



Commemorating the 250th Birthday of the U.S. Army

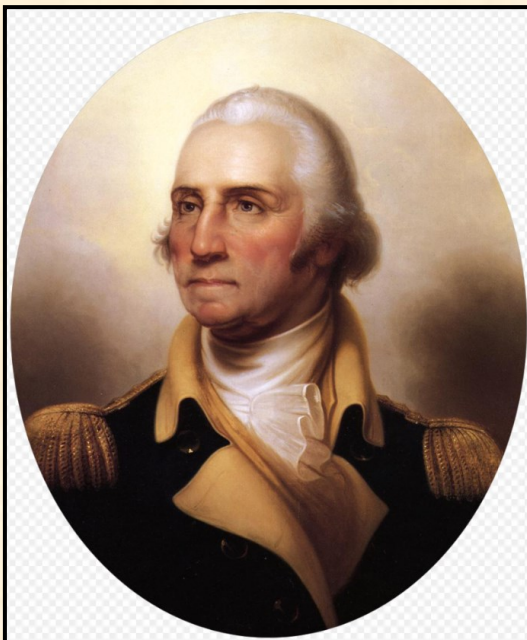
Trial by Fire: The Development of the Continental Army

On June 15, 1775, the 2nd Continental Congress created the Continental Army, with George Washington as Commander-in-Chief. The first members of the army were 27,000 preexisting militiamen assembled outside British-held Boston and New York. Washington organized the New England portion of the army into three divisions, six brigades, and 38 regiments. Meanwhile, 10 New York regiments under Gen. Philip Schuyler prepared to invade British positions in Canada. The Continental Congress then authorized a formal one-year enlistment, raising 10 companies from Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. The first of these were volunteers in the 1st Pennsylvania Rifles, which became the 1st Continental Regiment in January 1776.

The establishment of the Continental Army was a subject of serious concern for both Congress and colonists. While recognizing the need for a formal armed force to counter the British, many opposed the concept of a standing army. As a result, the development of the Continental Army saw an evolution in both organization and administration. The Continental Army nearly collapsed at the end of 1776. As June 1777 approached, it faced the prospect of dissolution, due to the expiration of one-year enlistments. Congress authorized a new one-year enlistment period. Despite efforts to recruit throughout the colonies, the majority of new enlistees were New Englanders. They were formed into a single battalion of eight companies and 36 regiments. As the war dragged on, the Continental Congress expanded the call for soldiers, requiring every state to raise a battalion. To eliminate the chaos accompanying the end of one-year enlistments, Congress expanded them to three years and, eventually, to the end of the conflict.



Flag of the 1st Pennsylvania Rifles



George Washington
Rembrandt Peale (1850)

Throughout the war, Washington served as Commander-in-Chief, with Congress periodically adding administrative positions to assist him. These included Adjutant General (1775), Muster-Master General (1775), Quartermaster General (1776), Inspector General (1777), and Judge Advocate General (1777). These men served a Continental Army that Washington divided along territorial lines. Though their boundaries changed frequently, and not all existed for the entirety of the war, there would be a total of seven territorial departments: Canadian, Eastern (New England), Northern (upper New York), Highlands (Hudson River), Middle (New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland), Western (Appalachians to Illinois country), and Southern (Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia).

The first year saw the army overseen by the Continental Congress as a full body. During the first year of enlistment, American volunteers fought 21 battles from Quebec to South Carolina, with Colonial forces managing 10 victories, including the capture of Fort Ticonderoga. However, these collective victories were small compared to British victories at Bunker Hill and Quebec. With the end of the

first year of enlistment, they made a change on June 12, 1776, forming the Board of War and Ordnance, a five-member committee consisting of John Adams, Benjamin Harrison, Edward Rutledge, Roger Sherman, and James Wilson, assisted by a secretary. This board had responsibility for maintaining a roster of officers; keeping track of soldiers, arms, and equipment; communicating with officers about army movements and requirements; and securing prisoners of war. During a 15-month tenure, the Board of War and Ordnance oversaw the army through 44 battles, 24 of which were British victories. Not only was this a heavy period of action for the army, it saw some of the most significant battles of the war, including American victories at Trenton, Princeton, and Fort Henry, and British victories at Long Island, Fort Mifflin, and Brandywine.





