



AIMED FIRE AND THE BRITISH SOLDIER

This important and highly informational addition to our regimental website was taken from an (edited) August, 2013 article in the *Journal of the American Revolution* entitled *The Aim of British Soldiers*. The *Journal* is a scholarly online magazine that also offers annual volumes and books <https://allthingsliberty.com/>. The author is the noted historian, writer and reenactor Don L. Hagist. Don is also editor of the *Journal* and an independent researcher specializing in the demographics and material culture of the British Army in the American Revolution. He maintains a blog about British common soldiers (<http://redcoat76.blogspot.com>) and his books include *The Revolution's Last Men: the Soldiers Behind the Photographs* (Westholme Publishing, 2015) and *British Soldiers, American War* (Westholme Publishing, 2012) along with numerous articles in academic journals. The entire article, which contains all the readers' comments and author's replies, can be found at <https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/08/the-aim-of-british-soldiers/>

Myth:

British soldiers were taught not to aim, but merely to point the piece towards the target^[1] ...the British soldier was a poor marksman. Actually, he did not “aim” his musket but merely “pointed” it at the enemy. The British manual of arms did not even include the command “Aim!”^[2] Its inaccuracy was reflected in the British manual of arms. There was no command to “aim.” Instead, men were ordered to “level muskets” before firing.^[3] British soldiers were trained to point their muskets, not to aim them as the American invariably did.^[4] Not only was there no attempt made to aim, British regulars were taught to look the other way, so as not to have the musket flash blind them.^[5]



Busted:

We see this one published over and over again – that British soldiers were not taught to aim their muskets. Some authors go so far as to say that Baron von Steuben’s great innovation at Valley Forge was replacing the command “present” in the British manual of arms with “take aim,” thereby giving American soldiers a tactical advantage. There’s just one problem with these assertions: **British soldiers were, in fact, taught to aim, and they practiced marksmanship.**

It is true that the manual of arms used to teach British soldiers how to handle their muskets did not include a command called "Aim" or "Take Aim," but this is strictly a matter of terminology. The command was called "Present", and part of the description was:

"..raise up the Butt so high upon the right Shoulder, that you may not be obliged to stoop too much with the Head, the right Cheek to be close to the Butt, and the left Eye shut, and look along the Barrel with the right Eye from the Breech Pin to the Muzzel...."^[6]

This sounds like aiming because it *is* aiming. The part about not stooping the head, that is, not tilting the head sideways, makes sense if one tries it with an actual musket. Reproduction muskets often have less "drop" from the breech to the butt than do originals (apparently to use less wood in the stock), but even with a reproduction it is easy to put the bottom part of the butt firmly on the shoulder so the barrel is high enough to sight along it without tilting your head.



But British muskets didn't have sights, right? Well... not the type of sights that modern weapons have, but there was that thing at the muzzle that people today call the bayonet lug. Eighteenth century military manuals call this the "sight." That's a pretty good indication of how it was expected to be used. And many surviving, regimentally-marked muskets (that is, weapons that we know left the armories and were used in the field) have a neat groove filed into the top of the breech for sighting along the barrel. It is unlikely that these were calibrated with any sophistication, but the original muskets give us clear evidence that aiming was important.

Alright, so they did have sights, and they were taught to aim. What about practice? It has been shown that soldiers in England during times of peace seldom fired with live ammunition ("ball cartridges"), instead practicing with blank cartridges (which included everything except the bullet).^[7] But when hostilities loomed in America, more time was spent "firing at marks,"

that is, target practice. Orderly books are replete with orders for soldiers, particularly recruits, to practice firing at marks. In late 1774 the commander-in-chief in Boston directed that *"The General has only the following particulars to recommend; first that the men be taught to take good aim, which if they do they will always level well."*^[8] One British officer in Boston described the practice in the opening days of 1775:

