



The Revolutionary War

13.1 Introduction

In Chapter 12, you learned how the American colonies declared their independence from Britain. From 1775 to 1783, the two countries fought in the **Revolutionary War**. In this chapter, you will learn how America won the war.

The two sides used different **strategies**, or war plans. When the war began, Britain seemed sure to win. The British had a large navy and a **professional army**. The colonial army, known as the **Continental Army**, was small and inexperienced. The British won most of the early battles.

The Continentals, though, had some advantages of their own. Continental soldiers had better reasons for fighting. They were defending their homes and their rights. In addition, other countries, called **allies**, sent soldiers and supplies. And unlike the British, the Continentals were fighting in familiar territory that was close to home.

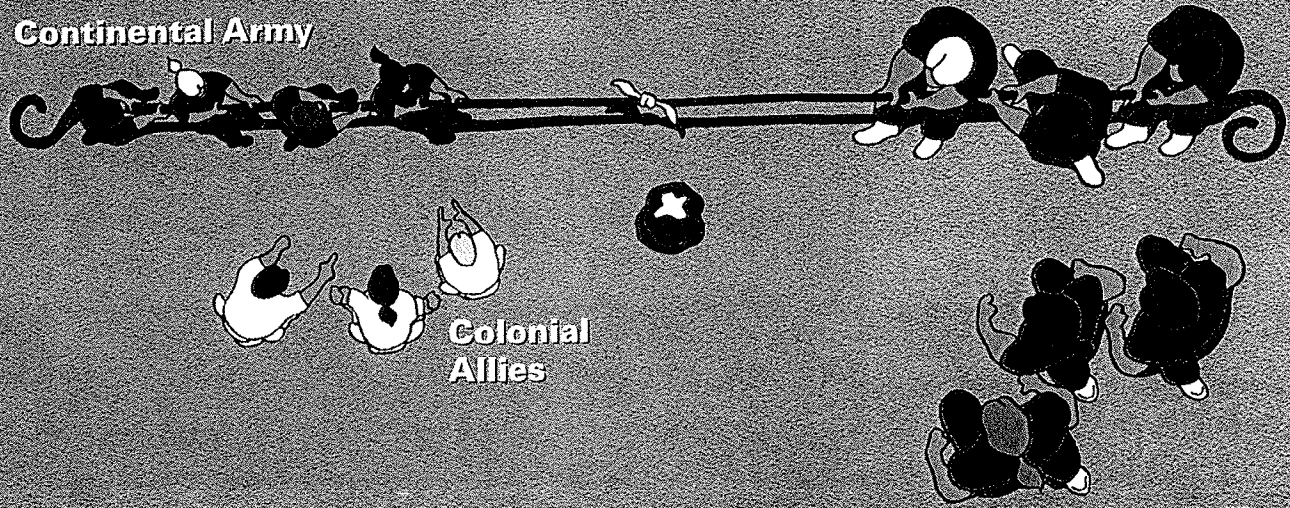
Look at the visual metaphor at the bottom of this page. The Revolutionary War can be compared to a tug-of-war between two unequal teams. The British army was like the team on the right, strong and confident. The Continental Army was like the team on the left, small but very determined.

As you read this chapter, think about how the smaller team might win this tug-of-war. How were the Continentals able to defeat a much larger army?

Revolutionary War: Unequal Tug-of-War

Continental Army

British Army



Colonial Allies



Volunteers, such as these Minutemen of Concord, were ready to fight with a “minute’s” warning. At the beginning of the Revolutionary War, colonial armies only had such part-time soldiers.

volunteers: people who freely perform a service

13.2 The Continental Army

When the war started, there was no American army. Instead, colonies had their own militias. The militiamen were part-time soldiers, like the farmers and merchants who fought British soldiers at Lexington and Concord.

In 1775, the Continental Congress asked George Washington to lead an army. The Continental Army was made up of **volunteers**. Most volunteers were poor farmers, merchants, and workers. At the start of the war, they volunteered for one

year at a time. After that period, they returned home to take care of their families.

About 15,000 men initially volunteered for Washington’s army, including many African Americans. Women took part as well. They cooked for soldiers, mended uniforms, and cared for the sick and wounded. Some even fought in battles. One of them was Deborah Sampson. She dressed in men’s clothes and fought in several battles. Eventually, she was wounded, and an army doctor discovered her secret.

The Continental Army had a number of problems. Congress had little money to pay the soldiers or buy supplies. As a result, volunteers had to supply their own uniforms and guns. In addition, they knew very little about being soldiers. Often, they had little discipline.

Washington worked hard to train his men. He taught them to obey orders and to fight together. In speeches and written messages, he encouraged them to believe that they could beat the mighty British.

Like the army, the colonial navy was small. Mostly it was made up of trade and fishing ships that carried small cannons.

