

The Continental Army

The choice of Noncommissioned officers is also an object of the greatest importance. The order and discipline of a regiment depends so much upon 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.

—Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States (1782)

By SSG David Abrams

From the beginning, all was not well with the Continental Army. Regiments were plagued by supply shortages and soldiers constantly complained about problems with pay and uniforms. When the Army was formed in 1775, most soldiers were clothed in buckskin, homespun or British uniforms left over from the earlier colonial wars. As late as July of that year, there was no standard Army-wide uniform, making it difficult to distinguish officers from NCOs and privates. As a temporary solution, Washington decreed that a strip of red cloth be sewn on the right shoulders of sergeants' uniforms. Corporals were to wear green strips of cloth on the left shoulder. It wasn't until 1782 that NCO uniforms changed to epaulets sewn on each shoulder for sergeants and on the right shoulder for corporals.

In October 1775, Washington established military pay for NCOs. Sergeants received 48 shillings per month; corporals, 44; and privates, 40. Though it's difficult to get a precise modern comparison due to the fluctuating inflation of the Revolutionary period, this equates to about eight dollars a month for the Continental NCOs. Sergeants major and quartermaster sergeants received an extra dollar as compensation for their added responsibilities. Out of this paltry salary, soldiers were also expected to purchase their own clothing and weapons.

Although the goal of Congress was to raise a force of more than 70,000 men, the peak strength of the Continental Army was 34,000 in 1777. By 1783, an estimated 232,000 soldiers had served in the Army at one time or another. Though the tables of organizations fluctuated depending on the availability of personnel, Washington nonetheless managed to establish a core of NCO leadership among the ranks.

Washington started with the raw material he inherited from the state militias. The militias had been in place in American colonies for many years, formed primarily for military emergencies.

The militias offered rudimentary military training for the colonists and depended on NCOs to provide small unit leadership. In the colonies, entire towns formed militia companies which were broken down into squads, each headed by an NCO who was usually elected to the position. It was common practice for some regi-

mental and company officers to practice nepotism by giving their sons or younger brothers NCO rank in the militia as a steppingstone to commissioned status. NCO grades in the militia varied in number from unit to unit and from region to region. In addition, there was no provision for NCOs on battalion or regimental staffs.

When Washington took command of the Continental Army in 1775, he tried to reform the militia units by standardizing their organization throughout the Army and imposing what he saw as the stricter standards of the British military system. Washington's standardized military units caused a significant increase in NCOs, whose role was to instill the stricter standards of conduct. During the remainder of the Revolutionary War's first year, Washington and his staff developed a standard table of organization, adding a noncommissioned element to each battalion and regimental staff, including a sergeant major, a quartermaster sergeant, a drum major and a fife major. By war's end, the following NCO ranks were in place: sergeant major, quartermaster sergeant, first sergeant, sergeant and corporal. Washington gave each regiment a headquarters staff and eight companies. In turn, each company had eight NCOs—four sergeants and four corporals as well as two musicians and 76 privates.

The commander-in-chief held high standards for his NCOs. He expected them to be diligent in their duty. He wrote, "Those who are found to be the least remiss will be punished. They are also to answer for the misbehavior of the men under their command."

Washington demanded the same strict disciplinary measures he'd observed among the British regulars. Consider the case of SGT James Finley, who was found guilty by court-martial for speaking disrespectfully of the Continental Army and drinking [to] GEN Gage's [a British commander] health. Finley was sentenced to be deprived of his arms and accoutrements, put in a horse cart, with a rope around his neck and drummed out of the Army—just for raising a glass to the enemy.

It wasn't long before Washington realized he had larger problems than ill-phrased toasts to deal with among the NCO Corps. In the winter of 1777-78, his army faced its darkest hours. "These are the times that try men's souls," wrote Thomas Paine after paying a visit to the Continental Army encampment at Valley Forge, PA, where both enlisted soldiers and officers often went for days without food and marched through the snow in shoes (if they were lucky enough to have shoes) with paper-thin soles. Morale hit rock-bottom among the troops who had joined to fight for independence from Great Britain. Until then, the Continental Army's main strategy was to avoid conflicts with the British redcoats, rather than actively engage the enemy.

In his book *The Winter Soldiers*, Richard M. Ketchum describes the Continental Army as a far remove from the leg-

end it would become. It was tired and hungry and ragged, fearful not about the distant future but about what the next 24 hours might produce. The army was sullen with the knowledge that it had been badly beaten every time it had gone into battle and forced to retreat after every engagement.