"The Regiments are frequently practiced at firing ball at marks. Six rounds pr man at each time is usually allotted for this practice. As our Regiment is quartered on a Wharf which Projects into the harbour, and there is very considerable range without any obstruction, we have fixed figures of men as large as life, made of thin boards, on small stages, which are anchored at a proper distance from the end of the Wharf, at which the men fire. Objects afloat, which move up and down with the tide, are frequently pointed out for them to fire at, and Premiums are sometimes given for the best shots, by which means some of our men have become excellent marksmen."^[9]



A visitor to Boston in March 1775 found it entertaining to watch the troops practicing:

"I saw a Regiment & the Body of marines, each by itself, firing at marks. A Target being set up before each company, the soldier of the regiment stepped out singly, took aim & fired, & the firing was kept up in this manner by the whole regiment till they had all fired ten rounds. The Marines fired by Platoons, by Companies, & sometimes by files, & made some general discharges, taking aim all the while at Targets the same as the Regiment. Lookt at five companies on the common firing at Targets. A little dog happened to be on the beach where the balls fell thickest, & continued to run backwards & forwards after the balls, being much diverted with the noise they made, & the dirt flying about; & kept doing so, till they had done firing their 10 rounds apiece without being hurt."^[10]

Of course, this doesn't mean that every soldier was a great marksman, or that in the pressure and confusion of battle every soldier aimed carefully. There are even comments about soldiers who appeared not to aim at all.^[11] But it is clear that the importance of aiming was recognized, taught and practiced in Britain's professional army – which should really come as no surprise. With many years of experience and experimentation in tactics and battlefield procedures, these career soldiers had figured out that firearms were more effective if aimed than if not. Why do people believe that they didn't aim? That remains a mystery.

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- [1] Richard Ernest Dupuy, *The Compact History of the Revolutionary War* (New York, NY: Hawthorn Books, 1963).
- [2] Robert Leckie, *The World Turned Upside Down: the Story of the American Revolution* (New York, NY: Putnam, 1972).
- [3] Hal Shelton, *General Richard Montgomery and the American Revolution: from Redcoat to Rebel* (New York University Press, 1994).
- [4] Eliot Clarke, *Land of the Free and Home of the Brave* (Pittsburgh, PA: Dorrance Publishing, 2003).
- [5] Mike Wright, *What They Didn't Teach You About the American Revolution* (New York, NY: Presidio Press, 2009).
- [6] *The Manual Exercise, As Ordered by His Majesty, in 1764....* The copy used here was printed by Hugh Gaine, New York, 1775. Although this document was very widely reprinted, the text of the manual exercise portion does not vary with the exception of typographical changes. Popular military writer Thomas Simes advised, "Great attention must be had in the instructing of recruits how to take aim, and that they properly adjust their ball." Simes, Thomas, *A Military Guide for Young Officers* (London, 1772) 196.
- [7] J. A. Houlding, *Fit for Service: The Training of the British Army 1715-1795* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).
- [8] General Orders, America. WO 36/1, The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, orders for 21 November 1774.
- [9] Frederick Mackenzie, *The Diary of Frederick Mackenzie* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930) 4. Mackenzie was a Lieutenant in the 23rd Regiment of Foot, the Royal Welch Fusiliers.
- [10] Robert Honyman. *Colonial Panorama, 1775: Dr. Robert Honyman's Journal for March and April*, Philip Radford, ed. (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1939), entries for 22 March and 25 March 1775. The "body of marines" was the two battalions of marines landed from British warships and formed into a land corps for service in Boston. "by files" refers to files of men, that is, men standing one behind the other when the corps is formed in two or three ranks.
- [11] An American officer at Fort Washington in November 1776 observed of some British soldiers firing on him, "...it is astonishing how even these blunt shooters could have missed us. But as we were ascending a considerable hill, they shot over us. I observed they took no aim, and that the moment of presenting and firing, was the same." Alexander Graydon, *Memoirs of a Life, Chiefly Passed in Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, PA: John Wyeth, 1811) 183. This passage is widely used as an example of poor British marksmanship, but could be an isolated case.



ADDITIONAL COMMENTS BY THE AUTHOR

Below are Don L. Hagist's replies to comments made by readers of this article and they shed additional light on the training and conduct of the British infantryman. They have been edited for space, with the author's permission, by Paul Loane. For a complete view of all the questions and comments, see the original article at <https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/08/the-aim-of-british-soldiers/>.

