

The American Soldier

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What kinds of guns and other weapons were used in the American Revolution? What were the armies like, and how did the soldiers fight? When we answer these questions, we learn a great deal about what war was like in the 1700s. And we learn about what the American soldier used during the war.

When the Americans began to fight for independence, the British government was able to provide the soldiers and weapons to combat the rebels. But the American rebels had to try to put together an army without money and without a strong government to organize that effort. Each colony raised regiments of soldiers to send to the Continental Line, the main army. Each colony also had its own militia to protect its citizens and property, if the British army should come within its borders.

Supplying the American troops was an extremely difficult task. There were very few factories in the colonies that could produce the weapons and the equipment needed by an army. The money necessary to pay for supplies was issued by the new state governments and the new central government. But this money did not have the trust of the business people and had very little value.

Another problem was getting the supplies to the soldiers. When the Continental army was able to get supplies, they had to be shipped great distances, usually by wagon across rugged trails and roads. The wagons were sometimes attacked and taken by enemy troops or by highwaymen—outlaws.

American soldiers also took supplies from the British army. After defeating the Loyalists at Moore's Creek Bridge in February 1776, North Carolina troops seized 1,500 firearms, 150 swords and **dirks**, ammunition, two valuable medicine chests, and thirteen wagons. This equipment was put to use against British troops.

Weapons were the army's main concern. The most important weapon during the American Revolution was the musket—a long smoothbore gun (a gun without grooves inside its barrel) fired from the shoulder—with a **bayonet** attached at the end. These weapons led to a certain style of fighting in the 1700s. Muskets could be aimed and fired accurately only at a target that was within one hundred yards. So the armies fought in groups of men, organized as regiments, at close range. The enemy regiments would line up face-to-face and fire two or three volleys—a volley involved firing all the muskets at once—and then charge with bayonets. The losing regiment was either driven from the battlefield or forced to surrender.

The idea was that because the muskets could not be aimed very accurately at a distance, the regiments would fill the air with massive amounts of lead. This shower of lead would strike down many of the enemy, causing gaps in their line. The regiment could then charge through the gaps, creating disorder and panic and causing the enemy soldiers to retreat or surrender. Speed was an important factor. A trained soldier could fire a musket about four times a minute. The flintlock type of firearm fired when a piece of flint struck steel. This created a spark, which in turn set off black powder—gunpowder—in the barrel of the gun. This type of gun did not work in wet weather because the loose gunpowder got damp and would not **ignite**. Consequently, both armies avoided battles when it was raining.

The British army used the “Brown Bess,” a musket that fired one-ounce lead balls. These guns were used by American soldiers when they could be captured from the British soldiers.

When the war began, American soldiers used the weapons from their state’s **militia stores** or from home. Recognizing a shortage, the Continental Congress and the individual colonies placed orders with American gunsmiths to make as many flintlocks as possible. Muskets were also bought from European manufacturers.

In 1778 France became an ally of the colonies in their fight against England. The French government sent large quantities of French muskets. These muskets were much lighter in weight than the British army’s “Brown Bess” and fired a smaller lead ball. They were a favored weapon of the Continental soldier.

Muskets could be fitted with a bayonet that made them into a “spear that could shoot.” The soldiers would use bayonets for hand-to-hand combat when they charged the enemy after firing their volleys. The bayonets had sharp points that were used to thrust and jab at the enemy.

Bayonets were brutally effective weapons, causing many of the wounds and deaths during battles.

Another type of weapon was the American long rifle. Many legends surround the American long rifle in the Revolution.

The rifle was a long gun made with grooves inside its barrel which made it more accurate than a musket. It was very accurate up to 300 yards and thus was a powerful weapon in the hands of scouts and **skirmishers**. American riflemen were so feared that some British officers were advised to remove the gold trimmings from their coats. However, the rifle was a slow weapon to reload and did not have a bayonet. A rifleman could be overtaken quickly by dragoons—troops on horseback—or by men with bayonets. North Carolina riflemen participated in defeating the British at the Battle of Kings Mountain.

The armies also had small arms—weapons that could be carried in a soldier’s hand. These included pistols, sabers, and other spear-like weapons called spontoons and halberds. Often these weapons were carried by officers and sergeants as a sign of rank. Officers, particularly, carried smallswords. Dragoons were equipped with pistols and sabers. For North Carolina mounted troops, sabers were often made from steel saws by local blacksmiths. Pistols were rare.

Also very important to the armies was artillery—large guns mounted so they could be moved easily and fired by a crew of men. Artillery included field cannon used on the battlefield, cannon used in forts and on ships, and cannon called howitzers and mortars used to drop bombs into a fort or a confined area such as a ship. North Carolina had artillery companies at various places throughout the war. It also sent an independent artillery company to the North Carolina Brigade with General George Washington’s army.

