

Training the Army

When they faced hardened British veterans in the battles that preceded Valley Forge, the Americans were at a disadvantage because they did not have a standard drill manual. When the new drill master, Baron von Steuben arrived in camp in February 1778 to train the army, he immediately recognized that Washington's men were committed to their cause, but needed more military order. Accordingly, Steuben explained to the dedicated citizen soldiers why a training program was necessary instead of forcing the soldiers to submit to the harsh discipline that ruled European armies of the day.

Von Steuben believed that success on the battlefield went hand in hand with a professional attitude. Before he began to teach the continental soldiers the new manual of arms, Steuben instilled in the boisterous men, the notion that a soldier's bearing echoed a respect for his trade and attention to the task at hand. According to Steuben, a soldier under orders must remain silent and obedient: he "... must not Stir his hands, blow his nose, or much less talk." Within a few months, the dutiful army at Valley Forge was marching with newfound precision and crisply executing Steuben's manual of arms.

These new military skills served Washington's veterans well. The Continental Army forced the British to retreat at the battle of Monmouth, New Jersey in June 1778, and fought with skill in the southern campaigns that led to the victory at Yorktown in 1781. The "relish for the trade of soldiering" that Steuben inspired in the men also enabled the army, despite continuing hardships and spiraling citizen apathy, to stick single-mindedly to their task until they secured independence in 1783.

The Musket Drill*

The commands of the Steuben musket drill seem too slow and deliberate to modern ears to be of efficient use in a battle situation. However, through proper execution of the training commands, the soldiers became a well-synchronized unit. Speed came with practice. In the stress of battle, officers gave shortened combat commands, and Washington's men could fire coordinated volleys of musket fire every fifteen seconds.

The Training Commands

1. Half-cock Firelock Soldier pulls musket cock back one notch and opens the steel (frizzen).
2. Handle Cartridge Soldier slaps cartridge box to settle the powder in the cartridges, tears open the cartridge with his teeth, and places

the opened cartridge under his chin to protect it.

3. Prime
Soldier places a small amount of powder in the pan.
4. Shut Pan
Soldier shuts the steel to hold the powder in the pan and casts the musket about in order to place the cartridge in the barrel.
5. Charge with Cartridge
Soldier dumps powder down the barrel and then places the paper-wrapped musket balls into the barrel.
6. Draw Rammer
Soldier draws the ramrod out.
7. Ram Down Cartridge
Soldier rams paper-wrapped musket balls down securely on top of the powder with the ramrod.
8. Return Rammer
Soldier returns ramrod to its place beneath the barrel.
9. Shoulder Firelock
Soldier holds musket steady on the left shoulder.
10. Poise Firelock
Soldier places musket in the ready position.
11. Full-cock Firelock
Soldier pulls musket cock back to second notch.
12. Take Aim
Soldier levels musket.
13. Fire
Fires musket.

Combat Commands

1. Load
Soldier loads musket using steps 1-9. From the shouldered firelock position, the officers can order the soldiers to charge, retreat, or fire.

If the officers want the soldiers to fire, the commands are:
2. Make Ready
Soldier goes through poise position and pulls musket cock back to second notch.
3. Take Aim
Soldier levels musket.
4. Fire
Fires musket.

The Bayonet

Soldiers routinely marched with their bayonets fixed to the ends of their muskets if they were expecting to see any action. Army officers of the day designed an off set bayonet which enabled a soldier to fire his musket with the bayonet attached. It was standard practice in the eighteenth century to use a menacing bayonet charge to force your enemy to retreat from the battlefield. In the same way that musket volleys were most effective when well timed, bayonet charges were more successful when executed with precision. Training at Valley Forge under von Steuben also increased the Continental Army's proficiency in bayonet tactics.

*The musket drill was designed for combat performance and should be respected as a legacy of the continental soldiers. This depiction of the drill is intended for educational purposes only. Historic and reproduction firearms should be treated with the same respect due modern weapons.