Unsheathing the Past:

The Role of the Sword

by: Robert Ranstadler

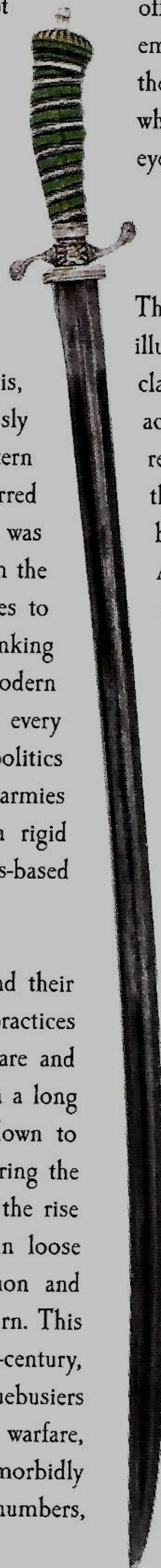
In 1881, on the eve of the 100th anniversary of Great Britain's capitulation to the American and French forces at Yorktown, nineteenth-century American journalist Sydney Howard Gay (1814 – 1888) recounted, "When Lord George Germaine waited upon Lord North with the news of the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown, on the 19th of October, 1781, the minister received it, Germaine says, as he would have taken a ball in his breast, and exclaimed: 'O God! It is all over!' It was not merely that a battle, or a town, or an army had been lost; it was the loss of a cause."

There is little reason to challenge Gay's retelling of the dramatic exchange between Frederick North, then Prime Minister of Great Britain, and George Germain, his Secretary of State during the American Revolutionary War. General Charles Cornwallis's stunning defeat, while a virtual inevitability when viewed in hindsight, was a laughable impossibility to most statesmen and military leaders at the outset of the war. There is also little discounting the fact that the surrender at Yorktown symbolically marked the end of the conflict and the beginning of a new era, despite the war technically lingering on for another two years. Of greater interpretive interest, is Gay's emblematic recounting of the event, in which Germaine observes that Lord North received the news of Cornwallis's surrender as if being struck in the chest by musket fire.

Germaine was likely accurate in describing his Prime Minister's shocking reaction to the dire news but, from a historically symbolic standpoint, it might have been more precise to describe Lord North's ostentatious response as being "thrust in the heart with a blade" or perhaps "as if slashed across the breast with a sabre." Without question, musket balls and cannon fire claimed thousands of lives during the Revolutionary War. Nevertheless, the eighteenth-century was an era in which the admission of military defeat was formally rendered with the ceremonial surrendering of the sword—a weapon that, in one form or another, has played a vital role in warfare for thousands of years. One only need examine the drama surrounding the surrender at Yorktown to understand its significance.

Following a devastating siege and naval blockade, a disgraced Cornwallis broke with military decorum by feigning illness and remaining in his quarters rather than surrender to the Franco-American forces in person. Instead, he sent out his adjutant, General Charles O'Hara, to deliver George Washington his sword. In a move, made either out

of ignorance or spite, O'Hara bypassed Washington and attempted to tender Cornwallis's blade to the nearby French Expeditionary Forces commander, General Jean-Beptiste Rochambeau. The French commander, in keeping with proper military protocol, declined O'Hara's offer and referred him back instead to the General of the Continental Army. Washington, unwilling to accept the trophy from anyone but Cornwallis and in observing proper etiquette, forced the British officer to deliver the blade to his own second-in-command, Major General Benjamin Lincoln (an American officer that the British embarrassingly defeated at Charleston the previous year).



As dramatic and confounding the surrender at Yorktown might appear to the modern observer, it was not an isolated event nor entirely difficult to comprehend when placed in the appropriate historical context. Cornwallis, Washington, Rochambeau and their contemporaries famously lived during the Revolutionary Period, an era of Western history foreshadowed by the Enlightenment and referred to by Thomas Paine as the "Age of Reason." The age was marked by the gradual transfer of power and authority from the religious and monarchical institutions of previous centuries to the aristocratic intellectuals, secular philosophers, free-thinking scientists, and representational bureaucracies of the modern era. These movements were manifold and touched nearly every aspect of Western civilization, from art and literature to politics and statesmanship. On the battlefield, "enlightened" armies and their eminently rational commanders operated by a rigid and hierarchical set of rules rooted in social norms, class-based authoritarianism, and cultural absolutism.

