"Loose Files and American Scramble"

Wargaming Battles of the American War of Independence

by Andy Callan (originally published in Wargames Illustrated No. 1, Sept 1987)

Arthur Harman's recent series of articles on battles of the American Revolution in this magazine's predecessor has, I hope, whetted readers' appetites for re-fighting these actions from this much-neglected period . Anyone who has read Arthur's articles will immediately see how far from the truth are the popular myths of the war, which present a view of pipe-clayed redcoats helplessly shot down by wily frontiersmen. The Americans can hardly be blamed for propagating this myth, for it must be hard to come to terms with the fact that the British, although usually outnumbered, managed to win most of the battles of the war. They did this not with the rigid manoeuvres of the European parade ground, but through an intelligent combination of conventional drill and discipline with flexible, fast moving formations and aggressive tactics. Such an innovative approach was ideally suited for the typical broken terrain of American battlefields and produced a fluid style of fighting in which successive waves of infantry attacked and counter-attacked with the edge going to troops able to quickly re-form after an action. So far from being rigid, one-sided affairs, most of the battles of the war were fast moving, close-run and unpredictable. Given the small numbers of troops involved (usually under 5000 men a side) this makes the period ideal for wargaming.

Note: The references above to Arthur Harman's articles are to articles at the time of the original publication of these rules in 1987.

To be realistic, though, the rules need to reflect the fast pace and special features of these actions. It is thus a mistake to think that you can just adapt a typical Seven Years War or Napoleonic set, since they are usually designed for the relatively stately, large-scale engagements of the European theatre. So it is probably best to start from scratch and design a set of rules that are tailor-made for the period. The final version of my own set, printed below, are the product of many revisions and play-testing, polished over the years through the experience of many a close-fought action. I don't expect they will suit everyone, and some of you may find the mechanisms a little unusual. But do give them a try before you write in to complain about apparent omissions or inconsistencies. Playability has been the keynote. I give some 'Designer's Notes' after the main body of the rules to explain the thinking behind some of the rule mechanisms.

WARGAME RULES FOR 15mm AMERICAN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE BATTLES

Scales

1 figure = 10 men. 1 inch = 25 yards. 1 turn = approx. 5 minutes. 1 model gun = 2 pieces of artillery.

Organisation

Infantry: in 'companies' of three figures to a base. Unit size = 9 - 30 figures.

Cavalry: in 'troops' of two figures to a base. Unit size = 4 - 12 figures.

Skirmishers: Individually based. Fire in groups of 3 figures. Maximum unit size = 15 figures.

Artillery: Each model gun has a crew of 3 figures and a team of horses.

One company/troop/base in each unit should be clearly identified as the 'Command Group' (e.g. by using a flag of officer figure).

Training

Each unit is given a basic efficiency grade at the start of the game, indicating its training and experience. This may vary in a campaign context, but the following should be taken as standard grades for the different categories of troops:

1st Class: Grenadiers, Light Infantry.

2nd Class: Regulars, Continentals, Rangers, Jagers.

3rd Class Raw Regulars, Veteran Militia, Loyalists.

4th Class: Militia, Inexperienced Loyalists, European-led Indians.

5th Class: Other Indians.

Order of Play in a Turn (all movement is simultaneous)

1. Compulsory Retreats/Routs following combat in previous turns.
2. Calculate Morale effects provoked by 1 above.
3. Firing
4. Allocate Command Points. Move commanders and couriers.
5. Move units. Announce attempted advances to contact/charges before moving.
6. Combat.
7. Re-dress ranks (according to training) of units that did not move this turn.

Command

This is exercised through the use of Command Points. At the start of the game determine the command points of each side's commander in chief. Unless these are determined by the scenario the number of command points = Average dice roll +1. Subordinate commanders (Brigadiers) always have 3 CP's.

The actions possible to a commander are listed below, together with the cost in CP's.

Move your own commander figure up to one dice (Average or D6, as you choose) x inches = 1 CP.

