

Corporals

Where NCO Leadership
Begins

Corporal chevrons
consisted of two
stripes, worn
point down from 1847 to 1902

By SSG David Abrams

Talk to most corporals today about pulling rank and they might tell you they're like half-powered Supermen: faster than a speeding specialist, but not able to leap tall sergeants in a single bound. The modern corporal inhabits a kind of "no man's land" in the Noncommissioned officer chain: no longer a private, but not quite a sergeant. While the hard stripes are still hardening, so are these new NCOs.

Time was, however, when the Big "C" was *the Man* to all those privates in his squad and under his supervision. With more recognized authority, the corporal was the one-man buffer zone between the legendary Private Snuffys and Sergeant Rocks. He was the spout at the bottom of the funnel—in line units, nearly all junior enlisted soldiers channeled their grievances through the guy with two stripes on his collar. Just as the rest of the Army has transitioned from Old to New, the "taproots" of the NCO tree have also grown.

To find some of the first corporals, we have to turn back several pages in the military history books. The English adopted the rank of corporal from the French who, in turn, got it from either the Italians or the Spanish. The term *caporale* is of Italian origin; *il cabo de esquadra*, or "chief of the squad," comes from the Spanish. Corporals had been a permanent part of the military structure in the French Army since the mid-1500s where, along with sergeants, they taught daily drill in marches and countermarches. Later in that century, corporals began to appear in the ranks of the English county militia where they commanded 25-man squads.

According to Johann von Wallhausen, a professional soldier of the early 17th century, the corporal was like a *hausvater* ("father of the family") to his men, maintaining peace and friendship with his soldiers and ensuring all soldiers in the squad had ammunition and rations. In his book *Guardians of the Republic*, Ernest F. Fisher Jr. says the 17th-century corporal "became a sort of middle class in the command structure of all Western armies, both professional and militia."

In America's early years, corporals occupied similar roles in the military middle class, working as the first-line NCOs in the Continental Army. In 1813, William Duane's *Handbook for Infantry* noted that corporals were to keep duty and detail rosters, help train recruits in the manual of arms and show them how to care for arms and ammunition. At tattoo, both sergeants and corporals called the roll and posted guard.

In the era surrounding the War of 1812, the lines of autho-

riety between junior NCOs started to blur, with sergeants frequently assuming the role of squad leader, making corporals assistant squad leaders. At the time, sergeants were given the monthly salary of \$11, while corporals pocketed \$10.

Fifty years later, GEN Silas Casey's *Infantry Tactics* changed the tactical formation of Army units and gave control of the squad back to the corporal. During the Civil War, corporals served as color guards—one of the most dangerous positions on the battlefield.

In World War I, corporals often found themselves in command of their platoons after the commanders and platoon sergeants had been killed or gravely injured. For their demonstrated bravery and leadership, several corporals received Medals of Honor, including Alvin York who was with the 82nd Division when he charged an enemy gun position and took more than 120 enemy soldiers prisoner. Another contemporary corporal of York's, Frank Dillman of the 7th Division, found himself the senior NCO in his unit and later boasted, "I felt pretty important with a whole platoon on my hands."

Several decades later, during World War II, the eight-man squad increased to a 12-man squad and the squad leader was elevated to the rank of sergeant, with corporals once again serving as second fiddle in the squad structure.

These years also saw a steady inflation in the NCO ranks. In December 1941, only 20 percent of the enlisted ranks were NCOs; but by June 1945, that proportion had swelled to nearly 50 percent. In time, the power of corporals in line units lessened, even though the corporal was, in theory and by tradition, a combat leader. With so many privates receiving promotions in the European and Pacific theaters, it was a case of "corporal overload."

During both the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, the corporal found himself thrust to the front of the battle. Terrain and tactics dictated that most battles be fought through small-unit operations. As squad leaders, corporals guided their men through the treacherous battlefields.

Today, corporals may not always leap over tall sergeants in a single bound, but throughout history, the Army has needed corporals who have taken the first step up the NCO staircase of rank. Both war and peace have proved the importance of junior NCOs—the ones who tend their squads as fathers (and mothers) tend their children. ■

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