

UNIT 3 BIG IDEA

SOLDIERS OF THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

Soldiers from multiple armies fought in the Revolutionary War. Whether they fought for the Continental Army, British Army, French Army, or the Hessian Army, each had their own personal story. Don Troiani's paintings can help bring these soldiers' stories to life. But who were these soldiers of the Revolutionary War and how were their experiences different from and similar to one another's?

Daily Life of a Soldier during the Revolutionary War

Soldiers, regardless of which army they belonged to, had a daily life that was defined by routine, fatigue, and preparation for battle. The day usually began at, or just before dawn, with a small breakfast. If on campaign, a soldier marched all day with a heavy load to carry. This might have included his weapon, haversack, knapsack, cartridge box, and other personal items including a cup, bowl, spoon, canteen, and if lucky, an extra blanket.

In camp, a soldier usually spent eight hours or more practicing military drills and doing labor necessary for the maintenance of the army, such as foraging for food or chopping firewood. Once these tasks and duties were done, the hungry soldier would finally be allowed time to cook food alongside other members of his "mess," a group of 6 to 8 soldiers who cooked together and shared a tent. Soldiers enjoyed down time by playing marbles and cards, rolling dice, and playing team games. As the sun set, a typical soldier would want to do nothing more than sleep, but the unlucky might be called to guard duty in shifts through the night.

The average soldier who fought in the Revolutionary War used a flintlock musket. These weapons could be loaded quickly (3-4 times per minute), but were inaccurate compared to rifles, which have grooves in their barrels to help the ammunition fly in a straight line. Rifles, however, were more expensive to make, took longer to load, and often could not mount a bayonet — a sharp blade used when the enemy was at arm's length. Soldiers who carried muskets often fought in lines at close range, meaning that they were about 100 yards from their opponent. Muskets typically weighed between 10 and 12 pounds and fired a one-ounce lead ball. Some Continental, British, and Hessian soldiers carried rifles that could accurately hit targets up to 300 yards away. In addition, some soldiers, especially those who fought on horseback, carried pistols and sabers. Officers often carried swords and spear-like weapons called spontoons as signs of rank.

All of the armies that fought in the Revolutionary War consisted of regiments made up of smaller units called companies. Most regiments were made up of infantrymen, or foot soldiers. Infantry regiments often included companies of specialized soldiers, such as British Army grenadiers, who were the tallest, strongest men in the army and often led attacks. Armies also featured regiments of artillery, soldiers responsible for moving and operating cannons, and dragoons, soldiers who were equipped to fight both on horseback and on foot.

Continental Soldiers

American soldiers came from all walks of life and had different reasons for joining the Continental Army. For many young men, enlisting not only gave them steady employment, but also the opportunity for excitement, adventure and promises of land and cash bonuses. Others were spurred by a passionate belief in the ideals of the Revolution and a strong sense of duty to defend their community.

Soldiers came from all 13 colonies, though more came from the North, where the eligible population was more densely concentrated. Most men who served were between the ages of 15 and 40, with the average age in the early 20's. Before enlistment, these men had been tradesmen, farm hands, laborers, and more. While many of the soldiers were

of European descent, the army included at least a dozen other ethnicities and many African American and Native American soldiers as well.

Before the Revolutionary War, each colony (with the exception of Pennsylvania) had its own government-regulated militia. When the war began, the Continental Congress established the Continental Army, made up of soldiers who enlisted for no more than a year. Soldiers planned to return to their vocation when their service ended. In 1777, as the war dragged on and it became clear that more soldiers with consistent military experience were needed, Congress authorized soldiers to enlist in the army for three years or "for the duration" of the conflict. As a result, soldiers felt they were part of a professional army and often formed close bonds with their fellow soldiers.

Continental soldiers wore many different uniforms during the Revolutionary War. At the beginning of the war, uniforms varied in color and design, based on where the soldiers came from. Later in the war, a general order attempted to standardize all Continental Army regimental coats to blue.

DID YOU KNOW?

Sanitation was a huge concern during the Revolutionary War even though the negative consequences of poor hygiene were not fully known at the time. For each soldier killed in battle, nine died of disease, mostly from a lack of sanitation and cleanliness.

The British Soldier

The British Army that landed in New York in 1776 included men, women, and children from across the British Isles and Europe. The majority of British soldiers joined the army in their late teens or early 20's, sometimes after having worked in another occupation. Enlisted soldiers typically came from the lower ranks of society, including farm laborers, weavers, and shoemakers. Soldiers were drawn from regions in England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and many other European nations. Employment with the British Army offered a lifetime of steady pay with a **pension** and men joined voluntarily.

