

## The Rifle in the American Revolution

by John W. Wright

[courtesy: *American Historical Review*, Jan.1924; vol.29, no.2, pp.293-299]

The attention of the student of the American Revolutionary War is constantly drawn to the rifle as a military arm. In fact, one of the first acts of the Continental Congress, in 1775, was to call for companies of 'expert riflemen', and these companies were the beginning of the Continental Army.<sup>1</sup>

The American rifleman was picturesque in his round hat and hunting shirt, and his marksmanship compelled British officers and sergeants to lay aside their spontoons and halberds while on American service<sup>2</sup> – just as later, in South Africa, British officers abandoned their swords, and for the same reason. That he made excellent use of his weapon we are assured in many contemporaneous sources. One German officer characterized the rifleman as 'terrible'.<sup>3</sup> Another wrote that the best American riflemen could, in a good light and with no wind, hit a man's head at 200 yards and his body at 300.<sup>4</sup> We are told that the riflemen, when they joined the army near Boston in August 1775, gave an exhibition, in which a company, on a quick advance, placed their shots in seven-inch targets at 250 yards.<sup>5</sup>

Some very accurate shooting is described in the *Virginia Gazette* of September 9, 1775. Riflemen, bound for Boston, gave an exhibition. A man held between his knees a board five inches wide and seven inches long, with a paper bull's-eye the size of a dollar. A rifleman at sixty yards, without a rest, put eight bullets in succession through the bull's eye.<sup>6</sup>

The rifle had been introduced into America about 1700, when there was considerable immigration into Pennsylvania from Switzerland and that vicinity, the only part of the world at that time where it was in use. It was then short, heavy, clumsy, and little more accurate than the musket. But in America the gunsmiths made remarkable improvements, and by 1750 it had evolved into a long, slender, small-bore gun, with a calibre about .50 and taking balls of about 36 to the pound – a weapon of accuracy.<sup>7</sup> It was little known in New England, and it may be said to have been confined to Pennsylvania and the colonies south, particularly to the western or border regions.<sup>8</sup>

The standard military firearm of the period was the flint-lock musket, weighing about eleven pounds and measuring four feet nine inches without bayonet. Its calibre was about .75 or eleven gauge – that is, it would take a lead ball of eleven to the pound.<sup>9</sup> When fired horizontally from the shoulder it had a range of about 125 yards. At 100 yards, a good marksman might make up 40 percent of hits on a target the size of a man standing.<sup>10</sup>

The question naturally rises, why did the musket continue to be the standard firearm when the rifle was available? Why was a weapon that had not sufficient accuracy to give a reasonable number of hits on a man standing at 100 yards preferred to one that could at that range deliver a high percentage of hits on a target the size of a man's head?

The rifle was much slower than the musket, about three to one.<sup>11</sup> This was due to its laborious loading process. The bullet had to fit very tightly, to take the rifling, and so was forced in with an iron rod about six inches long and a wooden mallet, then driven home with the ramrod. When the piece was foul the process was especially slow. The musket, on the other hand, could be quickly loaded with a loosely fitting ball or balls. Another important difference was that the musket, being a standard military arm, was fitted with a bayonet, while the slender rifle barrel, unstandardized, had received no such attachment.

The musket and rifle were thus quite distinct weapons. The musket and bayonet were the weapons for the line of battle, where the target was not an individual but another line, and when the lines closed the bayonet was ready for use. Firearms were very sensitive to the weather; after long-continued or heavy rain they were useless, and lack of a bayonet was then fatal. To take advantage of the power of the rifle, fire must be opened at a longer range, and its accuracy utilized in aiming at individuals. It could not be used with the musket in the line of battle, for the smoke then prevented the rifleman from seeing his target, thus nullifying the principal advantage of the weapon.

Its slow loading and lack of a bayonet made the rifle weak against the advance of a determined enemy, so this weapon was best adapted to the light troops, which acted outside of the line of the battle. Firing from positions in woods and on rough ground, difficult for the rigid line of the period, they could retreat when pressed and avoid a hand-to-hand engagement. The qualities of the musket and rifle were such that they could not be used together, but they could, in the hands of separate bodies, be combined to their mutual advantage. This idea was expressed by an American military writer in 1811, who said that 'where the musket ends, the rifle begins'. He also noted that a rifle corps is distinct from any other species of troops and useless in close combat.<sup>12</sup>

