

By L. R. Arms

TOP

Throughout American history, military leaders have viewed the first sergeant as the key to the development of a good company. The order and discipline of the troops, their care and well-being, have always been the focal point of the first sergeant's job.

During the American Revolution in 1779, Inspector General Frederick Von Steuben set forth the duties of the first sergeant in his *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of Troops of the United States*. Von Steuben instructed all first sergeants to "...be intimately acquainted with the character of every soldier of the company" and to "impress upon their minds the indispensable necessity of the strictest obedience....."

He further instructed first sergeants to maintain a company book. The company book contained the "name and description of every non-commissioned officer and soldier; his trade and occupation, the place of his birth and usual residence; where, when and for what term he was enlisted (sic); the bounty paid him, the arms, ammunition, accoutrements, clothing and necessaries delivered him, with their marks and numbers, and the times when delivered; also copies of returns, furloughs, discharges, and every casualty that happens in the company." The company book was the precursor of our modern records system.

Von Steuben viewed the first sergeant's duty in a company of soldiers as similar to the role of the adjutant at the regimental level.

The first sergeant was the senior NCO at the company level. The company commander chose the first sergeant and could dismiss him at will.

In tactical formations, the first sergeant stood directly behind the company commander. This held true for the better part of a century while companies fought in lines.

There are few clues as to changes in the duties of first sergeants after the Revolution. The 1830 *Abstract of Infantry Tactics*, for example, stated little about what the first sergeant should do. It did point out that "when promotions take place among the noncommissioned officers, the first sergeant will be required to instruct the new sergeants and corporals."

During the late 1800s and early 1900s the number of NCO ranks grew as technical innovations led to a proliferation of NCO ranks at the regimental level. The first sergeant retained his position, just above the sergeant, but a great number of NCO ranks were placed above him. This diminished the prestige of the first sergeant. Still, the first sergeant remained the senior NCO of a company.

Moss' *Noncommissioned Officer's Manual* of 1909, reflected the beginning of a revival in prestige for first sergeants. Moss devoted an entire chapter to the first sergeant's duties, listing records, reports, files and books to be kept—14 in all. The chapter begins with the statement: "It has been said that the Captain is the proprietor of the company and the First Sergeant is the foreman."

Moss' snapshot of a first sergeant's day included: "Taking reveille roll call; entering the names of sick on the Sick Re-

port, and sending the report and the sick to the hospital by a noncommissioned officer (generally the Noncommissioned Officer in Charge of Quarters); making out the morning report and the passes, getting the Company Commander to sign them and then taking them to post headquarters; forming and inspecting the guard detail and then marching it to guard mount; repairing to post headquarters at First Sergeants' Call to receive the Morning Report, the guard and fatigue details for the next day and such orders and communications as there may be for the Company Commander; making out details for the next day and making the proper entries in the Duty Roster; publishing to the company at retreat the guard and fatigue details for the following day and posting same on the company bulletin board; forming the company and calling the roll for all drills, ceremonies and other formations; exercising supervision over the official correspondence of the company, and preparing for the signature of the Company Commander all the reports and returns that are to be rendered the next day, and the discharges and final statements of men to be discharged the following day." This busy day was average for a first sergeant.

In 1920, after the First World War, NCO ranks underwent a dramatic restructuring. The Army discontinued all ranks indicating position, except that of the first sergeant. It introduced the rank of staff sergeant as an intermediate rank between the sergeant and the first sergeant. This restructuring increased the prestige of the first sergeant and placed him near the top of all NCO ranks. Now, the first sergeant equaled a technical sergeant in rank. Only the master sergeant outranked him.

On 16 June 1942, the Pay Readjustment Act established a new enlisted grade system, making the first sergeant equal to the master sergeant. The first sergeant and master sergeant shared honors as the senior NCOs of their day. Company commanders still appointed and dismissed first sergeants but first sergeants now equaled a battalion or regimental sergeant major in rank. In addition, the greater number of NCOs in the company also added to the first sergeant's prestige. The new regulations stated that the first sergeant was to be chosen from first line sergeants, not the supply, mess, or motor sergeants. The regulations made it clear that the first sergeant would be chosen for his ability to lead men.

This emphasis on leadership in subsequent regulation continued in Army Regulation 600-201, dated 20 June 1956 which established the NCO as an enlisted commander of troops. It set principles and criteria for the identification, development and recognition of the prerogatives and privilege to be accorded NCOs. A soldier's promotion was now recognized Army-wide, not just in his regiment. The custom that the "stripes stayed with the unit" passed into oblivion. For the first time, the company commander lost his ability to appoint and dismiss first sergeants on his or her own initiative.

