


## Firing a musket: 18th-century small arms

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During Living History Week at Alamance Battleground, reenactor Bill Thompson explains late eighteenth-century small arms, including how a flintlock works and the differences between rifles and muskets, and demonstrates the loading and firing of an English “Brown Bess” musket.

**Video:**  The 18th century Firing a musket

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**Duration:** 8:40

**Transcript:**

Fire in the hole! [musket fires]

#### **Firing a musket: Small arms in the 18th century**

**With Bill Thompson**

**Alamance Battleground, October 15, 2008**

What I have in my hand is a 75 caliber Brown Bess musket. This is actually a world-famous instrument. 75 caliber means that hole is three quarters of an inch in diameter. Brown Bess is kind of like a brand name: Ford, GM, Chrysler. This is what the British called their musket.

In all these nations of Europe, their militaries used muskets in the eighteenth century. The Spanish had a musket, the Dutch had a musket. The French called their musket a Charleville. My, what a lovely name for something made to kill somebody with. The difference between a British Brown Bess and a French Charleville is about the difference between Coca-Cola and Pepsi, not enough to argue about.

#### **“A very simple weapon”**

They were all loaded and fired the same. It's actually a very simple weapon. The musket was made for the military. You would literally starve to death if you tried to hunt with this thing. It's not accurate; it is not made to shoot at a specific target. It's made to shoot at mass troops, linear tactics. We get people that come out here all the time that think, how stupid; get out in an open field, stand up shoulder to shoulder, and shoot at each other! What you have to understand... this thing is made to be loaded and fired as rapidly as possible. You don't aim it, you just point it. The enemy is over there; a blind man could use this, just point towards the noise. Trained soldiers in the British army were expected to be able to fire this thing four times a minute, that's quite a lot of fire power. And the object was to continue to advance upon the enemy, until it was time to be able to attach the bayonets.

In the eighteenth century, battles ended in hand-to-hand combat. So, the bayonet, as you can see, basically turns the musket into a spear. If you could just imagine being stabbed with that, or your brains dashed out with the other end, it gets pretty nasty. That's about as gruesome as we get with a bunch of little kids.

#### **“The most savage hand-to-hand combat”**

There were nearly three thousand of the Regulators camped on that hill behind me. Picture in your mind all the horses and tents and fires. Governor Tryon had about a thousand men in his militia, and he brought eight cannons, similar to our three-pound field piece down there. We don't think that any hand-to-hand combat took place here at the Battle of Alamance. These were all amateurs; there were no professional soldiers here. But nearby Guilford Courthouse, National Military Park, about sixteen miles from here, that was said to be some of the most savage hand-to-hand combat of the entire American Revolution, so you may want to go over there someday.

#### **“Not much use on a farm”**

The musket, as I said, is quite simple. It's heavy; this weighs ten pounds. If you drop it, there are no delicate sights to knock out of alignment, like a rifle. If you hit somebody upside the head with it, the only thing that's going to hurt you is the head. It's rough, it's tough.

They did have rifles in the eighteenth century, and I'm betting most of the Regulators, being farmers, coming from home, had rifles, because a musket is not much use on a farm. A rifle is made to hit a specific target. I'm not aiming at y'all, I'm aiming at you. It's got rifling cut into the barrel that makes the bullet spin as it flies through the air, like a quarterback throwing a touchdown pass. That spin makes the bullet fly straight.

A rifle also has sights, one in the front, one in the back. And the gunsmith who made it spent hours carefully lining up those sights so that you've got something to actually aim at the target. It takes skill to hit something with a rifle. You don't just point it; you've got to literally aim at the target. You've got to line up the target, the front sight, the rear sight, and your pupil.

### **“Any man caught with a rifle would be hung”**

As big as that hole is, the musket actually shoots a bullet that's smaller than the barrel. I can load this thing literally this quickly; wham, bam. There's no resistance. However, but if you've got, say, a 50-caliber rifle, the bullet and the bore are exactly the same size. That's a tight fit, isn't it? Somebody say yeah. Alright. You've got to put grease on it and shove it from there to there. That's a long ways.

It takes two or three minutes to load a flintlock rifle, as opposed to, say, eight seconds for a musket. If you're trying to shoot a squirrel out of that tree, you've got all the time in the world. If you're out here in a wild battle, two or three minutes is a long time. So the rifle was for hunting, the musket was for fighting.

However, during this battle, and during the American Revolution, as I've said earlier, a lot of these farmers were bringing their hunting rifles with them. If you can't get but one shot off in two minutes, you're going to make it count. You shoot at the officer, you shoot at the medic. So the British got pretty mad about this. They put out the word that any man caught with a rifle would be hung.

### **“How a flintlock works”**

All the guns in the eighteenth century were flintlocks. You see that flint right there? That's basically a type of rock. That's the most important part on the gun. If this flint breaks, if it falls out, if it gets dull, the gun can't be fired until the flint is replaced. There's a flashpan here. In the case of the musket, you're getting ready to fire it, you reach into the cartridge box, and if you went through that many rounds, you were in one heck of a battle. That's twenty-seven of them. This paper tube was made by the soldiers [when] they were sitting around at camp. The bullet would be at the bottom. I don't have a bullet in here. They don't let me play with live ammunition. And then it's got 125 grains of black powder in there. What color is black powder? You kids are sharp. And it's all rolled up in this rather tough paper.

Now, I've got this ten-pound gun in one hand, how am I going to rip this open? Right, with your teeth, you're going to bite it open and prime it. See this flashpan here? Alright. Young lady, come forward. Look down in there and tell the class that there is a hole down there called the bin, drilled into the side of the barrel. That connects what's going on out here in the flashpan with what's going on inside the barrel. I'm going to tear this open and pour a tiny amount of the black powder in the flashpan, shut the pan. This is called a muzzle-loader. You load it down the muzzle. The rest of the powder is poured down the barrel, followed by the bullet. And don't get that backwards. If you put the bullet in first and dump the powder on top of it, you've got a mess. And the paper acts as a type of wadding. You put it in, pull the rammer out, and again, shove it into the bottom of the barrel.

Don't forget to put your rammer back in. If you shoot your rammer out, you're out of business. Giggles. Now you think that's funny. You would do the same thing, if you were scared to death, if this was your first battle. If you ever go to a battle reenactment, like they do at Guilford Court House, you'll notice we make them take the rammers out. They're just shooting, dumping powder. That's to keep somebody from getting carried away and killing somebody. That rammer would be a bullet, flying down the range.

### **“Fire in the hole!”**

What I'm going to do now is load and fire this. As you can see, black powder is very dirty stuff. This musket has been fired several times. You may get to see a misfire. In fact, you may get to see several misfires. The other day, I almost busted this thing on that tree right there, I got so aggravated. The dirtier it gets, the harder it is to get it to fire. We want you to understand that your enemy was having misfires at the same rate you were. That was another good reason for having a bayonet, a tomahawk, a knife, some kind of backup. Alright, cross your fingers. Fire in the hole! [Loads musket, fires musket.] Thank you.

### **“...But I'm not a professional soldier.”**

Okay, as you saw, I did that in about five seconds. I probably could have done it a little faster if I'd wanted to, but I'm not a professional soldier. The British Redcoats (and there were no Redcoats here), but during the revolution, were literally robots that had been trained and trained and trained to do this. They could get off a tremendous rate of firepower.

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