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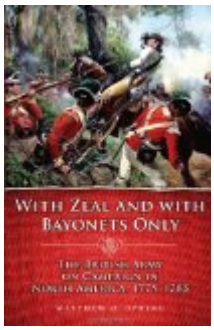


**Matthew H. Spring.** *With Zeal and With Bayonets Only: The British Army on Campaign in North America, 1775-1783.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008. xxiii + 381 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8061-3947-0.

**Reviewed by** Ian McCulloch

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**Commissioned by** Janet G. Valentine (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College - Dept of Mil Hist)

With the deftness and sureness of a bayonet stroke, British historian Matthew H. Spring's new book skewers the long-held, and largely Hollywood induced, portrayal of the British Army as a tactically inept force when faced by intrepid Patriots during the American War for Independence. Already a winner of the American Revolution Round Table of Philadelphia's Thomas Fleming Book Award for the Outstanding Revolutionary War Era Book of 2008, I heartily recommend this book to all scholars, students, and enthusiasts of the period.

*With Zeal and With Bayonets* is, quite literally, a masterpiece of analysis, well researched, well argued, and well written. It is the first book I know of that truly captures the essence of the operational and tactical levels of war in the eighteenth century. Not only do I believe it to be an instant seminal classic, and required reading for any scholar contemplating writing campaign history or a battle monograph of the period in the future, but it is equally suitable as a case study on insurgency warfare for any modern day staff college pondering the challenges of conventional warfare versus asymmetric warfare. It is just that outstanding.

The book opens with a superb discussion and mission analysis of the strategic problems presented by the insurgency in America, and the three operational military objectives given to the British Army. The three objectives were: to defeat and disperse the rebels' conventional military forces; to encourage the populace to cease supporting Congress's war effort, and even to transpose that support to the Crown; and finally, to induce the rebel leadership to give up the armed struggle in favor of a political settlement.

In his analysis, Spring shows clearly that British military leadership understood that it was paramount to neutralize the rebels' military forces either by kinetic or non-kinetic action in order to: reestablish control over American territory, persuade the rebel leadership to abandon the goal of independence in favor of a negotiated political settlement, and encourage the colonial pop-

ulation at large to withdraw its support for the rebellion. The center of gravity was thus assessed to be overwhelming military success against the Continental Army. If the source of the insurgency's military power could be neutralized or destroyed, it was believed that all the operational objectives could be easily achieved and strategic victory assured.

Spring then examines a number of operational constraints that were imposed externally or inherent in the nature of the insurgency, thus limiting the operational capabilities of the British Army in its quest to bring the elusive Continental and militia troops to battle. Spring identifies five key factors that "made it extraordinarily difficult for British commanders in America to secure the kind of battlefield engagement in which they sought to neutralize the rebels' military forces" (p. 48). Each can be tied directly back to one, or all three, of the operational objectives.

First, the British had to cautiously avoid being beaten in tactical engagements by the rebels early on in the insurgency in order to avoid the operational effect of giving the rebel cause hope, and galvanizing recruitment and popular support. Second, their limited manpower resources prevented them from exposing their troops unnecessarily to extensive campaign hardships or wasteful attritional battles with frontal style tactics. Third, logistical considerations (particularly their dependence on the Royal Navy to supply them from water and efficient land convoys) in Spring's own words, "grievously limited their field armies' mobility" (p. 48). Fourth, the British Army had an inadequate intelligence picture with which to prosecute effective operations. That is, there were few accurate topographical maps, and obtaining accurate information on enemy movements and dispositions from a primarily hostile population was practically insurmountable. Finally, the terrain (the all important ground) was rugged and underdeveloped, with limited road systems. It favored the defense, and thus enabled rebel defenders to pick their ground, and to shun unwanted major decisive engagements.