With their inexperienced army and small navy, the Continentals were like a small man about to do battle with a giant.

13.3 The British Army

At the start of the war, Britain was confident of quickly ending the revolution. Britain had one of the strongest armed forces (military) in the world. The British navy controlled the seas with 270 warships. Britain's shipyards built another 200 warships before the war was over.

Britain's army was large and professional. Professional soldiers are paid. Being in the army is their job. And British soldiers were well trained. Most were experienced fighters. They were also harshly disciplined. A soldier could be whipped just for having a button sewed on wrong.

Unlike the Continental Congress, the British Parliament had money to buy food and equipment for its army. Each soldier had a uniform, a good musket, and a **bayonet**. Soldiers attached their bayonets to the front ends of their muskets to use in close-up fighting.

There were about 45,000 British soldiers in the army. Most of them were poor men who earned low pay. Others were soldiers from other countries. For example, Britain hired about 30,000 Germans to fight in America. These men were mercenaries, soldiers who fight for anyone who will pay them.

Thousands of Native Americans fought for the British as well. They sided with Britain because the British had helped to keep their lands safe from settlers since 1763. Thousands of Loyalists also fought for Britain. In the New York colony, for example, many men were willing to join the British side at the start of the war.

bayonet: a sharp blade, like a sword, attached to the end of a rifle

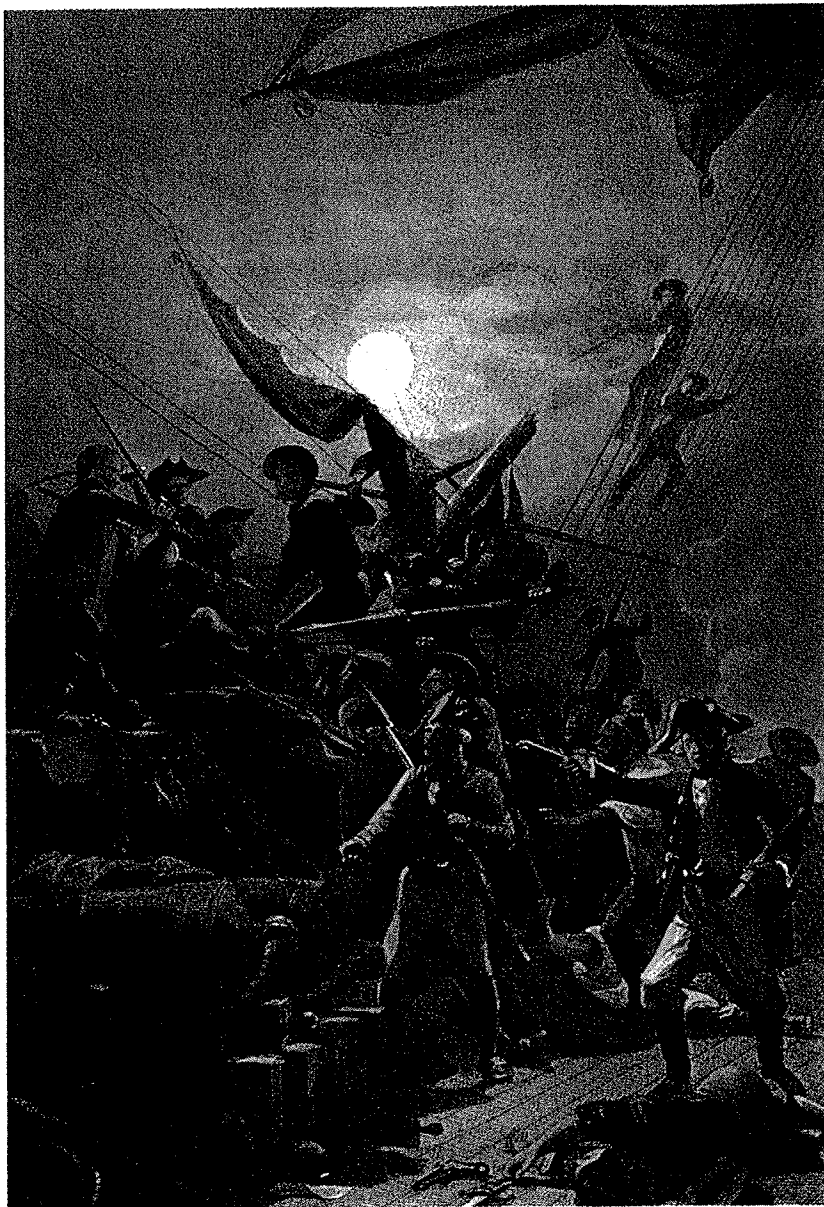


The British army had professional soldiers. They were well trained and well disciplined. The government provided them with sufficient food and good equipment.

