

# CONTINENTAL LINE

## The Organizational Structure of the Continental Line (While in the Field)

**By: Michael Thompson**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century American Revolutionary War reenactment community is currently faced with organizational and officer problems very similar to those that were encountered by General Washington and the American Army during our War for Independence. Then, as now, most of the soldiers and officers were no professionals by trade, but rather civilians. This lack of soldierly knowledge resulted in incompatible organizational structures that varied from company to company, battalion to battalion and brigade to brigade. The skill level of the officers was just as varied. This resulted in much disorganization for the whole and great confusion for the rank and file. It is important to understand that these problems were not due to incompetence or lack of motivation, but rather due to inexperience and lack of knowledge.

When Baron Von Steuben assumed responsibility for the drill and exercise of the Continental Army in 1778, one of the first problems he addressed was the lack of a standardized organizational structure. Von Steuben encountered companies that were larger than some battalions and some battalions that weren't large enough to form a company. These discrepancies made it virtually impossible to form an order of battle and keep a realistic account of troop strength. To correct this problem, he divided the organizational structure into two components: administrative and operational.

The administrative component consisted of regiments and companies. These terms were used to designate to where men belonged. Stores and pay would be issued through the regimental and company structure. This organizational structure however would not determine the tactical capabilities of the unit. The tactical capability a unit possessed was covered by the operational component, which was based on actual troop count.

Operationally, Von Steuben specified in his 1779 regulations, that a platoon was to consist of a minimum of 20 men and a battalion 160, or 8 platoons to a battalion. Administratively, he stated a Regiment should consist of a minimum of 320 rank and file divided into 8 companies. This would mean that at full strength the regiment would have 8 companies of 2 platoons, and 2 battalions of 4 companies (8 platoons). He further states that if a regiment consists of less than 320 rank and file it will form 1 battalion of 8 platoons and if a regiment should be further reduced and consist of less than 160 rank and file, then that regiment cannot form a battalion and must be either consolidated with another regiment so together they form a battalion or be put on detached service (Chapter IV). After Von Steuben organized his troops into a set structure, tactically controlling and directing the army became less confused for both officers and men and ultimately made it possible for the Continental Army to more than just hold it's own.

As I currently see it, the reenactment hobby is hindered by much of the same problem. I would propose that "The Continental Line" devise a set operational structure that will enable our weekend army to perform in a much more disciplined and less confused manner in which we currently find ourselves. I have formulated an operational structure for the army which is based primarily on Von Stueben's Regulations, Gen. Lee's Plan of Organization for the Army, Timothy Pickering's "An Easy Plan of Discipline for a Militia" and His Majesty's "Manuel Exercise" of 1764, while taking into consideration the limitations and existing circumstances of being a 20<sup>th</sup> century hobby comprised solely of weekend volunteers.

## OVERVIEW

"The Continental Line" would tactically field as a full strength regiment with special attachments. (This is based on current participation but can be scaled up or down depending on actual numbers). The structure would be:

### STAFF

- 1 Lieutenant Colonel – Commanding
- 1 Adjutant
- 1 Sargent Major
- 1 Drum Major
- 1 Fife Major

### INFANTRY

- 2 Majors – each commanding a battalion of 2 grand divisions
- 4 Captains – each commanding a grand division of 4 platoons
- 4 Color Ensigns – carrying a color for each grand division
- 16 Lieutenants – each commanding a platoon

### LIGHT INFANTRY

- 1 Captain – commanding a grand division comprised of 2 platoons
- 2 Lieutenants – each commanding a platoon of 16 men
- 1 Color Ensign – to carry the grand divisions colors

*Note: If the corps consists of less than 16 men, then the Light Infantry will form 1 platoon commanded by a Captain.*

### RIFLES

- The structure of the Rifles will be consistent with that of the Light Infantry

### ARTILLERY

- As I do not currently have enough information concerning the use of Artillery, I cannot offer a realistic organizational structure.

### DRAGOONS

- As I do not currently have enough information concerning the use of Artillery, I cannot offer a realistic organizational structure.

## OPERATIONAL UNITS

### PLATOONS

The platoon will form the smallest tactical unit (firing body). The platoon will consist of a minimum of 16 men and a maximum of 31 men. The platoon will be officered by 1 Lieutenant posted on the right of the front rank, 1 Sargeant posted on the right of the second rank covering the lieutenant and 1 Corporal posted on the left of the front rank. These men are to be included as part of the 16 man minimum. Platoon officers will stay in these positions at all times during a battle, never quitting their posts and only take commands from their Grand Division Captain. The minimum platoon formed will look like this:

Legend: MAJ = Major  
 CPT = Captain  
 L = Lieutenant  
 E = Ensign  
 S = Sargeant  
 C = Corporal  
 P = Private

CPPPPPPL  
 PPPPPPS

### GRAND DIVISIONS

The grand division consists of 4 platoons commanded by a Captain. 1 Color Ensign with colors is to be placed in the middle of the 4 platoons. A grand division can have a troop strength of between 66 and 126 men. The captain of the grand division will be posted 4 paces in front of the grand division's colors and only take orders from the Major commanding the battalion to which it is assigned. The minimum grand division formed for battle will look like this:

O  
 CPT

CPPPPPPL CPPPPPPL E CPPPPPPL CPPPPPPL  
 PPPPPPS PPPPPPS PPPPPPS PPPPPPS

### BATTALIONS

A Battalion will consist of 2 grand divisions and be commanded by a Major. The Major will be posted 6 paces before the front rank between the interval of the 2 grand divisions and only receive orders from the Lt. Colonel and then give appropriate orders to the grand division captains who will then carry them out. (ie. Firing by platoons/grand divisions or advancing by platoons/grand divisions). This will eliminate platoon or grand division commanders receiving conflicting orders from everyone passing by. The battalion drawn up in battle will look like this:

O  
 MAJ

O CPT O CPT

CPPPPPPL CPPPPPPL E CPPPPPPL CPPPPPPL CPPPPPPL CPPPPPPL E CPPPPPPL CPPPPPPL  
 PPPPPPS PPPPPPS PPPPPPS PPPPPPS PPPPPPS PPPPPPS PPPPPPS PPPPPPS PPPPPPS

In order for the above organizational structure to be successfully implemented, a number of factors will need to be realized. As many units within "The Continental Line" do not consist of enough men to form a platoon, small units will have to pool their resources together into platoons and grand divisions (we are currently doing this for the most part already). This requires cooperation on all parts for not all unit officers will be able to be an officer at all events nor will all unit colors be able to fly at all times. Officers should be chosen from amongst those pooled together – agreeable to those to be commanded – and appointed by the event commander. With concern to colors, a grand division can choose a non-existing unit's colors (such as the 4th Mass's in New England) or rotate carrying those belonging to the different units comprising the grand division.

This proposal was written so as to lay a foundation for which "The Continental Line" can formulate an organizational structure that will allow it to function at its fullest and most enjoyable potential.