



The American Revolution

A Historical Series Sponsored by William Hightower Chapter #35
Sons of the American Revolution

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The Militia

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The “Brown Bess” wasn’t the only musket provided to militias. They obtained French muskets, also of 72 caliber, and during the Revolutionary War even obtained several thousand Spanish muskets of 69 caliber. Not all militiamen carried these standard arms. Some provided their own arms in the form of flintlock rifles. There is a distinct difference between a smooth bored musket and a “rifled” flintlock. Smooth bore means the inside of the barrel was completely smooth and shiny, whereas the “rifled” flintlock had a series of twisting grooves alternating with raised areas (lands) passing down the inside of the barrel. When this instrument was fired, the rifling inside the barrel gave the bullet a spin. This spin gave the projectile greater stability and increased the accuracy. Flintlock rifles were usually bored for 38 caliber, which is the same caliber as a modern military police revolver used in many police departments. Rifled flintlocks were manufactured by gunsmiths in this country long before 1774. My Scottish forefather, William Thomas Long, was one such gunsmith residing in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. These flintlocks were not considered weapons, but were often elegantly engraved and were cherished hunting pieces. Such a “Pennsylvania or Kentucky” rifled flintlock was often referred to as a “Squirrel gun,” but in the hands of a well trained

militiaman, it could bring down a horse or its rider at 300 yards distance. Men bearing rifles were part of an elite militiaman corps, whose combat duty was to perform long distance sniping at the enemy.

Militiamen weren't always infantry. Infantry units were often referred to as "Foot Guards." Some militia units were mounted on horses and prepared for rapid deployment over distance to engage the enemy. These were cavalry or dragoon units, often armed with sabers in addition to their muskets. Dragoon and "Light Horse" units were designed to be used for reconnaissance, sometimes foraging, but always quick action.

In 1774 and afterwards, there were teamster militiaman units. These companies were responsible for moving freight, supplies and equipment for the fighting units. A famous Revolutionary War hero started his career as a militiaman teamster. Daniel Morgan of Winchester, Virginia, would rise to the rank of Brigadier General in the Continental Line Army, and deliver British General, Lord Charles Cornwallis one of his most humiliating defeats.

In closing this article, let me remind the reader that even in pre-war colonial America, the militia had artillery. These specialized militiamen had to care for artillery pieces, gather and safely handle large amounts of black powder and cannon shot. They were also responsible for maintaining large herds of draft animals in order to move the artillery from battle to battle. Our readers should by now have an appreciation for what is meant by the term, militia, and how American colonial militia units functioned leading up to 1774.