Issue an order = 2 CP's (note: a unit takes one full turn to react to an order).

Inspire troops in Combat (i.e. +1 in combat calculation) = 3 CP's *

Rally one D. Point (see below) = 2 CP's *

* Commander figure must be adjacent to unit's command group.

D. Points

Represent the temporary Disorganisation, Demoralisation and Desertion that can affect a unit's performance in action. Unlike casualties (see below) DP's do not have a permanent effect. The number of DP's on a unit may fluctuate up and down according to circumstances, but may never be more than 5. According to their training units may remove D. Points by re-dressing the ranks and otherwise sorting themselves out at the end of a turn. This varies according to training and circumstances.

1st Class units may remove up to 2 DP's per turn, if stationary and not in combat.

2nd Class units may remove 1DP per turn, if stationary and not in combat.

3rd Class units may remove 1DP per turn, if stationary, not in combat and not under fire..

4th Class units may only remove DP's by a commander using his command points.

5th Class units only remove DP's if commander in chief uses his command points.

Movement

In the close terrain typical of this war movement rates were unpredictable and so all movement is randomised in this game.

1st/2nd/3rd Class units move one or two Average dice (Player's choice) x inches.

4th/5th Class units move one Average dice or one Average dice and one D6 (Player's choice) x inches.

Skirmishers may move an extra D6 x inches if player wishes.

Cavalry may move an extra one or two D6 x inches if player wishes.

All troops except skirmishers take 1 DP for each 1 or 2 rolled. In woods take 1 DP for each 1, 2 or 3 rolled.

Special Cases:

Hessian infantry (not Jagers) move one Average dice or one Average dice +2 inches.

Cavalry may only change speed by one or two dice in a turn (i.e. if a unit is at rest it may only move off at up to two dice x inches, and if it is moving at top speed - four dice - it may only slow down to two dice on the next turn). In any move where it is the intention to close to contact, a cavalry unit must roll at least three dice, whatever the distance to be covered, taking any penalties in D. Points.

On Roads the player may choose his own roll on any Average dice (thus limiting the random effect and preventing too much 'bunching' in marching columns).

Woods/Uphill: Minus one inch from all dice rolled.

Manoeuvre

Wheeling: Treat as uphill move. Pivot one end of line. Measure distance moved by outer figure. Take 1 DP.

Change Formation: Takes one Turn. Take 1 DP (2 DP's if under fire).

Limber up/unlimber: Takes two turns. Take 1 DP (2 DP's if under fire).

Cross minor obstacle (e.g.. small stream, gully): Takes one turn. Take 1 DP (2 DP's if under fire).

Cross major obstacle (e.g.. abatis): Time and penalties determined by umpire.

Cross fence/wall, or about face: Takes 1/2 move (roll as normal, but halve total). Take 1 DP if cavalry or if under fire.

Collisions/Interpenetrations

Each unit takes 1 DP.

Retreating or Routing units move round supports that are better formed, (i.e. have less DP's), but run through and collide with units equally or worse formed.

Morale

Troops ignore the retreat of friendly units with a lower training grade but take 1 DP if such a unit routs past within six inches.

If equal/higher grade unit retreats past within six inches take 2 DP's.

If equal grade unit routs past within six inches take 2 DP's and 1 casualty.

If higher grade unit routs past within six inches take 3 DP's and 1 casualty.

Firing

1) Artillery: 3 classes of gun are recognised:

Light = less than 3 pounders (e.g. 'gallopers' or 'grasshoppers').

Field = Most guns. 3 - 6 pounders were in general use.

Heavy = 9 pounders and upwards. Rarely in use in the field (in this theatre).

Ranges: Long 10 inches to 36 inches (minus 6" for light, plus 6" for heavy).

Short = under 10 inches.

Effect: Roll one D6 for each model gun firing, modified as follows:

+1 : Heavy Gun.

+1 : Target in column, or limbered artillery.

+1 : Firing at same target, at same range, as in previous turn.

