

Rear Rank during the firing sequence

This is something that Zack Pace discovered while reading Steuben's manual at Guilford. After doing my own research I think that Zack is correct. First let me print what he wrote:

Rear Rank Firing Position Analysis - Zack Pace, 2d SC Regt

In Steuben Drill as practiced by most reenacting units, the rear rank firing position involves: a) the left foot remaining in place, and b) the right foot stepping diagonally, forward and right. This places the musket in-between and a safe distance in front soldiers in the front rank. This position puts the rear rank in an awkward position, one of stretching forward and off-balance.

A review of Steuben's Regulations, along with commentaries by Col. John F. Grimke, 4th SC Regiment, from December 1778, shows the current rear rank firing position practiced by reenactors is incorrect.

Steuben Manual

Position of each Rank in the Firings...

Rear rank! Make Ready! One motion.

Recover and cock as before directed, at the same time stepping about six inches to the right, so as to place yourself opposite the interval of the front rank.

Take Aim! Fire!

As before explained. [in Section III of the Manual Exercise: Step back about six inches with the right foot...]

Commentaries by Col. John F. Grimke, 4th SC Regiment, December 1778

The Custom for the Soldiers of the Second Rank to carry their Right foot opposite to the interval of the next file (being occasioned by the necessity of stepping over the Leggs of the men in the front Rank when kneeled down as in the order of three deep) is become in our present order not only useless by but even Pernicious. It throws the

Body into a vacillating & unsettled Position which renders the leveling of the musquet very uncertain. The Soldiers of the rear Rank therefore instead of that movement will make a short side step with both Feet to the Right at the word of Command "Make Ready" & at the word "Take Sight" They are to carry the Right Foot behind the Left in the same manner as the Soldiers of the Front Rank, firing in the same Position as This & Stepping again to the Left afterwards to Cover their File Leader.

So, on the command "Make Ready," the rear rank is supposed to side-step so they are in-between two soldiers on the front rank. By the book, on "Take Aim" the rear rank steps back with the right foot.

This footwork will require a bit more practice than what we are used to doing, but in the end it will result in less cluttered ranks and better execution. It also is more historically accurate.

Evidently this has been discovered before, by none other than Ernie Peterkin in his book "Exercise of Arms" written in 1989. See the two scanned pages on the next page. So according to Peterkin the rear rank doesn't necessarily side step, just steps further to the right so as to clear the front rank. Then the rear rank steps back with the right foot just like the front rank.

So the question is... when did we start taking a step forward with the right foot, instead of back like it says in the manual? The problem, like many old bad habits in reenacting, started in the Bicentennial. Each of the units had to learn the drill exactly like all the other units. This is when the front rank stepping forward with the right foot was introduced.

At the Camden event we can practice using both Zack's interpretation and Peterkin's interpretation and see which is better.

2nd North Carolina Regiment of the Continental Line

First Count, Part 4, As Rear Rank (*Fall Cock*) Figure 10-10

1. Lower the right elbow briskly.
2. Force the cock down to the full cock position with the right thumb.
3. At the same time, step six inches to the right with the right foot.



a

b

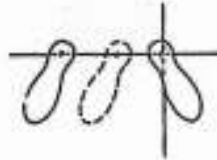


Fig. 10-10 Position of *Make, Ready (As Rear Rank), First Count, Part 4* from *Shoulder, Firelock* viewed from (a) the front and (b) the right flank.

2nd North Carolina Regiment of the Continental Line

First Count, As Rear Rank (Take Aim) Figure 10-14

1. Step back about six inches with the right foot.
2. Turn the left foot on the heel and bring the toe to the front.
3. Drop the muzzle of the piece directly to the front.
4. Place the butt end against the right shoulder.
5. Slide the left hand forward to the swell of the stock, the left thumb pointing forward.
6. Place the forefinger of the right hand before the trigger.
7. Keep the right thumb on the breech pin.
8. Lower the muzzle slightly below the horizontal.
10. Lean the right cheek on the butt of the piece.
11. Shut the left eye.
12. Look along the barrel with the right eye from breech pin to the sight at the object to be fired upon.

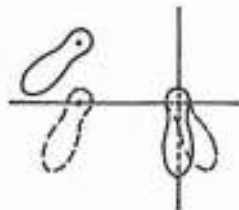


Fig. 10-14 Position of *Take Aim (As Rear Rank)*, *First Count* from *Make Ready* viewed from (a) the front and (b) the right flank.