Spring has fascinating follow-on chapters dealing with grand tactics, march and deployment, the advance, detailed discussions of morale and motivation, battalion command, firepower, the psychology of the bayonet charge, and the complexities of bush-fighting. Among the many interesting themes of this study to emerge is Spring's description of the almost Darwinian approach of Britain's "American Army" to adapt and evolve in order to survive the North American environment and fight the rebels on their own terms. For example, light infantry and bush-fighting skills that had been developed and refined by the British during the Seven Years' War were all but lost when these elite troops (best suited to act as a potent *gendermarie* on the fringes of a wild and unpredictable frontier) were disbanded.

By the middle of the war, however, the in-theater British light infantry had reinvented itself and, along with light cavalry, had become the equal or betters of the American sharpshooters and mounted infantry. Major General John F.C. Fuller wrote that "during the last three years of [the Revolution] the English had so well adapted themselves to its nature, that they were in no way inferior to their opponents."[1] Despite both sides developing a good light infantry capability, by contrast it was George Washington's Continental Army, assisted by French troops and the French Navy using standard European tactics and siege warfare of the day, that finally defeated the British Army strategically in North America.

To a large extent, the British tactical system of the 1770s, which conventionally favored mass and concentrated firepower in a European context, was replaced in America with an ad hoc system that emphasized maneuver and speed. While the credo of the modern infantry today remains "to close with and destroy the enemy," it could be said that such a maxim historically stems from the eighteenth-century tactical experience of the

Redcoat in North America. Spring contends that the British Army's "American" attack doctrine stressed the indirect approach--maneuvering onto a flank and attacking with "zeal" and "cold steel"--rather than relying on the old stand-by of wearing down one's opponent with heavy volleys of fire until one side gave way. By utilizing open order formations, and crossing the last lethal fifty yards at the double, the British quickly found they could minimize casualties from an adversary who was usually covered by strong defensive positions, and particularly well entrenched. This type of agile maneuver, however, required highly fit, highly motivated, and well-trained men led by bright, dynamic leaders.

Using a wealth of primary sources, Spring shows us that indeed this was the case, his narrative studded with firsthand accounts of the British soldiery, officers and other ranks, that experienced the face of battle in tracts of forest-bordered fields or hilly terrain. The methods they devised to maximize their combat power and minimize casualties were honed to such a point that sometimes elite troops, such as light infantry and grenadier battalions, were the only portion of the main British force to engage the enemy before he gave way. Colonel David Dundas, writing a few years after the war, cautioned that the "loose and irregular system of [British] infantry" was only possible because of "the very small proportion of cavalry employed in the American wars."[2] If the Americans had had heavy cavalry typical of the European theater of war, the British, he acknowledged, would have been forced to move with more "concert and circumspection" (p. 138).

This ad hoc tactical system specific to America worked well initially, but typically, the rebels would choose the ground on which they were willing to fight, and would always have a secure escape route. Despite many tactical victories, the British Army in America was never able to engage decisively the American rebel forces, or effectively pursue them to prevent them from reforming and returning to the fray. This was an operational failure. By 1781, the Americans had perfected their own tactical system, which saw them protecting their flanks, and echeloning their firepower in depth in order to absorb and blunt the shock and "zeal" of the British troops. By the end of the war, the Continental Army's best soldiers could meet the king's regiments on the open battlefield on more or less equal terms.

This final tactical stalemate imposed on British field commanders soon had an impact on their operational constraint of minimizing casualties (manpower) and, coupled with the constraints they consistently faced with regard to operational level logistics and their limited intelligence capabilities, negated any chance British leaders ever had of achieving any of their operational objectives.

Simply stated, Spring's work is a tour de force with wide appeal to specialists, students, academics, and the general public alike. He is to be commended for producing what I think is, hands down, the finest and most fascinating study of the tactical evolution of the British Army during the American War of Independence to date. It is just that outstanding. If only another author would now commit to do the same thing for George Washington's Continental Army, explaining how it campaigned operationally in the field, better military history for this important insurgency of the eighteenth century would abound!

Notes

[1]. John F. C. Fuller, ***British Light Infantry in the Eighteenth Century*** (London: Hutchinson and Company, 1925), 127-128.

[2]. Colonel David Dundas, ***Principles of Military Movements, Chiefly Applied to Infantry*** (London: T. Cadell, 1788), 12.

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