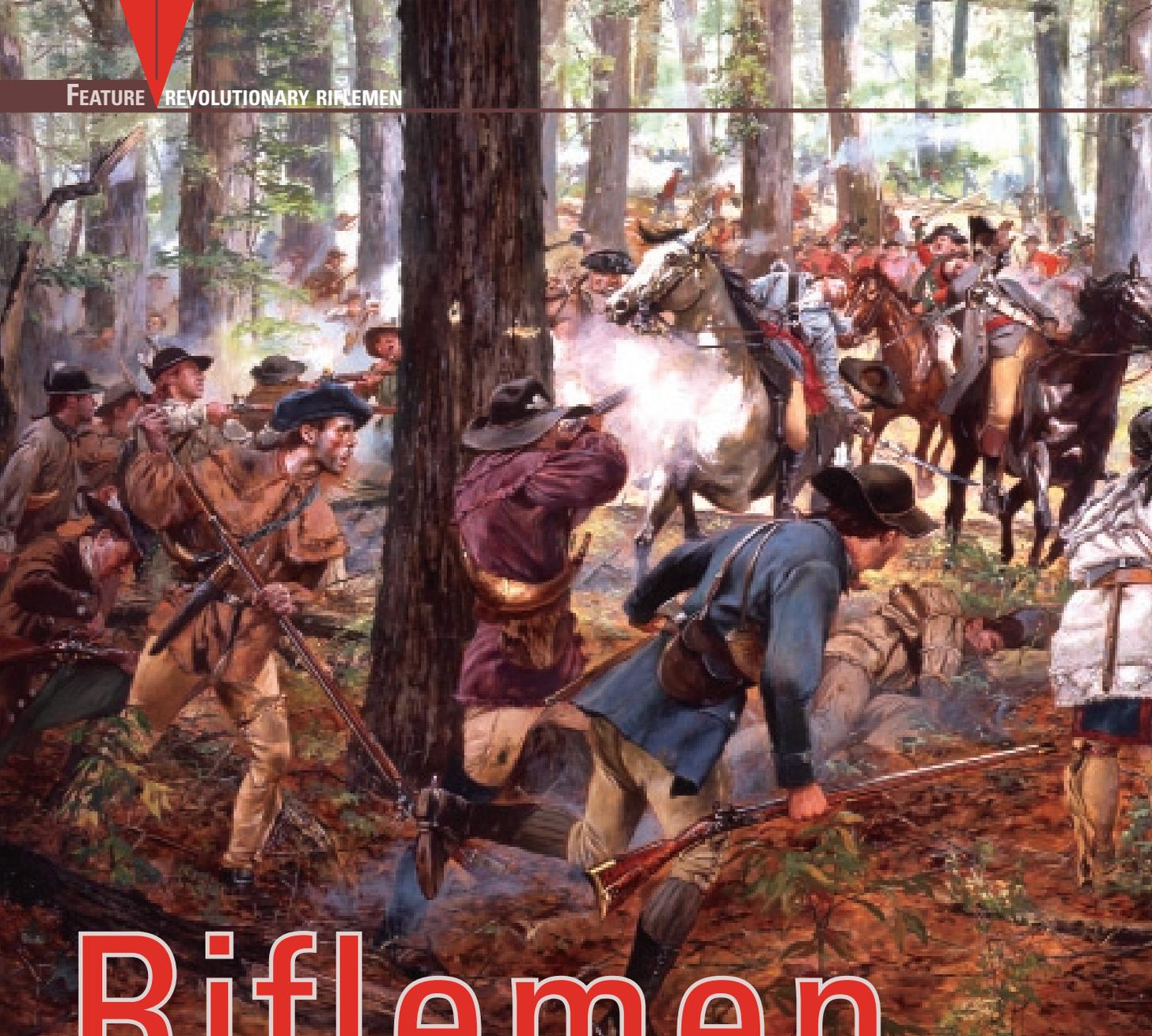


FEATURE REVOLUTIONARY RIFLEMEN



Riflemen *of the Revolution*



From the opening battles of the American Revolution through its conclusion, American riflemen with skill and accuracy played a significant role in securing American freedom and independence.

