18th-Century Military Tactics- Revolutionary War

**Musket** - The musket is a firearm that takes one charge at a time. Early muskets were fired by touching a lit fuse to gunpowder, but during the last half of the 16th century, a mechanism (the flintlock) was invented that sparked gunpowder by striking a flint on steel. The Revolutionary War era musket had a smooth barrel, which was made in a standard size so that musket balls of the proper size were very easy to obtain. The musket can be very quickly loaded and reloaded.

**Bayonet** - The bayonet is a sharp weapon that attaches to the muzzle of a gun. Early bayonets plugged into the muzzle of a musket. With a plugged muzzle, the weapon could either be used to shoot or to stab, but not both at the same time. In 1671, a Frenchman invented the socket bayonet, which fit around the muzzle of the musket; in this configuration the musket and the bayonet could be used at the same time. Many people were killed with bayonets in Revolutionary War battles.

**Rifle** - The rifle came into use about a century before the Revolutionary War, and many people in the Southern and Mid-Atlantic colonies owned them. Rifles have a corkscrew barrel that causes the ammunition to spin when it leaves the barrel, making shots quite accurate. However, Revolutionary War rifles took longer to load than muskets did, and did not typically have bayonets attached to them.

**Strategy**

**Standing in ranks (Linear Formations)** – Soldiers stood in long lines, or “ranks,” shoulder to shoulder. This allowed them to fire as one line, duck and reload as the second line fired, and then duck and reload as the third line fired. With this three rank system, the maximum number of shots was around nine per minute.

**Trading volleys** - Soldiers, using muskets, fired one round into the enemy troops. The rank of soldiers behind the first rank would then fire. This was done in order to increase the efficiency of the weapon being used; although the musket was not as accurate as the rifle, with an entire rank of soldiers firing at once there was a high probability of hitting the enemy.

**Bayonet charges** - When a rigid fighting formation became disorganized and soldiers “broke the lines,” the other side could rush them with their bayonets. Soldiers had to be very close to each other to be able to attack using the bayonet. When soldiers were being charged by enemies with bayonets, they had to either give way, or be run through by the bayonet.

**Skirmishes** - Skirmishes involved small numbers of soldiers who placed themselves near the primary ranks and fired their shots from concealed positions. In the Revolutionary War, skirmishers usually carried rifles. The main idea was to be able to attack from a longer distance and to protect the ranks from similar soldiers on the enemy side. Though riflemen were occasionally very successful during the Revolution, this style of fighting was not the most common way for Americans to fight.

**Artillery Attacks** - Armies would use cannons to fire into their enemy’s linear ranks. They were hoping to cause confusion and disrupt the enemy’s formations. Different types on rounds were used to attack enemy formations. Cannon balls came in sizes of 1.5 pounds, 3 pounds, 6 pounds, and grape shot (small ball all fired at once-like a shotgun).

**Redoubt** - Small defensive fort- used to repel attacks from foot soldiers. Sometimes would have a cannon inside of it.

**Calvary Attacks** - Soldiers on horseback were used for scouting, protecting the army’s flanks (side of the formation), and for attacking the flanks (sides) of an enemy’s formations.

**Militia** - Not professional soldiers. Citizens who train part-time as soldiers.

**Regulars** - Professional soldiers. They train full-time as a soldier.
**Formal battles** during the Revolutionary War consisted of three basic stages.

Stage 1: Field Artillery (Cannons) - Fire cannons into other side’s soldiers to disrupt their formations.
Stage 2: Front line soldiers advance towards the enemy line of soldier and when close enough fired in mass.
Stage 3: Bayonet (knife at the end of a musket or rifle) and cavalry charge (soldiers who ride horses).

Battles during the 18th century were based on two ideas: honor and tradition. Soldiers were expected to follow certain accepted “rules” of how to fight a battle during this time. It was seen as cowardly to hide or fight from concealed positions on the battlefield and not fight in linear formations. In addition to following the rules of combat, generals on the battlefield faced many other challenges. They had to keeping soldiers in formation, watch for attacks on the flanks, place the cavalry on the battlefield, and have good timing and communications. Battles during the Revolutionary War could often be very confusing situations, especially if a general did not have good control of his forces.

Many Americans have the misguided idea that the colonists prevailed in the conflict against the British, arguably, the finest military force of the era by using frontier tactics. American militia, or minutemen, rushed forth whenever the alarm sounded to confront the brightly dressed British regulars, who marched across the battlefield in tightly bunched formation, offering easy targets. Colonists hid behind rocks, trees, and fences and used their superior rifles to wreak havoc on the advancing redcoats, who were armed with inaccurate smoothbore muskets.