With the above factors in mind, it's clear why soldiers and their commanders engaged in highly regimented and organized practices that seem impractical or even illogical today. Linear warfare and tactics, whether concerned with maneuvering a regiment on a long march or conducting a prolonged siege, were distilled down to their most rational and scientifically verifiable elements during the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries. We therefore witness the rise of armies that, instead of advancing upon one another in loose tactical formations, mechanically fired fusillades of cannon and musket fire at their enemies while receiving the same in return. This was a departure from the wild, open fighting of the sixteenth-century, where pikemen brazenly waded into ranks of panicking arquebusiers across the battlefields of the war-torn Europe. "Modern" warfare, on the other hand, essentially boiled down to a series of morbidly precise calculations based upon closely recorded troop numbers, terrain features, ammunitions stores, and volumes of fire.

This admittedly simplified view should not, however, eclipse the bloody chaos and violence that frequently broke out on eighteenth-century battlefields. Field commanders relied upon focused volleys of fire to break holes in enemy lines, whereupon they would order their sword-wielding cavalrymen to cutdown routing troops. It was in this arena that field commanders and their subordinate officers were critical in maintaining discipline and holding the line. A combat officer's gravitas was forged upon social authority, rote training, and empirical drills influenced by generations of military tradition. It is therefore fair to say that the ceremonial act of surrendering a sword, while seemingly pretentious and inconsequential to modern civilian eyes, was an integral aspect of a much broader military code of conduct—one precariously balanced between rational objectivity and savage brutality.

The enlightened officers of the eighteenth-century were an illuminated generation of military leaders who, by way of their classical educations and the emerging influence of nascent military academic institutions, looked both to the past and present for reassurance and inspiration in the conduct and theory of war. In this regard, the sword held significant practical and symbolic value, both as a proven weapon and mark of gentlemanly martial virtue. As symbols, swords represented power, protection, and justice; characteristics that shaped the Western military tradition. On the other hand, arme blance (cold steel) was still indispensable in battle, with the sword remaining a capable component of warfare and sometimes dictating the outcome of closely fought engagements. The 1781 Battle of Guilford Courthouse, for example, was a savage fight where American General Nathanael Greene handed British troops a pyrrhic victory in vicious hand-to-hand combat involving bayonets, hatchets, and swords.

In the abstract, the lineage of the sword influenced many gentlemen officers of the Enlightenment, even if in the most intangible terms. As students of the past, many of these men were undoubtedly familiar with implements such as the Roman gladius, a short stabbing weapon that, in addition to winning the Caesars of antiquity many battles, served as a ceremonial award (frequently presented by the Emperor Tiberius to the distinguished officers of his legions). Progressing forward, one of the most coveted weapons of the Early Middle Ages was the European longsword. Saxon blades were considered objects of great adoration, as they were both time consuming and expensive to produce. With the rise of Christian Latin states, the sword took on yet another symbolic role as both the protector and deliverer of divine providence. Monarchs often dispensed knighthoods with ritual blades, for example, while Crusaders preyed with sword in hand.

From antiquity to the Renaissance, professional soldiering was rife with tales of the sword. The doomed Roman commander Publius Varus, for example, chose to fall on his own blade rather than

"The Death of Major Peirson" by John Singleton Copley ca.1784

The sword has long represented honor and ferocity in battle as it required skill in close hand to hand combat. The significance of both the sword and the bayonets in this painting is to show the honor of the battle and Major Pierson's death. Note how the sword has fallen from his hand and is depicted in striking detail just under his head.

face capture at the Battle of Teutoberger Wald (9 AD). Centuries later, the famed Minstrel of Taillefer supposedly juggled his sword, while wading into the enemy singing the "Song of Roland," at Battle of Hastings in 1066. A romanticized recounting of the Battle of Hattin (1187) even depicted the defeated French Crusader, King Guy of Jerusalem, delivering his sword unto the victorious Sultan Saladin. So influential was the sword that some major European powers coronated their monarchs with mystical blades, such as Charlemagne's Joyeuse and Edward the Confessor's Sword of Mercy (both of which survive today).

The sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries brought with them the a "gunpowder revolution" in which combatants saw the rise and proliferation of firearms, both across the Continent and abroad. Gunpowder weapons turned centuries of warfare—that included years of proven siege strategies and tactical formations—on its head. Swords, however, remained a prevalent part of combat during this era. Cavalry still cut down breaking ranks of infantry, for instance, while German doppelsöldners (two-handed sword-wielding mercenaries) were paid to wreak havoc upon enemy pikemen.