"The Battle Of King's Mountain, October 7, 1780," painting by Don Troiani, courtesy Historical Art Prints (Dept. AR), P.O. Box 660, Southbury, CT 06448; (203) 262-6560; www.historicalartprints.com. Rifle from Giles and Carolyn Cromwell collection. Photo by Lloyd Hill.



olution

By Maj. John L. Plaster, USAR (Ret.)

longrifles and the men who wielded
d independence.

T

he Revolutionary War had just begun when the Second Continental Congress met in emergency session in Philadelphia. At Lexington, Concord and Bunker Hill—and now, in June 1775, amid the Boston siege—the Minutemen’s inaccurate smoothbore muskets stood slim chance of hitting a Redcoat beyond 50 yds. What could be done?

John Hancock, whose elegant signature graces the Declaration of Independence, urged his congressional colleagues to recruit America’s frontier riflemen, “the finest marksmen in the world.” Future president John Adams agreed, noting that they could fire with “great exactness to great distances.” Thus, by special Act of Congress the very first unit of what became the U.S. Army was as revolutionary as the war itself—an all-volunteer rifle battalion. From the trackless forests of Pennsylvania, Virginia and Maryland, marksmen by the hundreds grabbed their fine longrifles and set off for Boston.

They were truly elite, these rifleman-sharpshooters, never exceeding 5 percent of the Continental Army’s foot soldiers; yet, these few legendary marksmen and their precision shooting would prove decisive at the war’s most critical moments. In Boston, the newly organized 12 companies of 82 marksmen quickly made life hazardous on the British lines. Congress was told, “riflemen picked off ten men in one day, three of whom were Field officers [and] one of them was killed at the distance of 250 yards, when only half his head was seen.” That toll soon rose to 42 enemy soldiers and officers, causing one Englishman to write home that the riflemen’s fire had, “grown so terrible ... that nothing is to be seen over the breastworks but a hat.” Another British visitor warned, “Advise your officers who shall hereafter come out to America to settle their affairs before their departure.”

After eight months of such one-sided precision rifle fire—and ever-growing artillery fire—the British abandoned Boston. As quickly as they left, however, Gen. George Washington disbanded most rifle companies to fill his smoothbore-armed infantry regiments, and with good reason.

Smoothbore Versus Rifle

The Revolutionary War rifle was agonizingly slow to reload, requiring as many as two minutes to pour powder, force a ball down its constricted bore, charge its powder pan and get off an aimed shot. By contrast, the smoothbore musket was that era’s arm of choice despite its inherent inaccuracy; what the smoothbore lacked in range it compensated with firepower, offering up to four rounds per minute. Eighteenth-century tacticians believed smoothbore-armed infantrymen won battles by advancing shoulder-to-shoulder and maintaining drilled discipline while they fired volley after volley after volley.

In contrast to the modern sniper, no matter how carefully a Revolutionary War rifleman stalked, no matter the cleverness of his camouflage or subtlety of his firing position, once he fired, his location was instantly detected. For the second a blackpowder sharpshooter pulled the trigger, his muzzle spewed a six-foot sooty plume that hung in the air. Spotting this conspicuous signature, his enemies had almost two minutes for eight volleys and a quick bayonet assault before the rifle-

On Oct. 7, 1780, at King’s Mountain, S.C., patriot militia and “over-the-mountain men”—most of whom were armed with rifles—soundly defeated a British and Tory force led by Maj. Patrick Ferguson. Shot down by multiple riflemen, Ferguson was one of Britain’s finest marksmen and inventor of the breechloading Ferguson rifle. This .50-cal. flintlock rifle (l.) was made circa 1780 by Alexander Walker in Rockbridge County, Va.

man could reload and fire. Further, unlike a smooth-bore musket, the rifle lacked a bayonet, forcing the rifleman to rely on his trusty tomahawk to take on his assaulting foes “Indian-style.” This was no small disadvantage.

At a 1777 engagement at Whitemarsh, Pa., “The moment [the riflemen] appeared,” a British witness reported, “[Howe] ordered his troops to charge them with the bayonet; not one man out of four had time to fire, and those that did had no time given them to load again; the light infantry not only dispersed them instantly but drove them for miles over the country.” The rifle’s snug-fitting bore was sensitive to black-powder residue. During the 1776 British attack on Fort Mifflin, “the rifles of the Americans became fouled by the frequent and long continued discharges,” one period account notes. “Man after man found he could not drive home a bullet in the clogged barrel of his gun.”