Surrender of General Burgoyne [Saratoga] - John Trumbull (1822)

Members of the board found themselves overwhelmed. Congress agreed that a more permanent solution was needed. Accordingly, it created the Board of War in October 1777. This initially consisted of three members from outside of Congress, but was soon expanded to five members. A year under this system saw 26 battles, 11 of which were American victories, including the success at Saratoga that convinced the French to recognize the United States and support the Colonial cause. Despite the comparative success of having a dedicated body to administrate the army, the Continental Congress decided it needed more oversight and, in October 1778, changed the Board of War to include two members from Congress and three from outside. Further changes to the organization came in 1780 with the additions of a Quartermaster General, Commissary General of Purchase, and Commissary General of Issue. The final change to Continental Army administration came in with the establishment of the position of Secretary of War, first filled by Benjamin Lincoln in October 1781.

By the end of 1781, the Continental Army was in crisis again. Years of significant defeats had damaged the morale of soldiers, the support of state legislatures, and the commitment of Congress. As three-year enlistments expired, a bankrupt Congress faced serious difficulties in their effort to replace departing soldiers. Poor conditions and delayed pay even led to attempted mutinies by regiments in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, though Washington swiftly put them down. Facing these difficulties, Congress chose to cut funding for the army. Despite these problems, Washington not only held the army together, but managed several strategic victories in this period, including the surrender of Gen. Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown (October 1781), which hastened the end of the war.

With the Treaty of Paris (1783), the American Revolutionary War officially ended, removing the need for a large standing army. Over the course of 1783, the Continental Army slowly reduced in size. Congress approved Washington's request for reductions in October 1783 after which the Commander-in-Chief issued his farewell to the army. Washington gave up his duties in December. When the Continental Army became the United States Army on June 3, 1784, most regiments were disbanded.

JMC Historical Document Collection

The JMC Public and Congressional Affairs Office maintains the JMC Archives, which collects and maintains historically significant records, including: emails, manuscripts, letters, reports, studies, images, videos, films, photographs, oral history interviews, briefings, SOPs, policies, decision papers, memoranda, statistics, newspapers, newsletters, brochures, maps, blue prints, drawings, and artifacts. Such records are pertinent to the Army's knowledge of active and predecessor installations, the ammunition industrial base, and JMC missions. JMC regularly uses these materials to research command history, and to answer research queries. When JMC workers leave positions or make physical moves, it is vital that their records be assessed before disposal. If employees are uncertain about the historical value of materials, the best policy is to make the items available to Paul Ferguson (paul.t.ferguson14.civ@army.mil).

This Month in Military History

Feb. 3, 1807: Under cover of darkness, British forces under the command of Brig. Gen. Sir Samuel Auchmuty defeat a Spanish garrison at the Battle of Montevideo (Uruguay). The city surrenders at 5 a.m. and civilians reportedly were going about their normal business by 8 a.m.

Feb. 6, 1933: Following a coup by Weimar Republic Chancellor Franz von Papen and President Paul von Hindenburg, The Free State of Prussia loses all its remaining freedoms when its parliament is disbanded. The nation will be formally absorbed by Nazi Germany in 1935.

Feb. 9, 1870: President Ulysses S. Grant signs a law establishing the creation of the "Division of Telegrams and Reports for the Benefit of Commerce" within the U.S. Army Signal Service. The division later becomes the National Weather Service.

Feb. 12, 1429: Off the coast of France, at the Battle of Rouvray, a combined fleet of Scottish and French ships attack an English supply convoy carrying fish to its army at Orleans. The attack is a failure and the incident becomes known as the Battle of the Herrings.

Feb. 15, 1220: Genghis Khan's Mongol army defeats Khwarazmian holdouts in the city of Bukhara following a 15-day siege, and executes 30,000 of its citizens. The rest are enslaved, or conscripted into the Mongol army for use as human shields.

Feb. 18, 1219: Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II reaches an agreement with Egyptian ruler Al-Kamil, securing control of Jerusalem for the Crusader Kingdoms in return for Christian withdrawal from Egypt. The Church rejects the treaty and Pope Honorius III excommunicates Frederick for negotiating instead of fighting.

Feb 21, 1746: British forces surrender the Scottish castle of Inverness to forces under Bonnie Prince Charlie, exiled heir to the Stuart line and Jacobite pretender to the throne. However, Charlie loses at the Battle of Culloden in April, prompting him to abandon the Jacobite cause and return to France.

Feb. 24, 1525: At the Battle of Pavia, troops under Holy Roman Emperor Charles V defeat the French, killing or wounding 5,000 and capturing King Francis I. The French king remained a prisoner until giving up concessions in the Treaty of Madrid (1526).

Feb. 27, 1921: Florentine activist Spartaco Lavagnini is murdered in his office by a mob of Fascist Blackshirts. The next day, Giovanni Berta, one of the mob leaders, is ambushed, beaten, stabbed, and dumped in the river.