

John Ordway

Lewis and Clark's Indispensable First Sergeant

On July 4, 1803, the *National Intelligencer* newspaper of Washington, D.C., reported that Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte of France had sold the Louisiana Territory to the United States of America. The treaty arrived in Washington on July 14, 1803, and was ratified by the United States Senate on October 20. That same day the House of Representatives authorized borrowing \$15 million for what became known as the Louisiana Purchase. Even before the acquisition, President Thomas Jefferson had long hoped to send an exploring party to this western wilderness. The Louisiana Territory was still largely unknown and uncharted, and it seemed prudent for the United States to discover the size and nature of this new land. To accomplish such a task the country needed an expedition for Northwest discovery.

To mount the expedition, Jefferson turned to the United States Army. Although historians have discussed the value of the expedition in terms of Native American studies, and zoological and botanical discoveries, the Lewis and Clark expedition was primarily a military unit. The army was the only organization that could equip and logistically support a disciplined team of trained individuals accustomed to enduring hardship, functioning in harsh climates, negotiating inhospitable terrain, and persevering against potential danger. Two army officers, Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, were assigned to lead the "Corps of Discovery." Popular stories about the expedition too often omit or marginalize the essentially military nature of the corps and its mission. Military organization, discipline, and esprit de corps, however,

added effectiveness to exploring in the wilderness and contributed greatly to the success of the mission.

News of the expedition soon spread, and many young frontiersmen were eager to join. Lewis and Clark recruited personnel as they made their way to St. Louis. Soldiers of the regular army were first selected from volunteers at military posts along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. The captains then recruited willing frontiersmen, hunters, and interpreters and enlisted them into the United States Army; they then engaged a select few civilians for employment under contract with the War Department.

Secretary of War Henry Dearborn had initially authorized 12 enlisted men and 1 civilian interpreter for the expedition. Before it was over, more than 50 individuals were associated with the expedition throughout its 1803 initial stages of travel from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to the 1804-05 winter encampment at Fort Mandan, North Dakota. Only 33, 28 of whom were soldiers, traveled from Fort Mandan to Fort Clatsop near the Pacific Ocean and back as members of the "permanent party."

To maintain order and discipline, Captains Lewis and Clark selected three sergeants and organized the Expedition for Northwestern Discovery into three squads, each led by one of the sergeants. Charles Floyd of Kentucky was one of the first to enlist in August 1803. He was the son of Captain Charles Floyd who had soldiered with George Rogers Clark, William Clark's older brother, during the Revolutionary War. Describing him as "a man of much merit," Lewis appointed him to the rank of sergeant.

Remembered as the only member who did not survive the expedition, Floyd died near present-day Sioux City, Iowa, probably from a ruptured appendix.

Patrick Gass was initially recruited as a private from Captain Bissell's company of the First Infantry at Fort Kaskaskia. He had joined the army in 1799 and was elected sergeant after the death of Floyd. Sergeant Nathaniel Pryor of Kentucky was a widower and cousin of Charles Floyd. He was made a sergeant, and Lewis and Clark considered him to be "a man of character and ability."

In late November 1803, when the men reached Fort Kaskaskia 50 miles south of St. Louis, Captain Lewis recruited Sergeant John Ordway from Captain Russell Bissell's company. Ordway was then 28 years old, having been born near Dunbarton, New Hampshire, in 1775. He was the only one of the original sergeants who volunteered from service in the regular army. He was intelligent, well-educated for the times, and had earned a good reputation.

On March 31, 1804, Lewis and Clark held an enlistment ceremony for the men selected as members of "the Detachment destined for the Expedition through the interior of the Continent of North America." Lewis appointed Sergeant Ordway as the "Orderly Sergeant," a 19th-century title for the first sergeant of a corps of less than company size. The appointment made him third in the chain of command following the two officers.

Ordway was instructed to keep a daily journal as well as the orderly book for the detachment. Others kept journals of the expedition, too. Lewis and Clark recorded voluminous amounts of scientific data and frequently kept daily journals during the trip. The four sergeants (Gass, Floyd, Ordway, and Pryor) and at

By Thomas D. Morgan

least two privates (Whitehouse and Frazier) are known to have kept journals. The one kept by Gass was published in 1807. The fragmentary journals of Floyd and Whitehouse were published in the early 20th-century. Because the journals of Frazier and Pryor were lost, a complete set of daily records of the expedition was therefore not available.

Lewis and Clark paid Ordway \$300 for his journal with the aim of incorporating it into the official journal of the expedition. It disappeared, however, and remained lost for over 100 years, until it turned up in the papers of the Biddle family of Philadelphia in 1913. It was Nicholas Biddle who had edited the original Lewis and Clark journals. Ordway's daily journal was complete, presenting a continuous daily record of the expedition from start to finish by someone other than the two leading officers. His accounts of Indian life and other details of the expedition are invaluable for understanding the human element of soldiering.

