

Program Bulletin- Musket Firing

Program Overview

This program focuses on the weapons carried by British soldiers at Michilimackinac, and how they were employed in daily garrison routines. It includes a demonstration of the manual exercise and firings necessary to operate the musket and provide accurate, concentrated firepower.

The Musket

The musket carried by interpreters is a reproduction of the New Pattern of Short Land Musket for Line Infantry, otherwise known as the Short Land Pattern Musket. It was introduced for British infantry service in 1769, and represents another variant in a series of flintlock muskets used by the British beginning in the 1720s. The weapon has a .75 caliber barrel, meaning that it is three quarters of an inch in diameter. The barrel is smooth-bored, meaning that the interior is smooth. It lacks the rifled grooves of most modern weapons, which impart a spin on the projectile as it travels down the barrel. The musket relies upon a flintlock mechanism to fire. The lock contains two primary exterior parts: the cock, which includes a piece of flint screwed into a set of jaws, and the hammer, which is a smooth piece of steel mounted on a hinge. To load the musket, a small quantity of gunpowder is poured onto a pan or tray just below the hammer, which swings down to lock the powder in place. When the trigger is pulled, the cock flies forward, forcing the flint to strike the steel of the hammer, which is swung open. The sparks generated by the flint and steel should fall on the gunpowder in the pan, which will burn through a touchhole bored in the side of the barrel and ignite the rest of the powder inside to propel the musket ball out of the barrel.

Given its smoothbore barrel and flintlock system, the musket cannot realistically be compared to modern weapons. Judged against a modern rifle, the musket is inaccurate and unreliable. However, on an 18th century battlefield, when placed in the hands of a well-disciplined and thoroughly-trained soldier, the musket became a very effective weapon.

Drill and Training

Soldiers required extensive training to be able to effectively employ the musket in combat. Tactical doctrines employed by the British and most other nations called for massed firepower, requiring soldiers to operate together as part of a larger unit. By grouping soldiers and their muskets together, and training them to be able to quickly and safely load and fire their weapons, officers could bring a tremendous amount of fire to bear upon enemy troops. However, operating together required constant training, covering everything from how to move around in columns and linear formations to the steps needed to actually load and fire the musket. As a result, drill was a fact of life for British soldiers posted around the world, including at Michilimackinac.

Despite the importance of drill to combat effectiveness, a number of hurdles stood in the way of effective training for British soldiers in the late 18th century. Tactics required large masses of troops to be effective, in turn requiring large numbers of soldiers who had practiced together extensively. Unfortunately, the British army of this period was both relatively small and widely dispersed to remote garrisons around the world. At Michilimackinac, for instance,

the garrison numbered somewhere between 60 and 70 men. As a result, it was often impossible to gather enough troops together to perform large-scale drill evolutions. Working more or less in isolation, small units developed their own idiosyncratic interpretations of the “official” drill regulations, resulting in the potential for confusion when large groups of soldiers were finally assembled together for major campaigns, such as during the American Revolution. Furthermore, lack of adequate troop numbers meant that soldiers were stuck practicing the same basic maneuvers and evolutions repeatedly, as it was impossible to explore more complex exercises without more soldiers. Despite these limitations, the average British soldier was a professional, and drill honed fundamental skills necessary to operate effectively in combat.

Firing the Musket

To fire the musket “by the book” requires a number of specific commands and motions. This exercise is lifted from a drill manual published in 1764 and is meant as both a training tool and a means to test a soldier’s proficiency.

1. Take care- basically the “attention” command, to listen for more orders.
2. Poise your firelock- the musket is moved from the left shoulder and held in front of the body
3. Cock your firelocks- the cock is pulled back to the half-cock position to facilitate priming and loading
4. Handle your cartridge- the musket is lower to the loading position on the right side, and the soldier grabs a paper cartridge from the cartridge pouch. The cartridge is opened by biting the end.
5. Prime- a bit of powder is poured into the priming pan
6. Shut your pans- the hammer is swung down to cover the priming pan. The musket is then swiveled around so that the muzzle is pointed up.
7. Load- the remaining powder and paper cartridge are inserted into the muzzle.
8. Draw your rammers- the ramrod is drawn out from the stock, spun around, and inserted into the muzzle
9. Ram down cartridge- the ramrod is used to seat the charge at the rear of the barrel. It is then removed from the barrel, spun around, and partially inserted back into the stock.
10. Return your rammers- the ramrod is fully seated in the stock.
11. Shoulder your firelocks- the musket is raised to the left shoulder, where it can be comfortably carried.
12. Make ready- the musket is tossed from the shoulder and held before the body. The cock is pulled back again to the full-cock position.
13. Present- the musket is placed against the right shoulder and leveled, with the soldier aiming at a specific target.
14. Fire- the trigger is pulled to fire the weapon.

This process can be repeated as often as needed. In combat, many of the spoken orders and deliberate pacing of the drill could be omitted. The simple command to “prime and load” would prompt the soldier to quickly load and shoulder their musket, performing all of the steps outlined above in perhaps 20 seconds. Training allowed soldiers to quickly and efficiently load their muskets even in combat.