The myth in question deals specifically with how soldiers were trained; the myth quotes at the beginning talk about how British soldiers were taught, and about the manuals used. The actual source material presented, only a small portion of what is available on the subject, should be enough to fully dispel the myth. How well soldiers aim(ed) in battle, regardless of their training, is a much more complex subject, and not the subject addressed here.

As for the sight grooves, they certainly were not applied at the armory, but they are quite common (albeit not universal) on muskets with regimental markings as well as on many without. It's possible that all of these grooves were added by later owners; on the other hand, the Earl of Cavan's *New System of Military Discipline* (London, 1773; there was also a 1776 Philadelphia edition) recommends "...at the breech a small sight channel be made, for the advantage and convenience of taking better aim." So it's clear that some military officers were aware of the possibility.

I have run uphill/downhill roundball data through Sierra Bullets' Infinity 6 exterior ballistics software and found that at the battle distances of the Rev. War the shift in point of impact shooting uphill or downhill was negligible. That being said, in the heat of battle, especially with untrained troops, firing high was then – and is now – common. I can't recall the citation exactly but believe it was at Bunker Hill where officers were reminding men to aim low. I am told that officers still caution their men to aim low.

...the British army effectively threw out most of its infantry drills at the beginning of the war and created more fluid combat drills that put more emphasis on the bayonet rather than firing. The British light infantry officer, Colonel John Simcoe wrote in his book: -A Journal of the Operations of the Queen's Rangers from the end of the year 1777- that: *"it was the object to instill into the men that their superiority lay in the close fight and in the use of the bayonet"*

The primary infantry drill of the British army was 'loose files and American scramble' which created more fluid battles than probably had been seen in the 18th century, using more aggressive tactics. In most battles the British attempted to get to close quarters as quickly as possible, rather than prolonged exchanges of fire. This was primarily to try to bring about more decisive victories without the benefit of large numbers of cavalry in North America. But also because the British considered the Americans to be superior marksmen, and they considered themselves superior at close quarters, so they wished to create a melee as quickly as possible

I appreciate all of the excellent comments! Much as I would like to discuss some of them in detail, many stray from the topic of the article which is very strictly concerned with whether or not British soldiers were taught to aim. Effectiveness of aiming (or not aiming) on the battlefield is an entirely different subject, but studying that subject does require starting from the correct frame of reference, that is, soldiers were expected to aim.

That said, here are responses to some of the points made in [the readers'] comments...:

Tactics:

It is entirely true that British battlefield tactics in America were not the parade ground maneuvers taught in training. For the premier discussion of that subject see Matthew H. Spring, *With Zeal and Bayonets Only: The British Army on Campaign in North America, 1775-1783* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008). For my own credentials on the subject, refer to the author's acknowledgments.

That said, remember that the purpose of the formal, manual-of-arms training was to foster expert handling of the musket so that basic skills were second-nature when it was time to practice "loose files and American scramble." The well-trained soldier might not perform the prescribed manual of arms on the battlefield, but taking aim was likely to be habitual if it was what he had practiced on the parade ground.

Also bear in mind that heavy reliance on the bayonet did not take away the use of gunfire. The open-order formations favored by the British army from 1776 onward, with intervals between files ranging from 18 inches to several feet, were likely to encourage individual aiming rather than discourage it when compared to shoulder-to-shoulder volley firing.

Training of recruits:

The notion that recruits had no training with firearms is generally false. Wartime recruits were trained at depots in Chatham, Plymouth and Corke for anywhere from a few months to two or more years before being sent to America. Much as I hate to cite my own book, the best discussion of this can be found in Don N. Hagist, *British Soldiers, American War* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2012); even that book does not go into the level of detail available from primary sources.

