

Seeds of a Soldier

The true story of Edgar Allan Poe — the Sergeant Major

By Michael L. Howard

Edgar Allan Poe wore U.S. Army sergeant major stripes. Using the name Edgar A. Perry, Poe enlisted in the U.S. Army on May 26, 1827. Poe climbed from private to regimental sergeant major of the 1st Artillery Regiment, promoted on Jan. 1, 1829. He served nearly two years of a five-year enlistment before the Army discharged Poe April 15, 1829, so that he could begin a yearlong effort to attend the Military Academy at West Point, N.Y. He began his studies at the Military Academy on July 1, 1830. The Academy dismissed him March 6, 1831, after a court martial for neglecting duties and disobeying orders.

But is this failure to ultimately succeed at the Academy an accurate portrayal of Poe's military performance? His later notoriety as a writer makes him a revealing example of an early-day sergeant major and soldier. While many people may disregard Poe's Army experience, letters from his officers he worked for and from Poe himself imply something very different. Even circumstances leading to his dismissal from the Academy indicate deep personal conflict with his foster father — circumstances which had led him to enlisting in the first place — more as the root of his problems than with discipline, academics or military life. In fact, there are indicators that Poe's performance as an enlisted man contains similar traits to those expected of modern day NCOs and Soldiers.

Army documents show that, along with faking his name, Poe claimed to be a 21-year-old clerk from Boston when, in fact, he clerked in Virginia and was 18. Little is known about Poe's enlisted days, but a critical look at his circumstances and actions before and while serving in the Army provide an interesting perspective on the forming of today's modern-day soldier.

The Army assigned Poe to Company H, 1st Artillery Regiment, at Fort Independence, Mass. A malaria out-

Author's Note

The catalyst for this article came in a lone picture and caption printed in an NCO history book written by Earnest J. Fisher Jr. There is no mention of Edgar Allan Poe in the book's text, only a reproduced portrait and statement that Poe was a sergeant major.

The thought of Poe walking through his regiment in 1829 while officers and enlisted men said "Good morning Sergeant Major" stirred a boyish interest. Questions: 1) Was Poe's court martial at West Point an accurate and complete indication of his soldiering and leadership abilities? 2) What circumstances led to Poe reaching regimental sergeant major in less than two years? 3) Are there similarities between qualities he possessed then and those required now that tell a story in the development of soldiers, NCOs and sergeants major?

The photo in Fisher's book led to a West Point library publication by J. Thomas Russell that briefly told Poe's military history prior to his becoming a cadet. His bibliography introduced Melvin C. Helfers' 1949 unpublished dissertation at Duke University. Collectively, these sources led to biographies which collectively shed light on Poe's Army life. Helfers' dissertation provided invaluable information and original conclusions on Poe's military career. His work included what appears to be a complete bibliography on the subject and, in many cases, included copies of original handwritten letters and documents for review.

break caused the Army to move Poe's unit to Fort Moultrie, S.C., in October 1827 and to Fort Monroe, Va., one year later. Poe's unit was one of 51 artillery companies in four artillery regiments placed at 30 sites along the East Coast during this timeframe. Except for briefly in 1828, Company H and the regimental headquarters were co-located throughout the moves. Colonel James House, the regiment's second commander, was in command of Fort Monroe when he promoted Poe to be the sixth regimental sergeant major since the unit formed in 1821.

Poe's role as sergeant major was probably very similar to that established in William Duane's Handbook of Infantry, which the Army used as its official regulation at the time. In this 1812 handbook, Duane established that the sergeant major owned the responsibility to "conduce ... discipline." He also gave sergeants major "charge of sergeants, corporals, privates and musicians" Most notably, though, Duane established that a sergeant major "should be a complete master of all exercises of the battalion from the first drill to the movements in line of battle." The origin of the sergeant major rank goes to 1775 when General George Washington included the sergeant major position in organization tables of battalion and regimental headquarters.

