

The Musket Drill Baron Frederich Von Steuben Used to Train The Continental Army



(Adopted from a National Park Service article)

When they faced hardened British veterans in the battles that preceded Valley Forge, the Americans were at a disadvantage because they did not have a standard drill manual. When the new drill master, Baron von Steuben arrived in camp in February 1778 to train the army, he immediately recognized that Washington's men were committed to their cause, but needed more military order. Accordingly, Steuben explained to the dedicated citizen soldiers why a training program was necessary instead of forcing the soldiers to submit to the harsh discipline that ruled European armies of the day.

Von Steuben believed that success on the battlefield went hand in hand with a professional attitude. Before he began to teach the continental soldiers the new manual of arms, Steuben instilled in the boisterous men, the notion that a soldier's bearing echoed a respect for his trade and attention to the task at hand. According to Steuben, a soldier under orders must remain silent and obedient: he "... must not Stir his hands, blow his nose, or much less talk." Within a few months, the dutiful army at Valley Forge was marching with newfound precision and crisply executing Steuben's manual of arms.

These new military skills served Washington's veterans well. The Continental Army forced the British to retreat at the battle of Monmouth, New Jersey in June 1778, and fought with skill in the southern campaigns that led to the victory at Yorktown in 1781. The "relish for the trade of soldiering" that Steuben inspired in the men also enabled the army, despite continuing hardships and spiraling citizen apathy, to stick single-mindedly to their task until they secured independence in 1783.

The commands of the Steuben musket drill seem too slow and deliberate to modern ears to be efficient use in a battle situation. However, though proper execution of the training commands, the soldiers became a well-synchronized unit. Speed came with practice. In the stress of battle, officers gave shortened combat commands, and Washington's men could fire coordinated volleys of musket fire every 15 seconds.

The Thirteen Commands Von Steuben Taught to Load and Fire a Musket

(These commands would be given by an officer to the soldiers when they are carrying their muskets on their left shoulders)

1. "Half-cock Firelock" – The soldier pulls the musket cock back one notch and opens the steel frizzen.
2. "Handle cartridge." - The soldier slaps his cartridge box to settle the powder in the cartridges. He grabs one cartridge, tears it open with his teeth, and places the open cartridge under his chin to protect it from any falling moisture.
3. "Prime." – The soldier places a small amount of powder in the pan.
4. "Shut Pan." – Soldier shuts the steel pan to hold the powder in the pan and casts the musket about in order to place the cartridge and ball down the barrel.
5. "Charge with cartridge." – Soldier dumps powder down the barrel and then places the musket ball down in the barrel (NO balls are to be carried into a reenactment. ONLY powder-filled cartridges.)
6. "Draw rammer." – Soldier draws the ramrod out.

7. "Ram down cartridge." – Soldier rmas musket ball down securely on top of the powder. (Reenators only ram powder if they use ramrods at all on the field.)
8. "Return rammer." – Soldier returns the ramrod to its place beneath the barrel.
9. "Shoulder firelock." – Soldier holds musket steady on the left shoulder.
10. "Poise firelock." – Soldier moves his firelock to his right shoulder in the ready position.
11. "Full-cock firelock." – Soldier pulls musket bock b ack to second position.
12. "Take Aim." – Soldier levels musket.
13. "Fire." – Soldier fires the musket.