



Colorado Society Color Guard

Understanding Firelock Musket Drills & Terminology

As our Color Guard grows in size and our participation in different events expands our knowledge and training must expand also. In the past the COSSAR Color Guard performed Posting of the Colors for SAR events and a few other organizations and parades. The Color Guard recently has had the honor of appearing at Living History events, Historical Societies and school presentations with all these venues requesting or allowing the use of black powder in live fire demonstrations. The goal of writing this paper is to provide the training tools to color guard members participating in programs or events involving flintlocks and live fire demonstrations so they can perform as historically accurate as possible and meet the NSSAR objectives of being an Historical, Educational and Patriotic Organization.

Here are a few ways I hope to meet these new challenges. First, I would like to present a history of the pre-Revolutionary War drill manuals and how they evolved into the first U.S. Army Drill Manual. Secondly, I will try to clear up some confusing commands and terminology of the period. Finally, I will issue to each member of the Color Guard Handbook with standard operating procedures (S.O.P.s) for all programs we have done and programs we will do in the future.

History and Evolution of Musket Drill Manuals

The military in the American Colonies during the Jamestown era were drilled in the use of matchlock muskets. Their manuals reflected the need to keep the weapon at arms length because you held a match in your left hand to light a match cord on the weapon. This would light the pan of black powder that was primed from several wooden flasks which hung on a bandoleer across your chest. Some drill manuals as late as 1745 still used a lot of the motions going back to the matchlock. With the introduction of the lighter flintlock muskets, European powers quickly rewrote their manual exercises to take advantage of lighter weapons, no lighted match cords and self contained paper cartridges instead of wooden flasks. This meant that priming and loading movements could be performed closer to the body and considerably quicker.

From the French and Indian War through the early days of the War of Independence, the Continental Army along with militias were made up of regional and county regiments. These regiments trained and drilled using the “Norfolk Discipline” by William Windham of Norfolk County England in 1759 and the newer British “Exercise Manual as ordered by His Majesty, in 1764.” The New England region preferred Thomas Pickering’s “An Easy Plan of Discipline for a Militia” which was written just before the hostilities in 1775. There were also many local variations of these drills. During the early days of the war these loosely knit groups used hit and run guerrilla tactics and

topography to hold off the British. They had no training in the use of bayonets, European linear tactics or standardized discipline required to stand toe-to-toe with the British.

It was Benjamin Franklin who realized Baron Von Steuben had skills the Continental Army could use. Von Steuben's European Military background could help the Continentals fight the British using tactics and training he received from Frederick the Great in the Seven Years War. Although Von Steuben was guilty of padding his resume, he proved at Valley Forge to be a great asset to the Army. After reviewing the troops at Valley Forge in 1778 Von Steuben realized that sweeping changes in training in the middle of a conflict with Britain would be time consuming, if not disastrous. Working in cooperation with Major General Nathanael Greene and Lt. Colonel Alexander Hamilton, Von Steuben instituted a standardized discipline that the troops could adapt to quickly. Von Steuben formed a model company from George Washington's Guard of the Commander-in-Chief to demonstrate the new drill. As they marched and trained in the parade grounds of Valley Forge, other units watched and became inspired. There was a frenzy of excitement that spread over Valley Forge. The training company was split up and used to train other units. Soon every one was marching and training with a new sense of confidence.

While doing this Von Steuben began writing the new drill manual in French which was translated by his staff for use by the Continental Army. Officers and enlisted men were familiar with the British "Exercise Manual for his Majesty in 1764" so Von Steuben adapted it for use by the Continental Army with all the unnecessary words and movements removed. Because the war was very much in doubt, the Continental Army needed the training manuals immediately for distribution to the entire army. The "REGULATIONS" lacked a lot of the details concerning the movements in Chapter V "Of the Instruction of Recruits" and that information was probably verbally transferred to officers and noncommissioned officers. Another problem was that the British Exercise Manual itself left out explanations of a lot of the movements so small portions of the French Manual and the Prussian Manual were added to the "REGULATIONS" written at Valley Forge. His staff being French and Thomas Pickering being on the Board of War may have had a lot to do with additions to the manual.

Von Steubens "REGULATIONS for the Order and Discipline of the TROOPS of the UNITED STATES" by BARON DE STEUBEN was approved by congress on March 29, 1779. The final published book cover was blue and was referred to as "the Blue Book".