Enlistment of criminals:

The VERY FEW men who chose enlistment over prison sentences were trained in exactly the same way as other recruits. Enlistment was a CHOICE offered to some men as an alternative to prison; with no duress involved, there was no need to treat these recruits differently. Refer to Stephen R. Conway, "The recruitment of criminals into the British army, 1775-81." *Historical Research*, lviii (May 1985) 46-58. For details on a few individuals, refer to [an article on my blog](#); the soldiers in question were enlisted in August 1776 but did not embark for America until February 1777, giving them several months of training before being sent overseas.

Impressment:

It was not legal for the British army to impress men until the middle of 1778, and it became illegal again in 1780; this too is discussed in detail in *British Soldiers, American War*. Even during the time that impressment was legal, very few men raised in this manner were sent to America. The first ones arrived in October 1779; of over 1300 recruits sent to America that year, only 70 were impressed men, and those were distributed among only six regiments. We don't have number for 1780, but it is clear that impressed men made up only a tiny fraction of the British army in America. It is possible that those men were poorly trained, but we have no specific information to know one way or the other.

Rate of fire:

The "3 to 4 rounds per minute" comes from live fire studies conducted during the late 18th century, but I don't have the details on hand. The firing was sustained for (I think) three minutes, and from that the per-minute rate is derived. The studies were done in idealized conditions.

Note also that the 1764 manual of arms has 15 "counts" from the order "prime and load" to returning to the priming position after pulling the trigger (beginning from the priming position, not from the shoulder). If the motions can be performed at the recommended one-second intervals, then the maximum rate of fire is four rounds per minute; but executing the motions at that pace, particularly handling the rammer, is challenging if it's possible at all.

Having spent some time as a reenactor myself, I will argue that with practice it is quite easy to fire four blank rounds per minute when rammers are not used. On the other hand, having been a reenactor, I do not recommend using reenactors as a measure for what professional soldiers in the 18th century could accomplish.

This is a very interesting comment [*"Many (Continental) used very accurate "squirrel" guns and picked off soldiers one by one, especially those British wearing epaulets on their uniform. They ran and hid in trees between attacks."*]. It shows how powerful popular legend is, in comparison to the genuine historical record. While the idea of hiding in trees and picking off soldiers one by one sounds effective, can we list the battles in which this sort of individual marksmanship was, in fact, effective? Let's try:

The retreat from **Concord**, April 1775: Modern studies have shown that British casualties were not particularly high compared to the numbers of militiamen involved and the number of shots probably fired. The British stayed largely on the roads because it afforded the fastest way to return to Boston, but it did leave them exposed.

Bunker Hill: No trees here, but the Americans were firing from behind cover at soldiers in the open. The number of British officer casualties was high, but that didn't win the battle and it's questionable how it influenced the campaign.

Saratoga: In the several battles and skirmishes in the closing days of this campaign, a good case can be made that marksmen made a difference.

King's Mountain: Everyone has rifles and trees here! But the American victory is caused by overwhelming force, not individual marksmanship.

Now take some American victories that influenced the course of the war, and ask whether individual marksmen played a significant role: **Trenton**? Nope. **Princeton**? Nope. **Charleston, 1776**? Nope. Any of the battles on the way to **Quebec** in 1775? Nope. **Great Bridge, VA**? Nope. **Monmouth** (if we call it an American victory)? Nope. Siege of **Yorktown**? Nope. **Rhode Island, 1778** (if we call it an American victory)? Nope. **Stony Point**? Nope. **Cowpens**? Nope.

Better not look at battles the Americans lost – the list is much longer, and clearly the outcomes were not affected by American marksmanship, or by British marksmanship either.

If we look at most engagements during the war, from large battles to small skirmishes, and compare the number of troops on each side to the number of casualties on each side, it is very difficult to make a case for either side having superior marksmanship, or for individual marksmanship having a strong influence on the outcome. The same is true for campaigns – is there a single one where one side gave up the campaign because too many men had been picked off one by one?

And, when the American army had the opportunity to organize and train at Valley Forge, look at the type of training they received. They weren't taught to climb trees and try to pick off enemy soldiers one by one. If that had been effective for the previous three years, why would they have abandoned it in favor of "classical" military training?

