



Playing the Bad Guy

In the world of Revolutionary War reenactments, “living historians” portray soldiers on both sides of the conflict. Some choose to portray patriots fighting for America’s freedom, while others choose to play what might be considered a more “sinister” role . . .



Photos by David Stirling

Two lines of soldiers stand face-to-face on the Lexington town green, eyeing one another warily through the early morning mist. An advance guard of British regulars, on the march from Boston to Concord in search of rebel weapons, are confronted by a crowd of local militia.* The townspeople of Lexington, previously alerted by Paul Revere, have been up all night awaiting the redcoats’ arrival and now stand stubbornly in their path. Tensions rise as the British officer orders the Lexingtonians to disperse. Angry words are exchanged between the two groups; this is not the first time rebellious colonists have expressed their defiance toward the king. Commanders on both sides step in to calm their men and de-escalate the confrontation. Just

as it appears the colonial militia are about to stand down, a shot rings out. Immediately, chaos takes over. Muskets fire on both sides: from the redcoats in attack, and from the militia in retreat. The British charge forward with their bayonets raised, and the heavily outmanned rebels run for their lives. Then, seemingly as quickly as it started, it is over. The British troops reassemble on the green to continue their march to Concord, and the townspeople rush to assist the fallen colonial soldiers: eight dead and ten wounded.

This confused skirmish is repeated every year, on the third Monday of April, as part of the Patriots’ Day holiday to commemorate the battles of Lexington and Concord in 1775. Historians consider these battles to

*Although “minutemen” companies—elite militia units that could be ready at a minute’s notice—eventually became synonymous with the soldiers of Lexington, in 1775 the town did not have such a company. The local militia at that time was simply known as the “Lexington Training Band.”



Scott Thornbury portrays a light infantryman in the 4th King's Own Regiment, which figured prominently in the battles of Lexington and Concord. Members of the 4th wore red coats trimmed with blue. Light infantrymen were expected to be highly agile in order to outflank the enemy.



Manny Gonzales takes on the role of a grenadier in service of His Majesty's 10th Regiment of Foot. The grenadiers, selected for their imposing stature, are known for their tall hats, trimmed with genuine bear fur.



Mary Stone, also in the 10th Regiment of Foot, is fife major in the military band. Musicians were distinguished from soldiers by having the colors of their coats and trim reversed. While women would never have been in uniform in the 18th century, they are welcome to join modern reenactment groups.

be the start of the American Revolutionary War. The scene is carefully choreographed to occur just as it did over 200 years ago. Dozens of experienced reenactors work together to portray both soldiers and townspeople to make the event as realistic and as historically accurate as possible. In order to participate, reenactors must be members of one of several societies dedicated to recreating the life and times of the Revolutionary War period.

One of the most popular reenactment societies, appropriately named the Lexington Minute Men, represents the colonial soldiers (and their families) fighting on the side of rebellion against King George. In the words of the organization's website, "The Lexington Minute Men are dedicated to honoring those brave Patriots who have made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of our Nation's freedom." Other groups recreate the military units that fought on the British side. Among them are the "4th King's Own Regiment" and "His Majesty's 10th Regiment of Foot." These organizations are committed to faithfully represent the soldiers who fought in service of the British Army during the "American War for Independence." So why would a modern American choose to fight on the side of the British in a reenactment? Who would want to play the bad guy?

Several reenactors on the British side stated that they initially began the hobby by portraying members of the colonial militia, but as they became more involved, they grew fascinated by the rich history of the British regiments and by the intricacy of their uniforms. The British soldiers may have all been referred to as redcoats, but in fact there were many subtle differences in uniform between regiments, including trim colors, insignia, and equipment. Each reenactor is responsible for creating his or her own historically accurate uniform, which is entirely handmade using authentic materials. It is a labor of love, requiring many hours of work and research.

Another attractive aspect of portraying a redcoat is the British drill and discipline. Unlike the colonial militia, the British troops were professional soldiers, with a highly regimented routine. British army reenactors spend a lot of time performing field drills. They also emulate the same command hierarchy that existed in an 18th century British regiment. As it so happens, many among the redcoat ranks were former members of the military in their real life; they appreciate reliving the regimental life of a different era.

Many British regiment reenactors cited their desire to better understand the British point of view during the Revolutionary War. As avid historians, they have read deeply about the competing interests and influences at work in colonial America in the late 18th century. Putting themselves in the shoes of a British soldier helps them explore a more nuanced view of the circumstances that led up to the explosive events of April 19, 1775.

Any other reasons? "Well," said one with a wink, "Sometimes it's just fun to play the bad guy."

A Soldier's Gear: Colonial Militia

By David Stirling. May be reproduced for classroom use. Toolkit Texts: Short Nonfiction for American History, The American Revolution and Constitution, by Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis, ©2015 (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann).



David Stirling

- A** The **flintlock musket** was the most common weapon used in battle during the late 1700s and early 1800s. Skilled soldiers could reload and fire a musket three or even four times per minute.
- B** A musket is loaded by pouring a premeasured amount of gunpowder into the **muzzle**, followed by the musket ball.
- C** The **flintlock mechanism** ignites the powder to fire the weapon. Pulling the trigger causes the hammer to swing down, scraping a piece of flint against a steel plate to create a spark.
- D** Soldiers carried a **cartridge box** that held 20 to 30 premade charges of powder and a musket ball, individually wrapped in paper.
- E** A **powder horn** holds extra gunpowder and keeps it dry.
- F** A **haversack** is a small pouch used to hold food and personal items. While sometimes made of leather, it was more commonly linen or cotton.
- G** A **knapsack** holds a blanket and bulkier items.

A Soldier's Gear: British Regiment



David Stirling

- A** The British Army all used the same standard issue **flintlock musket**, nicknamed the “Brown Bess.”
- B** A **cartridge** is a premeasured packet of gunpowder and a lead ball, wrapped in paper. To load his musket, the soldier tears the top of the cartridge off with his teeth, then pours the contents into the muzzle.
- C** The **ramrod** is stored beneath the muzzle of the musket. The soldier thrusts it into the muzzle to pack down the gunpowder, musket ball, and the wad of paper from the cartridge.
- D** Officers in the British Army could be identified by a decorative metal pendant called a **gorget**. It was engraved with a design unique to that officer’s regiment.
- E** The **bayonet** was a fearsome part of 18th century British weaponry. Normally holstered on the hip, the sharp-pointed blade could be affixed to the end of a musket for fighting at close range.
- F** Only officers were allowed to wear a **sword**, slung on the left hip.
- G** A **whistle** could be effective in directing soldiers under an officer’s command.