The 1950s NCO handbook described the first sergeant's role as the maintainer of continuity. The first sergeant was expected to remain with the unit while officers came and went with regularity. He was also the company's "First Soldier" and one of the men.

A decade later on the eve of Vietnam, the NCO guidebook stated that the first sergeant "issues his orders through the platoon sergeants and others in the chain of command. He does not deal directly with the men in platoons except in emergencies." This was a change for first sergeants.

There were several reasons for distancing the first sergeant from his men. While the basic nature of the first sergeant's duties changed little with time, the structure of the company and the requirements to administer the company grew. The first sergeant became further removed from his men by the introduction of the new ranks of sergeant first class and staff sergeant. Until the late 1950s the first sergeant trained new corporals and sergeants. With the creation of the new staff sergeant and sergeant first class ranks, NCOs holding these new ranks could conduct the training.

The first sergeant no longer had the time to train junior NCOs. There were so many more of them than there used to be. From 1812 to 1939, the NCO Corps never comprised more than 23 percent of enlisted men. From 1939 to 1966, the percentage of NCOs grew until it was nearly 78 percent,

greatly increasing the number of NCOs in a company.

Seeing the need to formalize instruction for first sergeants, the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) opened the U.S. Army First Sergeant Course at the Sergeants Major Academy in 1981. In 1983, a second First Sergeant Course opened in Europe, though it eventually closed in 1989 as part of the drawdown. The First Sergeant Course is designed to train sergeants first class and master sergeants in the duties of the first sergeant position. The course of instruction brought a heightened degree of professionalism to first sergeant duties not previously available.

The first sergeant position, although constant in nature, has grown consistently in prestige since the days of Von Steuben.

Always, the first sergeant has been the key to a good company. Von Steuben expressed that importance when he instructed the company first sergeant to "consider the importance of his office; that the discipline of the company, the conduct of the men, their exactness in obeying orders, and the regularity of their manners, will in great measure depend on his vigilance." ■

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◆ The Diamond ◆

By Dr. Robert Bouilly

How do you tell who's a first sergeant? Easy. Look for the soldier with a chevron that has a hollow diamond in the center. These days the hollow yellow diamond is surmounted by three stripes above and three rockers below. Its pretty much the same in the Marine Corps except that the diamond is a solid olive drab on a red background.

Where did the diamond come from? Tough question. The 1847 Army uniform regulation decreed for the first time that first sergeants would be identified through the wearing of a hollow diamond along with rank chevrons. Ever since, the hollow diamond has been the mark of the Army first sergeant. In times past the diamond has been different colors depending on the branch of the wearer. Sometimes the diamond has been big, sometimes rather small, but always hollow. The only exception has come with the adoption of subdued pin-ons beginning in 1981. These metal insignia are so small that the diamond is solid and, of course, black as is the whole pin-on.

We don't know why the Army uniform designers chose the hollow diamond in 1847. No one sat down and wrote out a memo saying 'we chose the hollow diamond because....' We can only guess now and your guess will be as good as the next person's.

We do know that American uniform designers tended to copy current European military fashion in the first half of the 19th century—particularly the English. By the time of the

Napoleonic Wars (1800-1815) some British units had taken to showing rank designation through the use of chevrons.

This still doesn't explain the diamond. Perhaps the diamond came from the waistcoat of previous uniforms. In the Revolutionary War the long coats had a tieback system near the knee which allowed the wearer to pull back the front of the coat and fasten it to the back so marching would be easier. General Washington decreed that the reinforcements for this hook and eye system would be a red heart. (They really did pay this kind of attention to each little detail.) The British uniform was similar, and some diamond-shaped reinforcements are known.

Anyway, styles changed and the long coat of the Army uniform became more abbreviated so that there was no real need for a tie-back system for marching. Still, the uniform retained a stylized representation of the tieback on what would be called today the tail of the coat. The patch now appeared to pull up the bottom of the tail. Captain John Wool's 1813 uniform has survived and it has a diamond patch on each tail.

Styles changed again and the Army uniform did away with tails altogether in 1833. There were no diamonds anywhere on the uniform. However, in 1847 the designers brought back the diamond as the device indicating the first sergeant. Why? We don't know. Why a hollow diamond? Again we don't know. Perhaps the uniform designers were nostalgic about the diamond from the uniforms they had worn in their younger days. Whatever the reason, the hollow diamond has been around a long time now and has served the NCO Corps well. Chances are that it will remain for some time to come. ■

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