

The history of the non-commissioned officer

[History](#)



Overview

The origin of the non commissioned officer (NCO) developed early in the country's history, actually before the country was a country. In the late 1700s the men worried about their rights of liberty and property at the hands of the English monarchy. " These advocates of ' the citizen-soldier' called on free, adult men of property to respond to their sense of duty, to their sense of political obligation, by serving for a period of time in the militia of their community. Thus military service, indeed, compulsory service in militias, was deemed appropriate under what has come to be known as the " consent" theory of government" (Karsten, 2001).

Fisher points to a difficulty in distinguishing between commissioned officers and non commissioned officers. He claims that it wasn't until the early 1700s that a distinction could be made. He argues that by the Revolutionary War period, great confidence was placed on the position of the non-commissioned officer, including the promise of some financial rewards (as high as \$80) to those who made it through each designated segment of service. However, there was still an undertone of lower status of the NCO at this particular time in American history (Fisher, 2001).

Unfortunately, not everyone felt the need to serve his country in the face of all enemies. Many founding essayists felt as if abandoning work to join in the military was an irresponsible action for husbands and sons alike. Even though the American Army had the money to pay 75, 000 men in 1776, it never got more than 37, 500 to sign up at any one time (Karsten, 2001). Thus, the picture of the non-commissioned officer was less of a concerned

and responsible citizen soldier and more of a lazy, unfocused, displaced laborer.

Between 1820 and 1850 the organization and training of these men was loose and unorganized. The enrolled men met only once or twice a year for “ militia muster and drill” as the law dictated. “ If one had ‘ the common defense of the nation’ in mind when he came to view such musters, it was quickly dispelled as the day turned from muster to picnic to drunken brawl in rather too rapid succession” (Karsten, 2001).

In addition to these men, the army also had a fair number of women. Like most armies, the Continental Army included women and even their children who “ followed the troops throughout the war, performing tasks that contributed to the soldiers’ welfare” (Rees, 1995). In 1777, Valley Forge had 400 women enlisted in its army. The number continued to rise and some units from areas closer to the coast had far more than average numbers of women (Rees, 1995).

Training and Discipline

Black describes training as “ learning war through war” (Black, 2002). Training was generally poor or non-existent because it was very difficult to amass large numbers of people in one spot, and if they were amassed, they were nearly impossible to outfit with supplies and weapons due to the lack of transportation and supporting infrastructure. The lack of training reduced the confidence of the men to fight in certain situations, especially in the open, so they often broke ranks and ran (Black, 2002)

Others disagree; Sheps and Pitcavage (1995) argue that the organization was as good as it could have possible been at that time in American history. These state organizations had extensive codes which regulated personnel selection, training, etc. These state organizations were hierarchical and geographical, sometimes electing officers and other times appointing them. Further subdivisions included brigades, regiments and companies. In some states officers were elected; in others, they were appointed by the state. The entire state was usually organized into geographical divisions which then corresponded with a military division (Sheps and Pitcavage, 1995).

In 1792, Anthony Wayne was one of the first great training generals for combat. Training and discipline gradually improved through the early 1800s. Large regiments increased confidence and better training led to more disciplined ranks. However, this training fell off in the years preceding the Civil War, and the problems recurred for both the North and the South during the war (Black, 2002).

Drills and operations slowly revived. At the beginning of the Civil War two manuals describing the duties of the NCO had been published. They were called Infantry Tactics by General Winfield Scott and Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics by Colonel William J. Hardee. According to these manuals, the NCO was to keep military cadence and direction, act as general guides and to instruct new recruits. In addition, they were to learn to give commands (Fisher, 2001)

Even extremely specific instructions began to be printed. IN addition to his two part explications on the care and cleaning of the musket, Alan Bowling

wrote the following in his report on military drills around the time of the Civil War:

“ This is not meant as a criticism of anyone but as a way of standardizing our drill practices and helping the 5th look sharp at drill as from accounts I have read the original members of the Missouri Brigade were known for their sharp drill. At our recent Spring Drill I noticed there was some confusion on conducting the inspection of arms, particularly the proper way for a soldier to give and take his musket to and from the inspecting officer or NCO.” (2006). Indeed other duties of the NCO were to make sure that all supplies, including helmets and weapons, were kept clean (Fisher, 2001).

Weapons

Early skirmishes saw the use of virtually anything as a weapon. One example is the use of the pitchfork during Shay's Rebellion in 1787. However, as more organized fighting progressed, aim and use of cover were more important than the weapons used. The musket had only one real advantage over the bow and arrow, that being that the bow and arrow was more likely to be deflected by vegetation. The musket was hard to repair due to a lack of equipment, skill and experience, and nearly all of the ammunition had to be brought from Europe (Black, 2002).

The introduction of the mass produced percussion cap of the early 1800s made the rifle a little more dependable because of the reduction of misfires. James H. Burton made an important improvement to the bullets used by these NCOs by giving it a hollow base. This bullet was less expensive, could

be locally produced and was far more accurate than earlier bullets (Black, 2002).

Developments in guns included the Union Repeating Rifle which eliminated the need to reload as often as they had to with the musket and early rifles. The Gatling gun was one of the first machine guns, but it wasn't utilized much prior to the Civil War because it ate up too much ammunition and was difficult to transport across the terrain (Black, 2002).

Formations

The early NCOs were to maintain formations that seemed more like Napoleonic warfare. The leaders were more interested in establishing positions and destruction of the opposing army no matter where they were located. They would often hesitate to use the bayonets and choose instead to fall back and fire from their muskets, which, as previously noted, were not at all accurate and forced the men to shoot, stop and reload over and over again. Even after the Repeating Rifle (AKA the Ager gun) appeared, the generals were reluctant to change their conservative ways and use them (Black, 2002).

Conclusion

The NCO is considered the backbone of the US ARMY with two responsibilities: accomplishment of the mission and the welfare of the soldiers (NCO CREED). From its history in voluntary service in the revolutionary war to its intermediary services now, the NCO has always had a vital role in American history

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