The rocks, rifles, and militia scenario originated with the story of Lexington and Concord, April 19, 1775, the skirmishes that started the fighting. British redcoats did indeed face colonial militiamen in linear formation. As the British force retreated to Boston, the colonists, armed with their own civilian weapons, sniped at their antagonists from behind fences and trees rather than confronting the professionals in formal lines of battle. With such guerilla tactics, the militiamen killed and wounded more British soldiers than British soldiers killed and wounded Americans. But the majority of the prominent battles of the war were contested quite differently.

Massed forces, British and patriot, in the linear formations were fought at the battles of Long Island, Brandywine, Monmouth Courthouse, Hobkirk’s Hill, White Plains, Germantown, Camden, and Cowpens, to name a few. Sometimes, as these engagements evolved, one side or the other retreated in disarray, and some soldiers sought protection behind fences or trees or other defensive barriers. But the battle plans developed by the generals relied on linear tactics in the European fashion that dominated eighteenth-century warfare.

The concept of linear tactics seems counterintuitive. It is almost ridiculous that two armies would face one another at less than a hundred yards in tight formations, three ranks deep, firing volley after volley. As they shot, they moved closer together, often closing the fight with a bayonet charge as one force drove the other from the field. Clumped, the soldiers seemingly offered their foes a classic “sitting duck” target. But this was true of both sides. Why then did eighteenth-century armies adopt such tactics?
The answer to why they fought in a linear formations is in the weapons the armies used. The smoothbore military musket—the English version came to be known as the Brown Bess—is often maligned for inaccuracy, though the weapon was true enough at short range, say less than eighty yards. Yet accuracy was not at all the issue. Rate of fire, with companies firing in volley, gave muskets their military advantage. A well-drilled company could load and fire in unison at least four times a minute, and some seasoned units probably did better. No soldier aimed his weapon at any single adversary. He “presented” his weapon straight ahead, or obliquely to the right or left, at the command of his officers, and fired in unison with his company as rapidly as possible.

As a modern historian has written,

“Speed was everything. Speed for the defending force to pour as many bullets into the attacking force as possible; speed for the attacking force to close with its adversary before it had been too severely decimated to have sufficient strength to carry the position. . . .”

Rapidity of fire—sending constant, coordinated volleys in the direction of the enemy—was infinitely more important than the accuracy of any individual’s musket. Such firepower was hard to achieve unless the men were arrayed in open terrain and organized by company. So much for rocks and trees.

What about those rifles? These formidable firearms had been in use for about a hundred years before the Revolution, and they were plentiful in the southern and middle colonies, though relatively rare in New England. True enough, they were more accurate and effective at greater distances, several hundred yards, than were military muskets. But accuracy came at a price: rifles took too long to load. A minute or more was needed to tightly “patch” the ball and carefully ram it down the barrel to engage the rifled grooves that spun the ball and gave it true trajectory.

Moreover, unlike the riflemen, musketmen did not carry the powder horns used in the time-consuming measurement of powder for each charge. A musket’s charge, along with the ball, was measured and encased in a paper cartridge. The wrapper served as the ball’s wadding when it was quickly, though loosely, thrown down the barrel and pushed home with the rammer. The comparative sluggishness of reloading a rifle rendered it unsatisfactory for linear military tactics. Interpreter Dale Smoot says during his Magazine presentations, “Rifles are fine weapons for shooting at things that don’t shoot back—like deer.”

There was another problem with rifles and, indeed, all civilian long arms of the period. They were not fashioned to accommodate bayonets, an essential weapon of eighteenth-century infantry. Regular forces moved into lines of battle with bayonets fixed. Military bayonets were offset from the muzzle to permit loading and firing with the bayonets in place, always ready for a charge to force the enemy from the field. Civilian weapons might be equipped with plug bayonets, essentially knives with wooden plugs to be inserted into the barrel of the firearm, rendering it incapable of firing.
Questions:

1. Formal battles were based on what two ideas?

2. This was seen as cowardly during a formal battle?

3. Explain the three stages of a formal battle during the Revolutionary War
   Stage 1:
   Stage 2:
   Stage 3:

4. What challenges did a commander/ general face on the battlefield?

5. What were the three standard size cannon balls used during the Revolution.

6. Calvary was most effective when attacking which parts of an opposing army?

7. What was an advantage a musket had over a rifle in 18\textsuperscript{th} century warfare? What advantage did a rifle have?

8. How were \textbf{redoubts} used during a battle?

9. Explain why both the British and colonists fought in a linear formation style during the Revolutionary War.