

NCO History Pt. 3: Civil War

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After the Mexican-American War, noncommissioned officers found themselves leading small units into the new frontier to defend settlements against Indian raids and set up in the newly gained land out west.

In 1849, a young man named Percival Lowe enlisted into the U.S. Army's elite Dragoon unit. Lowe use his knowledge of the land and equestrian skills to immediately make an impact in his unit. Lowe would achieve the rank of first sergeant in just over two years.

In 1853, Lowe, along with other NCOs in his company, established the "company court martial." It was not yet recognized by the Army, but this was the first time that NCOs could enforce discipline in their Soldiers for breaking regulations without dealing with lengthy proceedings.

During the 1850s, changes in the chevron and epaulet continued to occur. After declaring in 1847 that the chevron would be worn in the inverted "V" position, it was changed to point down, where it remained until the regulations of 1902. The epaulet became acceptable to wear in dress uniform but was not permitted with the normal duty uniform.

Major changes to U.S. weaponry occurred in the 1850s that added greatly to the fire power and accuracy of the weapons being used by Soldiers.

The Sharps Carbine and Joslyn Rifle, which both used breech loading, added a new dimension of training for Soldiers. NCOs again took the lead ensuring that all Soldiers in the unit were trained and capable to fire the weapons quickly and accurately.

In April 1861, the leadership skills learned from fighting in the Mexican-American War and defending the new frontier from Indian attacks, along with training new Soldiers in advanced weapons and equestrian skills, came full circle for NCOs as cannons under confederate flags opened fire on Fort Sumter, S.C., officially beginning the Civil War.

NCOs would be called on not only to lead the lines of skirmishers, but also carry the flags and regimental colors of their units. In order for commanders to define the locations of their units on the field, NCOs were charged with this dangerous and deadly task to ensure the units proper placement and direction.

As the war progressed, new tactical and organizational changes occurred along with developing technology in the form of railroads, telegraph communications, steam ships and other innovations that would affect the ranks of the NCO.

Technical jobs, in the form of ordnance, sappers and hospital stewards, would now receive a higher pay, even if they were not of the same rank, than those who were in tactical jobs.

The use of more open battlefield formations further enhanced the tactical combat leadership for of the NCO. The NCO took on multiple tasks on the battlefield at a higher rate than in any previous war.

In mid September 1862, the tactical proficiency of the NCO was pushed to the limit as the Battle at Antietam raged in Maryland. An entire day of attack and counterattacks from both the Union and Confederate Armies resulted in the single bloodiest day in American Military history, with an estimated 23,000 men losing their lives.

The Civil War continued to incorporate different racial and ethnic groups into the Army, not as individuals but entire units. After the war, ethnic units discontinued but the trend of racial units would continue into the Indian Wars, most famous being the “Buffalo Soldiers” of the Cavalry Regiments.

Four years after the war broke out in South Carolina, 600,000 American’s paid the ultimate price for freedom, the war ended in April 1865 with Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendering his army to Gen. Ulysses S. Grant in Virginia.

With the Civil War behind, the NCO again looked for opportunities to further training and education across the Army.

The NCO would have to do this while battling constant engagements with Native Americans during the Indian Wars of the 1870s-1890s leading into the Spanish-American War in 1898.