During the war, Continental soldiers were the core of the American Revolutionary war effort. These were the men that General Washington and Congress depended most upon. Congress raised the Continental army by calling on the individual states to organize regiments of soldiers. North Carolina was asked to raise two regiments of five hundred men each. Eventually it sent ten regiments of infantry to the Continental Line. These regiments were formed into a single brigade called the North Carolina Brigade. This brigade joined Washington’s army in 1777.

The Continental infantryman had equipment that was like that of the British soldier. In addition to a musket, he carried on his right side a leather or tin cartridge box that held twenty to thirty

rounds of ammunition, a musket tool, and a supply of flints. On his left side he carried his bayonet in a leather scabbard attached to a linen or leather shoulder strap. Each soldier had a haversack, usually made of linen, to carry his food rations and eating utensils. The utensils usually included a fork made of wrought iron, a pewter or horn spoon, a knife, a plate, and a cup. He also had a canteen of wood, tin, or glass to carry water. A knapsack held extra clothing and other personal items such as a razor for shaving, a tinderbox with flint and steel for starting a fire, candle holders, a comb, and a mirror. Soldiers also often carried a fishhook and some twine so that they could catch some fish when they were near a lake, creek, or river.

The Continental army often used the local militia to help out. The militia, made up of male citizens over sixteen years of age, was the defense force of each state. Regiments of militia were called up for service by the governor or the commanding general to serve for a campaign or for a period of time as needed. These soldiers were told what equipment they had to bring with them.

The militia soldier carried equipment that looked different from that of the Continental soldier but that usually performed the same or similar function. His knapsack was generally made from linen or canvas and sometimes painted. His haversack and canteen were usually similar to those used by the Continentals. He also had an ax and a blanket.

A militia rifleman carried his rifle, knife, tomahawk—a light ax, water bottle, a powderhorn for his black powder, and a hunting pouch that held other shooting supplies. Sometimes a patch knife, used to cut a patch of cloth, and a loading block, which held patched bullets enabling the rifleman to load quicker, were attached to the strap of the hunting pouch. In addition, a charger measured the amount of powder to put into the rifle when loading.

Uniforms were a vital consideration to the armies. During this period, battles fought with black-powder weapons would produce enough smoke to make it difficult to see more than a few yards. Clouds of thick smoke would form over the battlefield. It was important to distinguish between friend and foe. Because the smoke was white, bright colors were used for uniforms. The British wore, for the most part, red and scarlet uniforms; the French, uniforms of white and differing shades of blue; and the Americans, dark blues and browns.

Congress did not adopt a Continental uniform until 1779. However, soldiers attempted to have clothing similar to the others in the company or regiment. Many volunteer companies entered the war in uniforms purchased by themselves or their commanders.

The uniform of the American soldier was made up of:

- . a hat, usually turned up on one or three sides,
- . a shirt made of linen or cotton,
- . a black leather stock, worn around the neck,
- . a wool coat, usually with collar, cuffs, and lapels that were a different color
- . a waistcoat or vest, usually made of linen or wool,
- . a pair of wool, linen, or cotton trousers, either breeches that were gathered just below the knee, or overalls,
- . stockings, and
- . leather shoes.

Congress adopted brown as the official color for uniforms in 1775. But there was a shortage of brown cloth, so some regiments dressed in blue and gray. In September 1778 Congress received a large shipment of uniforms from France. The North Carolina Continental Line regiments received blue coats faced with red collars, cuffs, and lapels. In October 1779 Congress adopted regulations requiring North Carolina troops to wear a uniform made of a blue coat with blue facing and laced with white around the buttonholes.

North Carolina troops frequently were without proper uniforms, but the most difficult item to supply was shoes. In 1777 officers from one regiment appealed to Governor Richard Caswell for help, stating that the men were “without blankets or tents or shoes.” The governor noted that many of the privates of the Independent Artillery Company were barefoot. The winter of 1777–1778 was a hard winter for the American soldiers. Driving rains turned to snow and sleet, causing great suffering to men without shoes. General Washington wrote: “You might have tracked the army . . . to Valley Forge by the blood of their feet.” Eventually the government was able to supply the necessary shoes to the North Carolinians.

Along with the American long rifle, the American hunting shirt became famous in the American Revolution. It was generally made of homespun linen and cut in a long overshirt or wraparound style. It had rows of fringe around the edges and fit loosely so the wearer could move easily. Favored by General Washington, it was frequently worn by both Continentals and the militia. In 1776 Washington described it: “No dress can be cheaper nor more convenient, as the wearer may be cool in warm weather and warm in cold weather by putting on [additional clothes]. . . .”

In 1775 when the North Carolina Congress raised a battalion of ten companies of minutemen, or militia, it called for these men to be uniformed in hunting shirts. General Washington stated that

a man wearing a hunting shirt created “no small terror to the enemy who think every such person is a complete marksman.” Aside from hunting shirts, the militia usually wore homespun wool coats in a variety of colors and patterns and waistcoats, breeches, and stockings.