Gen. Washington well understood these strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, with Boston secured, he transferred most riflemen to his under-strength smooth-bore musket regiments, retaining a few detachments to scout or defend the frontier from British-inspired Indian raids.

Jaegers From Europe

Having been on the receiving end in Boston, the British Army now appreciated the value of rifles and riflemen. Thus, only five

months later, Jaeger riflemen, among the first Hessian troops hired by the British crown, deployed to America. These “Jaeger” companies—German for “hunter”—contained specially trained riflemen experienced at operating in forestlands and mountains. The most famous of these units, the 2nd Jaeger Company under Capt. Johann Ewald, arrived in New York on Oct. 14, 1776, and saw its first action just nine days later. As with most Jaegers, Ewald’s men saw action in every campaign in the war.

Although described as a corps, the Jaegers operated in small groups of not more than 30 riflemen, and served alongside conventional British or Hessian smoothbore-armed infantry units. By 1777 the Hessian Jaegers had grown to about 1,000 men, including five foot companies and a mounted chasseur company.

Despite their rifled weapons and European woodland experience, Hessian Jaegers did not prove as capable as American riflemen. This was partially attributable to their short-barreled rifles, the sights of which did not allow aiming as precisely as American longrifles. (See www.americanrifeman.org

for more on Jaeger rifles, the Ferguson rifle and the American longrifle). Additionally, the Jaeger rifle’s bore, of .60 caliber or greater, meant a heavier, slower ball, less forgiving of range estimation errors and a limited effective range of 200 yds. or less. Background and mindset, too, favored the Americans, who’d grown up on the wild frontier as both superb shooters and adept backwoodsmen. As young boys, they had survived Indian raids and as teenagers they had hunted for the family cookpot. Despite the skilled Jaegers being called “hunters,” they were more Alpine game wardens than stalkers or sustenance hunters.

These differences were apparent when these riflemen were pitted against each other. Gen. Washington’s aide-de-camp reported to the President of Congress: “On Wednesday there was also a smart skirmish between a party of Colonel Hand’s riflemen, about two hundred and forty, and nearly the same number of Hessian [sharpshooters], in which the latter were put to rout. Our men buried ten of them on the field, and took two prisoners, one badly wounded. We sustained no other loss than having one lad wounded, supposed mortally.”

Another encounter, mentioned in a letter from Congressman William Smith, reported: “Morgan’s [rifle] Corps [and about] an equal number of the yagiers had a Serious dispute in View of both Armies, who both lookd on without offering to assist. Morgan prevailed. When the enemy gave way our rifle men raised the war whoop which occasioned them to fly in the greatest confusion, tis Said they left near 100 on the field.”

Riflemen In Red

Even as the Hessian riflemen were arriving in America, the British authorized the deployment of five riflemen to each company, arming them with short-barreled rifles similar to those carried by the Jaegers. Additionally, one company of each regiment’s 10 was designated a “light company” of skirmishers and scouts, and these troops, too, often included riflemen. The British employed small numbers of riflemen in support of larger elements, rather than designating them to separate units.

There were exceptions, the most notable being the Corps of Riflemen led by Capt. Patrick Ferguson. A world-class marksman considered the finest rifle shot in the British Army, Ferguson also was the inventive genius who designed the world’s first breech-loaded military rifle, which could fire an astounding six aimed shots per minute. When he demonstrated his rifle for King George III in June 1776, not only did the enthusiastic monarch order it into production, but he authorized Ferguson to recruit his own 100-man Corps of Riflemen to be armed with the revolutionary gun.

Unfortunately for Ferguson, his commander in America, Sir William Howe, did not take well to young upstarts with pet ideas. Howe publicly welcomed the new unit and its peculiar rifle, but he sought to



dispose of both. That came with the September 1777 Battle of Brandywine, when Ferguson's riflemen were unwisely employed and suffered more than 50 percent casualties, among them Ferguson, whose right arm was badly wounded. That encounter, however, almost turned the course of history. As Ferguson later wrote, at one point a mounted enemy officer rode past, well within range. "I could have lodged a half-dozen balls in or about him before he was out of my reach," the British officer recalled, "but I was not pleasant to fire at the back of an unoffending individual who was acquitting himself very coolly of his duty; so I let him alone." That officer was Gen. Washington.