The British Army was purposely kept small during peacetime, but when the war in America began, recruitment increased. Many British soldiers who served in America were new to the army, not battle-hardened veterans. Unlike the Continental Army, joining the British Army was considered a career move. British soldiers received more training than soldiers in the Continental Army, especially at the beginning of the war. British soldiers who were married often brought their families with them overseas. Approximately ten percent of British soldiers in New York in 1776 arrived with their wives and children.

British soldiers who fought in the Revolutionary War are often called "redcoats" because of their uniform color. When the conflict began, American Revolutionaries came up with negative names for these soldiers, based on that coloring, including "lobsters" and "bloody backs."

The Hessian Soldier

In the 1700s, the country of Germany that we know today did not exist. Instead, it consisted of small nations or "principalities" that shared a common language and culture. Because principalities were in frequent conflict with each other, each maintained a powerful and well-trained army. To offset the cost of these conflicts and to support internal programs at home, the German dukes and princes who ran these principalities often hired out their trained soldiers to other countries for large sums of money. As conflict in the American colonies escalated, Britain, with its small peacetime army spread around the globe, decided to hire regiments of German soldiers to fight in America. Though they are often referred to as "Hessians" because more than half came from the principalities of Hesse-Cassel and Hesse-Hanau, these soldiers also came from five other states. About 20,000 Hessians served in the Revolutionary War, plus 10,000 soldiers from other states, such as Brunswick and Anspach-Bayreuth. These soldiers were admired and feared by both the Americans and the British for their toughness, discipline, and their supposed reputation for stealing.

Recruitment of soldiers varied from state to state. All men were strongly urged to enlist, especially the younger sons of poorer landless families, who made up the bulk of the infantry regiments. The pay for a soldier was higher than that of a servant or unskilled worker. Hessian soldiers are often referred to as mercenaries - soldiers who are hired and make money in return for their service. But the ordinary Hessian soldier was not a soldier of fortune. These soldiers were serving in the army of their prince and had little choice on where they were rented out to fight. They received no bonuses for being sent to fight in America. In addition, Hessians killed in action were treated as lost property and their princes, not their families, received payments from King George for their lives.

Soldiers in certain Hessian units wore tall brass caps decorated with insignia of their prince. These soldiers, known as grenadiers, fought with hand grenades. Other soldiers called fusiliers used light muskets and were able to move quicker due to their light equipment. Both these groups of soldiers wore tall brass caps that made them appear taller and more threatening to the opposing army.

The French Soldier

Though France had recently lost its North American colonies to the British at the end of the Seven Years' War, they remained a global power in the 1770's. In 1775, when the first shots of the Revolutionary War were fired at Lexington and Concord, the French looked at the rebellion in Britain's North American colonies as an opportunity for revenge and to reestablish themselves in this part of the world. In addition, many people in France were deeply engaged in the intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment and had sympathy for the ideals that inspired colonists to rebel against the British monarch. At the beginning of the war, France secretly sent shipments of weapons and uniforms to the Continental Army. However, they refused to become officially involved until the American Revolutionaries proved themselves against the British. Following the major American victory at Saratoga, New York in 1777, France signed a Treaty of Alliance with the United States and provided the young nation with money, soldiers, ships, and supplies to battle the British.

Inspired by the ideals of the Revolution, independent Frenchmen like Marquis de Lafayette traveled to America to join the war effort in 1777, months before the Battle of Saratoga. Officers in the upper classes of society, familiar with Enlightenment ideas, were also eager to help the Americans in their quest to establish a nation ruled by the people. However, the average French soldier was motivated only partially, if not at all by revolutionary ideals, but by money and a hope of a better life. In the years leading up to the Revolutionary War, a series of poor harvests caused hunger and poverty for many French farmers. Army recruiters took advantage of this situation and focused their efforts on the French countryside by offering young men with few prospects a chance to serve in the army. Recruiters told tales of adventures and travel, offering large sign-up bonuses. When accepting a place in the army, men signed up for the standard term of enlistment, which was eight years.

Don Troiani's detailed studies of the soldiers who fought in these armies and his depictions of them in battle help us to imagine what their experiences in the Revolutionary War were like. Explore Don Troiani's paintings and examine what life was like for these soldiers!