact during the Spanish American war and how did Vietnam and the most recent conflicts modify or solidify NCO duties. The duties of a professional are found here, the NCO creed.

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**The early years** Rudyard Kipling famously called the Noncommissioned Officer Corps the backbone of the army. Kipling understood early on that the duties performed by these individuals were invaluable to the new armies' success. The Noncommissioned Officer as we know today is a remnant of the organizational structure of the traditional European army, especially as it existed during the Hundred Years' War. At that time, non-commissioned officers were drawn almost exclusively from the upper ranks of society and as can be expected, had far different duties than contemporary officers. It is also worth noting that there was almost no interaction between officers, who were predominately aristocrats, and the conscripted foot soldiers who came from the lower classes. Hence to this day there has been philosophies of separation of the ranks. One of the Noncommissioned Officer's role was to serve as a kind of liaison between the two groups, and to maintain order in the camp. Non-commissioned officers had almost no authority of their own, however, and during battle their duties were limited to maintaining firing discipline. Here we begin the analysis of the American Noncommissioned Officer duties from his humble roots in the European system through the important role played by the NCO Corps in the American Civil War and beyond. Early on training and tactics of NCOs were already a part of American military culture in the Jamestown colony, where the first American militia was formed. "The militia structure, in which an entire town formed a single company, emphasized the need for noncommissioned officers. The local militia quickly divided into squads, each with its own NCO, to share the burden of rotating guard duty". The colonial militias remained in existence until the time of the Revolutionary War, when they were by and large incorporated into the George Washington's Continental Army. Warfare in this period was characterized by linear tactics, in which armies would face each other in long lines and exchange fire. NCOs held the positions at the ends of the line and directed the timing of volleys. Linear tactics remained the standard until after the American Civil War. The role of the NCO was

greatly expanded under the direction of General-Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, the German who was appointed second inspector general of Washington's army in 1778. Von Steuben introduced a new rigor to the training of soldiers: This blue book as it was called gave the NCO corps the edge of organization that it had so desperately needed. . Von Steuben emphasized the importance of NCOs in implementing these new policies, writing in the Blue Book that: The Discussion of noncommissioned officers duties is an object of great importance. The order and discipline of a regiment depends so much on their behavior, that too much care cannot be taken in preferring none to that trust but those who by their merit and good conduct are entitled to it.

**Spanish American war and the Buffalo soldiers** In the American armies there were un parallel divisions among noncommissioned officers. Many of the white NCO,s treated the negro NCOs as if they could not perform there duties, but the facts showed something totally different. Two of the Regular Cavalry Regiments, the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, were the legendary "Buffalo Soldiers," African-American units formed in 1866 under a new law authorizing the creation of black cavalry and infantry units. For thirty-two years, the men of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> had fought in the Indian Wars in the west, taking part in almost 200 major and minor engagements. Indians gave the name "Buffalo Soldiers" to the men, first as a way of comparing their hair to that of the buffalo, but later as a sign of respect for their bravery and perseverance. Fourteen buffalo soldiers were awarded medals of honor, the army's highest award for bravery. The Buffalo Soldiers comprised a full 39% of the regular cavalrymen under General Wheeler's command. At the outbreak of the Spanish American War, the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalries consisted of 875 African-American soldiers. The two cavalries also included 42 officers who, by law, had to be white. Buffalo Soldiers were the first to reach the crest of San Juan Hill. Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders rushed from adjacent Kettle Hill to join the fighting on San Juan Hill after the Buffalo Soldiers were engaging Spanish forces along the crest. The turn of the twentieth

century was marked by rapidly growing racial tension and hostility. Many examples can be found of attempts to discredit the service of African-American soldiers during the Spanish American War. For example, after of the battle of San Juan Hill, Col. Roosevelt stopped two black cavalymen as they moved to the rear. Roosevelt accused the men of cowardice and ordered them, under threat of being shot, back to the front, whereupon he learned that they were under orders to get shovels and other implements to help dig fortifications for the expected Spanish counter-attack. The duties of the NCO in this period of time was limited to those of privilege. It would take many more battles and victories to demonstrate that the NCO,s duty of taking care of the soldier must be required across the board. Roosevelt apologized to the men for not believing their story and hands were shaken all around. Two months later, at the ceremony disbanding the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps Cavalry Division at Camp Wikoff, Montauk Pt, N.Y., Col. Roosevelt shook hands and said farewell to every member of the Rough Riders as well as those of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalries. **The civil war period** African American soldiers participated in every major campaign of 1864-1865 except Sherman's invasion of Georgia. The year 1864 was especially eventful for African American troops. On April 12, 1864, at Fort Pillow, Tennessee, Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest led his 2,500 men against the Union-held fortification, occupied by 292 black and 285 white soldiers. Non commissioned black soldiers were responsible for the training of all their own soldiers. African American NCO,s ensured that there counterparts had knowledge , which was generally limited to the white NCO,s. After driving in the Union pickets and giving the garrison an opportunity to surrender, Forrest's men swarmed into the fort with little difficulty and drove the Federals down the river's bluff into a deadly crossfire. Casualties were high and only sixty-two of the U.S. Colored Troops survived the fight. Many accused the Confederates of perpetuating a massacre of black troops, and the controversy continues today. The battle cry for the Negro soldier east of the Mississippi River became "Remember Fort Pillow

**World war II and Vietnam**By the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 70s the military was fully integrated and blacks soldiers were on the front lines and making a difference. African-Americans made up more than ten percent of all forces in Southeast Asia. In studies by the military, blacks were often classified as unfit for combat and were not allowed on the front lines. They were mostly given support duties, and were not allowed in units with white soldiers. That changed in 1941, when pressure from African-American civil rights leaders convinced the government to set up all-black combat units, as experiments. They were designed to see if African-American soldiers could perform military tasks on the same level as white soldiers. African Americans played a major role in Vietnam and, in the process, changed the complexion of the U.S. Armed Forces. Contrary to popular impressions, a large proportion of African American servicemen were well-trained, highly motivated professionals; some 20 received the Medal of Honor, and several became general officers. Despite the likelihood of seeing hazardous duty, they reenlisted at substantially higher rates than whites. In 1964 blacks represented less than 9 percent of all U.S. Armed Forces; by 1976 they made up more than 15 percent of all men in arms. Although the percentage of African American officers doubled between 1964 and 1976, they still accounted for less than 4 percent of the total. During Vietnam, the Noncommissioned officers were thrust into many leadership roles, which were generally held by Commissioned officers. As leader of soldiers the Non commissioned officer is responsible for the development of the soldiers he or she supervises. During the Vietnam conflict soldiers and NCOs were one in the same, as the first sergeant was killed in action, specialist and sergeants stepped up to the plate and led their soldiers through the jungles.

### **Operation Iraqi Freedom.**

As Non commissioned officers entered a new era of combat, the basic skills of leadership were called upon to lead the way. In an unconventional war, non commissioned officers were charged with training soldiers to survive in a unsure environment. Training and troop development has always been the trade mark of noncommissioned officers. During operation Iraqi freedom many of the noncommissioned officers were minorities. Unlike many of their predecessors from wars before, these soldiers were ready and able to exhibit their NCO prowess. It would be in this conflict, this global war on terror where looking out for the soldier would be the order of the day. As the army of America continues to change through its modulation transformation. The united States can count on the Noncommissioned officer, whether, black, white, red or yellow, to perform their duties with honor. From the early beginning of the NCO corp., right up to present day, the NCO will be true to his calling to train his soldiers, protect his soldiers and perform all duties that are legal in pursuit of accomplishing his/her assigned mission.

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