



Army Heritage Center
Foundation
*Telling the Army Story...
one Soldier at a time*

Voices of the Past

Part of the Army Heritage Center Foundation's Educational Series

REVOLUTIONARY WAR

Highlights:

- Uniforms make troops look and feel like Soldiers, and can enhance morale, unit cohesion, and battlefield performance.
- The Continental Army lacked standard uniforms at the beginning of the war, so George Washington ordered the use of the hunting shirt until more formal uniforms became available.
- Continental Soldiers used frontier tactics with limited success at the start of the war, but finally achieved victory by adopting the same formal battlefield tactics as the British.
- The two most common firearms in the Continental Army were the British Land Service Musket (aka Brown Bess) and the French Infantry Musket.

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For Independence's Sake: Personal Equipment of a Revolutionary War Soldier

(United States, 1775-1783) The Army uniform is as much a part of a Soldier's equipment as anything else. Every part of the uniform from the weave of the cloth to the colors and appearance serve some function. Whereas modern Soldiers wear camouflage to help them hide from the enemy, 18th century Soldiers usually fought in open fields in large formations. Their uniforms were brightly colored to help their officers identify them in the smoke and heat of battle.

The traditions of the United States Army, including its uniform and accoutrements are rooted in the British Army of the 18th Century. Clothing of this period is characterized by tightly fitted smallclothes (waistcoat and breeches) and coats with tight fitted sleeves. Generally speaking, each Soldier would receive a uniform consisting of a wool regimental coat, with linen smallclothes in the spring, and a wool regimental coat, with woolen smallclothes in the fall.

At the beginning of the Revolutionary War, a few pre-war militia organizations had uniforms, but most of the Soldiers of the American Army at the Siege of Boston were wearing civilian clothing. For expediency sake, shortly after assuming command, George Washington ordered the use of the hunting shirt as a field garment to provide some uniformity. Made of linen, this garment was little more than a farmer's smock altered with the addition of a fringed cape.

Regulations published in 1779 establish the colors for the Army uniform: blue coats with colored



Hunting shirt of the type used by the Continental Army early in the war.

facings based on region, white for New England, red for Mid-Atlantic, and blue for the South. Musicians wore uniforms with the coat and facing colors reversed.

The vast majority of Soldiers wore a cocked hat made of black felt and often bound with wool tape around the edge of the brim. Members of the Light Infantry and Dragoon units wore caps made of felt or black leather.

In 1782, as the Revolutionary War came to a close, the uniform colors were changed to blue coats with red facings for all troops except generals and staff officers. Infantry uniforms were designed with white metal buttons while Artillery uniforms had yellow metal buttons.



Reconstruction of a private's uniform of the Continental Army (New England Regiment), circa 1780.

Revolutionary War Weapons and Equipment

Accoutrements (those items carried on a Soldier's person) come in two categories: first, the items needed to fight, including the cartridge box, bayonet carriage, and scabbard; and second, the items needed to sustain the soldier, including a haversack for food, a canteen for water, and a pack or bedroll for spare clothing. In today's Army, these would be referred to as the Fighting Load and the Approach March load. Organizational items (Sustainment Load) like a change of clothes and bedding were carried by the unit trains.

The Continental Army used a variety of small arms during the Revolution. At the beginning of the war, the British Short Land Service Musket, often referred to as the Brown Bess, was most common. In 1777, the

French joined the war on the American side and began sending arms and equipment to the Continentals. Many American troops received a French Model 1763 Infantry Musket, sometimes referred to as the Charlesville Musket, after the arsenal where many of the muskets were made. Cavalry troops, known as Light Dragoons, generally carried carbines, pistols, and sabers.

The muzzleloading flintlocks of the Revolutionary War required multiple steps to load and fire. Soldiers had to first place the gunpowder charge in the barrel, ram the bullet down over the charge, prime the flash pan of the flintlock with gunpowder, cock, aim, and fire. The flint would strike the steel causing a spark to ignite the powder in the flash pan. From there, a tiny jet of flame would shoot through a pinhole sized opening in the barrel, where it would ignite the main charge behind the bullet.



The British Short Land Service Musket, Caliber .75



The French Infantry Musket, Model of 1763, Caliber .69



British Light Dragoon Carbine, Caliber .73



British Light Dragoon Saddle Pistol, Caliber .70

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A good Infantryman could be expected to fire three shots a minute, though the stress of combat made this very difficult. Partly for this reason, army's in the 1700's used smoothbore muskets despite the availability of highly accurate rifles. Rifles use grooves (called rifling, hence the name "rifle") in the barrel to spin the bullet, making the weapon far more accurate. This, however, required a tight fit between the bullet and the barrel. The tight fit made rifles slower to reload than the smoothbore muskets. Commanders had learned that massed Infantry firing smoothbore muskets at close range was more effective than slower, more accurate fire from riflemen.

The Continental Army did employ riflemen, but the slow rate of fire made them more suitable for small unit actions, especially early in the war. By the end of the war, the Continental Army had adopted the same techniques of using large formations of troops in open fields.

Sources

"Guilford Courthouse, 15 March 1781" by H. Charles McBarron. U.S. Army Center of Military History.
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"Guilford Courthouse, 15 March 1781." by H. Charles McBarron. Image Courtesy of the Center for Military History.