

Topic: American Revolutionary Guerrillas

Imagine that you are in charge of leading a small army of volunteer soldiers against the largest and most powerful professional army in the world. Are you going to march straight into battle? Not if you expect it to be a very long one!

For centuries, small armies have relied on **guerrilla warfare** to help even the odds. This includes non-traditional wartime tactics like ambushing, sabotage, and raids rather than direct engagements. Guerrilla warfare is not meant to really defeat an opponent; instead, the idea is to make the war drag on and become so expensive that your adversary gives up. It's the difference between fighting a professional boxer versus a swarm of mosquitoes - the mosquitoes won't kill you, but they just may drive you away.

Amongst the many armies to try out these tactics were the American colonists fighting for their independence. The **American Revolution** was a conflict between a group of volunteers and a massive professional army. Did they think they could defeat Britain, the heavyweight champion of European colonialism? Maybe not, but while Britain prepared to defend its title, it was the colonists who learned how to 'float like a butterfly and sting like a bee.'

Guerrilla Tactics in the Revolution

There's a popular belief that Americans fought and won the entire revolution with nothing but guerrilla warfare. That's not true, and the myth largely stems from how the war began. The very first military engagement between British and American forces occurred on April 19 of 1775. American militia men had been covertly transporting weapons and colonial government leaders from town to town, hiding them from the British army. The British heard about these stockpiles in the Massachusetts towns of Lexington and Concord and went to seize them. The American volunteers of these towns gathered together to oppose the British, resulting in a brief skirmish. As the British beat a hasty retreat back towards Boston, American militia units basically popped out of the bushes along the entire road, shot a few volleys, and disappeared. It wasn't enough to decimate the British, but the British weren't prepared for it, and it drove them back.

Mixed Warfare

The battles of Lexington and Concord resulted in the first shots of the Revolution, as well as the first uses of guerrilla tactics. This would occur throughout the Revolution, but it wasn't quite as widespread as many people think, especially in the northern states. Most of these battles were fought by the Continental army, which behaved more like a traditional military and less like the local militias. Still, Washington was certainly not above guerrilla tactics, and he used them to his advantage.

When we're talking about guerrilla warfare in the North, we're actually generally looking at a mixed system of war. Guerrilla tactics were used to aggravate or funnel the British into a larger military encounter. One of the best examples of this is the Battle of Saratoga in New York. Militia units from across New York and New England picked at British forces. Individually, each of these little militias seemed unlikely to defeat the British army. However, at Saratoga, the small rag-tag groups suddenly converged into a sizable Army, which the British never saw coming. The Battle of Saratoga was one of America's most important victories. It was here that France was convinced to join the war and became the first nation to recognize American independence.

War in the South

Where we see more traditional examples of guerrilla warfare was in the South. Nearly all of the big-name battles of the American Revolution happened in the North. However, about 80% of the total Revolution was fought in the South, where the Continental army was less active. Down here, local militias carried the brunt of the fighting, and they did so using guerrilla tactics. This is why there aren't many major battles to talk about from 1780 to 1782 in the American Revolution. The British decided to concentrate their efforts on the South and work their way north. Southern militias used the dense foliage, marshes, and uneven terrain of the South to their advantage. Did they strike any major blows to the British this way? No, but they did extend the war by years. The British march through the South turned out to be expensive and exhaustive, which is exactly what guerrilla warfare is meant to do.

Privateering

There's one other type of guerrilla warfare we often forget to talk about in the American Revolution and that's the war on the high seas. America had a continental navy, but it was much too small to fight the largest imperial navy in the world. However, America did have a lot of merchants who had their own ships. So, the Continental Congress granted American merchants the right to arm their ships and attack British merchants. We call this **privateering**, but let's just be honest here, it's state-sanctioned piracy.

