

The halberd:

A symbol of NCO authority

By Sgt. Samuel J. Phillips

Throughout history, weapons have changed the course of battle and forced armies to adapt. One such weapon introduced in the 1400s was the halberd, a fearsome looking weapon that combined a battle ax with a hook — topped with a spearhead — all on a 6- to 7-foot wooden shaft.

Just by looking at the massive two-handed weapon, one can imagine the possibilities of its use. The ax allowed halberdiers to hack through their opponents with such force that they could sever limbs and cut through even the toughest armor. With the hook, wielders could drag their enemies off their saddles. The spear rounded out the weapon: It allowed the halberdiers to perform thrust attacks and, when braced on the ground, provided additional defense from cavalry charges.

In the 1400s, the halberd helped bring an end to the days of the mounted knight and heralded the era of the infantry.

These infantry formations required considerable training to be effective on the battlefield, said Larry R. Arms, curator of the U.S. Army Museum of the Noncommissioned Officer located at Fort Bliss, Texas. The Swiss were perfect examples of this, combining halberdiers with pikemen — men armed with 10- to 25-foot-long wooden poles topped with either an iron or steel spearhead — to create a versatile fighting force.

“Each man had to be thoroughly drilled in the use of the pike or halberd, and had to keep his place in formation to take advantage of the element of mass,” Arms said.

To conduct the required drills and instill the proper discipline, older Swiss soldiers trained new recruits in maneuvers to strike, cleave and take down a mounted opponent. Those older, more experienced soldiers became the predecessors of the modern day corporal and sergeant.

“After the Swiss pikemen and halberdiers repeatedly defeated superior numbers of Austrian knights in battle after battle, their fame and the use of the halberd spread quickly to other nations,” Arms said.

For centuries, the halberd held its dominance on the battlefield. Then in the 1600s, when muskets came into use, halberdiers found themselves increasingly vulnerable to enemy gunfire. Eventually, the halberd declined in use, but at least one major



Image courtesy of the Center of Military History

“To Range the Woods,” by Spc. Manuel B. Ablaza, depicts rangers, including a colonial sergeant (left) preparing to set off on a scouting mission for the British regulars trying to capture Canada from the French in 1760.

lesson was learned from the days when it was popular — a well-trained and orderly force is far more effective than a larger but disorganized force. The need for adequate training and discipline became readily apparent, Arms said.

However, the halberd did not disappear entirely. It became a symbol of authority within both the British and colonial armies, Arms said. In 1755, “An Act for the better regulation and training

the Militia” in Virginia required both corporals and sergeants to be armed with a cutting sword and a halberd.

“Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, author of the Revolutionary War ‘Blue Book,’ which served as the standard United States drill manual until the War of 1812, said that the musket required too many movements to fire and would interfere with the duties of the noncommissioned officers,” said Jeff Davis, director of plans and operations at the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy at Fort Bliss.

The halberds were also used to locate sergeants quickly. In camp, all Soldiers would have to do is look for a halberd posted outside of a tent and that told them that their sergeant was inside. On the battlefield, Soldiers could locate their sergeants simply by scanning their surroundings for the massive two-handed axes, Davis said. But, over time, this symbol faded from use as combat weapons continued to evolve.

On June 13, in keeping with the Army’s “back to the basics” movement, USASMA decided to resurrect this centuries-old symbol of NCO authority. It was the academy’s unique situation — the fact that, since 2009, the position of commandant has been held by a command sergeant major — that led to this decision, said Sgt. Maj. Joseph D. Camacho, the assistant operations sergeant major at USASMA.

“Considering that [the commandant] is an NCO, the passing of the colors — the traditional ceremony held to symbolize the transfer of authority from one commanding officer to another — didn’t adequately represent his role within the academy.”

“It was the natural choice,” Camacho said. “The halberd has already played such a big role in the NCO Corps, it only seems fitting that it will once again represent the authority of noncommissioned officers.”

“We, the Sergeants Major Academy, wanted to have a historic icon or emblem that is specific or unique to the Noncommissioned Officer Corps,” Davis said.

Sgt. Maj. Junella Manglona, the operations sergeant major at USASMA, said the academy first looked at using a spontoon, a type of European lance that was used alongside the pike and halberd. But, after more research, the halberd was found to be more fitting of an NCO, as the spontoon was traditionally an officer’s weapon, she said.

“The next step was to do more research,” Manglona said. “There are a lot of different halberds out there. We wanted to find the style that was used by the colonial Army. Then, we had to find somewhere to buy it.”

That search led them to a vendor specializing in



Photo by Mikie Perkins

Staff Sgt. John P. Massaro, a Warrior Leader Course instructor at the Fort Bliss NCO Academy, dressed in a Revolutionary War uniform, presents the halberd to Command Sgt. Maj. Wesley Weygandt, deputy commandant of USASMA, as part of a change of command ceremony June 13. USASMA used the halberd in place of the unit’s colors to better represent the unique authority held by its commandant, Command Sgt. Maj. Rory L. Malloy.

muzzle-loading guns, kits, parts, accouterments, rendezvous gear and primitive Americana. There, the academy purchased a Revolutionary War-era halberd, a style carried by both British and American sergeants.

USASMA is trying to set a precedent by adopting the halberd. “It is our goal to have the halberd incorporated at each of the NCO academies,” Davis said.

There is currently no drill, standard or regulation that covers the use of the halberd, Davis said. However, USASMA, in conjunction with the Institute of NCO Professional Development at U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command headquarters, will be at the forefront of developing any formal documentation on its use. 📄

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