Exclusive to the eighteenth-century was the socket bayonet that, when affixed to the end of a musket and used in mass charges, became an intimidating and bloody weapon. The sword, meanwhile, was largely regulated to the cavalry. Heavy cavalry, which saw action across Europe, made use of pointed broadswords suitable for thrusting into the enemy. Light cavalry, on the other hand, relied more on the use of curved sabers that were better suited for slashing routing foot soldiers. Swords of the latter type evolved from European hunting "hangers" of previous centuries. Characteristic of hunting and cavalry hangers were sharpened "false edges," which delivered gruesome wounds, and brass or steel knuckle guards that afforded their owners a minor degree of protection while wielding the weapons. Also typical of these swords was a single fuller that traveled the length of the blade. This slight longitudinal groove served the dual purpose of both lightening the weapon while imparting greater structural strength along the core of sword.

Infantry and artillery swords were largely outmoded before the first shots were fired at the outset of the Revolutionary War. Regular troops in the Continental Army favored the bayonet if pressed

into hand-to-hand combat, while militiamen found swords too cumbersome or noisy when attempting an ambush. The latter, who learned a great deal of their irregular tactics from fighting Indians in the wilderness, preferred to use hunting knives or hatchets if forced into a fight. Swords were exceedingly rare items in Colonial America and expensive to import from abroad, which largely regulated their use to officers who were wealthy and of a higher social standing than rank and file soldiers. Thus, Revolutionary War-era swords were still very practical and deadly when wielded by cavalry but primarily took on more ceremonial and symbolic roles elsewhere in the military.

Above: Sword awarded to Colonel Marinus Willett by the Continental Congress for his meritorious action at Fort Stanwix. This is one of eleven identical swords made by C. Liger of Paris, France. (1785-86)

Bottom Left: Painting of Colonel Willett wearing the ceremonial sword by Ralph Earl ca. 1791

The infantry officer's sword, although initially patterned after practical thrusting and stabbing weapons, gradually became more ornate in assuming its ceremonial role. In this regard, swordsmiths drew inspiration from the gentleman's weapons of previous decades, such as luxurious hunting swords of the seventeenth and sixteenth-centuries. Hilts were generally decorative and incorporated features typically found on European smallswords, such as wire knuckle guards, swept quillons, and ornamental pommels. Such swords were also constructed of or finished with precious metals, like gold or silver.

While swords were expensive, it was not entirely uncommon for an officer of high station—especially European field commanders—to own several such weapons. British General John Burgoyne, who surrendered his sword to American General Horatio Gates following the second Battle of Saratoga (1777), owned several blades. According to Saratoga Battlefield National Park Service Rangers Joe Craig and Eric Schnitzer, "A general officer like Burgoyne would have owned a variety of swords; as a mounted officer, a standard sword would have been a hanger with a long, strong blade. But Burgoyne was also a cavalry officer (he was colonel of the 16th or Queen's Light Dragoons) and as such he may have worn his regiment's officer pattern horseman saber (although this is unlikely, as it would have been out of context with his position as a general officer while wearing a general officer's uniform). Further, as an officer who was faced with ceremonial instead of battle duty, he may have carried a lightweight gold wash-hilted small sword." The historical record fails to clarify which of the above swords "Gentleman Johnny" delivered to Gates at Saratoga. Regardless, the act signified a major turning point in the Revolutionary War that, up until Burgoyne's defeat, had proceeded miserably for most of Washington's forces.

In addition to offering swords as symbolic tokens of capitulation, Revolutionary War military leaders sometimes bestowed precious blades upon officers and soldiers in recognition of their gallantry on the battlefield. Washington, himself, had a long history of bestowing swords in such a manner. In 1782, for example, he presented three militiamen—John Pauling, David Williams and Isaac Van Wart—each a "dress sword and a brace of pistols" for capturing British spy Major John André. He additionally petitioned a fledgling Congress to produce fifteen swords for similar purposes. Officials only managed to procure ten swords, however, purchasing the weapons from France. The list of recipients included a variety of men, including "Col. David Humphreys, for his fidelity and ability... he presented Congress with the twenty-four British Regimental flags captured at Yorktown." In his last will and testament, Washington even went as far to bequeath five swords upon his nephews. "These swords are accompanied with an injunction not to unsheathe them for the purpose of shedding blood," he wrote, "except it be for self defense [sic], or in defense of their Country and it's [sic] rights; and in the latter case, to keep them unsheathed, and prefer falling with them in their hands, to the relinquishment thereof..."

Whether a symbolic measure of military virtue or practical weapon of war, the sword continues to hold a special place in military history. Nowhere was this more prevalent than in Colonial America, where a ragtag handful of revolutionaries emerged from the dust and chaos of a seemingly unwinnable war to hand the supreme military power of the early modern era, Great Britain, the most stunning defeat of the eighteenth-century. While it was a loss received by Lord North as if he had "taken a ball in his breast," it will forever be etched in our collective memory with the ceremonial surrendering of the sword—first at Saratoga then later at Yorktown.