I have used several publications and a DVD to try and fill in the missing explanations of the movements. The first and probably most read book is the Dover Press Publication "Baron Von Steuben's Revolutionary War Drill Manual" A facsimile reprint of the 1794 Edition of the "REGULATIONS for the Order and Discipline of the TROOPS of the UNITED STATES" by BARON DE STEUBEN ISBN0-486-24934-4. This book is an unabridged version of the New Edition reprinted in 1794. This is an actual copy with the old type letters and colonial English with no modern explanations. Because Von Steuben's original and the facsimile copy by Dover Press are hard to read, several other books are available with notes and illustrations to help explain the movements. The Valley Forge National Park uses "The Exercise of Arms in the Continental Army" by Capt. Ernest W. Peterkin, USNR (Ret.) ISBN 0-919316-94-8. This book is by far the best researched and a definitive source for information concerning the training of the Continental Army. Capt. Peterkin goes into great detail of the evolution of colonial drills and compares them to Von Steubens drill. He also describes unexplained movements and includes photographs to show foot and hand placement in the movements. Unfortunately this book is no longer in print and is hard to find. As far as I know there are only two copies in Colorado. I have one and the U.S. Air Force Academy has one. The soft covered book "The American Soldier of the Revolutionary War" includes excerpts from Baron Von Steuben's Regulations of 1778 edited by A.N. Shultz. ISBN: 0-913150-47-9.

It is well written, accurate with illustrations and is still available most anywhere. The SAR Guardsman “How to do it” publication is a great source of information and a beginning point to standardize and simplify Color Guard duties. Luckily I bought several copies a while back for the COSSAR Color Guard. In the past the NSSAR website has sections available but at this time the Color Guard Committee link is down. The best DVD I have seen to date is “Von Steuben’s Continentals by Lionheart. It is available at Godwin’s and the SAR Merchandise online store. This DVD really does a good job demonstrating the Prussian’s regulations and camp life of the Continental Army.

Explanation of Chapter V “Of the Instruction of Recruits“ Von Steuben’s REGULATIONS

Chapter V covers all aspects of training a recruit. There are three parts that cover drills for firelocks. The first part is “The Manual Exercise” on page 16. It covers the 27 commands and movements. This is the most common section reprinted. Keep in mind that the Manual Exercise was for training raw recruits in open ranks with wood replacing flints and cartridges. The first four commands cover how to fire a flintlock, command 5 through 13 cover priming and loading a flintlock. Command 14 through 17 are for Parade exercise from a shouldered musket; command 18 through 21 are for protecting your musket from the weather and fixing your bayonet. The last commands 22 through 27 are for progression of the musket across the body.

The next two parts deal with priming, loading and firing firelocks in closed ranks on the battlefield. Closed ranks are just what they sound like. On the command “REAR RANK CLOSE TO THE FRONT” “MARCH” “The rear rank closes to within a common pace or two feet of the front rank.” The ranks are shoulder to shoulder. This is why it is important to execute the movements precise and close to the body.

The second part “Explanation of Priming and Loading, as performed in the Firings” pg. 26 covers priming and loading a musket in closed rank on the battlefield. This part first mentions “come to the recover” where the piece is brought down to the left breast then down to the priming position. “COME TO THE RECOVER” is the same movement as “MAKE READY” with out cocking the piece.

The third part “Position of each Rank in the Firings” pg. 28 & 29 deals with firing by rank. The command of “FRONT RANK MAKE READY”, “TAKE AIM”, and “FIRE” is given, then the command “REAR RANK MAKE READY, TAKE AIM”, “FIRE”.

Commands and Terminology

At this point I would like to clarify some of the confusion in the commands and terminology used during Color Guard duty. First I will clarify the use of the command “POISE FIRELOCK” versus “MAKE READY.” The term Poise Firelock is used in The Manual Exercise for recruits in open ranks for safety. The piece is brought down directly in front of the face then the command to cock firelock is given. It is also used in the command “PRESENT ARMS”.

“Priming and Loading as performed in the Firings” on page 26 explains the movements for priming and loading from the shouldered position in closed ranks to load a piece in preparation of firing a volley. On the command of “PRIME AND LOAD” The flintlock is brought down from the shoulder to the left breast (come to the recover) then down to the priming position.