Poe's reasons for enlisting appear similar to those of soldiers throughout the years. For Poe, he had no money, job, marketable skill, or college diploma, and mostly, a strained relationship with his adoptive father. Gaining favor in the eyes of John and Francis Allan probably provided additional motivation for Poe to ultimately succeed. Poe's biological father disappeared when Edgar was

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3 years old. The Allans took Poe in under their care after his mother died the following year — this accounts for the “Allan” part of his name. Francis Allan raised Poe as a “Southern Gentleman.” This lifestyle led Poe to be financially dependent on his new parents. John Allan, though, appeared reluctant to provide that support when Poe went off to college. Arguments with John Allan eventually led Poe to leave home and join the Army. John Allan was upset with Poe over \$2,500 in extra expenses during Poe’s brief attendance at the University of Virginia. Poe said the money was needed to maintain the same standard lifestyle as his classmates while the elder claimed the money was needed to pay gambling debts. In any case, Poe came home from college and John Allan put him to work in the family store. They could not settle the dispute, so eventually Poe left home for Boston.

Another factor in Poe’s enlistment was Poe’s interest in literature and initial failure as a writer. Poe possibly took on the name Perry with the Army to hide from the embarrassment of being an enlisted man. Or he simply wanted a new identity and personality. There are indicators that Poe wanted to show his parents that he could succeed without their support or influence. Until his death in 1849, Poe made up and maintained elaborate stories of living in Russia and elsewhere during the timeframe covering his enlistment. The public accepted these until biographers checked with the War Department and discovered the “Perry” connection. Prior to enlisting, Poe used the pseudonym “Henri le Renet” and published his first book under the byline “A Bostonian.” The book, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, appeared in print around the time he enlisted. The book ultimately failed and, since he invested his own money to publish it, Poe likely entered the Army without money or any other place to go.

Poe’s natural military inclination probably combined with these factors to lead him into enlisting. “General” David Poe, Poe’s grandfather, served under Washington as a quartermaster officer in the Revolutionary War. As a 15-year-old, the junior Poe showed his interest in the Army by becoming second-in-command as a lieutenant in the Junior Morgan Volunteers. The unit formed in Richmond, Va., to serve as honor guard for General Marquis de Lafayette’s October 1824 visit. It appears this interest continued, because he joined the cadet company and volunteered for military drill classes while attending the University of Virginia.

Many Poe biographers portray his military life in degrees of his own dissatisfaction and as a clear mismatch to his actual character. Even the most critical writers describe Poe’s performance in terms such as “successful,” “prospered,” “distinguished



Edgar Allan Poe

himself,” “pleased his superiors” and promoted to sergeant major “for merit.” Another writer on Poe even gave him a backhanded compliment by saying that Poe’s making rank showed that he was not a “dipsomaniac” — alcoholic — at this point in his life. But Poe’s own words may be most revealing: “... My desire is for the present to be freed from the Army — since I have been in it, my character is one that will bear scrutiny and has merited the esteem of my officers — but I have accomplished my own ends — and I wish to be gone.” He wrote that to John Allan in a letter dated Dec. 22, 1828.

Poe’s achievements show a clear drive for success. Because of the enlisted structure then, it is difficult to establish Poe’s actual position in Company H when House selected him from the regiment’s nearly 500 authorized enlisted men to become his sergeant major. Artillery regiments did not have first

sergeants in those days, so there was no clear career path to sergeant major as there is today. We do know that Poe rose to the rank of “artificer” within his first year, promoted on May 1, 1828. This rank was actually a special ranking reserved for expert artillerymen who prepared and oversaw the company’s ammunition supply. This appears to have been a natural progression since Poe had both artillery and quartermaster skills. His promotion to artificer made him at least the 11th ranking enlisted soldier, outranking nearly 400 regimental privates in the unit at the time. Poe’s salary as an artificer was \$10 a month, one dollar more than what he would get as a sergeant major.

Another aspect of Poe’s Army behavior matches positive observations about his performance. As an artificer, Poe apparently established relationships of trust and respect. A sign of this is seen in Poe writing to John Allan on Dec. 1, 1828. This was his first letter written home since enlisting in the Army. The letter indicates that Poe admitted to Lieutenant Joshua Howard, his company commander, that he had falsified his enlistment documents. Poe seemed to be seeking Howard’s assistance in gaining a discharge by telling him that arguments with John Allan led to his enlistment. It appears Howard took on a mentoring role as he told Poe to first reconcile with John Allan. Howard introduced Poe to House so they could discuss the discharge and, on Dec. 20, 1828, House reassigned Poe to the regiment’s headquarters for duty in the adjutant’s office.

