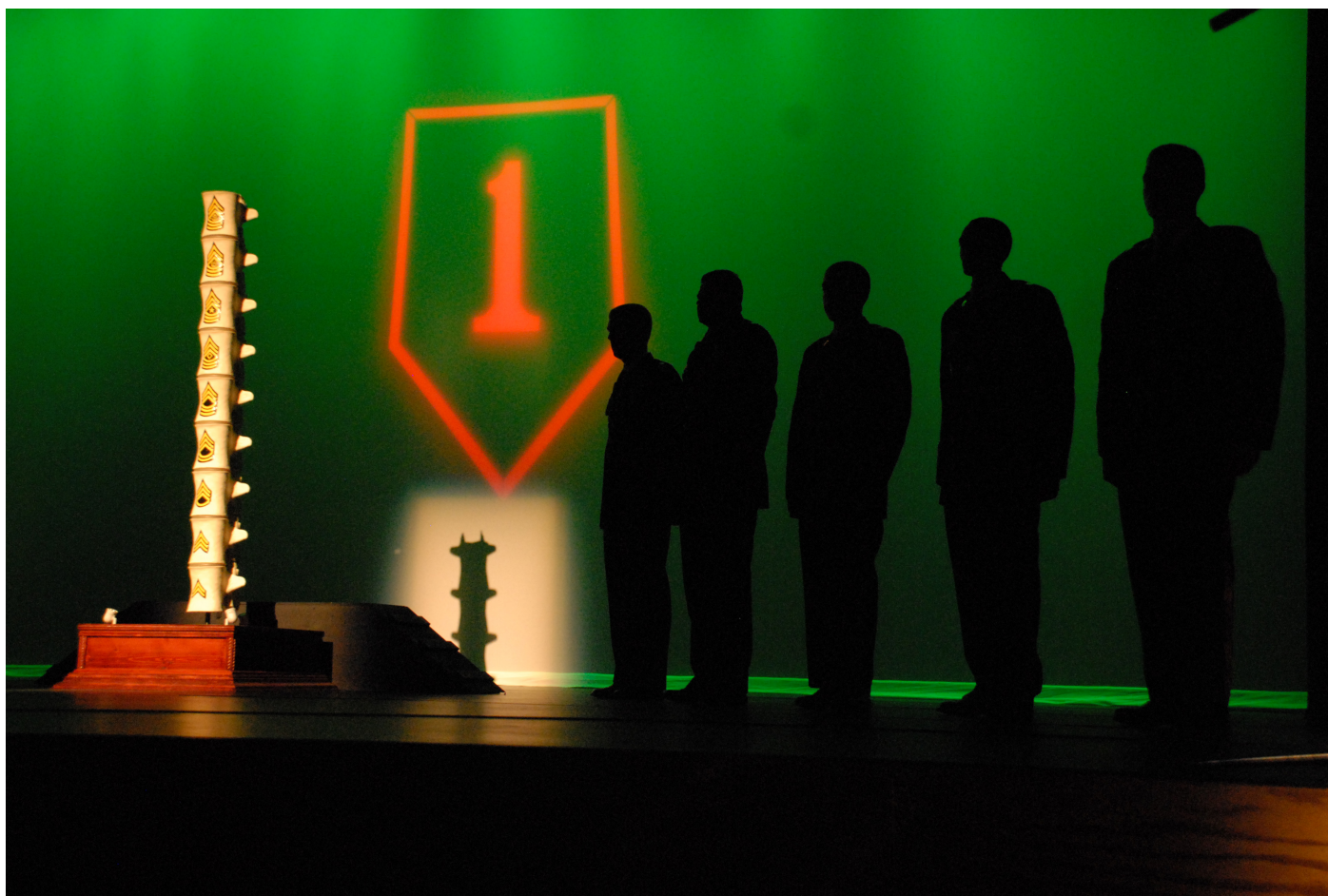


Backbone of the Army

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1st Infantry Division Soldiers stand silhouetted against a 1st Inf. Div. backdrop after the NCO backbone was completed during the NCO Backbone Ceremony held in the C.L. Hoover Opera House, Junction City, Kansas, Aug. 12, 2009. Each Soldier placed his respective rank on the backbone after explaining the importance of that particular rank. (U.S. Army photo by Jordan Chapman)

No doubt about it. The 1939 movie, "Gunga Din" is an entertainment classic - the "Raiders of the Lost Ark" of its time. Starring Cary Grant, Douglas Fairbanks Jr., and Victor McLauglin as three British sergeants serving Queen and Country in India, the movie is loosely based on a poem written by Rudyard Kipling, a man who wrote a lot about men of action - especially sergeants.

You may remember other Kipling stories that later became movie favorites, titles such as "The Man Who Would Be King" and "Captains Courageous."

But chances are you didn't know that Kipling is the man who coined one phrase familiar to every soldier: "The NCO is the backbone of the Army."

Kipling first said it in 1895, in a poem called "The 'Eathen." The poem, written in a Cockney accent, contains 19 stanzas. The famous phrase about noncommissioned officers comes at the end of stanza 18:

*The 'eathen in 'is blindness bows down to wood an' stone;
'E don't obey no orders unless they is 'is own.
The 'eathen in 'is blindness must end where 'e began,
But the backbone of the Army is the Non-commissioned Man!*

In the decades after the poem first appeared in 1896, Americans quoted the phrase frequently because by then, as a world-renowned writer, Kipling had married an American woman and was living in the United States. First, the expression found a niche in the American vocabulary, then it began to evolve into the form we know today.

The poem is really a ballad, or story, which emphasizes that discipline and leadership are the keys to military success. The story starts with a description of the hassle endured by trainees.

As the trainees see it:

"The cruel-tyrant-sergeants they watch 'im 'arf a year;"

But then the tale turns to discuss how sergeants care for their men:

*An' when it comes to marchin' he'll see their socks are right,
An' when it comes to action 'e shows 'em how to fight.
'E knows their ways of thinkin' and just what's in their mind;
'E knows when they are takin' on an' when they've fell be'ind.*

Speaking of the bravery of all soldiers:

*An' now the ugly bullets come peckin' through the dust,
An' no one wants to face 'em, but every beggar must;
So, like a man in irons, which isn't glad to go,
They moves 'em off by companies uncommon stiff an' slow.
Of all 'is five years' schoolin' they don't remember much
Excep' the not retreatin', the step an' keepin' touch.
It looks like teachin' wasted when they duck an' spread an' 'op.
But if 'e 'adn't learned 'em they'd be all about the shop.*

About leaders:

*'E's just as sick as they are, 'is 'eart is like to split,
But 'e works 'em, works 'em, works 'em till he feels 'em take the bit;
The rest is 'oldin' steady till the watchful bugles play,
An' 'e lifts 'em, lifts 'em, lifts 'em through the charge that wins the day!*

The poem ends in a refrain which admonishes:

*Keep away from dirtiness - keep away from mess,
Don't get into doin' things rather-more-or-less!
Let's ha' done with aby-nay, kul, and hawr-ho; [Don't put things off]
Mind you keep your rifle an' yourself jus' so!*

One reason Kipling was such a popular writer, and the reason his stories have become motion picture hits, is that he was a great story teller. But beyond that, his stories focused on people who lived by values he thought were important: values such as courage, candor and commitment to duty.

The next time you hear yourself referred to as "the backbone of the Army," give a thought to the British author with an American bride. Maybe even pick up a Kipling book, such as "Barrack Room Ballads," or "Soldiers Three." The next time you look for films of his stories about soldiers in India, enjoy a bit of Kipling.