-1 : Firing at new target.

-1 : Each DP on gun firing.

-2 : Target in fieldwork or stone building.

-2 : Target in skirmish order.

-1 : Light gun.

At long range inflict 1 DP for final total of 4 or over.

At short range inflict 1 DP for total of 2 or 3, inflict 2 DP's for total of 4 or 5, inflict 1 DP and 1 Casualty for total of 6 or more.

2) Infantry: Note, only skirmishing infantry may fire *and* move in the same turn.

Ranges: Musket 0-8 inches, Rifles 0-10 inches.

Effect: Roll one D6 for each company or group of 3 skirmishers firing, *minus* the number of DP's on the firing unit. Halve the total if firing at artillery or skirmishers, halve again if target in fieldwork or building. Halves round up.

E.g.: A seven company unit with 2 DP's firing at skirmishers would roll (7-2) = 5 / 2 = 2 1/2, rounds up to 3 dice.

Inflict 1 DP for throws of *six* only. Skirmishers roll again for throws of five, with subsequent 4/5/6 = inflict 1 DP.

Casualties

If a unit under fire has already sustained the maximum number (i.e.. five) of DP's, any subsequent DP's caused by fire, combat or morale *only* are taken as casualties.

Loss of one 'casualty' = remove one company (3 figures) of infantry or one troop (2 figures) of cavalry. A gun that receives a casualty is knocked out.

Combat

Occurs when a unit advances to within 4 inches of an opponent. Each side throws one Average dice, plus or minus the following:

+3 : Each Training grade higher than the opponent.

+3 : Defending fort or stone building.

+2 : Defending fieldwork or wooden building.

+2 : Making bayonet attack (option open only to British regulars. Declare before attack).

+1 : Terrain advantage (e.g.. uphill, behind stream, gully, wall, fence, etc).

+1 or 2 : General with unit (depends on how many CP's he spent on 'inspiring troops').

-3 : in skirmish order.

-3 : being attacked in flank or rear.

-2 : each DP on the unit.

-2 : each casualty suffered.

-1 : outnumbered. *

-2 : outnumbered 3:2 *

-3 : outnumbered 2:1. *

-5 : outnumbered 3:1 or more. *

 * For these purposes one cavalry figure = three infantry; one gun = six infantry.

 For two units attacking one, the attackers total up all their factors and divide by two (halves round up).

Count highest grade unit for training comparison.

 Result: Compare scores. If side A's total is, say, +3 and side B's is -2 then side A is the winner by a total of +5 and B is the loser by -5. Consult the following table for the effect on each unit:

+4 or more: **Easy victory.** Take 1 DP. 1st/2nd/3rd class troops obey orders. 4th/5th class pursue (see below)

+2/3: **Successful action.** Take 1 DP and (if facing infantry or artillery and not in a fort, building or fieldwork) one casualty. Halt one turn.

+1/0/-1: **Stand off.** No clear result. Both sides halt. Action continues next turn. Both take 1 DP and (unless infantry, facing cavalry, or facing a bayonet attack, or in a fort, building or fieldwork) one casualty.

-2/-3/-4: **Driven Back.** Take 2 DP's and one casualty. Retreat one move at maximum speed (no deduction for abut face).

-5/-6/-7/-8: **Defeated.** Take 2 DP's and two casualties. Retreat at maximum speed behind next line of friendly troops, or next terrain obstacle if no support.

-9 or more: **Routed.** Run away at maximum speed to beyond artillery range of enemy or next terrain obstacle (whichever is the further). Take 4 DP's and two casualties.

 Note: Pursuit continues until the enemy outdistances the pursuers or is destroyed by them.

Cavalry who get a **stand off** result against infantry or artillery act as if **driven back**.

Generals who attach themselves to a unit may not quit that unit until the combat is resolved, and they must share the fate of that unit (ie. risking retreat/rout **and** getting caught up in a pursuit).