As Commanding Sergeant Major (Ret.) Jimmie Spencer, director of NCO and Soldier Programs, Association of the United States Army, has said, "History remembers generals and other great captains, but rarely is recognition given to enlisted soldiers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) for their service to the nation." Despite Ordway's significance to the expedition, we know little about him other than that he was 1 of 10 children and one of the few well-educated men recruited for the expedition. That Lewis and Clark held him in high esteem is clear from their journals. He was entrusted with keeping the rosters, assigning duties, posting guards, maintaining all registers and records, and issuing provisions. In the captains' absence, he was in charge of the expedition.

During the winter at Camp DuBois, Sergeant Ordway had to assert his authority and win the respect of the rambunctious Kentucky and Virginia enlistees. With Lewis and Clark away, privates Reuben Field and John Shields refused to mount guard duty because they would not take orders from anyone

Watercolor sketch of Sergeant John Ordway wearing the dress uniform of the United States Army noncommissioned officer in 1803, when he joined the Corps of Discovery.



Painting by Alan Archambault

Sergeant Ordway Larger Than Life

The Fort Lewis Chapter of the Association of the United States Army (AUSA) is raising funds to commission a larger-than-life bronze statue of Sergeant Ordway to be erected in a new memorial plaza outside Fort Lewis's main gate where a statue of Captain Meriwether Lewis and his dog Seaman has already been installed. For more information on the project or how to make a donation, contact the Fort Lewis Chapter, AUSA, at 253/588-5915 or visit www.ausa.org.

other than the captains. Privates John Colter, John Boley, Peter Weiser, and John Robinson told Ordway they were leaving to go hunting—against his orders. Instead, they went to a neighboring whiskey shop and got drunk.

Fights periodically broke out among the restless men. Shields opposed another of Ordway's orders and threatened the sergeant's life. Colter did the same but took it a step further, loading his gun and threatening to shoot Ordway. The captains had to step in with the latter incidents. A mutiny trial resulted in the two privates seeking forgiveness. They "promised to doe better in future," the captains reported, and were issued no punishment.

"Doe better" they did. In fact, Colter in particular seemed to patch things up with his sergeant. Ordway, in his journal, notes that he and Colter worked many days together the rest of the journey. They hunted together and were at the salt works on the Pacific together. They ate together and traveled in the keelboats and canoes with each other. Ordway probably knew Colter as well as any man. In his journal Ordway often praised the performance of Colter and the other men in his unit.

On a number of occasions Ordway led detachments of men on special assignments. During the return trip from the Pacific Ocean he led the 10-man detachment that recovered the canoes left

at the head of the Jefferson River before the expedition crossed the mountains. After repairing the canoes, Ordway led the men down the Jefferson to the Great Falls of the Missouri, portaged them around the falls, and then proceeded to the mouth of the river to reunite with the overland groups led by Lewis and Clark. After the expedition, Ordway accompanied a party of Indians to Washington, D.C., to meet President Jefferson.

Sergeant Ordway received \$266.66 and 320 acres in land grants as payment for his services during the expedition. He was discharged from the army after the expedition and used the land grants he received to become a prosperous farmer in southeastern Missouri near New Madrid. Within a year's time he had two plantations under cultivation, peach and apple orchards planted, and good farm buildings constructed. He married around 1807, but his wife Gracey died two years later. He then married a widow named Elizabeth Johnson and fathered two children, Hannah and John.

Ordway's fortunes changed abruptly with the New Madrid earthquakes of 1811-12, some of the most powerful ever to strike North America. In December 1811 triple temblors followed by two others in February 1812 destroyed all of Ordway's farm buildings; "sand volcanoes" and quicksand appeared out of nowhere, ruining his land. By spring of 1812, New Madrid was a ghost town. Ordway's prosperity never returned, and family illness and death beset him. He died of unknown causes around 1817, in his early 40s. His widow Elizabeth married a third time in 1834 but died a few years later. John, Jr., died in 1836, never having married, and Hannah died in 1839 after losing her only child at a young age.

The Lewis and Clark expedition accomplished its mission of exploring and mapping the Northwest because it was a well-led, trained, and disciplined military unit. Sergeant Ordway typified the dedication and loyalty of the army's non-commissioned officers who have led, encouraged, and sustained their soldiers for over two centuries. Ordway was a smart,



George Cox photo

This clay maquette of Sergeant John Ordway is being used to create the larger-than-life statue that will be cast at the Tacoma Bronze Works. Ordway is in his official army uniform, which he likely wore on some occasions during the Lewis and Clark expedition.

courageous soldier who set the example for his troops. One of those uniquely qualified early American leaders whose progressive attitudes distinguished him from his European counterparts, he helped forge the legacy of the American noncommissioned officer.

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COVER: "Portrait of Free Enterprise," c. 1950 (oil on board), by Clarence L. Garner. A number of Garner's paintings document Pacific Northwest logging techniques and practices between the 1890s and 1930s. The mill in this painting has a short flume to carry logs to the mill pond. Some flumes were much longer and higher, carrying huge amounts of wood. The famous Thielsen flume in the Blue Mountains of Oregon carried 50,000 board feet of lumber a day. See related story beginning on page 23. (Washington State Historical Society)