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NCO Responsibilities Grow as...

U.S. Emerges As World Power

By Douglas V. Meed

In the final decade of the 19th century the United States was poised to take its long-delayed place on the world stage as a power to be reckoned with. But if the country was ready, the diminutive Army of the republic was not.

Little more than a constabulary, the Army was spread mostly throughout the Western states in company-sized forts. In a world of rapidly growing armies frantically studying revolutions in weaponry such as machine guns, magazine rifles, long-range, breech-loading artillery pieces and smokeless powder, a congressional budget held the Army to 26,000 men, mostly infantry, cavalry and an emaciated artillery.

The major tactical dilemma American officers faced with the advent of these new weapons was how to advance across open ground against the massive firepower that a defensive force, well dug in, could bring against attackers. Well aware of the slaughters of Cold Harbor, the Wilderness, Fredricksburg and Pickett's gallant charge at Gettysburg, officers studied new tactics and formations.

Handicapped by garrison duties and administrative details that had Noncommissioned officers acting as straw bosses for everything from growing vegetables to building and rebuilding barracks and stables, there was little time for military training. Because units were scattered miles apart, large-scale maneuvers were impossible even if funds were available for such grandiose ideas.

The lack of large-unit field exercises caused the Army in 1891 to scrap its tight regimental formations where soldiers marched shoulder-to-shoulder against defensive works. Instead, it favored more innovative formations using an extended order where troops deployed in loose formations—spreading out to make more difficult targets in the face of the massive firepower of breech-loading magazine rifles.

The Army recognized that these new tactics placed a greater burden of command and control on company officers and especially on squad and platoon NCOs. As historian Perry D. Jamison wrote in his book, *Crossing the Deadly Ground: United States Army Tactics, 1865-1899*, some theorists foresaw NCOs would have greater influence over the outcome of future battles.

But the Army was well supplied for its small size, with long-service NCOs who in earlier campaigns against hostile Indian tribes learned to use more individual tactics against their wily foes. These cavalry sergeants had gained a toughness and a wealth of experience riding 40 miles a day on beans and hay against the Comanches and Apaches, while the infantry learned to survive and win battles against the Sioux and Cheyenne dog soldiers during the bitter winters on the Northwestern plains.

The combat arms also emphasized marksmanship. America began as a nation of marksmen whose prowess with the long rifle had put meat on the table and kept invaders at bay. This emphasis on individual marksmanship also used the experience of company NCOs whose training of recruits was based on combat firing at live, fleeting targets during the final days of the Indian Wars.

When the U.S. Battleship *Maine* was blown up in Havana Harbor on Feb. 15, 1898, and the country went to war with Spain, the American Army wasn't large, but what there was of it was tough.

Historian Jamison wrote: "The Spanish War also seemed to bear out the expectation that NCOs, as well as junior officers, would have to assume greater initiative."

This expectation proved to be true according to official reports. BG Arthur MacArthur, father of the celebrated Douglas, gave generous praise to SGT Dennis Mahoney who took a squad out on a long and dangerous scout of the Spanish defensive positions around Manila, bringing back vital information.

Rough Riders attack fortifications in Santiago, Cuba.

Sergeants Andrew J. Gaughron, Winfield Harper, Lindzy E. Cheatham and David J. Sullivan received praise by one officer for commanding platoons of 40 men during the course of combat operations. Other sergeants were commended in dispatches for conducting reconnaissance patrols and mapping the rugged terrain, while their fellow NCOs supervised work parties that carved trails and built bridges, enabling field guns to be brought into action during the advance on Manila.

Although victorious, the Army learned some hard lessons in the Cuban and Philippine campaigns. Losing more casualties from typhoid, malaria, yellow fever and other diseases than from combat,

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the Army initiated research into the causes of tropical fevers. It also improved field hygiene and sanitation for both the Army and the occupied territories. The responsibility for enforcing the new regulations fell upon the hard-working NCOs.

The Army went further and added a cook with the rank of corporal to the roll of each company.

From then on, a more healthy U.S. Army was never again to suffer massive casualties from disease and improperly prepared meals.

The fight against Philippine guerrillas from 1899-1902, and in 1900 the expedition against the Boxer insurgents in China, were mostly small-unit actions that again tested the mettle of small unit commanders. During those deadly little battles and skirmishes, it was the war-hardened NCOs who formed the military backbone around which the inexperienced troops could rally and defeat their opponents.

As the fighting eased, shortly after the turn of the century, the Army faced new challenges from a rapidly evolving technology. The development of telephones, electrical innovations and the internal combustion engine meant that many new skills had to be taught and a cadre of specialists had to be developed to keep the Army up to date.

Keeping those new NCO specialists with their highly marketable skills needed in a fast industrializing and urbanizing society became increasingly difficult. Industrial wages had increased while Army pay had remained unchanged since 1870. The Army saw too many of its highly trained and disciplined NCOs lured away from the service by high-paying civilian jobs.

The situation became so grave that in 1907 Secretary of War, later to be president, William Howward Taft reported to Congress: "Once competent NCOs are secured—their retention as long as physically fit for their duties works for efficiency, provided that a reasonable flow of promotions be maintained. Just as in the old Army no cause contributed more to the standard reached than the high class of NCOs developed, so now no cause has contributed more toward demoralization than the inability under existing conditions to secure qualified men for these grades, or to retain them when secured...

"The Noncommissioned officers are men who in civilian life would be skilled workmen, foremen, chief clerks and subordinate officers. If the Army cannot offer them inducement equal to those that civil institutions are glad to offer it cannot hope to secure or retain them."

Recognizing the absolute necessity for keeping experienced NCOs in the ranks, the Congress set Army pay with the Appropriations Bill of 1908. While it still didn't bring Army pay up to civilian standards, the increases were large enough to satisfy most of the hard-core NCOs. And it was these hardened, experienced men who, two decades later, would mold a mass of untrained civilians into an Army that would go into combat in France in 1917 and 1918 and defeat the Kaiser's army. ■

Meed, who served as an NCO in WWII, holds a master's degree in history. The El Paso-based free-lance writer is the author of a number of history books on the Southwest.