Because a commander had complete authority in choosing his sergeant major, it is unknown why House “unexpectedly” chose Poe as sergeant major a short time after meeting him. Poe himself wrote that House knew him only as a soldier in the

regiment before their meeting. Poe reported that he and House had discussed his grandfather. Descriptions of House show he was a student of literature and, from that, may have chosen Poe because they had similar interests. House was probably also familiar with Poe's grandfather. The elder Poe was a popular quartermaster officer who, although he was actually a major, people referred to as "General" because he spent his own money to purchase supplies for his soldiers during the American Revolution.

Traits of Poe's people and leadership skills as a soldier can also be seen during this timeframe as he reunited with his family, came clean with the Army, and worked to find his place in the Army. Poe developed relationships based upon apparent hard work, honesty, trust, and mentorship with his officers. He was able to do that despite entering the Army using false information. If House's intent in promoting Poe was to encourage him to remain in the Army, it is possible the strategy briefly worked. In December 1828, Lieutenant Colonel William J. Worth, (later the famous General Worth for whom Fort Worth, Texas, is named) returned to the regiment from his job at the Military Academy as the commandant of cadets. He had a great deal of influence on Poe.

Needing to show Howard proof that he and John Allan had reconciled, Poe informed his parents that he had spent the last 18 months in the Army. John Allan responded indirectly that Poe should stay in the Army, so Poe eventually shifted by stating he wanted a discharge so that he could apply to West Point. Whether it was the idea of Poe going to West Point or the fact that Francis Allan died in February 1829 and John Allan felt some sympathy for Poe, John Allan requested that the Army grant Poe a discharge.

After Poe left the Army in April 1829, he began a successful yearlong lobbying effort, asking then Secretary of War John Eaton for a class seat. Armed with letters of recommendation from Worth and other officers, John Allan, and Virginia politicians, Poe gained a cadet appointment from President Andrew Jackson. Worth's example of swiftly rising from private to lieutenant in 1813 was probably the genesis of an idea that gave Poe an incorrect view of his upcoming Academy time. Poe believed his enlisted training would help him receive a commission within six months at West Point. He later learned he'd need to attend the entire four years.

Most symbolic of Poe's ability to influence was his final act of shaping both his military and personal futures. Poe excelled as a "model cadet," ranking third in French and 17th in math while recording no disciplin-

to leave the Army. Two critical events made Poe realize he would never retrieve his relationship with John Allan. First, Poe insulted John Allan over some rekindled money issues and, second, John Allan took Poe out of the family inheritance. Poe told John Allan in one of his final letters to his father that he would get out of West Point with or without the elder's permission. Poe then purposely set out to gain a discharge. Poe's last efforts ironically ensured the relationship's end.

That is Poe. And, in Poe, we find seeds of today's soldier and Army.

Allan died in 1834, and is only remembered for his relationship to Poe. And, while the name of Regimental Sergeant Major Edgar A. Perry (Poe) is perhaps familiar only to military history and literature buffs, Poe's successes and failures are intrinsic to the fact that the name Edgar Allen Poe resonates to this day.

Many criticisms exist among Poe biographers. Maybe Poe received a gratuitous promotion to sergeant major to add dignity similar to the way people promoted Poe's grandfather to "general" years earlier. Maybe Poe used whatever means to get out of the Army because he despised it and was bored with it. Motives and exact circumstances are unknown. Comparing Poe as a soldier to a soldier of today is tough. Poe's superiors, though, clearly recognized desired traits. He was intelligent, influential, resourceful, driven for success — an apparent standout. He also mastered basic soldier traits at the time.

One undisputed fact does remain. Poe outranked more than 400 regimental soldiers when the U.S. Army promoted him to its highest enlisted rank nearly 175 years ago. His failures — in his personal life with his father, and at West Point — do not change this fact.

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