The job of a privateer was to capture British ships and steal all their stuff. Can you defeat the British Empire this way? No, but you can undermine their economy and make it really hard for them to get resupplied. American merchants took enthusiastically to the call. While the Continental Navy had about 64 ships, Congress recognized 1,697 privateers during the revolution. These ships patrolled the Atlantic coast, and a few went even farther and started raiding villages in Britain itself. Think about that...the British military was occupied in North America so a few private ships raided unguarded Britain. It wasn't enough to do a ton of damage, but it was a terrific insult. Altogether, however, American privateers proved to be pretty effective at slowing down Britain's ability to fight the war. In fact, historians estimate that these privateers did \$18 million in damages to the British maritime economy. That's \$302 million in today's money. Now that's a mosquito bite that's definitely going to sting!

Lesson Summary

When fighting the **American Revolution**, American forces often relied on non-traditional tactics, or **guerrilla warfare**. While guerrilla warfare did not win the Revolution, it did extend the war and slow British advances, thereby increasing the cost Britain had to sink into the conflict. In the North, the Continental Army fought traditional battles but also implemented guerrilla tactics to rout or confuse the British. In the South, local militias relied heavily on guerrilla tactics, which is why there were so few major battles in this part of the country, but also why 80% of the war was fought down here. American merchants also became **privateers**, legal pirates who stole from British merchants and did some serious damage to the British economy. Guerrilla warfare may not always be enough to defeat an opponent, but in the American Revolution it was enough to slow down the British heavyweight champion until an American contender was ready to enter the ring.

Sub-Topics: Each team member will complete one of the choices below:

- ☐ Describe goal of **guerilla warfare**; provide examples of battles that used guerilla tactics
- ☐ Explain what **mixed warfare** is; provide examples of battles that used mixed tactics
- ☐ Define **privateering**; explain its impact on the war effort

Topic: The Battle of Trenton

The Battles of Lexington and Concord fired 'The Shot Heard Round the World'. For the first time, Enlightenment ideas of republicanism and the consent of the governed were to be tested in a war between an empire and its rebel colonists. Could George Washington, with his army of volunteers, manage to defeat the most powerful military in Europe? Or would King George III retain control of the most profitable land in his empire and restore order until the colonists could be persuaded to abandon this war of independence?

1776 started well for the Americans, but it was the year the Revolution almost died. In March, the Continental Army forced the British out of Boston. But shortly after the signing of the Declaration of Independence in August, the imperial army returned, landing this time in New York. The well-trained, well-equipped British fighting machine overwhelmed Washington's ragtag band of militia in the biggest battle of the war. They captured 3,000 American prisoners of war and set them adrift in a rudderless ship in New York harbor, commencing the use of deadly prison ships, where more Patriots died than in combat. On September 11, 1776, the British commander offered peace and an end to the war. All the Americans had to do was retract the Declaration of Independence. Everything else would be forgiven. The Americans, led by John Adams, refused these terms. So, from their new base in New York City, Britain moved into New Jersey, capturing more territory, a fort and supplies that Washington badly needed.

Things continued downhill from there. The Continental Army had dwindled from an impressive 20,000 troops in March to just 5,000 by winter. Unlike the British regulars, Americans weren't professional soldiers, and their interests were divided. It wasn't uncommon for men to desert the camp and return home to attend to business, a harvest or some other personal matter. Plus, the original enlistment term for the Continental Army was a maximum of one year, causing significant turnover and training and logistic problems for George Washington. At least one man plotted to supplant Washington as commander of the Continental Army. Thomas Paine wrote 'These are the times that try men's souls.'

The Battle of Trenton

Washington needed to act decisively, knowing that his next move could mean life or death for the Revolution. In a surprise move, he led a stealthy attack on Christmas 1776. He crossed the Delaware River in the middle of a stormy night, taking the British army - comprised mostly of Hessian troops - completely off guard. In what's known as the **Battle of Trenton**, the Continental Army captured nearly 1,000 prisoners, supplies and equipment and successfully defended the city from the advancing British army. Capturing Trenton, NJ, was not merely a military victory, it was a badly needed morale boost. Over the course of the winter, Washington pushed the British back to their base in New York City.

Lesson Summary

Under George Washington's leadership, the Continental Army had forced the British out of Boston in March 1776. When the British returned that fall, they were stronger and better organized than before. They easily captured New York and offered terms of peace. The Americans refused, and the British proceeded to conquer the surrounding territory. With a dwindling army, Washington executed a surprise attack on Christmas 1776, launching the successful **Battle of Trenton** and ultimately driving the British out of New Jersey.