After Brandywine, Gen. Howe collected Ferguson's rifles—the world's fastest-firing military rifles—and disbanded his rifle corps. It was not the end of Ferguson, however. Promoted to major, he later led a large force of mounted British and Tory soldiers in the Carolinas, eventually being surrounded by 1,600 frontier riflemen at King's Mountain, S.C., on Oct. 7, 1780. Led by Col. Isaac Shelby, the backwoods riflemen were instructed, "Let each one of you be your own officer, and do the very best you can . . . shelter yourselves, and give them Indian play; advance from tree to tree, pressing the enemy and killing and disabling all you can."

Eyeing the conspicuous Ferguson, a number of riflemen took careful aim. According to James P. Collins, who witnessed Ferguson's death, "almost 50 rifles must have been leveled at him at the same time; seven rifle balls had passed through his body, both of his arms

were broken, and his hat and clothing were literally shot to pieces." Ferguson's force suffered 157 killed, 163 wounded and 698 captured. Against this, the victorious American riflemen lost 28 dead and 64 wounded.

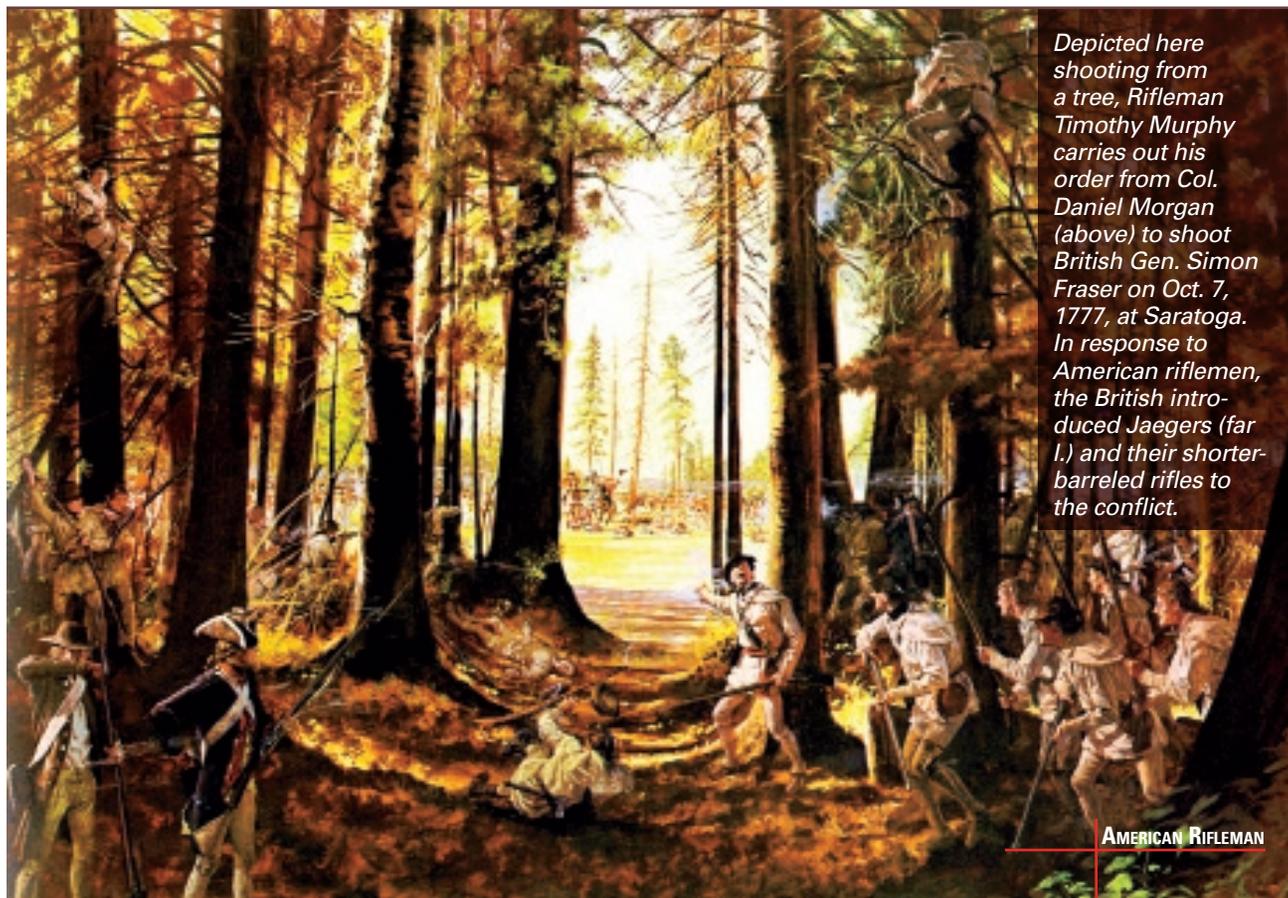
Riflemen On The Northern Frontier

The most decisive employment of American riflemen came in 1777, when British Gen. John Burgoyne invaded from Canada with a force of 6,000 British, Hessians, Tories and Indians that threatened to cut away New England along the Hudson River Valley. Spearheading Burgoyne's invaders were Indian scouts and a special sharpshooter unit, Capt. Alexander Fraser's Company of Select Marksmen. Chosen "for their strength, ability and being expert at the firing of ball," their mission was, "to act on the flanks of the advance brigade and reinforce by what number of Indians the General may think fit to employ."

Unfortunately for the British, their marksmen more than met their match with a newly organized Continental Army unit. By mid-1777, Gen. Washington had fielded



Author's collection



Depicted here shooting from a tree, Rifleman Timothy Murphy carries out his order from Col. Daniel Morgan (above) to shoot British Gen. Simon Fraser on Oct. 7, 1777, at Saratoga. In response to American riflemen, the British introduced Jaegers (far l.) and their shorter-barreled rifles to the conflict.

