

Chevrons of the Noncommissioned Officer
Development and change of shape and design of the
Noncommissioned Officer chevrons over time.

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Over the past 227 years, the noncommissioned officer's rank insignia has evolved from a hodgepodge of emblems, such as feathers, sashes, epaulets, stripes, and other displays to the current stripes and arcs of today. The history of chevrons can sometimes be confusing due to the lack of official records or documents to describe the various rank insignia. The vagueness of the official records that do exist resulted in conflicting interpretations leading to a wide variety of the same rank insignia being worn by various ranks of soldiers. Noncommissioned officer (NCO) chevrons became more standard and visibly recognized with the emergence of standing armies (Emerson 27).

Since before the birth of the Continental Army, and as far back as the 9th century, NCOs received recognition as being those whose values and traditions are among the best. The NCOs were the enforcers of camp discipline and the authority figures in close contact with the troops. Chevrons, therefore, were a badge of honor and a symbol of rank worn on hats, shoulders, sleeves, or sometimes around the waist and chest (Rokats). One legend is that the chevron was presented to knights and men-at-arms in the feudal days, awarded to them for taking part in capturing a castle, town or other building. The chevron was said to resemble the roofs of these captured buildings, and it is believed this same symbol evolved to represent grade by the military (Perscom 1).

Since the earliest days of warfare, knowing who to listen to was as important as the fighting skills themselves. Soldiers had to know who shouted the orders they were to obey; therefore, the symbol of rank became extremely important. In 1775, not enough uniforms existed in the Continental Army to distinguish the officers from their men (Fisher 30). The organizational charts of the Continental Army indicated that enlisted personnel consisted mainly

of sergeants, corporals, musicians and privates. When Gen. George Washington took command of the Army at Cambridge, he ordered the designations for rank and grade for officers and NCOs. This order, issued from Headquarters at Cambridge, stated that “Sergeants may be distinguished by an Epaulette or stripe of red cloth, sewed upon the right shoulder; the Corporals by one of green.” In 1782, sergeants were authorized to wear two silk epaulettes, and corporals wore one-worsted epaulette on the right shoulder (Fisher 30).

For years, NCOs have been set apart from the rest of the soldiers by distinctive insignia from a variety of shapes and styles of rank. Chevrons sewn on the sleeves of uniforms in 1821 were with the point down. Although there was not an official direction, regulations stated that the “Chevrons will designate rank as follows: Sergeant Majors and Quartermaster Sergeants will wear one chevron of worsted braid on each arm, above the elbow. Sergeants and senior musicians wore one on each arm, below the elbow, and corporals, one on the right arm, above the elbow. They will conform in color to the button of their regiment or corps.” This regulation also indicated the first use of the arc as part of the chevron (Emerson 91).

The chevron has gone through a series of changes from 1833 to 1851, the chevron, worn in both “V” point down and (inverted V) up positions. A few years later in the 1850’s, it turned to the point down position (Emerson 42-46). In 1840, in an effort to give the NCO Corps greater prestige, the Corps adopted a distinctive sword, which remains the sword of the NCO Corps, still used in special ceremonial occasions (Arms 11). Article 1577 of the revised Regulation of 1861 stated, “The rank of Non-Commissioned Officers will be marked by chevrons upon both sleeves of the uniform coat and overcoat, above the elbow, of silk worsted binding, one-half inch wide, same color as the edgings of the coat, point down” (Perscom 2).

By 1872, the war-torn nation was returning to normal (Emerson 57). This marks the beginning of an orderly expansion of the enlisted rank insignia. The War Department published Quartermaster Clothing and Equipment Specifications. These specifications established standard manufacturing criteria for chevrons. This manufacturing technique, patented by Francis S. Johnston, completely changed the way the Army made chevrons. Heavy chain stitching used to make the chevron made them visually different from all other chevrons. The three arcs of the sergeant's chevron was made from a single piece of material, and each bar was outlined by the new heavy stitching (Emerson 29).

In 1902, the Quartermaster Clothing and Equipment Specifications regulation changed. These changes required several years to manufacture the chevrons in the quantity needed to supply the entire Army. With new chevrons came new uniforms. With the exception of the overcoat, men wore chevrons on all uniforms "V" point down midway between the elbow and shoulder. The chevrons were worn two inches above the cuff on the overcoat (Emerson 60).

