**History of the NCO 1700: Valley Forge**

After a disappointing fall campaign that ended with a British Army occupying Philadelphia, George Washington cast about for winter quarters for his troops. He found a site among the thickly wooded hills around Valley Forge. The American camp lay somewhat to the north but within easy striking distance of the main road from Philadelphia to York, where the Continental Congress had taken refuge. This allowed his army to provide protection for the revolution’s governing body. Valley Forge lay in a rich agricultural region that the contending armies had picked over extensively during the previous years. (Stewart, R. W., (Ed.). (2009). *American Military History Volume I, The United States Army Forging of a Nation, 1775 – 1917*. Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History.)

When the 12,000 poorly fed, ill-equipped Continentals, weary from long marches, had staggered into Valley Forge, only about one in three had shoes, and many of their feet had left bloody footprints from the marching. Blankets were scarce; at one point these shortages caused nearly four-thousand men to be listed as unfit for duty. Many Soldiers wounded in previous battles died not from the injuries they sustained, but rather from exposure. In fact, disease, malnutrition and exposure claimed 2,500 Soldiers by the end of the winter.

An inspection of the camp grounds found that Soldiers were living in crowded, damp quarters, with no standardized arrangement of tents or sanitation standards. Men relieved themselves where they wished and when an animal died, it was stripped of its meat and the rest was left to rot where it lay. Needless to say, the Army was ravaged by sickness.

Not only were supplies non-existent but morale was at its lowest. For many that did not succumb to cold, hunger, or disease desertion was their final means of survival. Desperate to keep the Army intact, Washington tried to stem desertion by resorting to lashings as punishment and then threatening to shoot deserters on sight. Fear of starvation was not the only compelling motive for desertion. Wages for American Soldiers had never been good; during the Revolution in particular, the families of Soldiers often found themselves going from door to door begging for basic necessities. In addition, administrative issues led to further demoralization. An NCO could not transfer from the regiment that had accepted his enlistment to another and retain his grade. Coupled with this was the practice of placing recruits in a unit before they had received training. It is no surprise that desertion was a daily occurrence.

The American public, along with Congress, began to criticize Washington for his inability to advance the war effort. Washington himself was painfully aware of the shortcomings of his makeshift Army. Their single file tactics and amalgamation of drills and maneuvers had been the source of confusion and peril on certain occasions. Washington had done his best to establish order at Valley Forge. Nevertheless, so severe were conditions that Washington despaired that “unless some great and capital change suddenly takes place . . . this Army must inevitably . . . starve, dissolve, or disperse, in order to obtain subsistence in the best manner they can . . . ”