

The American Revolution and the NCO Tradition

By Dr. Robert H. Bouilly

The American noncommissioned officer tradition began with creation of the Continental Army in 1775 at the beginning of the American Revolution. Before 1775 there was no permanent standing Army which could be called American. The colonies had developed militias in the face of military emergencies. However, their effectiveness was so limited that Great Britain had to import British regular troops to fight the French from 1754 to 1763 in what has often been called the French and Indian War.

The militias provided rudimentary military training for the colonists. No match for trained European regular troops, the militias fared better in providing a defense against Indians on the frontier. They depended heavily on non-commissioned officers, as did contemporary European standing armies, but the role of a militia noncommissioned officer in the colonies was broader than in Europe.

The huge social distance between the aristocratic officer corps and the NCOs strictly limited the lives and prerogatives of a European NCO. The NCO's primary responsibility was to maintain the linear fighting lines of the day in the face of appalling casualties.

In the colonies, an entire town formed a militia company. The company broke down into squads — each headed by an NCO. Many NCOs were elected to their posts. Because of the fluid nature of

Indian fighting, colonial militia NCOs had more opportunity to exercise initiative than did their European counterparts. So, the distinctive American dependence on small unit leadership by NCOs had its roots in these colonial militia.

Throughout the Revolutionary War, short enlistment periods saddled the Continental Army with a tenuous existence. The strength of George Washington's army rose and fell in wide fluctuations, virtually by the season. Washington had little faith that his army could directly confront British regular troops alone and sought instead to maintain his army intact through an avoidance of battles with major elements of the British forces. His victories at Princeton and Trenton, for example, came against only portions of the British Force. Even at the decisive campaign at Yorktown, he successfully confronted the main British Force only when he had substantial French help.

Washington firmly knew that his army lacked the military skill and toughness of his British regular army opponent. He understood that a major weakness of the Continental Army was its leadership — both commissioned and noncommissioned. An exception to this rather dour assessment was the appearance of Baron Frederick William von Steuben at Valley Forge in the winter of 1778. Steuben was a Prussian volunteer of shadowy background. His claim to the title Baron and to the aristocratic "von" in his name cannot be substantiated. He possibly

made it up. Despite these pretensions, he possessed considerable military skill gained through service in Frederick the Great's premier European Army during the Seven Years War. Steuben became General Washington's best disciplinarian and trainer of troops.

Washington badly needed more officers like Steuben but had to settle for less talented leadership in most cases.

Baron von Steuben's legacy is twofold. He had a direct impact on the fighting efficiency of Washington's army during the American Revolutionary War. Steuben was sensitive to the problem of adjusting European discipline and training to American conditions. When he began to train the Continental Army, he did not translate Prussian discipline and tactics literally. He attempted to incorporate American tactical experience into his system. The Baron himself often worked as a drill sergeant as he introduced his system of minor tactics to a model company of officers. Then he dispatched the company to transmit his lessons through widening circles of the Army. It was Steuben who developed standardized training battalions separate from the regiments and it was the training battalions which allowed the Continental Army to maneuver with calculable results. Steuben also increased the army's ability to deploy by changing the practice of marching single file to marching in columns of four.

Baron von Steuben's influence also extended beyond the war through his

Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States, published in 1779. General Washington directed that the book be adopted as the basic training guide for his Army. This little **Blue Book** standardized NCO duties and responsibilities and became the primary regulation for the Army for 33 years. The **Blue Book** set down the duties and responsibilities for corporals, sergeants, first sergeants, quartermaster sergeants, and sergeants major which were the NCO ranks at that time. It emphasized the need to select quality soldiers for NCO positions.

The **Blue Book** aided the NCO's growth as an instructor of soldiers. It covered all aspects of infantry service and stressed NCO responsibilities for the care, discipline and training of the men in garrison and in the field. Steuben stressed these responsibilities because he considered their general absence in the Continental Army to be weakness. The **Blue Book** also directed the company's senior, or first sergeant to keep a company descriptive book. The descriptive book listed the name, age, height, place of birth, and prior occupation of every enlisted man in the unit. Such books, in one form or another, were used into the early 1900s.

The duties of other NCOs were also established. Sergeants and corporals were expected to inspect recruits in all matters of military training, including neatness and sanitation. A listing of the sick was to be forwarded to the first sergeant and those responsible for disturbances were to be punished.

The duty of the quartermaster sergeant was to assist the regimental quartermaster and to assume his duties when the regimental quartermaster was gone. The quartermaster sergeant also supervised the proper loading and transport of regimental baggage when in march. The sergeant major served as the assistant to the regimental adjutant. He formed details, kept rosters, and handled matters concerning the "interior management and discipline of the regiment."

In battle, NCOs were responsible for



More accurate weapons made NCOs responsible for aimed volley fire.

closing the gaps in the battle lines caused by casualties. They were to "encourage men to silence and to fire rapidly and true." This emphasis on accurate fire may seem common today, but in the Revolutionary War, it marked a new emphasis on the noncommissioned officer's battlefield role.

Consequently, American NCOs became responsible for aimed volley fire, while the British volleys remained untargeted. This emphasis on aiming by the whole force, rather than merely pointing the musket in the general direction of the enemy, made Americans unique among the infantrymen of the day. To help Americans engage British soldiers, Steuben also emphasized bayonet training. Under his tutelage, the Continental Army learned precision, high-speed maneuvering and flexibility on the battlefield.

NCOs also were trained as leaders. On the battlefield, the sergeant became the "covering sergeant" who stood in the second rank immediately behind the company officer and was responsible for protecting him. He did not fire in volleys but reserved his fire to defend his captain or lieutenant.

A corporal assumed a similar guard function to protect the ensign who carried the colors. In time, the color sergeant assumed that position with an

expanded guard of corporals. Each of these covering NCOs could take over for line officers in combat if the need arose.

The **Blue Book** established the principle that the noncommissioned officer was selected by, and responsible to, the company commander upon approval of the battalion or regimental commander. This provision locked a noncommissioned officer into one regiment for his entire career. Transfer in grade from one regiment to another was virtually impossible. The stripes remained with the regiment at the expense of NCO professional development.

Despite its warts, the Continental Army, with the help of the French, prevailed over the British at Yorktown and the colonies gained their independence. Without an enemy to fight, the Continental Army began to rapidly dissolve. By 1784, the Army consisted of just 70 men. Even so, a distinctive American tradition of NCO leadership had been established. Begun in the colonial militia, developed during the Revolutionary War, and codified in Baron von Steuben's **Blue Book**, the distinctive NCO tradition was in place for the Army of a new nation. ■

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