“Position of Each Rank in the Firings” on page 28 & 29 explains the movements in firing by rank. At the command “FRONT RANK MAKE READY” the piece is brought

down from the shoulder to the left breast and cocked waiting for the command “TAKE AIM” and finally “FIRE”. Using the command “MAKE READY” eliminates the command “COCK FIRELOCK” as used in “POISE FIRELOCK”. The SAR Guardsman “How to do it” publication uses the command “POISE FIRELOCK” during Color Guard Salutes. This seems to be the most common approach to the Flintlock Salute. Von Steuben’s REGULATIONS does not address firelock Salutes.

AS far as Color Guard duties involving Salutes, the use of POISE FIRELOCK will be just fine as in the Instruction paper “Firing Commands for Color Guard Salutes”. As far as Living History Events, reenactments and public and school demonstrations the use of the command “PRIME AND LOAD” as in “Priming and Loading as performed in the Firings” then use of the command “FRONT RANK MAKE READY” “TAKE AIM” “FIRE” would be period correct and considerably more interesting to the spectators.

One other clarification in terminology is the use of the term FLINTLOCK versus FIRELOCK. The use firelock references all fire arm locks clear back to the hand cannon and matchlock. During this period it was not uncommon to see more than one kind of fire arm lock on the battlefield. For example you might have a matchlock and a wheel lock side-by-side or a wheellock, snaplock and a flintlock. In this case, having a term as firelock would cover all arms on the field. In all the training manuals of the period they refer to “FIRELOCK”. I can not find any thing that explains the difference in using the terms flintlock and firelock or even when the first time flintlock was ever used. Von Steubens “REGULATIONS” does not use the term flintlock.

One more point to cover is the commands “PRESENT ARMS” and "ADVANCE ARMS. The term “ARMS” is used in situations where commands involve multiple types of weapons such as Swords and Espontoons.

Conclusion

For our Color Guard to keep moving ahead and improving, I have three recommendations to put before you:

1. Form a three man squad to demonstrate the Manual Exercise. There would be one as an NCO giving commands and two trainees. Performing the Prussians Manual Exercise will take a commitment of time to train as a group.
2. Form a small fife and drum corps of at least one fife and one drum.
3. We need to generate a way to financially support these programs through donations or grants.

I have written four training papers to help standardize movements involving the use of black powder at events we are involved with. The first is a break down of Von Steuben’s “Manual Exercise” to be done with wood replacing the flint and cartridge. The second paper I modified “The Manual Exercise” for Living History and school demonstrations that permit the use of black powder. The original exercise starts with a ½ cocked musket ready to practice fire where the modified version you can demonstrate the actual priming and loading first then fire the musket and proceed through the remaining movements. Third, “Priming and Loading as performed in the Firings”. This paper explains the commands for demonstrating a front rank volley beginning with unloaded firelocks. If rifled muskets are involved the command “FRONT RANK MAKE READY” will be given when all muskets are shouldered.

The fourth paper “Firing Commands for Color Guard Salutes” This is basically the same as the SAR version except for these changes:

The SAR Firing Commands on page 23 beginning with the second command of “COCK YOUR FIRELOCK”. Von Steuben dropped the use of your in all commands. It should read “COCK FIRELOCK”.

The Fifth command “LOAD and FIRE” should read “PRIME AND LOAD”

Also the SAR Salute Guidelines fails to mention that all commands and movements up to closing the pan are to be executed together. **“When the pans are shut, make a small pause and cast about together; then the loading and shouldering motions are to be done as quickly as possible.”**

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For Color Guard Salutes we will use the training paper “Firing Commands for Color Guard Salutes”. This is basically the same as the SAR version except for these changes:

1. The SAR Firing Commands on page 23 beginning with the second command of “COCK YOUR FIRELOCK”. (Von Steuben dropped the use of “YOUR” in all commands. It should read “COCK FIRELOCK”.)
2. The Fifth command “LOAD and FIRE” should read “PRIME AND LOAD”
3. The SAR Salute Guidelines fails to mention that all commands and movements up to closing the pan are to be executed together. **“When the pans are shut, make a small pause and cast about together; then the loading and shouldering motions are to be done as quickly as possible.”**

Respectfully Submitted,

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