enough smoothbore-armed infantry regiments to afford the luxury of a separate rifle regiment, led by a dynamic, resourceful officer, Col. Daniel Morgan. Although officially designated the 1st Continental Regiment, their armament inspired the nickname, "Morgan's Kentucky Riflemen." As Burgoyne's army descended into New York, these 500 backwoods sharpshooters advanced to meet them. At every turn, from every hillock, Morgan's concealed shooters plinked away, whittling away the invading army's eyes and ears. It was the stuff of legends.

The riflemen next targeted the Redcoat officer corps. As Gen. Burgoyne later wrote, "The [Americans] had with their army great numbers of marksmen, armed with rifle-barrel pieces; these, during an engagement, hovered upon the flanks in small detachments, and were very expert in securing themselves and in shifting their ground. ... there was seldom a minute's interval of smoke in any part of our line without officers being taken off by a single shot."

As the British neared Saratoga on Sept. 19, 1777, for the first time a unit composed solely of riflemen fought a pitched battle against musket-armed European infantry. On favorable terrain, Morgan's Kentucky Riflemen so soundly defeated Burgoyne's 62nd Regiment that by the end of the day, the British could muster just one company for duty. Of 48 artillerymen in one battery, Morgan's sharpshooters killed or wounded all but 12. A British officer wrote, "The only shelter afforded to the troops was from those angles which faced the enemy as the others were so exposed that we had several men killed and wounded by the riflemen, who were posted in trees."

Among Morgan's riflemen one sharpshooter especially distinguished himself by exhibiting exceptional courage, unerring aim and tactical skill. Muscular and fleet-footed, with a taut, tanned face and piercing, intelligent eyes,

Rifleman Timothy Murphy had grown up on a wilderness farm along the Susquehanna River, near today's Sunbury, Pa. Armed with an unusual Golcher double-barreled long rifle, the 24-year-old Murphy and his partner Dave Elerson had fought since 1775 and performed remarkably well during the Boston siege. At one point there, the crack-shot Murphy fired upon a party of British soldiers rowing a flat-bottomed scow in the harbor at an estimated half-mile, far beyond effective rifle range. Lobbing his slugs from an overlooking hilltop, he dropped them one-by-one, victims of undoubtedly the longest-range deliberate rifle fire then seen in the world.