Risk to Commanders

If a unit to which a commander is attached (e.g.. for rallying purposes, or to give an order, etc) takes a D. point from enemy fire, or takes a casualty in any circumstances, roll one D6 to see if the commander is hit (maximum of one such roll in any one turn):

1 = hit. Roll again.

4/5/6 = Light wound. Lose 2 CP's.

2/3 = Serious wound. Retire from field. Loses all CP's.

1 = Killed.

Formations Permitted

	Regulars	Militia	Light Infantry	Jagers/Rifles/Indians
Line	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

Column	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Skirmish	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: Line is the normal fighting formation for both infantry and cavalry. Column is used only on the march except that regulars may use it as an attack formation when assaulting a fieldwork, bridge or defile. Regulars are too sensible to consider skirmishing, but militia are happy enough to do it (Minutemen, etc) even though the effectiveness of untrained skirmishers is questionable.

"DESIGNERS NOTES"

D. Points

Because the number of D. Points affecting a unit is constantly changing it is not practical to try and keep a note of them on paper. Some sort of counters, placed next to the command group of the unit in question is a much better system since you can see at a glance how disordered a unit is - the enemy can see it too, which is only realistic since ranks would be wavering etc. - and you can add or take away counters as required. The counters I prefer to use are little pebbles, sold as gravel for fish tanks in pet shops. These can be handled more easily than flat counters and don't look too out of place on the table.

Command Points

Keeping a record of how command points are used is equally important. The system I have settled on, after much experimentation, is to use a little gadget made up of cork tile and mapping pins. Each commander has a small rectangle of cork tile marked so:

MOVEMENT (1)						
ORDERS (2)	▓	▓			▓	▓
RALLY 1 D (2)			▓	▓		
COMBAT +1 (3)				▓	▓	▓

The figure in brackets is the cost in command points of each command action.

Give each commander as many mapping pins as he has command points. At phase 4 on each turn the commander's CP's are allocated by putting the pins in the appropriate boxes. Six is the maximum number of boxes needed, since the maximum command points score is Average dice +1. Thus a four-point general could, say, move two dice x inches and then rally one D. Point, or he could issue two orders. But he couldn't move two dice x inches and add one in combat since this would cost a total of five CP's. Using the cork tile and pins this is immediately clear to the umpire and the players.

The Advance to Contact

A couple of points to note:

(1) You'll find that an attacking unit can avoid coming under fire from the defender before the combat calculation if he carefully times his attack (so that he starts his move from outside musketry range - i.e. over 8 inches - but ends it within the combat zone - i.e. less than 4 inches). This does take some careful timing and a good deal of luck (since movement is randomised) but does give a particularly finely-judged advance an appropriate reward. The umpire should, of course, prevent players carefully measuring distances.

(2) The +2 for a bayonet attack is a bonus open only to British regulars, who used the tactic to good effect to "put the frighteners on" their opponents. Note however that the bayonet attack is a two edged weapon (sic) since if you only get a **stand off** result then the defender doesn't take a casualty. This reflects the fact that the attacker has dispensed with any firing during the advance,

but has still been subject to the defender's fire. The advantage thus passes to the defender with the opposing sides going into the next round with the attacker on minus four (-2 for a D. Point, -2 for a casualty) and the defender on only minus two (-2 for a D. Point). The lesson for the British player is therefore - only use a bayonet attack to enhance an already likely victory, or as a risky last resort to get out of trouble. Steady Continentals are unlikely to be impressed by it.

Manoeuvre

Under these rules you get some idea of how difficult it is to put a complicated plan of action (or even a fairly simple one!) into effect. The terrain is assumed to be broken up by trees, scrub and fences (this was typical of AWI battlefields) which all get in the way of parade ground manouvres. The ability of well trained troops to quickly re-dress their ranks gives them a decisive advantage.

