

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL JONES



by
CLAYTON E. CRAMER

HISTORY

Legend and truth often differ dramatically. A firearm historian digs into the literature to see just how good American marksmen really were during the Revolutionary War.

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We have all grown up with an image of the American Revolution—wily American marksmen behind trees and stone walls, picking off formations of British soldiers in scarlet uniforms at outrageous distances. It's a charming idea, but myth and history aren't the same thing. So, just how good *were* they?

Until very recently, historians assumed that the American colonists were crack shots. David Ramsay's 1789 *History of the American Revolution* observed: "For the defence of the colonies, the inhabitants had been, from their early years, enrolled in companies,

and taught the use of arms." Ramsay also observed, "Europeans, from their being generally unacquainted with fire arms are less easily taught the use of them than Americans, who are from their youth familiar with these instruments of war ..."

Richard Frothingham's 1903 *History*

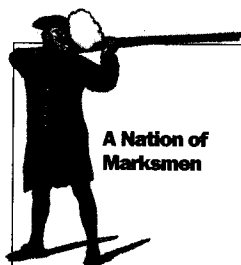
of the Siege of Boston described the high quality of marksmanship among ordinary Americans: "[A] martial spirit had been excited in the frequent trainings of the minute-men, while the habitual use of the fowling-piece [shotgun] made these raw militia superior to veteran troops in aiming the musket." Frothingham's account of the Battle of Bunker Hill emphasized the tremendous effectiveness of the militia in cutting down the advancing British soldiers:

"Many were marksmen, intent on cutting down the British officers; and when one was in sight, they exclaimed, 'There! See that officer!' 'Let us have a shot at him!'—when two or three would fire at the same moment. They used the fence as a rest for their pieces, and the bullets were true to their message."

According to Frothingham, British journals sought to explain the enormous loss of life at the Battle of Bunker Hill as evidence of both uncommon valor by British troops, and remarkable shooting by the Americans:

"Attempts were made to account for the facts that so many of the British, and so few of the Americans, fell. One officer writes of the former, that the American rifles 'were peculiarly adapted to take off the officers of a whole line as it marches to an attack.' Another writes, 'That every rifleman was attended by two men, one of each side of him, to load pieces for him, so that he had nothing to do but fire as fast as a piece was put into his hand; and this is the real cause of so many of our brave officers falling.'"

Not only did historians claim that Americans were good shots; their targets claimed that also. British Army officer Charles Stedman, who served under General William Howe, described in *The History of the Origin, Progress and Termination of the American War* why even able officers and brave men were unable to fight back effectively against the Minutemen: "The people of the colonies are accustomed to the use of fire-arms from their earliest youth, and are, in general, good marksmen.



A Nation of Marksmen

Infantry in the World.” Further, it claimed that every man could hit an object the size of an orange at 200 yards: “Every shot is

fatal.” Richard Henry Lee’s letter would require every frontier rifleman to make shots of two and a half minutes of arc. This would not be a difficult feat with a modern rifle, but it seems unlikely—especially in an era before telescopic sights—that this would be within the capabilities of every frontier rifleman.

Arthur Lee was an agent of the colonies in London, and dined with John Wilkes, London’s Lord Mayor, who was sympathetic to the American cause. Richard Henry Lee may have intended his brother to show the letter around. The prospect of going up against marksmen that good might have discouraged the British government from going to war. Lee’s letter probably exaggerated the abilities of the frontier riflemen—but it had to be sufficiently within the realm of possibility that it would scare British officials. If Lee’s letter had claimed that the frontiersmen could consistently kill soldiers at 1,000 yards, it’s likely that no one would have found that believable.

We think of James Madison, the father of the Bill of Rights, including the Second Amendment, as an intellectual, not a man of the field or of action. However, Madison wrote a letter in 1775 to William Bradford in Philadelphia that shows a different side:

“The strength of this Colony will lie chiefly in the rifle-men of the Upland Counties, of whom we shall have great numbers. You would be astonished at the perfection this art is brought to. The most inexpert hands rec[k]on it an indifferent shot to miss the bigness of a man’s face at the distance of 100 Yards. I am far from being among the best & should not often miss it on a fair trial at that distance. If we come into an engagement, I make no doubt but the officers of the enemy will fall at the distance before they get [within] 150 or 200 Yards. Indeed I believe we have men that

would very often hit such a mark 250 Yds.”

Unlike Lee’s letter, Madison’s claims are much more carefully phrased, and written to a fellow American. Bradford was in no position to influence British opinion. Madison’s description required the average riflemen to shoot within five minutes of arc, and the very best able to hit targets within two minutes of arc. The Nov. 3, 1775, *Virginia Gazette* reported that “a rifle-man killed a man at the distance of 400 yards.” This is plausible, but it was probably reported as news because it was unusual.

Most of the shooting in the first battles of the Revolution would have been with muskets. New Englanders were not making much use of rifles this early. By July 1775, frontier riflemen were moving to the front lines. Frederick County, Maryland, raised two companies of riflemen to join the army forming outside of Boston. An eyewitness, J. Thomas Scharf, in *History of Western Maryland*, described a demonstration by Captain Michael Cresap’s rifle company of “upwards of 130 men”:

“[To] show the gentlemen of the town their dexterity at shooting. A clapboard, with a mark the size of a dollar, was put up; they began to fire off-hand, and the bystanders were surprised, so few shots being made that were not close to or in the paper.

“When they had shot for a time in this way, some lay on their backs, some on their breast or side, others ran twenty or thirty steps, and, firing, appeared to be equally certain of the mark. With this performance the company was more than satisfied, when a young man took up the board in his hand, not by the end, but by the side, and holding it up, his brother walked to the distance, and very coolly shot into the white; laying down his rifle, he took up the board, and, holding it as was held before, the second brother shot as the former had done.

