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## The School of the Sentinel

Through out military history the sentinel has been allocated an important, but often overlooked role. It seems that the sentinel only gets attention if something goes wrong! Any army that fought an irregular enemy in the 18th and 19th centuries came to appreciate the value and role of camp sentinels. This article refers to the sentinels of the Police or Camp guard. The duties of the grand guard will be treated in another article.

In the 3rd US Infantry the role of the sentinel is documented in the Navajo attack on Ft. Defiance in October of 1860. In this pre-dawn attack by an estimated 1000 Navajo warriors, the garrison of 4 companies was alerted by the actions of the sentinels. In fact the rifle fire of the sentinels was instrumental in delaying the Navajo warriors until the garrison could be awakened and organized for defense.

In the Civil War Army the importance of the sentinel's role is defined in the Kautz's Customs of the Service for Officers of the Army. Kautz was convinced that the manner in which guard duty is performed is a good indication of the discipline and "military character" of the regiment.

Kautz also states that sentinels are required to remain at their posts at all costs. " ... the soldier has no alternative except to die at his post if necessary. No nobler death can fall to the lot of the soldier." (3, para. 93)

### Duties of a Sentinel

The duties of the sentinel are enumerated in the Army Regulations. The Regulations state that a sentinel will not allow himself to be relieved except by an officer or non-commissioned officer of the guard or the commanding officer. The sentinel will report every breach of orders or regulations he is instructed to enforce. He will keep himself on the alert and observe everything that takes place within sight or hearing of his post. (1, par. 413-415).

Every sentinel post is numbered. The number 1 post is always at the guard house or guard tent where the off duty guards are assembled. (2, para. 48). Other sentinel posts would be at the commissary or quartermaster stores.

The sentinel should not quit his post or hold conversation that is not required for the proper discharge of his duties. In the event of a disorder, the sentinel must call out the guard. In case of fire, he will cry "Fire" and add the number of his post. If the disorder or fire is great he should accentuate the warning by firing his rifle. (1, para. 418)

The sentinel should relay to the guard house the calls from any other post more distant from the guard house than his own. (1, para. 419) This rule implies that no sentinel should be posted so far from another sentinel that he can't be heard.

Gilham was more explicit, than Kautz about the placement of regimental sentinels. The officer of the day was a captain and the officer of the guard was a lieutenant. There were ten sentry posts. One at the guard tent (always numbered as post 1); one at the colonel's tent; three on the color line; one over the colors; three posts 50 paces in the rear of the field officers' tents and one sentinel on each flank of the camp between it and the next regiment. (4, para. 752).

The sentinel over the colors would allow no one except a color bearer to move the colors. The sentinels on the color line would allow no soldier to remove his rifle from the stacks. (This implies that all rifles were stacked on the color line.) The sentinels around the camp were to allow no one to leave camp with arms unless conducted by an NCO. No one should pass the sentinel line at night except to go to the sinks. Their return was to be marked. Suspicious persons were to be arrested by the sentinel. (4, page 630)

### **Walking his post**

When a soldier is placed on his post he becomes a sentinel. His duties are first the general duties that are required of all sentinels; and then those duties that are distinct to the particular post to which he is assigned. (3, para. 76). The sentinels are instructed in their duties when they are placed at their posts. One item of instruction is the path the sentinel is to walk on his post. The sentinel is to be relieved every two hours unless this time limit is changed due to weather. (3, para. 88).

The sentinel will carry his rifle at support arms, or on either shoulder, but will never "quit them". He will typically have his bayonet fixed at all times. In rainy weather sentinels can use secure arms and carry their rifles under their ponchos. (1, para. 415) All persons of every rank are required to observe respect toward the sentinel. (1, par. 416). An interesting interpretation of this custom is that no one will stand on the sentinel's post or obstruct him from walking his post. That includes any officer. The justification for this interpretation is that anyone who interferes in any way with the sentinel's performance of his duty is endangering the camp.

If the sentinel is conversing with someone, be that person an officer, relief sentinel or visitor, he would carry his rifle at "Arms Port". This position allows the sentinel to defend himself in the event the other person attempts to attack him. The sentinel must never give up his rifle to anyone other than an NCO or officer of the guard.

No member of the guard detail is allowed to take off his clothing or accouterments while on the guard detail. (1, para. 409) This means that even if they are not on their posts and relaxing at the guard tent or guard house, they must still wear their accouterments.

### **Saluting while on post**

The regulations are very explicit about who and how the sentinel is to render salutes while on his post. These rules show, more than words, the relationship of the various ranks in the army.

1. The sentinel will "present arms" to general officers, field grade officers (majors, lieutenant colonels and colonels), the officer of the day (regardless of his rank) and the commanding officer of the post or camp. (1, para. 420)
2. The sentinel will also "present arms" at the passing of the colors or a body of troops under the command of an officer.
3. All other officers (line officers such as lieutenants and captains) will be saluted by facing the officer at the "shoulder arms" position. If the sentinel is posted in a sentry box he will salute by standing at "shoulder arms" and bringing the left hand to the rifle at the height of the right shoulder. (1, para. 420-421).

### **Sentinels after dark**

Challenges and countersigns are used only after Retreat and before daylight when visibility is limited. During darkness, the sentinel is required to challenge every person who approaches his post. He will take the position of "Arms Port" and allow no one to come nearer than within the reach of his bayonet. (1, para.

424)

By challenging the sentinel will call out "Who comes there?" He will allow any persons with the countersign to pass with his command, "Advance, friend with the countersign." If a party approaches, the sentinel will allow only one member of the party to approach him with the countersign. (1, para. 425)

The sentinel will also challenge his relief and allow only the sergeant or corporal of the guard to advance with the countersign. (1, para. 425)

Any time the sentinel has a problem with person who doesn't have the proper countersign, or causes trouble in any way he will "cause them to stand" and call for the corporal of the guard. (1, para. 425).

As Kautz explained in his book *Customs of the Service for Officers of the Army*, It is a measure of the tone and the spirit of the regiment, and the precision in the performance of all the compliments required of Guards that are the real indications of the military quality of the regiment. (2, para. 53). To properly portray the Regular Army soldier we must be acquainted with the duties of sentinels and be able to perform these duties in a true manner.

### Sources

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