

*The European Roots*

# Sergeants' Legacy

*Dates to Renaissance*

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*Sergeant*'sar-jentifr. Latin *servient, serviens, to serve*. Was used initially to designate petty or lesser officers, generally of the crown, who served in such capacities as royal falconer, huntsman or tailor.

The modern sergeants Americans have come to love or hate carry the same legacy as their predecessors from the times of the late Renaissance in Western Europe to the period of modern warfare.

The rudimentary origins of the sergeant rank are found within feudalism, the military keystone of which was the armored and mounted knight. These knights, landholders who performed military obligations in return for land tenancy, made up the warrior class of medieval Europe. Sergeants ranked just below the knight in the hierarchy and held sergeancies or lesser grants of land for which they owed military service obligations.

By the end of the 13th century the service obligations attached to sergeancy became monetary payments in lieu of service and the rank fell into disuse.

As a purely military title or rank, "sergeant" didn't reappear until the mid-15th century when the aristocratic tradition of feudal warfare began to dissolve into larger and less elite formations composed mainly of commoners—foot soldiers armed with bows and pikes.

Instead of wandering about the battlefield looking for a worthy opponent as did the aristocratic knight, each soldier now had to keep his place in ranks and fight according to a carefully rehearsed battle drill, conducted by older, more experienced men—predecessors of the sergeants and corporals of the *Landsknechte* or mercenary foot soldiers highly regarded by

the rulers of 15th- and 16th-century Europe.

Sixteenth-century military commentators made no general distinction between commissioned and Noncommissioned officers. From corporal to colonel all were described as officers of a company, battalion or regiment. A captain or colonel, however, generally was hired or 'commissioned' by a prince or by the ruling council of a city or state. He, in turn, appointed subordinates to assist him.

The practice of distinguishing between commissioned and Noncommissioned officers gradually developed over the 17th century.

Western Europe experienced a revolution in astronomy, mathematics and physics from the mid-15th century to the end of the 18th century. This scientific revolution changed



Western viewpoints and laid the groundwork for the development of modern science. However, the concurrent revolution in military arts and sciences wasn't that well known.

By the end of the 17th century modern warfare replaced the chivalric pattern of combat—heavily armed knight and horse—with well-structured and organized standing armies fighting according to clearly defined and logical principles.

Systematic discipline, stimulated by drill training became an essential tool for sergeants and corporals, while the commanding officer administered military law.

Important elements in this time of change were the development of an elaborate rank structure, the lengthening of the chain of command and the delineation of the status and role of each officer in that chain.

Sergeants, charged with instructing and drilling the troops, were also found in the French Army as early as 1485. When Francis I reorganized his army in 1543, he formed 500-man companies or bands, as they were sometimes known. A captain commanded a company with a lieutenant as assistant, an ensign who carried the colors, one sergeant, five corporals, a fifer and a drummer. Thus reorganized, the French army became a model for other countries, notably the Netherlands and England. The ranks of sergeant and corporal thereafter became permanent parts of the formal military structure.

The great turning point in military ranks and organization, however, occurred through the influence of Maurice of Nassau, Prince of Orange, military commander of the forces of the Estates of the Netherlands (1585-1625). He enjoyed the important advantage of having access to the wealth of the Dutch merchants in providing prompt and generous pay for his troops.

Prince Maurice also saw the sergeant and his corporal assistants as drillmasters. Daily drill of the troops “practiced year-round when on garrison duty and occupying spare time when on campaign and in the field,” characterized Maurice’s training principles. Drilled by sergeants and corporals, his troops could execute quickly and smoothly those marches and countermarches that increased battle effectiveness.

Parade ground commands, such as “right face,” “left face,” and “halt,” familiar to all soldiers today, had their origin with Prince Maurice. His training and organizational precepts, based on earlier Italian, Spanish and French practices, enjoyed wide circulation during his lifetime through the writings of a succession of professional soldiers.

Their writings clearly detailed the duties and functions of every officer in the military hierarchy, and it's to them that we turn to describe the developing role and status of the sergeants and corporals during the 16th and 17th centuries.

The idea of a more humane attitude on the part of officers (including sergeants and corporals) toward their men started to emerge. According to John Smythe, a professional soldier with wide experience, the ideal standard for everyone in authority—from the general to the corporal—was:

*“...to winne [sic] the love of their soldiers by taking great care of their health and safeties, as also by action in their own persons, venturing their lives in all actions*

*against the enemy [sic] amongst them, and therewith all accompanying of them in sickness and health, or wounds received, as of their own children.”*

This almost family-like relationship between officers and men applied especially to the sergeant and the corporal, who were closest to the ordinary soldiers.

The role of the sergeant as linchpin of the company was further underscored by the importance given the chief disciplinarian of the unit. Robert Barret, another contemporary (1598), wrote:

*“...in him consisteth the principal parts of the observation of military discipline....” So vital was the sergeant's role, Barret averred, that a skillful sergeant “...must read and write, be well trained in martiall [sic] matters, yea and of soe [sic] great importance that more tolerable it were that all other officers of the company and the capitaine [sic] himself to be rawe [sic] men of little experience, but the sargente [sic] not so....”*

The sergeant was also to instruct “the Drummes and Phifes their several sounds, as to how to sound a call, [to] a Troupe, [for] a march swift or slow, an alarm, a charge or a retreat.”

The sergeant also had the responsibility to appoint “those which shall work in the trenches,” meaning he had a role as unit peacemaker and disciplinarian and had to apprehend any offenders.

He also posted the watch or saw to it that the corporals did so properly. He gave the corporals “his opinions in placing the sentinels...and gave them the Word (password) with all circumspection and secrecies, as was delivered to him by the Sergeant Major.”

The sergeant was the company's main liaison with regimental headquarters through his daily contacts with the regimental sergeant major. Barret wrote that the sergeant “ought to carrie [sic] great respect unto the Sergeant Major,” carry out his orders with alacrity, spend as much time in his presence as possible and earn promotion by listening carefully to his instructions and by following his example.

That NCO, the Army sergeant, is “the backbone of the Army” Rudyard Kipling wrote about (1896) in the poem, “The Eathen.” Those “muscles and sinews of the corps”—those military professionals charged by the 17th century soldier Sir John Smythe “...to winne the love of their soldiers by taking great care of their health and safeties...as of their own children....”—those are the soldiers who continue to serve in the 20th century and on into the 21st under similar guidelines and roles of their military forbears. ■

*Fuller, Public Affairs NCOIC at USASMA, based this article on material from Guardians of the Republic, a history of the NCO Corps, written by Dr. Ernest F. Fisher Jr., and published in 1994 by Ballantine Books.*