At the beginning of the Revolution, England had no riflemen, and so called for Jäger in her German contingents. These were trained riflemen, recruited from hunters and gamekeepers. They wore a distinctive green uniform, and their orders in action were given on the hunting horn, instead of the drum, as in the line infantry. Among the Brunswickers serving with Burgoyne under General Riedesel, there was a battalion of Jäger, over 650 strong.<sup>13</sup> The Hessians had one Jäger company with the contingent that arrived with de Heister in August 1776, and another arrived with Knyphausen in October. These two companies proved so useful that more were called for, and the Landgrave furnished five companies, one of them mounted, about a thousand rifles in all. Other companies came from Hanau and Anspach.<sup>14</sup>

The Jäger rifle was by no means the equal of the American. It was short-barrelled, and took a ball of nineteen to the pound. The fixed sights were set for 100 yards. With its large ball and a small powder charge, this rifle was of low velocity, high trajectory, strong recoil, limited accurate range, and slow fire. It was the same gun that had been introduced into America in 1700. It had no bayonet.<sup>15</sup>

In 1776 Captain Patrick Ferguson, of the British 70th Foot, invented a breech-loading rifle, which could fire four aimed shots per minute.<sup>16</sup> In 1777 he was sent to America with one hundred officers and men, armed with the new rifle and uniformed in the rifleman's green.<sup>17</sup> With him came special instructions, authorizing him to select men from the various regiments. General Howe was at this time the chief authority on light infantry, and this request seems to have annoyed him. But the corps was formed, and went into action for the first time at Elk Head, August 25, 1777; and it covered the advance of Knyphausen's division at the Battle of Brandywine, where the value of the breech-loader was proved in a striking manner. Ferguson operated alongside the Queen's Rangers, a Loyalist light corps; but his men did not have to expose themselves in loading, and so lost only two men, while the Rangers lost seventeen. Ferguson's corps soon disappeared, being incorporated into the light companies of the various battalions. Ferguson was promoted to major in 1779, and, with the temporary rank of lieutenant-colonel, was put in command of the 'American Volunteers', a corps of Loyalists from New York and New Jersey, armed with the Ferguson rifle. This corps accompanied Clinton to Charleston and took part in the Battle of King's Mountain, where Ferguson met his end.<sup>18</sup>

The best known corps raised by the British among the Loyalists, such as Tarleton's Legion and Simcoe's Queen Rangers, were not armed with the rifle. Simcoe, in his *Journal*, states that the riflemen in Virginia under Lafayette had no bayonets, which 'permitted their opponents to take liberties with them'.<sup>19</sup>

Probably the most famous corps of riflemen in the Continental service was Morgan's regiment, organized in June 1777, from picked men of the entire army. This regiment served until July 1778, when it was disbanded.<sup>20</sup> Corps like those of Marion, Sumter and Pickens were probably armed with the rifle, as this weapon was most suited to partisan warfare. The French brought no riflemen to America.

It seems that, while the American rifleman was a most efficient soldier individually, and while rifle corps were of the highest value, nevertheless the characteristics of their arm confined their activities to a secondary place. On October 26, 1776, the Secretary of the Board of War wrote to the Committee of Public Safety of Maryland with reference to raising a rifle company. He said that the company would be much more serviceable if armed with muskets, as 'there is a superabundance of riflemen in the army. Were it in the power of the Congress to supply muskets, they would speedily reduce the number of rifles, and replace them with the former, as they are more easily kept in order, can be fired oftener, and have the advantage of bayonets'.<sup>21</sup>

In 1777 General Wayne wrote to the Board of War that he was determined to have all his old rifles exchanged for muskets and bayonets, as experience had taught that the rifles were not fit for the field; he wished to keep only a few rifles, for issue to real marksmen. In 1778 he wrote again, [Note: Omissions indicated by dots, are as in the original text]

'I don't like rifles - I would almost as soon face an Enemy with a good Musket and Bayonet without amunition - as with amunition without a Bayonet; for altho' there are not many instances of bloody bayonets yet I am Confident that one bayonet keeps off an Other...The enemy knowing the defenseless state of our Riflemen rush on - they fly - mix with or pass thro' the Other Troops and communicate fears that is ever Incident to a retiring Corps - this Would not be the Case if the Riflemen had bayonets - but it would be still better if good muskets and bayonets were put into the hands of good Marksmen and Rifles entirely laid aside. For my own part, I never wish to see one - at least without a bayonet.'<sup>22</sup>