Equipment for camp was vitally important to the soldier’s comfort as well as his life. Probably the most important piece of camp equipment for the American soldier in the American Revolution was his blanket. It protected him against the cold, and, when he did not have a tent to sleep in, from the moisture in the air. It also served as an overcoat when a soldier did not have one. Blankets were usually made of wool, and Governor Caswell considered them a priority when he supplied the troops.

Tents provided protection from the cold and rain. They came in various sizes, generally depending on the occupant’s rank. The officers’ larger tents were called *marquees*. They were made of canvas or heavy cotton, usually about ten feet across by fourteen-feet deep by eight-feet high. By comparison, a private’s tent was about six-and-one-half-feet square by five-feet high. It was expected to hold five men.

Feeding the army was difficult, especially during the winter. When the army was marching or on a campaign, soldiers were given a type of biscuit or hard bread and ears of corn. Sometimes there was a packet of cornmeal and, when available, some dried beef. Baggage wagons carried the provisions and rations in front of the North Carolina soldiers as the men marched. This was done so that when the campsite was reached, the men could pick up the rations from the wagons as they passed by.

In camp, cooking utensils were necessary because food was issued in raw form. A set of cooking utensils was usually issued to every six or eight men. This included a kettle, cooking forks and spoons, and often a water bucket. Soldiers usually provided their own forks, spoons, and knives to eat with. They also needed a plate, usually made of wood or pewter, and a drinking cup. In the North Carolina Brigade, soldiers were not allowed to put any of their personal property in the baggage wagons when they were on the march. They had to carry their own blankets, kettles, and other personal items.

In 1777 it was ordered that each soldier would receive one pound of flour or bread, one and one-half pound of beef or pork, and one quart of beer per day. Each week he would receive five pints of peas, one pint of meal, and six ounces of butter. Vinegar was issued on occasion and rum was

issued to those men working around the camp and on guard duty. It was recommended that the men should always boil or roast their provisions.

Often it was hard to get supplies, and the shortages hurt the war effort. The North Carolina troops planned an expedition to Georgia and Florida, but it failed for lack of supplies. One officer defended General Robert Howe of North Carolina, stating that the public was “throwing a thousand reflections on the General and the army for not marching to attack the enemy and storm lines, without provisions and without ammunition.” The officer elaborated, “What can be more cruel than crowding eight, ten, and twelve men into one tent, and oblige those who cannot get in, to sleep in the heavy dews?” Ten to fifteen men were using one camp kettle and six to eight men were sharing one canteen. Sometimes when supplies were issued, there was confusion as to whether they were meant for the Continental Line troops or the state militia regiments.

With poor shelter and food, and lack of sanitary conditions, thousands of soldiers fell seriously ill and many died. Overcrowding in tents and hospitals caused the diseases to spread. Soldiers sent to hospitals with one disease often acquired a second one while they were there. In an effort to prevent sickness, the North Carolina Brigade was often ordered to clean their camp and warned not to throw bones and scraps of meat around their tents. The troops were ordered to keep themselves as clean as possible. Eight pounds of soap was distributed each week to every hundred men. A general order in 1777 called for the North Carolina Continental troops to shave their beards and to be properly dressed in regimental uniforms.

The Continentals and militiamen from North Carolina were never supplied as well as some of the soldiers from the wealthier or more industrial states. However, they seemed to make up for their lack of supplies and equipment with their willingness to endure hardship. At Valley Forge during the cruel winter of 1777–1778, the North Carolina Brigade had the lowest number of desertions of any state although it was the poorest in provisions and clothing. Perhaps by this time, the North Carolinians had grown accustomed to doing without.

After General Cornwallis retreated to Wilmington and then to Virginia in 1781, the North Carolina militia generally controlled the state and its resources. Food and equipment were supplied more regularly to its troops fighting in South Carolina and elsewhere. After Cornwallis surrendered to General Washington in October, the shortages the Carolina troops experienced were due more to a general feeling that the war was over and North Carolinians did not have to worry so much about supplying the army.

**At the time of this article's publication, J. Lloyd Durham was a specialist on the history of the North Carolina Militia and State Guard who had published several articles on the development of their uniforms and equipment. He assisted museums, researchers, collectors, and enthusiasts in this and other areas of North Carolina history. Durham earned an M.A. degree from North Carolina State University.*

Definitions

A **dirk** is a long, straight-bladed dagger.

A **bayonet** is a steel, spear-like blade that is attached to the front part of a long gun and is used for stabbing and jabbing.

To **ignite** is to set on fire.

Militia stores are warehouses that hold arms, ammunition, and equipment.

Skirmishers are a small, independent attack force.