13.4 The British Army: A Long Way from Home

Even though the British army and navy were very strong, the British had a major problem. They were a long way from home. Supplies, military orders, and soldiers had to travel 3,000 miles by sea across the Atlantic Ocean. The trip from Britain to America could take three months.

Although weak, the Continental navy enjoyed a few heroic successes. Here, Continental naval captain John Paul Jones is shown capturing the British warship *Serapis*. When asked to surrender, Jones responded, "I have not yet begun to fight."



Even after British supplies made it across the Atlantic Ocean, it was often hard to get them ashore. The Continentals had few ships that could attack the British warships. But they did call on hundreds of "privateers." Privateers were small, fast ships with a few light cannons. Congress gave their captains permission to attack British supply ships. They could also keep

most of the goods they captured. Later in the war, French warships also attacked British ships.

Unlike the British, Continentals were fighting in their home country and could get supplies easily. As the war went on, the Continental Army found new ways of gathering equipment and supplies. Often, local citizens sold or gave the army food. Soldiers also captured cannons and muskets from the British.

Continental soldiers also had the support of women. Women ran the farms and businesses while the men were away fighting. They brought supplies to camp, made uniforms, and worked as nurses. They also spied among the British.

In contrast, the British had to fight in a country that they didn't know well. Most colonists refused to help them when they needed food or supplies. Often, the British felt surrounded by people who disliked and even hated them. These feelings made it harder to want to fight.



During the winter of 1777–1778, the men in Washington’s army suffered from freezing cold and starvation — yet they refused to give up.

13.5 The Continental Army’s Motivation to Win

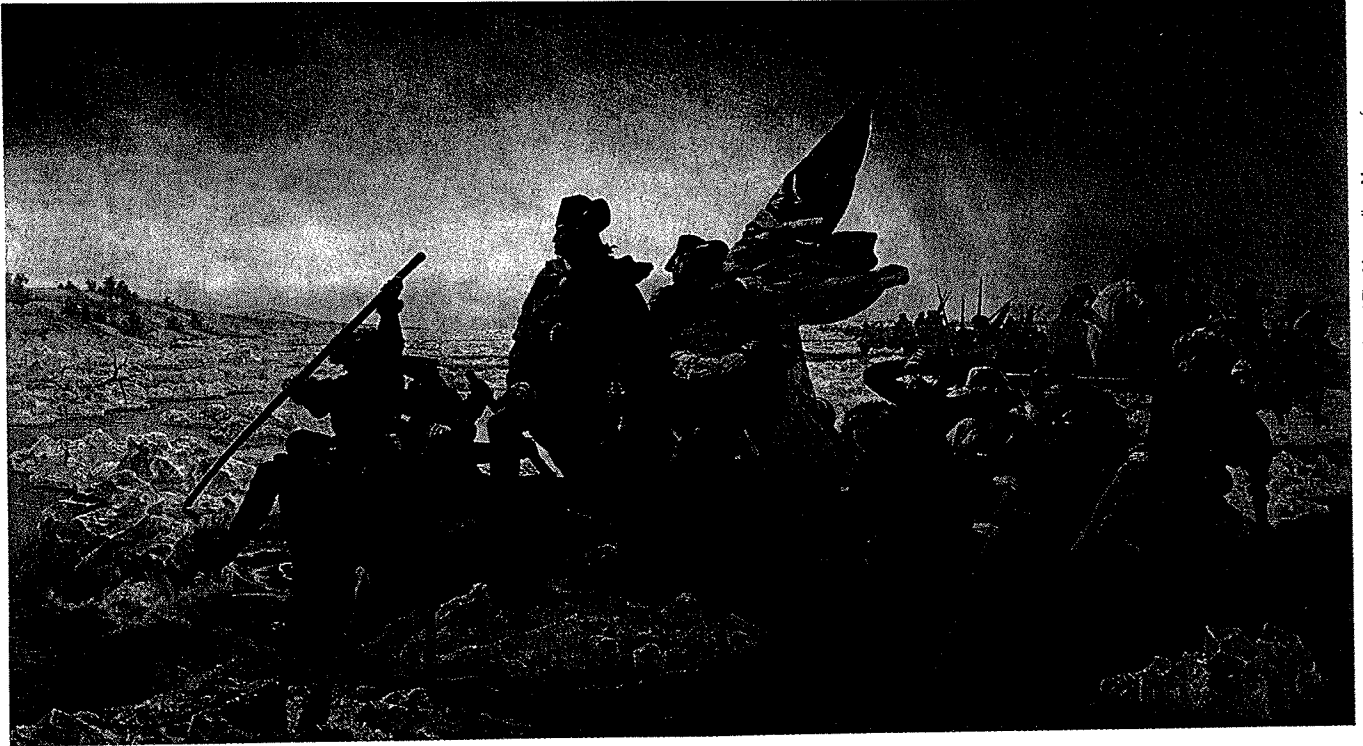
Continental soldiers had a special advantage over the British. They had a stronger motivation, or desire, to win.