In 1808 General Graham of North Carolina, writing of the southern campaigns of the Revolutionary War, said that it was unfortunate that there were no other kind of militia there than riflemen. He quoted Daniel Morgan, the great rifleman, as having said to him, referring to the campaign of 1777 in New York; 'My riflemen would have been of little service if they had not always had a line of Musquet and Bayonette men to support us; it is this that gives them confidence. They know, if the enemy charges them they have a place to retreat to and are not beat clear off.'<sup>23</sup>

On August 17, 1777, Henry Laurens wrote to Colonel William Thompson, commenting favorably upon the latter's request for authority to replace half his rifles with muskets and bayonets. It seems to have been the colonel's intention to have rifle companies in the regiment which he could use for skirmishing, thus combining in one regiment the two species of troops – light (rifles) and line (muskets).<sup>24</sup> General Stephen, on October 17, 1776, thought it would be decidedly for the good of the service to replace the rifles of the 4th Virginia with muskets and bayonets;<sup>25</sup> and Colonel McIntosh, while organizing the 1st Continental Battalion of Georgia in February 1776, reported apologetically that he had been compelled to arm one of the eight companies with rifles because muskets were not available.<sup>26</sup>

General Peter Muhlenberg shows us that for general serviceability the rifle was inferior to the musket. He wrote to Washington from Winchester, February 23, 1777, as follows: 'I must trouble your Excellency with another petition in behalf of my regiment. The whole regiment consists at present of riflemen; and the campaign we have made to the southward last summer fully convinced me that on a march, where soldiers are without tents, and their arms continually exposed to the weather, rifles are of little use. I would therefore request your Excellency to convert my regiment into musketry.' Finally, the opinion of the commander-in-chief is expressed in his reply to Muhlenberg, in which the staff officer writing in the name of Washington says: 'His Excellency, satisfied with the justice of your observation about rifles, has determined to have as few used as possible. He will put muskets into the hands of all those battalions that are not very well acquainted with rifles.'<sup>27</sup>

The inherent weakness of the rifle appears from the above quotations. Too slow in loading, and without a bayonet, the rifleman could not meet a charge. His service was restricted to rough country, with a line of retreat always open. It also appears that the Americans had more riflemen than they could use. They required more men so armed and trained that they could meet the British soldier on an equality.

#### **Foot-Notes**

1. *Journals of Congress*, I, 82.
2. Hamilton, *History of the Grenadier Guards* (London, 1874); Stevens, *Gen. Howe's Orderly Book* (London, 1890), p.210.
3. *Letters of Brunswick and Hessian Officers* (trans. Stone, Albany, 1891), p.90.
4. Kephart, 'Birth of the American Army', in *Penn. German Magazine*, VIII, 373.
5. Thacher, *Military Journal* (Boston, 1827), p.33.
6. Moore, *Diary of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1860), p.121.
7. Sawyer, *Firearms in American History* (Boston, 1910), II, 32-38; Freemantle, *The Book of the Rifle* (London, 1901), pp.11, 28-30.
8. Sawyer, II, 80.
9. Greener, *The Gun and its Development* (London, 1881), p.106.
10. Sawyer, II, 102.
11. Freemantle, p.24.
12. Hoyt, *Practical Instructions for Military Officers* (Greenfield, Mass., 1811), p.111.
13. *Journal of DuRoy the Elder* (Univ. of Pa. Press, 1911), p.1.
14. Lowell, *The Hessians and other German Auxiliaries* (New York, 1884), p.107.
15. Sawyer, III, 26, 28.
16. Id, II, 138.
17. *American mss. in the Royal Institution*, I, 93.
18. Wilkins, *Some British Soldiers in America* (London, 1914), p.152.
19. Simcoe, *Journal of the Operations of the Queen's Rangers* (Exeter, 1787), pp.2, 167.
20. Graham, *Life of Morgan* (New York, 1856), pp.123, 215.
21. Force, *American Archives*, fifth ser., II, 1247.
22. Stille, *Maj.-Gen. Anthony Wayne*, p.118.

23. W.A.Graham, *Gen.Joseph Graham and his Papers* (Raleigh, 1904), p.135.
24. Burnett, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress* (Washington, 1923), II, 452.
25. Force, *American Archives*, fifth ser., II, 1092.
26. Id., fourth ser., IV, 1159-1160.
27. H.A.Muhlenberg, *Life of Maj.-Gen.Peter Muhlenberg* (Philadelphia, 1849), pp.74, 354.