

## NCO History Pt. 1: American Revolution Compiled by Staff Sgt. Jarod Perkioniemi

The history of the U.S. Army noncommissioned officer dates back to 1775 with the birth of the Continental Army.

Like the Army itself, the NCO Corps did not copy the fundamental roles of just the British Army; instead it blended traditions of the British, French and Prussian armies to create its own unique institution.

As the American political system progressed over the years, the NCO Corps continually distinguished itself from its European counterparts as well.

In 1778, at Valley Forge, Inspector General Friedrich von Steuben, a Prussian-German Army Officer, standardized NCO duties and responsibilities for the Continental Army NCO Corps.

Before this, there was very little standardization in what the true role of the NCO was in the new Continental Army.

In his publication, *“Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States,”* commonly called the “Blue Book,” Von Steuben set forth the duties and responsibilities of the NCO ranks at that time.

There were five NCO ranks: corporal, sergeant, first sergeant, quartermaster sergeant and sergeant major. When Von Steuben wrote his publication, which was printed in 1779, it became the primary regulation for the Army for the next 30 years.

Von Steuben was the first to refer to the NCO Corps as the “backbone” of the Army and his regulation established the centerpiece for NCO duties and responsibilities from 1778 to the present.

The development of the NCO Corps helped sustain the Continental Army through severe hardship towards finally achieving independence in 1783.

It was customary during battles that NCOs were to “fire rapidly and true”, while also close gaps created by casualties.

NCOs were also responsible for keeping men silent during night missions, while leading them through the terrain.

This was a key factor during the Battle of Stony Point, where the bayonet training received from Von Steuben played a critical role in the charge to capture the fort from the British.

NCOs wore an epaulet, a French word meaning “little shoulder,” to signify their rank.

Sergeants wore red epaulets while corporals wore green. It was in 1779 that sergeants began to wear two epaulets while corporals retained their single epaulet.

It was not uncommon that a Soldier would often spend their entire career within the same regiment.

If a Soldier were to change regiments, he would not take his rank with him; the stripes remained with the regiment.

At that time, all promotions that a Soldier received came directly from the regimental commander.

No NCO could transfer in grade from one regiment to the other without the permission of the General in Chief of the Army, who was the Commanding General of the U.S. Army, which was rarely done.

During the American Revolutionary War, historians indicate that only three Soldiers were awarded the Badge of Military Merit for their acts of heroism. All of them were NCOs and received the award from Gen. George Washington himself.

The Badge of Military Merit was a purple heart with a floral border and the word “merit” inscribed across the center. The badge is the predecessor to both the Medal of Honor, which was first awarded during the Civil War, and the Purple Heart, which was first awarded in 1927. After the American Revolutionary War, the award faded from use, though it was never abolished. The award of the badge was not recommended again until after World War I.

In the years following the American Revolution, many changes and additions were made to the NCO ranks leading up to the War of 1812 and the Mexican-American War in 1846.