

The Centurion was an important officer in the structure of the Roman legion for it was he who was eventually responsible for ordering his century (company) in battle, according to the instructions of the general and tribunes (colonels), and for maintaining good order and discipline in his band of 100 men when the army was not engaged in actual hostilities. There were different grades in the centurion rank so that it is difficult to give the position a modern equivalent. To call them simply sergeants is quite misleading since a junior centurion was probably more equivalent to a lieutenant, while a senior centurion ranked as a major or even lieutenant-colonel. In the days of the Republic and Early Empire centurions were drawn from the lower classes of society and were unable to rise beyond the rank of centurion.

Spurius Ligustinus (active as a centurion in the early second century B.C.) tells us that he was born in his father's cottage on a "farm" which measured 240' X 120'. He married a girl who brought him no dowery but her free birth and chastity, and who later bore him six sons and two daughters. In 200 B.C. this poor farmer's son was drafted into the Roman army as a common legionary. His pay would have been one-third of a denarius per day (roughly \$7.00) out of which deductions were taken for food, clothes, weapons and tents, since the soldier was responsible for his own upkeep. After two years as a ranker, he was promoted, probably on the advice of the tribunes and at the discretion of the presiding consul, to the centuriate. Unlike the modern practice, however, his rank had to be confirmed with every new general, and there could be new generals every other year. The usual reason for promotion was bravery in battle, pure and simple. When Spurius was first made a centurion he would have been the most junior of the six centurions of the tenth cohort of his legion, a decimus hastatus posterior. From there he would advance by moving both upwards in the cohort (10 to legion) structure and also sideways in being transferred from the higher numbered cohorts (tenth, ninth, etc.) towards the prestigious first cohort, cohors prima. Because of his outstanding courage Spurius was allowed to return from Spain, where he had been on service, to march in the triumphal parade of the governor, Flaccus. Thereupon he went back to Spain in 178 B.C. to serve the father of the famous Gracchi brothers, and was finally promoted to chief

legionary centurion (there were 60 centurions in every legion) i.e., primus pilus prior. In theory his pay was still only double that of a regular soldier, but in practice things were no doubt otherwise. After 22 years with the standards, Spurius was decorated 34 times for bravery and had won the civic crown for saving the lives of citizens 6 times. When the young men of Rome rioted and shouted that they refused to go to Spain, this crusty old hob-nail, though over fifty and no longer eligible for service, volunteered again, just to shame them.

Not all Roman centurions were like the redoubtable Spurius, though, by and large, they were all battle-brave. Some were notoriously cruel in enforcing discipline with the vine-staff, bacillus, which they carried as a mark of office. One brute was nicknamed "Give me another" by his men, for when he broke his staff over some poor dog face's back, he would immediately shout for another stick to continue the punishment. Furthermore, by controlling the roster of the grinding fatigue duties imposed on legionaries, the centurion could and did shake his men down for bribes to be let off a continuous barrage of toilsome tasks. Even the sixty day furlough which the legionary was entitled to each year sometimes had to be bought from the centurion with a gift. Whenever an army rioted, it was always such centurions who were murdered first. The situation grew so dangerous that the government, in attempting to stop these dangerous abuses, eventually agreed to pay the centurions their graft money directly so that they would leave their men alone and not drive them to desperation.

By the second century A.D., centurions were making between 5,000-8,000 denarii per year (cf. Spurius' salary of c.200 denarii per year in the second century B.C.) in recognition of their value to the Empire and the increased professionalism of the army.

Upon discharge, centurions could return to civilian life in this later Imperial Period and assume a relatively high position in society. Lucius Caecilius Optatus, a centurion of the "Seventh Gemina Felix Legion" in Spain tells us in an inscription that he had "been honorably discharged by the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (A.D.138-161) . . . , been selected by the town of Barcino (Barcelona, Spain) to be among those exempted from public charges, and achieved the office of aedile (city commissioner) and three times the office of duumvir (mayor) . . . He left a legacy to the municipality as follows: I . . . bequeath . . . 7,500 denarii with the 6% interest on which I desire a boxing contest to be held each year on June 10 at the cost of up to 250 denarii, and on the same day 200 denarii of oil to be supplied to the public in the public." Was Howard Hughes any more generous with his fellow citizens?