At the end of the 19th century, 20 different grades of distinctive NCO chevrons existed. The changes in grade structure and the proliferation of ranks during the last 30 years of the 19th century created a need for specialists. Army leaders felt these specialists needed insignia to distinguish them from the "ordinary" soldiers (Emerson 57). Color sergeants, signal sergeants, and even lance acting hospital stewards, to name a few, got their own distinctive grades and chevron design (Emerson 29). But as the NCO grades expanded and became more complex, the addition of special NCOs posed the question as to which sergeant out-ranked the others. To determine seniority; date of rank was used, (Emerson 78) and on May 1, 1903, Army Regulation 622 made the first change from the chevron point down to (inverted V); point up (Perscom 1).

By 1916, the Army, not only changed its tactics due to improving technology and institutional structure reforms, but it was changing the rank structure of the NCO as well as the chevron design. Much of the Army's pre-World War I perceptions of the NCO was found in the tradition that the NCO "belonged" to the company commander. The NCO promotions reflected on the commander's judgment and sense of values; therefore, when an NCO transferred from one unit to another, he lost his grade. The 1920 amendment to the National Defense Act of 1916 established a completely new enlisted grade structure made up of seven grades. These grades were: Master Sergeant, 1st Sergeant or technical sergeant, staff sergeant, sergeant, and corporal. Private first class and privates made up the sixth and seventh grade. In August 1920, insignia consisted of olive drab chevrons set on dark blue background (Fisher 210).

World War II made more demands upon the NCO and had a greater impact upon the NCOs role and status more than previous conflicts in American history. The war engaged a huge proportion of the nation's manpower. This great mobilization not only increased the number of NCOs, but it also led to an inflation of the grade structure (Fisch 15). On 16 June 1942, congress established a new Pay Readjustment Act. Under this act, First Sergeants would advance to the first pay grade and they added another rocker to their chevrons. Technicians were generally selected from the various grades and shifted to either grade three, four or five and given chevrons marked with the letter "T" under their stripes. These technical grades ranked immediately below the non-technical grades had no command authority (Fisher 252). August 1948 brought more changes to the NCOs chevrons. All technical grades were now discontinued and all technicians given the same insignia of rank as their "sergeant" counterparts. However, two new types of enlisted grade insignia were established. The first type would indicate NCOs in combat or troop leading positions, who wore chevrons of dark blue with gold color background with green cloth

leadership tabs on each shoulder loop. The second new rank would indicate non-combat personnel with the chevrons being gold in color with a dark blue background (Emerson 190).

In the late 1950s, the Army discontinued these two different types of chevrons due to confusion, and they incorporated both into one design. In 1954, the Army Chief of Staff approved a plan that brought the specialist rank structure back into the Army, the design consisted of a gold eagle on an olive drab background with rank indicated by arcs above the eagle. The Military Pay Bill, effective 1 June 1958, introduced the pay grades of E8 and E9. The new grades were expected to add considerable incentive and prestige to the NCOs holding them (Fisher 307-311).

March 9, 1959, DCSPER authorized additional rockers for specialists in grades of specialist eight and nine. The enlisted rank of nine considered sergeant major, until the addition of Command sergeant major in 1968. Sergeant Major then became Staff Sergeant Major. It changed back to Sergeant Major in 1971. Specialist eight and Specialist nine existed on paper only and were never worn. Specialist eight and nine were dropped from the ranks in 1965. Specialist seven dropped from the ranks in 1975. Specialist five and Specialist six both dropped from the ranks in 1985, leaving only the Specialist four rank of today. More than twenty chevron designs have been authorized since then, with the last two changes being the addition of the SMA in 1979, and adding the eagle to the SMA insignia in 1994 (Perscom 6-8).

Noncommissioned officers earn respect and prestige by their duty performance and the manner in which they care for their soldiers. Noncommissioned officers will not be successful unless proficient in their trade, dedicated to their profession, and devoted to their duties. A noncommissioned officer's chevrons are more than a symbol of rank; the noncommissioned officer chevrons display an emblem of their way of life.

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