Commanders

Are usually kept busy straightening out the mess manoeuvring units get themselves into. Beware of getting your general shot at, as the loss of all those useful command points can have unpleasant and decisive results. Note that while most commanders can steady a unit in defence by keeping a close eye on them (i.e.. spending 3 CP's on 'inspiring troops in combat'), a general has to be above average to be capable of raising spirits while leading his men in an attack (the "hat waving" style of leadership) since moving costs him CP's as well, and exceptionally charismatic to lead a dashing cavalry charge.

Troop Training

Quality is immeasurably superior to quantity. You'll find that seasoned regulars can absorb a lot of punishment, sort themselves out quickly and then come back for more. Militia units, on the other hand, have limited usefulness and life-expectancy, so are best placed behind some sort of cover and told to stay put. Manoeuvre with them at your peril as they soon fall into disorder and become good for absolutely nothing.

Skirmishers

Are easily seen off by regulars determined to use the cold steel. Skirmish fire is primarily of nuisance value but can soon become alarmingly destructive if not dealt with promptly.

Cavalry

You'll see why cavalry didn't play much of a part in this war. Under these rules they are exceptionally difficult to handle to good effect since they usually fall into disorder too easily to be of much use against steady troops. A successful cavalry charge is thus a great rarity, but when it does come off it can be wonderful to behold.

A FLAVOUR OF THE TIMES

A few quotes which I think sum up a number of the characteristic features of the War of Indepenence:

The American Experience

"*We fight, get beat, rise, and fight again*" General Nathaniel Green

The British Experience

"*As we go forward into the country the rebels fly before us, and when we come back they always follow .... we seem to be playing at bo-peep*" Anonymous British Officer, 1777

"*Lord Cornwallis' victories have increased our losses without leaving any hopes*" Horace Walpole

American Militia

"*Place them behind a parapet, a breast work, or anything that will sfford them shelter and from their knowledge of a firelock they will give a good account of their enemy .... ut they will not march boldly up to a work nor stand exposed in a plain*" George Washington

British Regulars

"*The British line advanced at a sort of trot with a loud Halloo. It was the most beautiful line I ever saw*" Private Thomas Young, with the America Militia at Cowpens

"*We were in some confusion after being broke several times in getting over the rails etc. I did all I could to form the two companies on our right which I at last affected, losing many of them while it was performing. I ran from left to right and stopped our men from firing .... when we got into tolerable order we rushed on and all shouting 'push on, push on' advanced with infinite spirit to attack with our small arms*" Lt. Waller, with the Marine battalion at Bunker Hill

American Riflemen

"*The orders were ... for every man to raise a whoop, rush forward, and fight his way as best he could*" Private Thomas Young, at King's Mountain

"*These things are ominous. These are the damned yelling boys*" Captain Abraham de Peyster, Briitsh second in command at King's Mountain

"*My riflemen would have been of little service if they had not always had a line of Musquet and Bayonette men to support us*" General Daniel Morgan

Hessians

"*Our troops when they are fully closed up are not able to march in line with the English, but lose thirty paces in every hundred*" General Knyphausen

"*I believe them stead, but their slowness is of the greatest disadvanctage in a country almost covered with woods against an enemy ... keeping up an irregular but galling fire on troops who advance with the same pace as at their exercise*" Lt. Hale, 45th Foot

Continentals

"*The regular troops, who had the keen edge of sensibility rubb'd off by strict discipline and hard service, saw the confusion (the rout of the militia) with but little emotion. They engaged seriously in the affair*" Otho Williams, American Adjutant-General at Camden

"*I soon removed his fears by pointing to the line and observing that men were not beaten who retreated in that order ...*" Lt. Colonel John Eager Howard at Cowpens

Indians

"*They gave him a shot from the top of a ridge and ran according to their custom as soon as the fire was returned*" Captain James Norris, with Sullivan's expedition, 1779

Back to Europe

David Dundas's plans to introduce Prussian style drill into the post-war British army did not always meet with approval. General William Harcourt was very sceptical. He doubted whether every Briitsh officer was capable of appreciating Prussian order and discipline "*and upon the whole whether loose files and America scramble would not have been preferred*".

Acknowledgements