



By SSG David Abrams

With the Revolutionary War over and the Continental Army demobilized, debate raged in Congress over whether to maintain a standing regular national Army or to rely on state militias of relatively untrained soldiers.

Americans, however, had already settled the issue. As Manifest Destiny called, pioneers pushed west into the wilderness of what was later Kentucky, Ohio and Indiana—areas of the fledgling nation populated with marauding Indians and offering little in the way of supply outposts. America's new frontier needed Army troops to keep law and order for the new settlers and, in turn, Noncommissioned officers to keep law and order among the troops.

Soon after the last shot of the War for Independence was fired, Congress turned to GEN George Washington for his recommendation of the Army's future. Though he advocated the use of a militia, Washington conceded that regular troops were also indispensably necessary.

In April 1785, Congress settled the military issue by resolving that, in addition to a larger militia force, "it is necessary that a body of troops consisting of 700 officers, Noncommissioned officers and privates be raised for the term of three years....for the protection of the northwest frontiers, to defend the settlers on the land belonging to the United States from the depredations of the Indians....and for guarding the public stores."

Though the NCO's role had been broadly defined by Baron von Steuben seven years earlier in the Blue Book, status

and prestige still remained relatively low for those who wore the stripes. Under monthly pay scales established by Congress in 1785, sergeants made only one dollar more than corporals and only two more than privates.

During this period, soldiers were as poorly trained as they were paid. Attempts were made to raise a more professional force, particularly in the NCO Corps. In December 1792, Washington appointed Revolutionary War hero GEN "Mad" Anthony Wayne to command the new Legion of the United States, which combined all combat arms under one command with an actual strength of about 1,500. Wayne set high standards for the troops garrisoned in Pennsylvania, requiring drills straight out of the Blue Book and seeing to it that all soldiers were properly clothed and fed. Wayne treated NCOs with greater respect than normal. He usually disciplined NCOs with written admonishments and reductions in rank rather than with corporal punishments like floggings or even the severing of ears.

Later, the Army's ranking officer, BG James Wilkinson, attempted to maintain order among the troops at remote frontier outposts by drilling the men daily from 5 to 7 a.m., 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 4 to 6 p.m. Under the supervision of officers carrying the Blue Book, NCOs spent the workday training in tactics.

Off the parade grounds, frontier soldiers enjoyed a variety of leisurely pursuits. Contrary to stereotyped images, not all garrisoned troops spent their down-time drinking, brawling and playing cards. NCOs read books, wrote letters, tended gardens and formed drama groups that performed plays for

culture-starved audiences at the remote military forts.

Professionally, NCOs continued to advance. In the era surrounding the War of 1812, new military bibles gradually replaced the Blue Book: William Duane's *Handbook for Infantry: Containing the First Principles of Military Discipline* published in 1813 and GEN Winfield Scott's *Rules and Regulations for the Field Exercise and Maneuvers of Infantry* of 1814.

Duane's *Handbook* emphasized the administrative role of the NCO, stating that the order and good conduct of the company depended on NCOs who should be selected from among the most orderly and best qualified men. Within the company, each sergeant was in charge of a squad, seeing to the cleanliness of his men and their uniforms, arms and quarters. NCOs closely monitored the activity of the soldiers with five roll calls per day. Each morning, the sergeant prepared two copies of the morning report and gave them to the first sergeant who then kept one and passed the other to the company commander. Sergeants also prepared weekly reports on the condition of men and equipment for the regimental sergeant major.

Duane, like Steuben before him, was reluctant to give NCOs a large role in tactical training. Drill instruction remained in the hands of officers. NCOs, Duane wrote, seldom know more than to imitate what they have seen or heard of, and teach [the tactical principles] mechanically. In combat, however, NCOs continued the Revolutionary War tradition of keeping order among the men in ranks.

Based on Napoleonic tradition, Scott's *Rules* also placed battle discipline in the hands of the NCO. As Ernest F. Fisher, Jr. notes in *Guardians of the Republic*, "When units marched into battle, they moved from column onto line and maneuvered on the field of battle in rigid conformity....The senior noncommissioned officers played key roles in making these often intricate maneuvers move in an orderly fashion. Orders were given by the commanding officers, but it was the noncommissioned officer who saw to it that the ranks remained steady and the files closed up."

In 1821, Scott issued the Army's first published general regulations which established the method of appointing NCOs, their uniforms and their place in the chain of command.

At this time, the authorized strength of the Army was only about 6,000 soldiers, spread thin over the ever-increasing territory of the West (what is now the Midwest). As officers relied on NCOs to keep a watchful eye on enlisted soldiers, the ranks of sergeant major, quartermaster sergeant, sergeant and corporal earned more social prestige.

Among America's largely illiterate population, educated persons recruited into the Army were almost certain to be promoted to staff NCO ranks. Appointment of both company and regimental NCOs was in the hands of the regimental commander. However, in the case of company NCOs, regimental commanders generally gave a stamp of approval to the company commander's recommendation.

Unfortunately, NCO career opportunities were still severely more limited than those of commissioned officers.

From 1835 to World War II, no NCO or private could be transferred in grade from one regiment to another without the previous authority of the general in chief of the Army—essentially locking the NCO into his regiment for an entire military career. (One of the few exceptions to this rule was the ordnance sergeant.)

Consequently, to protect their grade, senior NCOs had little choice but to remain with the same unit throughout their military careers, Fisher writes, adding, that these men often became almost legendary figures in their respective regiments as generations of officers came and went, while the old sergeants stayed on as seemingly indestructible fixtures, held in awe by both officers and enlisted men.

Changes in military lifestyle also affected NCOs during the early part of the 19th century. In 1801, a measure was adopted requiring soldiers to wear their hair short—a move that didn't sit well with many officers and senior NCOs. One old sergeant reportedly insisted that when he died he wanted his shorn pigtail to protrude from his coffin as one last act of defiance.

With the national temperance movement in full swing in 1832, Congress proposed to replace the long-standing Army ration of liquor with a cash allowance. This was designed to reduce disciplinary problems associated with 'the devil rum.' Though President Andrew Jackson officially decreed that coffee and sugar were to be substituted for the allowance of rum, whiskey or brandy, it wasn't until the Civil War that coffee completely replaced liquor in the soldier's mess kit.

Though NCOs would put their bravery and leadership skills to the test in the Mexican War in the mid-1800s, it was in policing the frontier where they really earned their military pay (scant as it was). By the time the Plains Indians were finally subdued in 1890, the Army had fought 24 military operations officially tagged as wars, campaigns or expeditions and had engaged in nearly 1,000 armed clashes with hostile bands of Indians. To illustrate the enormity of this task, Fisher reports that the Army's 11,000 men in 1859 were stationed in 130 garrisons over three million square miles from the Canadian border to west Texas. Tactically, this scattershot dispersal meant combat took the form of small-unit operations calling for the skilled leadership of NCOs.

One of the most successful examples of this frontier conflict took place in Texas in January of 1858 when 1SG John W. Spangler, commanding a detachment of regular and state troops, encountered a war party of Comanches along a tributary of the Red River. In the battle that followed, the cavalrymen killed 14 Indians, wounded several more and captured three. In addition, the soldiers corralled 45 of the Comanche's horses. All this without a single death or serious injury to anyone under Spangler's command.

Experiences like this shaped the NCO Corps and prepared it for the upcoming trials of the Civil War. For the young nation in the 1800s, the sergeant stripes were vital to the mission of policing the frontier and protecting the Westward settlers. ■

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