CONTINENTAL ARMY DRUMMERS

By: John Whiteside

Musicians and music have been an integral part of the battlefield since Biblical times, used to move armies into position and to create a measure of fear in those about to be attacked. Percussion instruments like drums were often used as they were the loudest and easiest to hear during combat operations. The use of the drum continued in that role into the Revolutionary War, along with the addition of the fife, and its unique, high-pitched notes.

The age of drummers in the Continental Army differs in many historical accounts. Ages have ranged as young as a seven-year-old boy in a North Carolina regiment to men in their forties. Most sources believe that the majority of drummers were about sixteen years of age and older during the conflict. At the time, sixteen-year-olds were considered to be men. They were required to learn how to play the songs familiar to the soldiers, and to play well. Early in the war, there were few standards for the drummer, adding to battlefield confusion. It would not be until February, 1778 when Baron von Steuben arrived at the Valley Forge encampment, that rules for musicians would become standardized for all.

The drum instrument of the Continental Army for the most part was a snare, (or side), rope tension drum. The ropes providing the tension to the drum head were made from hemp. The drum heads were stretched calfskin, primarily built to provide battlefield signals above the noisy fray, and not made to a high musical quality or standard. The uniforms worn by drummers were purposely designed to differ from their own regiments so as to distinguish them as non-combatants during battles. This was commonly done by opposing fighting armies. Despite the effort to protect the drummers from injury, many were war casualties. Some were killed, captured by the enemy, and even taken out of the country with other prisoners. Many had stories to tell, just as graphic as those of the infantry soldiers.

Ideally, there would be one drummer and one fifer assigned to each company of seventy-five men. Their duties not only included providing drum signals and beats during combat and at rest, but were also used to improve morale among the troops, in the form of entertainment.

In his Drill Manual, General von Steuben identified drum sounds by both beats and signals, and how the drummers in a regiment or battalion formation were to play them. The General beat was to alert the troops to strike tents and prepare to leave camp. The Assembly was beat to have troops move to the flags, and the March beat initiated movement of the troops. More familiar beats were Reveille, the wake-up call for inspection; the Retreat at sunset to again do a roll call and read orders of the day; and the Tattoo, for soldiers to go to sleeping quarters until Reveille the next morning. Two other beats, To Arms, ordered soldiers to get their muskets quickly in case of attack. And, the Parley, which was used for several purposes. It would request a pause in action for a meeting between opponents, or as a break to attend to injured on the field. It was also played as a call to church services during camp.

The signals included drum cadence for both officers and non-commissioned officers to action. They also ordered calls for obtaining firewood, water, and provisions for the camp. Many of the drum beats and signals, along with the accompanying fife tunes were originated from favorite songs of the troops. Commander-in-Chief Washington, keenly aware of the value of music at camp, said in June, 1777 that, “Nothing is more agreeable, and ornamental than good music.” He is also added that, “Every officer, for the credit of his corps should take care to provide it.”

While at Valley Forge, on May 9, 1778, Washington issued general orders pertaining directly to Drummers in camp. He wrote, “The hours appointed for the Exercise of the Troops having been changed makes it necessary to alter the hours appointed for the Drummers to practise (sic), which will for the future be from five to six in the morning and from four to five in the afternoon, any Drummer that shall be found practising (sic) at any other than the time mentioned above shall be severely punished. The Adjutants of the several Regiments are to pay particular attention to this order as they will be answerable for the Execution of it. The use of Drums are as signals to the Army and if every Drummer is allowed to beat at his pleasure, the Intention is entirely destroy’d (sic), as it will be impossible to distinguish whether they are beating for their own pleasure or for a signal to the Troops.”

Interestingly, this same General Order announced that, “Congress has been pleased to appoint Baron De Steuben Inspector General with the rank of Major General.”

The drummers and their fifer colleagues had an important role to play throughout the entire Revolutionary War, ensuring communications were understood both on and off the battlefield, and were at all times held to a strict standard as any other officer or soldier in connection with their official duties.

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