

MEANWHILE, ACROSS THE POND...

by David L. Jones

It is valid to consider the vast differences in the battles common to European armies versus those of the combatants in *“Almost a Miracle!”*. Some features of the armies of both continents were similar, from the uniforms to the drill manuals. The excellent *Battles of the Age of Reason* (BAR) series, by Clash of Arms, considers the two conflicts to be similar enough to largely use the same rules systems for both. However, the size of the armies and the comparative losses they suffered, were very different.

In the Battle of Brandywine, fought on September 11, 1777, perhaps the largest battle of the Revolution, both the armies had at least 15,000 men per side. The battle lasted over 11 hours but was surprisingly non-bloody. Losses for the battle were about 4% for the victorious redcoats and 9% for Washington’s army. This was common for the war; battles rarely reached a casualty level of more than 10% and averaged only about 7%.

Guilford Courthouse was an exception, perhaps the bloodiest of the battles of the War for American Independence, at least on the British side, with approximately 27% casualties on their side. The telling features of the casualty total were a British force consisting of veteran regulars, Provincials, and Hessians, opposed by a small core of equally veteran Continental troops augmented by thousands of militia. In perhaps the most impressive performance of the war, Lord Cornwallis’ troops outfought Nathaniel Greene’s army, outnumbered as much as three to one, in a sweltering heat. However, the large losses of Cornwallis’ tiny army required a retreat to the coast and was therefore a strategic defeat.

By contrast, let’s examine the Battle of Zorndorf, fought on August 25, 1758, contested in Poland by the Prussian army of Frederick the Great against the Russian host of General William Fermor.

Approximately 36,000 Prussians were present, facing 43,000 or more Russians. By the end of the bloody stalemate, Frederick’s army had suffered 33% losses vis-à-vis 37% casualties for Fermor’s army.

This is perhaps an extreme example, but most of Frederick’s battles had casualties on the order of 20% to 35%. In addition, surrenders of large numbers of troops did occur on the battlefield occasionally. Curiously, even in Frederick’s victories, his losses by percentage were often greater than the armies he defeated. The degree to which his highly disciplined veteran regiments could endure such casualties without routing was undoubtedly the reason for this.

What were the reasons for the difference in the intensity and level of bloodshed on the two continents? Probably the most prominent factor was the lack of shock cavalry, such as the cuirassier and heavy dragoon regiments of all major armies of Europe. In America, on the British side, only elements of two regiments (the 16th and 17th Light Dragoons) fought on the continent, doled out part and parcel to different commands. They were perpetually low on remounts, so captured colonial horses were prized. Some Loyalist Legions, such as Tarleton’s, achieved notoriety. On the American side, cavalry was basically ignored for the first two years of the war, and once dragoon regiments and foreign-led legions (most famously, Pulaski’s Legion) were raised in small numbers, they generally were used for scouting and skirmish more than for their battlefield effect. Many of their exploits are well-documented but few had any battlefield impact.

A general lack of battlefield artillery was a second factor. At Zorndorf nearly 400 cannon thundered back and forth over the Polish countryside, while at Brandywine about 10% of the that total was present. The general lack of artillery on both sides, and its light throw-weight (four and six pounders, usually) were never decisive in large engagements.

A lack of trained infantry certainly was a factor in the Continental Army. Soldiers who enlisted for a year disappeared with the end of the campaign season, replaced in the spring with raw recruits. And armies relied on a significant percentage of militia. Washington faced political pressure to allow the militia to fight semi-independently, under state officers, and was loathe to order them into the line. As a result, his armies lacked the shoulder-to-shoulder willpower to endure prolonged musketry, cavalry charges, or heavy artillery fire. Continental battle lines were “spooked” more easily than their opponent’s by these onslaughts, and wholesale routs were commonplace (Camden, Kip’s Bay, and Monmouth for example). Only later in the war were recruits enlisted for 3 years or “the duration” and had the opportunity to form a veteran core.

One overrated impact on the difference in warfare was terrain. The armies of both continents sought out the most open terrain available to fight over, and in general the terrain of the Frederician showdowns was little different from North America. Saratoga was a notable exception, being in a largely wilderness area.