

Outstanding NCOs in Our History

SGM William T. Padgelek Jr.

Nonresident Sergeants Major Course

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Student # 716

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Throughout the history of our nations military there have been many American soldiers whom have deemed the title of hero. Unfortunately, this title typically goes to the commissioned officer rather than the noncommissioned officer, better known to us as the NCO. These individuals known as the “Backbone of the Army” have achieved more behind the scenes than what most people recognize them for.

Everyone is familiar with the famous Lewis and Clark Expedition that tracked more than eight thousand miles long and took over two years to complete. However, what most people do not realize is that the noncommissioned officer made a contribution to the success of Captain Lewis and Captain Clark to complete their journey. This individual named Sergeant John Ordway, was with the First Infantry Regiment and assisted Captain William Clark with training before the group departed on their expedition. Sergeant Ordway being the senior sergeant was also known as the “top-sergeant” of the expedition and maintained leadership and discipline over the troops during their adventure. On several occasions, Sergeant Ordway was left in command of the expedition in the absence of Captains Lewis and Clark. Sergeant Ordway was also appointed as a presiding officer on at least two court-martial boards used to instill military law. He issued the daily rations and provisions to each member of the expedition and set up guard rosters along with other details needed for camp life. At the end of each long day Sergeant

Ordway would document the events which occurred that day for future reference (Hogan, Wright and Fisch 59).

The Lewis and Clark Expedition was one of the most daring adventures of American History. During this adventure military training and discipline was critical for the success of the overall mission. Without the leadership of noncommissioned officers such as Sergeant John Ordway the mission would have surely failed. Noncommissioned officer leadership was an important part of the Lewis and Clark Expedition just as it is important today. This research paper will disclose the importance of the noncommissioned officer and recognize some outstanding individual NCOs in American history.

During the Civil War a young Sergeant William McKinley who later became our twenty-fifth U.S. President (1897-1901) was noted for a heroic act during a heated battle. On Sept. 17<sup>th</sup> 1862 during the Battle of Antietam, Sergeant McKinley being in charge of the Commissary Department personally and without orders to do so served every man in the entire regiment hot coffee and warm food. This alone does not seem to warrant heroic mention. However, he conducted this act while under enemy fire in one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War. Sergeant William McKinley has a monument dedicated to him for this heroic act located on the historic Antietam Battlefield. Sergeant William McKinley later rose to the rank of Major and of course became President (Famous Quartermasters 2).

Another one of our best known heroes or outstanding NCOs in American history was none other than Sergeant Alvin C. York. Alvin York was raised in a log cabin in Pall Mall, Tennessee and in 1917 he was drafted into the United States Army during World War I. York set off for Camp Gordon, Georgia for his basic training and became a member of Company G 328<sup>th</sup> Infantry attached to the All American 82<sup>nd</sup> Division (Birdwell 2).

On the morning of 8 October 1918 Corporal Alvin York was in the Argonne Forrest of France. York's battalion was approaching a German rail point when a battalion of German infantry opened up with heavy machine gun fire on the American soldiers. Corporal York was instructed to move with his platoon to flank the enemy gun emplacements. While doing so the American soldiers in York's platoon came under fire and suffered nine casualties out of the nineteen assigned to their platoon. Corporal York, who was an excellent rifleman, began to return fire into the parapet of the enemy machine gun position. As each of the German soldiers exposed their heads, Corporal York took steady aim to shoot more than a dozen enemy soldiers. Suddenly, six Germans with bayonets fixed charged from their position to attack York and the remaining Americans. Corporal York once again began to fire at the enemy with careful aim. As the enemy quickly approached he fell the oncoming soldiers with precision marksmanship from the furthest away saving the closest for last. After Corporal York extinguished all the charging Germans he turned his fire back to the well entrenched Germans who manned the remaining machine gun emplacements. While York continued firing into the enemy position, he was calling out to the enemy to surrender. Miraculously, the German battalion commander who witnessed over 20 of his men being killed by this lone soldier offered surrender to York. Corporal York's platoon now with wounded soldiers, several captured prisoners and behind enemy lines had to devise a plan to navigate back to the American positions. York organized his platoon for movement and headed in the direction of safety. While traveling they encountered more German resistance taking additional prisoners along the way. When Corporal York's platoon reached the American lines they had disabled 35 German machine gun emplacements and captured 132 prisoners.