If you CAN show that American marksmanship was generally superior, and played a significant role in the outcome of the war, please do so! It'd be a great contribution to the literature on the war. My comments here are not meant to sound flippant, but to suggest reassessing the lore of American marksmanship in light of the actual events of the war.

...As for military doctrine, British tactics in America were based very closely on experience and lessons learned in the French & Indian War. In 1774, a year before hostilities broke out, General William Howe trained British regiments in England in fast-moving, open-order formations that became the norm during the 1775-1783 war in America. In 1771, a light infantry company was permanently added to the establishment of each British infantry regiment after the success of pro-tem light infantry corps used in the French & Indian War. And in 1769 the length of the standard British infantry musket (today called the Brown Bess) was shorted by 4 inches from the 1756 pattern that had been widely cut shorter during the French & Indian War.

In other words, the main changes in military doctrine between the late 1750s and the American Revolution was to institutionalize things that had been found successful during the French & Indian War. As for instructing soldiers to aim, that didn't change at all.

["Did the British infantry do more of their training in the British Isles or in North America? Also were the British Infantry train in 'Loose files and American scramble' or did they train in regular formations, and just extended them in a more rushed way prior to combat?"]. I cover a lot of this in my book *British Soldiers, American War*, but here's a few sweeping generalities:

- A British soldier's training in basic military knowledge like hygiene, posture, maintaining his clothing, and what have you began in the recruiting party that enlisted him. This was almost always in Great Britain.

- If the regiment he enlisted in was in Great Britain, he was sent directly to the regiment (after a few days or weeks with the recruiting party) for all further training.

- If the regiment was overseas when he enlisted, he was sent to a depot in Chatham (near London), Plymouth or Cork. There he and other recruits for his regiment received training in handling arms, formation marching, etc. A recruit spent anywhere from a few weeks to a couple of years at the depot, depending upon when convoys were ready to take recruits to their regiments overseas. Training continued even on the transports during the two- to four-month journey from Great Britain to America.

- Once the recruit joined his regiment, he was trained in that regiment's own tactical methods.

As for the open, fluid formations used in America, these were based on lessons learned during the French and Indian War and were developed in the early 1770s. When each regiment learned depends on their specific service. The 33rd Regiment is known to have

practiced these techniques in Ireland in the early 1770s. In 1774, General William Howe organized a training camp in Sarum, England, where he taught these techniques to men sent from regiments all over Great Britain – a “train the trainers” exercise so that these men could then teach the techniques to their regiments. So regiments were adopting these methods piecemeal as the threat of war loomed.

Howe formalized this tactical doctrine in Halifax in April and May of 1776, and it remained in use for the rest of the war. I don’t know the extent to which recruits at the depots in Great Britain were trained in these techniques; my assumption is that the depot training was focused on basic arms handling and close formation, which is essential to master before using the open formations successfully.

To answer the question as you asked it: in general British regiments were trained in the “Loose files and American scramble.” Some were trained in Great Britain before the war, some in America while preparing for campaigns. I believe that most individual soldiers learned these techniques after joining their regiments, and after having a solid foundation in the more traditional close-order marching.

[“I read documentation that stated that the British Soldier in peacetime only fired one live round a year in training. Also the British were noted as firing too high on occasions.”] The (probable) source of your information about the infrequency of training with live ammunition is clearly stated in the article (*Fit for Service* by J. A. Houlding). Also, notice that the article discusses the dramatic increase in practicing with live ammunition that began the year before war broke out; British commanders were keenly aware of the peacetime infrequent practice with live ammunition and took steps to mitigate the problem long before the fighting began. And the tendency to fire high is mentioned.

Modern shooters have widely different experiences with reproduction 1756 pattern and 1769 pattern British infantry muskets (the “long land” and “short land” “Brown Bess”); I’ve heard from people who testify to surprising accuracy and others who find them highly inaccurate. This article, though, is not intended to address the effectiveness of aimed fire, but rather to prove that aimed fire was trained; the quotes at the beginning of the article illustrate a widespread belief that British soldiers didn’t even attempt to aim, whereas primary sources show that they clearly did. Whether they hit what they aimed at is a different topic.