Sub-Topics: Each team member will complete one of the choices below:

- ☐ Explain **America's early difficulties** in the Revolutionary War
- ☐ Describe the **Battle of Trenton** and its significance to the war effort
- ☐ Summarize the message in **"The Crisis"**; explain its part in the attack on Trenton.

Battle of Trenton

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Trenton>

George Washington's crossing of the Delaware River, which occurred on the night of December 25–26, 1776, during the American Revolutionary War, was the first move in a surprise attack organized by George Washington against the Hessian forces in Trenton, New Jersey, on the morning of December 26. Planned in partial secrecy, Washington led a column of Continental Army troops across the icy Delaware River in a logistically challenging and dangerous operation.

Just prior to launching boats across the Delaware River, Washington had an excerpt from Thomas Paine's inspirational pamphlet *The Crisis*, which was published just two days earlier, read aloud to the army to provide inspiration. The pamphlet began:

“These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.”

Washington's troops surprised and defeated the troops of Johann Rall quartered in Trenton. Only three Americans were killed and six wounded, while 22 Hessians were killed with 98 wounded. The Americans captured 1,000 prisoners and seized muskets, powder, and artillery.

Following the battle, Washington had to execute a second crossing that was in some ways more difficult than the first. In the aftermath of the battle, the Hessian supplies had been plundered, and, in spite of Washington's explicit orders for its destruction, casks of captured rum were opened, so some of the celebrating troops got drunk, probably contributing to the larger number of troops that fell into the river had to be pulled from the icy waters on the return crossing. They also had to transport the large numbers of prisoners across the river while keeping them under guard.

The victory had a marked effect on the troops' morale. Soldiers celebrated the victory, Washington's role as a leader was secured, and Congress gained renewed enthusiasm for the war.



Topic: The Battle of Saratoga and Valley Forge

In early 1777, the British had two large army bases in North America (one in Quebec, and one in New York). From New York, the British army under the command of General Howe attacked up and down the East Coast, taking control of Philadelphia on September 11, 1777.

Meanwhile, back in June, British General John Burgoyne left Quebec with the goal of cutting off New England from the rest of the colonies. Though his Indian forces had retreated and loyalist forces never appeared, Burgoyne proceeded cautiously toward Albany, NY, because he had to find a better location to spend the winter. But before he could reach it, he was stopped short by Washington's army at Saratoga. American General Benedict Arnold had accurately predicted General Burgoyne's first move and minimized British success by using American sharpshooters to target the British officer corps. Burgoyne waited for reinforcements that never came. General Howe was making his way to Philadelphia, and the remaining troops in New York were too few and too far away. Burgoyne's army was running short on ammunition and food. After an unauthorized charge led by Benedict Arnold, Burgoyne was outnumbered and surrounded. He surrendered to General Horatio Gates on October 17, 1777.

The **Battle of Saratoga** proved to be the turning point of the Revolutionary War. Of course it was an important military success, minimizing the threat from Canada. More importantly, it was a political victory. Early in the war, Benjamin Franklin had petitioned France for help. They sent secret financial aid but refused to send soldiers. (Although, despite this ban, many Frenchmen did travel to America and enlist on their own. Perhaps the most valuable of these volunteers was the Marquis de Lafayette, who paid to outfit his own ship, arrived in America as a major general and proved himself to be a valuable military leader.) However, following the victory at Saratoga, France formed an alliance with the United States of America. France declared war on Great Britain and tipped the scales in favor of the Patriots. In addition to providing military support, France convinced other nations to declare war on Great Britain. The Americans were strengthened, and King George III had bigger worries than rebel colonists in North America.

Valley Forge

But friendship with France didn't immediately improve the condition of George Washington's army as the winter of 1777 set in. The British had forced the Continental Army to withdraw to the safety of **Valley Forge, PA**, where Washington directed the creation of shelters for 12,000 men with only one axe available. Their clothes were in tatters, a third of them had no shoes and blankets were scarce. Four thousand of the men were declared unfit for duty as a result of malnutrition, exposure and disease. They relied on the assistance of civilian friends and relatives, who brought food, supplies and comfort to the troops. Nearly a quarter of his army did not survive the winter at Valley Forge.