Corporal York's outstanding heroic courage was recognized with the promotion to the rank of sergeant and awarded the Medal of Honor. The now infamous Sergeant York quickly became an American Icon. When he returned home in 1919 he was offered many endorsements from Hollywood and Broadway to exploit his achievements (Birdwell 3). However, Alvin York turned his back on fame and fortune and headed back to Tennessee where he organized educational opportunities for the youths of his mountain state.

Another Legendary noncommissioned officer who emerged during World War II was a young soldier named Audie Leon Murphy. Murphy who was born in Texas, and was actually turned down from the paratroopers and the U.S. Marines because of his small stature of 5'5" weighing only 110 lbs. Sergeant Audie Murphy served in countless engagements including battles in North Africa, Italy, Germany and Sicily. He was assigned to the 15<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division when his dauntless actions earned himself a battlefield commission (Ryan 5).

In Holtzwihr, France on Jan. 26, 1945 the newly promoted Lieutenant Murphy's platoon was viciously attacked by 250 German infantrymen along with six Panzer tanks. LT Murphy gave his men orders to maintain a defensive fighting position while he mounted a burning tank. Murphy, using a .50 cal machinegun began to fire into the advancing German forces driving them back. Although wounded by enemy fire, LT Murphy managed to kill nearly fifty enemy soldiers with his suppressing fire. The actions of Murphy allowed his men to counter attack and press the Germans out of Holtzwihr. For his display of heroic gallantry, Lieutenant Audie Murphy was awarded the Medal of Honor. Murphy is still honored as America's highest decorated soldier who has earned 33 combat medals and decorations. Many of these awards were earned more than once with achievement awarded from Belgium and France.

Sergeant Murphy's accomplishments are still being honored today by our nation's noncommissioned officers. Approximately 20 years ago, a club in Fort Hood, Texas was formed in his honor to commemorate his achievements. Today, members of this prestigious society, the Sergeant Audie Murphy Club serves as an organization for outstanding Army NCOs.

Some noncommissioned officers outstanding achievements were temporarily held top secret in order to keep that individual safe. This was the case with Army Reserve Staff Sergeant Hiroshi Miyamura. On the night of April 24, 1951 Miyamura, a machine gun squad leader of Company H, 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, 3<sup>rd</sup> division, was ordered to take 15 of his men to defend against an approaching Chinese offensive. Through the night, Miyamura and his squad defended off countless attacks from the Chinese using their heavy and light machine guns. Miyamura was credited with directing machine gun fire onto the Chinese positions while he fired his own carbine and threw grenades. Hiroshi Miyamura also fixed a bayonet to his carbine and killed at least ten of the enemy soldiers in close hand to hand combat (Pullen 2). When Miyamura's unit was about to be flooded by the advancing Chinese, Miyamura elected himself to stay behind to man a machine gun while the other men of his squad made a hasty retreat. Miyamura fired from his machine gun until he ran out of ammunition. He then began to throw grenades at the approaching enemy until he was forced to destroy his own machine gun so it would not fall into enemy hands. As Miyamura attempted to escape from his position he ran directly into an enemy soldier. The enemy soldier threw a grenade at the same time he was shot by Miyamura. The grenade exploded killing the soldier who threw it and wounding Miyamura in the leg. Miyamura's position was then over taken by Chinese forces. Miyamura attempted to play dead as the enemy invaded his location but was discovered by a Chinese soldier. Four days later, Miyamura's position was recaptured by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. Around Miyamura's machine gun

position were he last stood his ground were more than 50 dead Chinese soldiers. Miyamura's body was not among the dead American soldiers who were found at the battle indicating that he had been captured.

Miyamura was indeed captured and spent 27 months in brutal confinement. He endured starvation and no medical treatment for the first 12 months of his captivity. While in captivity Hiroshi Miyamura was promoted to the rank of sergeant and secretly awarded the Medal of Honor. When Sergeant Miyamura was released from captivity on August 20, 1953 he was told of his top secret Medal of Honor award that he had earned. It was explained to him by Brig. Gen. Ralph Osborne that the secrecy was kept due to the high amount of enemy soldiers that he had personally killed. If the enemy would have been aware of Sergeant Miyamura's actions they would have surely killed him in revenge for his heroism. Sergeant Miyamura was then promoted to the rank of Staff Sergeant and officially awarded the Medal of Honor by President Dwight Eisenhower (Pullen 3).

Noncommissioned officers have played an essential part of our nation's military history. Through decades of wars and countless battles the NCO has risen to meet the challenges of his or her duties. The noncommissioned officer has contributed to mission accomplishments along with battlefield successes. Today, many American Noncommissioned Officers are still being noted for their outstanding efforts and proving their worth among the ranks of the finest military force in the world.

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