Disorder ran rampant among the ranks of freedom fighters as officers regularly fraternized with privates. Problems with enlistments also abounded. Most soldiers who'd signed up on short-term enlistments of three to six months were ready to quit the Army and go back to the farms they'd come

Left to right: A Virginia rifleman; a minuteman; a member of the Connecticut Governor's Foot Guard; and a member of the City-troop of Philadelphia.



from. Ammunition was running low and the soldiers smooth-bore muskets performed erratically because of poor maintenance. They had a maximum effective range of about 90 yards. On the average, infantrymen were able to load and fire only three rounds per minute. Lead and powder were in such short supply that in 1776 Benjamin Franklin actually advocated the use of bows and arrows by the Army.

However, perhaps Washington's greatest concern was the state of battle readiness.

During the winter of 1777-78, training in combat arms—which had never been more than haphazard—continued to languish. Continental soldiers may have been united by the cause for independence, but their manual of arms couldn't have been more diverse. Most were used to the rustic training of the militia's once-a-week drill on the village green. Each handled his weapon in a different way and there was little uniformity or discipline while marching in formation.

Help came from a most improbable source in the form of Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben. The adjutant in the Prussian Army came to Valley Forge as the newly-appointed inspector general of the Army on Washington's staff. Washington soon gave him the thankless task of teaching leadership to his dispirited men. The choleric foreigner who spoke little English brought with him an intimate knowledge of Prussian army regulations and traditions which he merged with the British military's way of thinking and then combined that with the tactical experience of the Continental soldiers.

In camp, Steuben emphasized maintenance of weapons. On the battlefield, NCOs were responsible for closing gaps in the battle lines caused by casualties. Officers maneuvered the units, but it was up to the NCOs to maneuver the men. When enemy fire, usually at ranges of less than 200 yards, tore holes in the ranks, it was the NCOs who prevented the military formations from deteriorating into mobs of confusion. According to Steuben, sergeants were to keep the greatest silence in the ranks, see that the men load well and quick, and take good aim. This emphasis on accurate fire marked a turning point in the NCOs' battlefield role. While British volleys remained untargeted, Americans were unique in aiming their muskets, conserving both ammunition and lives.

The result, in the words of an officer observing drill and ceremony at Valley Forge in the spring of 1778, was... "an army which grows stronger every day... There is a spirit of discipline among the troops that is better than numbers... [There is a] regularity and exactness with which they march and perform their maneuvers."

In June 1778 the Continental Army demonstrated its battle readiness at the Battle of Monmouth Court House where the rank and file stood toe to toe with their British counterparts. This was the new American Army.

Steuben's transformation of a model company at Valley Forge from ragtag farm boys and frontier sharpshooters to a strictly regimented military force was the basis for the forma-

tion of the backbone of the Army. The months of drill at Valley Forge under Steuben's close supervision gave Washington a newly disciplined force. Throughout the ages, Steuben has won the admiration of historians. In *From Lexington to Liberty*, Bruce Lancaster writes, "A new American Army was born on the bleak plateau of Valley Forge."

The War for Independence ended with the signing of the Treaty of Paris on Sept. 20, 1783. Most members of the Continental Congress believed the Army had been created only to fight the war and, now that the conflict was over, a standing military force was no longer needed. On Oct. 18, 1784, Congress disbanded the Continental Army. Lessons learned in shaping the NCO Corps—as raw and rough as it was in its infancy—remained on the books, especially in the pages of Steuben's Blue Book. In the coming years, military commanders would come to depend on the NCO Corps to provide solid leadership, born on the parade fields of Valley Forge and the battle lines of Monmouth Court House. ■

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Two NCO Leaders

There are several examples of NCOs performing heroically on the battlefield. SGT Ezra Lee distinguished himself in 1776 by attempting the first submarine attack in the history of warfare. Slipping through the waters of New York Harbor in a one-man water-tight vessel, Lee tried to pierce the bottoms of British ships. Unfortunately, the powder charges he released weren't strong enough to pierce the copper bottoms of the warships. Nonetheless, this daring NCO proved underwater warfare was possible.

Another NCO who performed above and beyond the call of duty was SGT Elijah Churchill, a 32-year-old carpenter who in 1780 led an attack against Fort Saint George, a British storehouse. Churchill and his 16 men braved a freezing storm and journeyed by whaleboat for four hours before landing behind enemy lines and eventually burning 300 tons of hay, destroying the fort, torching a British schooner and returning to American lines with 50 prisoners.

For his exemplary leadership, Churchill received the Badge of Military Merit, established by Washington in 1782 and given to enlisted men who distinguished themselves in battle. This was America's first military decoration (and the second oldest in the world, after Russia's Cross of St. George) and would

eventually be replaced by the Medal of Honor.