Continental soldiers believed they were defending their rights described in the Declaration of Independence. They were trying to make a better future for themselves. To many Continentals, these were things worth dying for.

The men in Washington’s army showed their strong motivation during the winter of 1777–1778. The army was camped in the snow at a place called *Valley Forge*. The soldiers were tired and starving. They didn’t have warm clothing to protect them from the freezing cold. Many didn’t even have shoes. More than 2,500 men died that winter from cold and sickness. Yet the army refused to give up.

The British, on the other hand, had less motivation than the Continental soldiers. Most British soldiers were fighting because it was their job, not to defend their homes or their rights. Even the British government had problems other than the war to worry about. The British had colonies to protect in many parts of the world besides North America. They had to worry about possible enemies like France and Spain. And many people in Britain were unhappy about fighting an expensive war in North America.

Of course, not all Americans were motivated to fight the British. Loyalists still believed that independence was unwise. In addition, the British sometimes promised to free slaves who joined their side. As a result, some African Americans fought for the British to gain their freedom. As you know, many Native Americans also fought for the British to protect their lands.



Washington Crossing the Delaware by Emanuel G. Leutze, 1973. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of John Stewart Kennedy, 1897. Photograph © 1992 The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Continental Army relied upon surprise attacks against the British. George Washington crossed the Delaware River on Christmas Eve. He defeated the German mercenaries who were celebrating the holiday.

strategies: overall plans, such as for winning a war

tactics: specific ways of carrying out a plan, such as ways of fighting battles

guerilla tactics: tactics used by fighters outside of a regular army (guerillas), such as shooting at soldiers from hiding places in the woods

13.6 Different War Strategies

The British and the Continentals used different **strategies** to fight the Revolutionary War.

Britain had to fight an offensive war. They had to attack the Continentals and take control of the cities and countryside. In contrast, the Continentals could fight a defensive war. They didn't have to destroy the British army, only hold them off.

At first, the British tried to end the war by stopping the rebellion in Boston. They thought that most Patriots were there. But they soon discovered that thousands of other colonists were willing to fight for independence.

So the British changed strategies. They tried to show power by capturing important cities like New York. After losing New York, Washington moved his men into the countryside. From there, they used "hit and run" **tactics**. They made surprise attacks against small groups of British and then retreated.

Continentals also used **guerilla tactics** to frighten and discourage the British. For example, sharpshooters (riflemen) hid in the woods and shot down British soldiers, one by one.

By 1777, the British strategy was to destroy the Continental Army. They wanted to fight the army face to face, the way armies fought in Europe. They tried to force Washington's army into the open by capturing the important city of Philadelphia.

But Washington had a different strategy. He wanted to keep his army together until the British became discouraged. Rather than risk losing soldiers, he let the British have Philadelphia. Then he took his men to Valley Forge for the winter.

13.7 The Continental Army Gains Allies

Continental Army leaders knew that they needed **allies** to win the war. In 1776, Congress sent Benjamin Franklin to Paris, France, to seek help.

France helped the Patriots by supplying gunpowder (ammunition) and by lending Congress money. Some European soldiers also joined the Continental cause. A 19-year-old Frenchman, the Marquis de Lafayette, became a general in the Continental Army. Friedrich von Steuben, a German soldier, helped to train the Continental Army at Valley Forge.

In mid 1777, close to 9,000 British troops marched down from Canada. About 1,500 Vermont militiamen attacked them. Other Continental troops rushed to help. With his army trapped, the British commander surrendered at Saratoga, New York.

The Battle of Saratoga showed that the colonists could beat a British army. After that, France openly supported the Continental Army. Spain pledged support to France. In 1781, Spain captured a British fort at Pensacola, Florida. Now the Continental Army had powerful allies.

After their defeat at Saratoga, the British again changed strategies. For the next three years, they tried to win the war in the southern colonies. They thought that Loyalists there would help them.

In the summer of 1781, a large British army marched to the Virginia coast. British ships were bringing supplies from New York, but French warships cut them off. Meanwhile, Washington's army and thousands of French soldiers hurried down from the north.

The Continentals and the French trapped the British in the port of Yorktown. For more than a week, they pounded the British with cannon fire. Finally, the British surrendered.

The Battle of Yorktown was the last big battle of the war. With the help of their French allies, the Continentals had won an important victory.

allies: people or countries fighting on the same side against a common enemy

Following their defeat at Yorktown, the British troops surrendered to the Continental Army and their allies. The Battle of Yorktown in October 1781 was the last big battle of the war.

