

Weapons and Tactics of the Revolutionary War

A basic overview of how the weapons of the American Revolution were used and why.

I. Primary Weapons and Tactics

A. Main weapons of the American Revolution were:

1. the muzzle-loading smoothbore flintlock musket

- a. it would have been a large caliber weapon, with a .62 to .75 inch bore, equal to a modern 11 or 16 gauge shotgun.
- b. it would have been loaded through the muzzle or end of the barrel
- c. it would have been smoothbored, meaning it had no rifling to spin the ball
- d. Because it was "smoothbored," it would have shot both ball or shot, or a combination
- e. The firearms of the period used black powder. Black powder leaves fouling behind when fired. For this reason, the balls used by the military were undersized, so that the troops could quickly seat the next load down the barrel. The British musket, (the Brown Bess), was 75 caliber and they used a 69 caliber ball. The French musket (the Charleyville), supplied to the Americans, was 69 caliber and fired a 65 caliber ball.

2. the bayonet attached to the end of the musket

- a. The muskets of the period were long barreled (about 42 inches) and could mount a long triangular shaped bayonet (knife-like instrument) on the barrel.
- b. The bayonet was an important part of the musket system, enabling a soldier to stab at his enemy in hand to hand combat.
- c. The length of the musket, with the long bayonet, was also designed to be used to defend against horsemen.
- d. By forming a rectangle or square with men facing outward with their bayonets, horsemen could not ride among them.
- e. Cavalrymen were considered the equal of 3 to 5 men on foot, because of their mobility.
- f. The bayonet replaced the pike as the means of defending against cavalry, and was the close range weapon.

B. Musket and bayonet use

1. Loading a musket

- a. Armies of the period used paper cartridges to speed the loading process and reduce the risk of loose powder being around sparking guns.
- b. A wooden dowel about the diameter of a ball was used as a former to make paper tubes.
- c. The paper tube was loaded with the ball and the proper amount of black powder, and then it was sealed.
- d. To load a musket, a soldier opened his cartridge box, grabbed a cartridge, bit off the end to expose the powder, and poured a small amount into the pan of the lock, closed the pan, dropped the cartridge (powder first) into the barrel, removed his rammer, rammed it home, returned his rammer, and then "made ready" to shoot by cocking his lock, and "presenting" or pointing, his piece to the enemy.
- e. Muskets could be fired as fast as every 15 seconds. It took a sense of timing to be able to drive a charge home while the enemy was unable to fire and break up your lines.
- f. Rifles, while much more accurate than muskets, were loaded much more slowly. It would take at least 30 seconds, and sometimes a minute or more, to reload a rifle. In that time they were

often charged with the bayonet, and since rifles were not equipped with bayonets, riflemen usually had to yield to musket men.

g. Early in the war, the Americans had a shortage of bayonets. When France joined the war, they supplied muskets with bayonets, and the other accoutrements -- uniforms, cartridge boxes, etc -- alleviating the Americans shortage of arms and bayonets. The French provided a hundred thousand muskets and bayonets during the war.

h. There were no sights, just the bayonet lug near the muzzle. The soldier just looked down the barrel.

2. Musket shot was not very targeted

a. Since the ball is undersized, and the paper cartridge is just dropped into the barrel, the ball might come out spinning as the gases behind it escaped unevenly.

b. The ball might spin in any direction, and fly like a curve ball or be thrown slightly to any side. After 50 yards it was very hard for a soldier to deliberately hit a man sized target.

c. To compensate for inaccurate shooting, the men fired volleys, sending a mass of balls toward the enemy, some of which should hit.

d. In order to fire volleys in unison, they formed into units of two or three ranks (lines) deep, shoulder to shoulder.

e. The unit would operate like a machine, lead by an officer (assisted by his subordinates), who would give the orders to load, fire and maneuver.

f. Units could turn their lines, form into columns or squares, advance or turn about at the direction of their officers.

g. Early in the war, the Americans did not have a universal system. Each state or even regiment had their own, making command by generals harder. The Americans also did not practice large unit drills early in the war.

3. The use of the bayonet

a. The tactics of the day called for each unit to form next to it's neighbor, forming a line across the battlefield (not necessarily a straight line, or an unbroken one).

b. They would defend and attack in these formations, which gives them the name of linear tactics.

c. The tactics were not designed to shoot down the enemy until he gave way, but to break up his organized lines so that your side could then march forward, in cohesive, organized and linear fashion, and charge with the bayonet.

d. A disorganized unit can not stand against an organized bayonet charge.

e. Each unit tried to break the unity of the enemy formation so it could charge with the bayonet.

f. Charged units, if not able to organize themselves, would give way or be killed.

III. The cannon: the queen of the battlefield

A. Infantry unsupported by cannon usually lost if the enemy had cannon.

B. American Militia units were known for not standing up against British units with cannon support, since they rarely had any of their own.

- C. The Muzzle-loading cannon used were smoothbores, and smaller than used in later wars.
- D. Most were 3, 4 or 6 pound guns, mounted on wooden carriages with large wheels.
- E. Some 3 pound guns had iron legs to stand on and were called "grasshoppers."
- F. Larger guns of 12 pounds were sometimes used in the field, and even larger guns were mounted in fortifications and ships.
- G. The cannon fired either solid ball, various small shot, or sometimes shells.
- H. Shells are a hollow iron ball filled with black powder and fitted with a fuse.
- I. The shot used could be buckshot, musket balls or grape shot, which are larger iron or lead balls about 1 inch in diameter.
- J. Cannon had a range of several hundred yards.
- K. A 3 pounder ranged about 800 yards with solid shot, and 200 yards with grape shot, maximum. At close range, loaded with shot, it could destroy an enemy company.

IV. Conclusions: Tactics

- A. It is a myth that the Americans won by using cover, while the dumb British stood in the open in ranks to be shot by the hidden Americans.
- B. Both sides fought primarily in the open, in formation.
- C. When Baron von Stueben took over training at Valley Forge, he put a single standard and methodology into the American army, so they could work better together.
- D. They then became a match for the British on the open ground in every respect.
- E. The Americans had been hampered by various methods and commands of maneuver, with little large scale drill.
- F. Von Stueben changed that, setting a single standard and training the army to use it, and the Americans proved their ability to use these techniques at the Battle of Monmouth.
- G. Instead of a regimental way, or state way, there was only the ARMY way. One method, one way to issue the order.
- H. Certainly on occasion the Americans used cover, hiding behind trees and rock walls.
- I. The start of the war at Lexington and Concord is a prime example, and the New Jersey Militia, used it well also, both being examples of partisan warfare.
- J. Most battles of armies, however, were fought using linear tactics. Even most partisan battles were fought using some form of linear tactics- they would fire volleys, and often stood in lines.
- K. The final point is: the Continental Army won the war fight in the style of the British Army; this war was not won by guerillas fighting an "American style" war.