

NCO History Pt. 5: World War I

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In June 1914, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, was assassinated; an event that many attribute as one of the main underlining moments that led to what would be known as “The War to End All Wars,” World War I.

Not initially becoming involved in the war itself, the U.S. wasted no time in preparing itself for the possibility of joining the Entente Powers in their struggle against the Central Powers.

Noncommissioned officers, specifically corporals, who were the primary trainers at the time, began training Soldiers in what would be the first massive training of men the U.S. had ever seen. By the time the war ended in 1918, NCOs had trained 4 million men, of which 1 million were sent overseas.

In addition to the standard training emphasizing land navigation, weapon familiarization and tactical maneuvers, NCOs spent numerous hours teaching the proper wear and use of the gas masks, which in turn included multiple trips into the gas chamber.

World War I forced NCOs to use and teach new tactics, as gas warfare became a prominent method of attack by both sides in the war. The war also introduced the use of trenches, which not only protected Soldiers from enemy fire, but also connected the front and rear lines allowing wounded to be transported on and off the line, along with supplies.

In 1917, the U.S. declared war on Germany, officially bringing them into World War I. By the summer of 1918, the U.S. was sending 10,000 troops a day into France to fight alongside its allies.

In June 1918, the 2d Division made the first offensive maneuver by an American division at the villages of Bovesches and Vaux, France. It was a costly offensive, with 9,777 casualties, but helped stop the German offensive and brought a new moral boost to the Entente Powers.

The war ended in July 1919 with the signing of various treaties, the most famous being the Treaty of Versailles, which helped redraw the European map after all of the Central Powers lost land and several new countries were created.

After the war, the NCO Corps underwent major changes including a reorganization of ranks, the introduction of technical ranks, massive demotions and enlisted men being pushed out as the Army tried to reduce its numbers.

In 1922, the Army, in an attempt to reduce the force and save money, scheduled the reduction of rank for 1,600 NCOs. Also, with entire units being disbanded, Soldiers who had been promoted within the regiment were not allowed to take their rank with them to the new unit, instead the Soldier went back to the rank of private. It wasn't until 1940 that enlisted Soldiers would be able to retain their stripes if they transferred from one unit to another.

An example of this radical shift is the record of Alexander Loungeway who served 32 years of service. Loungeway, who enlisted into the Army in 1908, rose through the enlisted ranks and was then promoted to first lieutenant during World War I. He was reverted to a first sergeant after the war, only to be then reduced again to sergeant, then corporal before dropping all the way to private first class. A year before his retirement he was promoted back to corporal.

In the 1930s, technicians were created in the army, which wore chevrons marked with a “T.” The slots were created in the corporal, sergeant and staff sergeant grades. This new created grade

increased promotions in the technical career fields. In addition, there were also 231 vocational skills that could add \$3 to \$35 to a Soldier's pay.

With the Great Depression affecting the entire nation, NCOs dealt with the potential of not only being demoted or pushed out of the Army, but also only receiving half his pay or consumer goods and food.

Desertion again became a problem in the Army and NCOs would be counted on to combat against it, as they themselves felt the pressure of staying in the Army.

During the late 1930s, NCOs fought to keep their rank and place in the Army, while training Soldiers unique tactics learned from fighting in World War I, all the while watching new conflicts arise across Europe.

The NCO Corps and the entire nation would be drawn back into war on Dec. 7, 1941, "A date which will live in infamy," as quoted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, officially bringing the U.S. into World War II.