“By this exercise I was more astonished than pleased. But will you believe me, when I tell you,

that one of the men took the board, and placing it between his legs, stood with his back to the tree, while another drove the center?”

Other eyewitness accounts of Cresap’s company, published in *The Virginia Gazette*, also report on their marksmanship, suggesting that they were capable of one to two minutes of arc accuracy:

“[W]e mention a fact which can be fully attested by several of the reputable persons who were eyewitnesses of it. Two brothers in the company took a piece of board five inches broad and seven inches long, with a bit of white paper, about the size of a dollar, nailed in the centre; and while one of them supported this board perpendicularly between his knees, the other, at the distance of upwards of sixty yards, and without any kind of rest, shot eight bullets through it successively, and spared a brother’s thigh!

“Another of the company held a barrel stave perpendicularly in his hands with one edge close to his side, while one of his comrades, at the same distance, and in the manner before mentioned, shot several bullets through it, without any apprehension of danger on either side.

“The spectators appearing to be amazed at these feats, were told that there were upwards of fifty persons in the same company who could do the same thing; that there was not one who could not plug nineteen bullets out of twenty, as they termed it, within an inch of the head of a tenpenny nail. In short, to prove the confidence they possessed in their dexterity at these kind of arms, some of them proposed to stand with apples on their heads, while others at the same distance, undertook to shoot them off; but the people who saw the other experiments declined to be witnesses of this.”

These skills were not limited to hitting inanimate targets or wild game. When the riflemen reached the lines outside of Boston, they took to sniping British soldiers, contrary to

Washington's orders, and outraging the British, who called "their twisted [rifled] guns the worst widow- and orphan-makers in the world." Similar actions at Quebec City—but this time operating under orders—provoked similar reactions from the British. James Thacher's military journal of August 1775 apparently referred to this same group of frontier riflemen:

"They are remarkably stout and hardy men ... dressed in white frocks or rifle shirts, and round hats. These men are remarkable for the accuracy of their aim, striking a mark with great certainty at two hundred yards' distance. At a review, a company of them, while on a quick advance, fired their balls into objects of seven inches diameter at the distance of two hundred and fifty yards. They are now stationed on our lines, and their shot have frequently proved fatal to British officers and soldiers ... even at more than double the distance of common musket-shot."

John Harrower recorded a similar account of how a rifle company commander in Virginia sought to identify the best marksmen out of an overflow crowd of volunteers. The colonel's solution was a shooting contest:

"Col. Washington ... made a demand of 500 Riflemen from the frontiers. But those that insisted on going far exceeded the number wanted when in order to avoid giving offence, the commanding officer chose his company by the following method, viz. He took a board of a foot square and with chalk drew the shape of a moderate nose in the center and nailed it up to a tree at 150 yards distance and those who came nighest the mark with a single ball was to go. But by the first 40 or 50 that fired the nose was all blown out of the board, and by the time his company was [filled] up, the board shared the same fate."

Here we have the best frontier riflemen shooting two minutes of arc—consistent with James Madison's claim—and the various accounts of the accuracy of Cresap's men.

British Army Major George Hanger, who held the accuracy of the common soldier's musket in contempt, had a different opinion about America's riflemen. He was on horseback with Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton, preparing an attack on the Americans. A rifleman 400 yards away fired at Hanger and Tarleton, who were less than two feet apart. The shot killed the horse of the orderly standing between and just behind Hanger and Tarleton. Hanger became a prisoner of war at the Battle of Saratoga. In conversations with the riflemen, they told him "that an expert rifleman ... can hit the head of a man at 200 yards. I am certain that provided an American rifleman was to get a perfect aim at 300 yards at me standing still, he most undoubtedly would hit me, unless it was a very windy day" Hanger's

Whittemore was not only a good shot, but a tough old bird, according to Frank Warren Coburn's account in *The Battle of April 19, 1775*. The smoke from his musket gave him away and soon British flankers surrounded him. "With one pistol he killed the second Briton, and with his other fatally wounded a third one. In the meantime, the ever vigilant flank guard were attracted to the contest, and a ball from one of their muskets struck his head and rendered him unconscious." The British soldiers clubbed him, then bayoneted him. The village doctor decided that he was beyond hope, but "Whittemore lived eighteen more years, dying in 1793 at the age of ninety-eight."

The mechanical accuracy of modern rifles (except for a very few, very exceptional target rifles) is typically

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statement would suggest that the best American riflemen were capable of shooting within three to four minutes of arc.

While the most impressive examples of accuracy involved rifles, we have some astonishing reports concerning muskets. "Samuel Whittemore, aged eighty years," upon seeing British soldiers marching towards Concord on April 19, 1775, prepared by oiling "his musket and pistols and sharpening his sword." When the soldiers returned, "Whittemore had posted himself behind a stone wall, down Mystic Street about four hundred and fifty feet ... The distance seemed an easy range for him, and he opened fire, killing the soldier he aimed at."

one-half to two minutes of arc. The limiting factor is almost always the person shooting the rifle, not the mechanical accuracy of the gun itself. Yet these accounts from a variety of sources suggest that Americans familiar with the rifle were quite capable of five minutes of arc accuracy and the very best marksmen were regularly shooting within two minutes of arc, if not better.

The evidence is pretty clear: our Revolutionary ancestors were a nation of marksmen. ①

Clayton E. Cramer is a historian. This account is adapted from Armed America: The Remarkable Story of How and Why Guns Became as American as Apple Pie (Nelson Current, 2006).