And now, along with Morgan's Kentucky Riflemen, this greatest of American riflemen occupied a tree-covered hillside just outside Saratoga, opposite the right flank of Burgoyne's army arrayed for battle. As an element of Gen. Horatio Gates' American army, Morgan's men were about to fight the most decisive battle of the war, with victory turning upon the war's most decisive shot.

The Most Decisive Shot

Before the riflemen, lined up and advancing neatly, were some 2,000 British troops—a third of Burgoyne's entire army—led by Gen. Simon Fraser, his most capable subordinate. Watching wide lines of British soldiers advance across the open field, Col. Morgan waved over his legendary sharpshooter, Timothy Murphy. Pointing to where Gen. Fraser rode a handsome gray mare behind his Redcoats, Morgan instructed, "I admire him, but it is necessary that he should die—do your duty!" Murphy climbed a stout tree, then held his front sight ever so carefully on the handsomely uniformed horseman, raised his muzzle to compensate for the considerable distance, and squeezed. A flash, a plume of smoke—and Fraser collapsed, hit center-chest at about 330 yds.

Fraser's senior aide, Sir Francis Clarke, galloped to his fallen leader just as Murphy let loose the second barrel of his unusual two-shot rifle. Clarke tumbled from his horse as well, and then the entire British 24th Regiment fired two ineffective volleys. Morgan's riflemen more accurately returned the salute, and then panic spread among the leaderless Redcoats. Burgoyne rushed over to take personal command, but it was too late—the Redcoats abandoned the fight, hemorrhaging their right flank and forcing their army into an uninspired defense. A few days later Burgoyne surrendered his sword and his army. The American rebels had captured an entire British field army! With the American victory at Saratoga, at last France agreed to join the American side, offering the naval support and ground troops needed to win the war.

Writing of Murphy's fateful shot at Saratoga, a prominent historian observed, "Few individual feats of marksmanship in any war have been so important." Murphy also fought extensively on the frontier and continued sharpshooting right through the end of the war, by which time he had accumulated 42 confirmed kills.

Sharpshooting Shifts South

The war largely had shifted south by 1780 when a British landing force captured Charleston, S.C. From there, British troops fanned out across the Carolinas, where Gen. Francis "Swamp Fox" Marion's ambushes and rifle sharpshooters perplexed the Redcoats. British soldiers, a newspaper reported, were boxed up in major towns, "not daring to go out on the road on account of the advanced riflemen concealed in the woods."

In a typical engagement, as a British unit attempted to cross the Black River in March 1781, some 30 backwoods sharpshooters, led by Capt. William McCottry, engaged it from the opposite bank. Even McCottry got in the fray and was

credited with killing an enemy officer at 300 yds. Having suffered heavy casualties, the British withdrew and their regimental commander, Col. John Watson, remarked, "I have never seen such shooting before in my life."

The decisive result of integrating accurate rifle fire with smoothbore musket volleys was demonstrated on Jan. 17, 1781, at Cowpens, S.C. Gen. Daniel Morgan—who'd commanded the riflemen at Saratoga—shrewdly arrayed his 1,500-man force, which included 150 North Carolina and Georgia militia riflemen. Morgan instructed the marksmen to "Aim for the epaulets"—shoot officers—fire only two shots apiece and fall back just as the British begin to mount a bayonet attack.

Arrogantly dismissing these militiamen as unsophisticated cannon fodder, British Col. Banastre Tarleton ordered a frontal assault with 1,200 British soldiers. Oblivious to his officers collapsing from well-aimed shots, Tarleton mistakenly thought the riflemen's orderly withdrawal a rout, and rushed forward into several more phased delays, with more rifle fire taking down his officers.

When Tarleton's troops finally reached the main line—manned by well-drilled Continental soldiers firing by volley—they'd lost too many officers and sergeants to continue. The final blow came as an American cavalry charge. Utterly defeated, Tarleton's professionals suffered 100 dead—39 of them officers—plus 229 wounded and 600 prisoners. Hardly 200 escaped. By contrast, the Americans lost but 12 killed and 60 wounded.

A few months later the British Army began its doomed march northward to entrapment at Yorktown, Va., and Gen. Lord Charles Cornwallis' surrender to Gen. George Washington. This humiliating loss of a second army would spell the death knell to the British war effort.

And forever, the rifle had proved its worth in battle. 