

Establishing the NCO Tradition

By Dr. Robert H. Bouilly

The American Noncommissioned officer tradition began with the creation of the Continental Army in 1775 at the beginning of the American Revolution. Before 1775 there was no permanent standing Army that could be called American. The colonies had developed militias in the face of military emergencies. However, their effectiveness was so limited that Great Britain had to import British regular troops to fight the French from 1754 to 1763 in what has often been called the French and Indian War.

The militias provided rudimentary military training for the colonists. No match for trained European regular troops, the militias fared better as they provided a defense against Indians on the frontier. They depended heavily on Noncommissioned officers, as did contemporary European standing armies, but the role of a militia NCO in the colonies was broader than in Europe.

The huge social distance between the aristocratic officer corps and NCOs strictly limited the lives and prerogatives of a European NCO. The NCO's primary responsibility was to maintain the linear fighting lines of the day in the face of appalling casualties.

In the colonies, an entire town formed a militia company. The company broke down into squads—each headed by an NCO who was often elected to his post. Because of the fluid nature of Indian fighting, colonial militia NCOs had more opportunity to exercise initiative than did their European counterparts. So, the distinctive American dependence on small unit leadership by NCOs had its roots in these colonial militias.

Throughout the Revolutionary War, short enlistment periods saddled the Continental Army with a tenuous existence. The strength of George Washington's army rose and fell in wide fluctuations, virtually by the season. Washington had little faith that his army could directly confront British regular troops alone and sought instead to maintain his army intact through an avoidance of battles with major elements of the British forces. His victories at Princeton and Trenton, for example, came against only portions of the British force. Even at the decisive campaign at Yorktown, he successfully confronted the main British force only when he had substantial French help.

He understood that a major weakness of his army was its leadership—both commissioned and noncommissioned. Many of Washington's problems were solved with the arrival in 1778 of Baron Frederick von Steuben, who had been hired to help train the Continental Army [see "Continental Army," pages 10-11].

Von Steuben standardized the duties and responsibilities of NCOs in his *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*, published in 1779. The regulations, also known as the Blue Book, aided the NCO's

growth as an instructor of soldiers. It stressed NCO responsibilities of the men in garrison and in the field. The Blue Book also directed the company's senior or first sergeant to keep a company descriptive book that listed the name, age, height, place of birth and prior occupation of every enlisted man in the unit. Such books, in one form or another, were used into the early 1900s.

In battle, NCOs were responsible for closing the gaps in the battle lines caused by casualties. They were to "encourage men to silence and to fire rapidly and true." This emphasis on accurate fire may seem common today, but in the Revolutionary War, it marked a new emphasis on the NCO's battlefield role.

Consequently, American NCOs became responsible for aimed volley fire, while the British volleys remained untargeted. This emphasis on aiming by the whole force, rather than merely

pointing the musket in the general direction of the enemy, made Americans the unique infantrymen of the day. To help Americans engage the British



soldiers, Steuben also emphasized bayonet training. Under his tutelage, the Continental Army learned precision, high-speed maneuvering and flexibility on the battlefield.

NCOs also were trained to protect officers. On the battlefield, the sergeant became the "covering sergeant" who stood in the second rank immediately behind the company officer and was responsible for protecting him. He did not fire in volleys but reserved his fire to defend his captain or lieutenant.

A corporal assumed a similar guard function to protect the ensign who carried the colors. In time, the color sergeant assumed that position with an expanded guard of corporals. Each of these covering NCOs could take over for line officers in combat if the need arose.

The Blue Book established the principle that the NCO was selected by, and responsible to, the company commander upon approval of the battalion or regimental commander. This provision locked an NCO into one regiment for his entire career. Transfer in grade from one regiment to another was virtually impossible. The stripes remained with the regiment at the expense of NCO professional development.

Despite its warts, a distinctive American tradition of NCO leadership had been established and was in place for the Army of a new nation. ■

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