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L579 History of the Noncommissioned Officer

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The American Frontier Noncommissioned Officer Corps

The buzzword going around our Army today is transformation. As soldiers throughout the world accept and implement the vision of our nation's leaders, the Army is poised to meet the challenges of the 21st century. A similar condition existed just over a century ago and many of the lessons learned still apply today. Just as today, NCOs of this era made significant contributions to the advance into the future.

The US Army role changed after the Civil War. Reconstruction, westward expansion, and battles with Indians highlighted the Army's missions. As peacekeepers during Reconstruction, soldiers answered the call to help heal the wounds from the Civil War. Reconstruction ended in the 1870s and with it was the final stage of the massive draw down of active duty soldiers after the war. Politicians set the Army strength at just under 25,000 and gave enlisted soldiers a three dollar pay cut down to 13 dollars a month. The Army leadership protested the cuts to no avail and set out its next mission of protecting the frontier during westward expansion. The promise of adventure was the main strategy to bring recruits into the Army.

Reasons for joining the Army back then are as varied as they are today. Patriotic love of country and high adventure were the most noble reasons, but many less than honorable characters joined the ranks and created challenges for the leaders to deal with. There were no background checks to stop murderers, thieves, or thugs from enlisting. The discipline had to be very strict. The only form was the courts martial and it was used for every infraction. There was no non-judicial punishment. The result was a huge backlog of cases pending. Hangings and executions were common.

Enlistment in the Army was for a period of five years and the only way out other than death or injury was desertion. The desertion rate during the Interwar Years (the period just after the Civil War to the end of the century) was in the 10 to 20% range. There was no system of tracking deserters and many would join in the fall to have a place to stay for the winter. They would desert in the spring to seek fortune out west. If unsuccessful, they would join another unit in the fall and keep this up for years, if necessary. The Army caught on to this and considered branding a big D on the face of captured deserters, but failed to get political support for the idea. The Army was not popular with politicians or the American people and was almost forgotten were it not for the resistance of Indians to westward expansion.

Fighting Indians on the frontier was tough and rugged duty. NCOs were there every step of the way leading their men and carrying out the orders of their officers. New tactics for fighting Indians increased the role of NCOs. The large all out battles of the Civil War were rare. Small skirmishes over wide areas spread out the battlefield and left NCOs in charge of the fight quite frequently. While there was no shortage of officers because of the high pay and the glory they were guaranteed with success on the battlefield, NCOs were quietly evolving as the backbone of the Army. However, there was much more to Army life than fighting Indians.

Everyday life on the frontier for the NCO involved many duties associated with sustainment, such as farming, ranching, and craftsmanship. When a decision was made to establish an Army post on the frontier, materials and funds would be sent from the east. Unfortunately, due to the frugal mindset of the politicians, the supplies sent were rarely enough to complete the project to standard. The success of the project depended on the craftsmanship skills of the NCOs and soldiers of the unit. Soldiers also raised their own beef and grew crops for fresh vegetables if the climate permitted. Poor diets from lack of vegetables caused sickness in many units on the

frontier. Soldiers serving as blacksmiths were highly regarded in the unit for their skill as craftsmen and earned more monthly pay than the first sergeant.

The pay system for enlisted soldiers caused outrage among the ranks in the last part of the century. High paid officers appealed to the War Department to bring parity to the enlisted ranks and fairly compensate the NCO corps as they increased in importance to the Army. However, the politicians wouldn't budge. The reason a blacksmith could earn \$23 a month and a first sergeant only \$21 was called extra duty pay. New technology was rapidly being inserted into the Army and extra money had to be paid to keep these highly skilled workers in the force. Signal, ordnance, and quartermaster enlistees also received extra duty pay. The unwillingness of politicians to bring parity to the pay system caused some morale problems and kept desertion rates high, but most soldiers knew they had the opportunity to improve their education level and compete for NCO and officer positions if they had the ambition to do so. Unlike the up or out system in the Army today, a private could spend 20 years being a private.

The development of education in the Army rapidly increased in the last part of the century. Fueled by a tight operating budget, the Army discovered it was very cost effective to train larger numbers of soldiers the same tasks to the same standards. Schools, such as the cavalry school at Fort Riley, taught horsemanship and mounted warfare. Illiteracy was very high among enlistees along with non-English speaking immigrant soldiers. Units developed strong incentives to encourage soldiers to learn reading and writing. As better weapons and equipment were developed, and as the country became a worldwide powerhouse, smarter soldiers would be needed to operate the equipment.

As the economy started booming toward the end of the century, the politicians started to take steps to improve the quality of life in the Army. As the older soldiers neared the end of their careers in this era, many developed lasting friendships. Sergeant John B. Charlton and Captain Robert G. Carter served together in the Indian Wars and maintained a lifelong friendship until Charlton's death in 1922.

Sergeant John B. Charlton served as a shining example of the NCO corps and is one of the early reasons why NCOs are the backbone of the Army today. His memoirs include many missions he gallantly fought with Captain Carter. While Sergeant Charlton mused at the pay gap and the quality of life on the frontier for the enlisted soldier, those issues were insignificant compared to the honor he felt serving his country. After retiring from the Army, he earned a modest pension.

The retirement system during this era was 50% of basic pay along with a few other benefits. One of the benefits was the Old Soldier's Home on the east coast for old veterans unable to care for themselves. These rewards for honorable service to the country ensured that veterans would have money for food and a place to live for the rest of their lives.

The Interwar Years was a time of transformation for the Army and the NCO corps. Many changes during this period serve as a foundation for what today has become the most powerful NCO corps in the history of the world. The frontier NCO has made significant contributions to our Army. The lessons we learn from our past will help us build a strong corps for our future.

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