Washington wisely decided to use the winter to his advantage and found help from the Marquis de Lafayette as well as a Prussian officer named Baron von Steuben. He figured that keeping the men busy would not only improve morale, it would make his men better on the battlefield and more efficient behind the lines. Though history has revealed that von Steuben was not truly a baron and that he had inflated his credentials, he was effective in systematically training the American soldiers based on the Prussian military system. In the spring of 1778, Washington's reduced force was better organized and more prepared for battle than they had been the previous fall. Plus, France had drawn off British ships and soldiers from North America so that they could fight France in the Caribbean. France also brought soldiers to help the colonists fight. Things were looking up.

Lesson Summary

Let's review. The British, under General Burgoyne, pushed down from their base in Canada with the intent of isolating New England. After meeting the Continental Army, Burgoyne waited for reinforcements, but the main British force was on its way to capture Philadelphia. Washington won the **Battle of Saratoga**, inducing France and some of her allies to join the fight on the American side. Meanwhile, the colonial troops were exhausted and running out of supplies. They spent the winter at **Valley Forge, PA**, recuperating, planning and training with a Prussian military expert.

Sub-Topics: Each team member will complete one of the choices below:

- ☐ Describe the **Battle of Saratoga** and its significance to the war
- ☐ Detail the difficulties Washington's army had in **Valley Forge** in the winter of 1777
- ☐ Identify **Marquis de Lafayette** and **Baron von Steuben**; explain their contribution to the war effort

Topic: The Last Year of the War

Late in the American Revolution, George Washington had good reason to be hopeful. Despite Britain's Southern Strategy, American troops were making headway against the British army and their loyalist forces. Foreign navies were fighting the British at sea, and French officers, like the Marquis de Lafayette, were also helping on land. While the morale of the Continental armies and navies were on the rise, British troops became disheartened, and the English population was starting to grumble about another expensive, seemingly endless war.

In an attempt to disrupt the American troops in the south, General Charles Cornwallis had moved his army into Yorktown, Virginia at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. From there, he planned to attack the American supply and communication lines. And in the event that things went poorly, he figured he had a quick escape by sea.

In mid-August 1781, the Continental Army received a message from across the sea. The French fleet was leaving the West Indies and heading to Yorktown. They would arrive within a month. Washington's army and its French allies moved down from Rhode Island to meet the fleet. By September 5, all of the pieces were in place.

The Siege of Yorktown

When word reached the British that its rivals were converging on Yorktown, a fleet from New York was dispatched and the British and French fleets clashed at sea in the **Battle of the Chesapeake**. On September 16, the British attack fleet retreated to New York with their tails between their legs, leaving General Cornwallis pinned against the bay with France at his back and the combined army approaching from the front. At least 7,000 land forces arrived on September 28, joined by more than 3,000 French marines. The British army was surrounded.

The **Battle of Yorktown** was really a three-week siege. French and American cannons began to fire on British defensive positions without stopping in order to prevent the British from making any repairs. The allies captured the outermost British defenses known as redoubts and turned the guns back on the British. As the allies drew closer to the town, Cornwallis began sinking his own ships in the harbor to keep them from being captured. After a failed attempt to escape, General Cornwallis surrendered on October 19, 1781.

Back in England, King George insisted he could send more troops and win the war, but he didn't have any support in Parliament or among the English people. The surrender at Yorktown marked the end of the American Revolution. However, it would be two more years before the various navies resolved their fights overseas, British troops evacuated the United States and a peace treaty was signed.

The Treaty of Paris

In the peace talks that followed, the Americans' top priority, of course, was independence. Spain wanted Gibraltar, and France wanted some of the sugar islands in the Caribbean. Great Britain took advantage of the different interests among its enemies and proposed a secret meeting with America. Wanting the most favorable terms, the American delegation accepted, despite having been directed by Congress to work with France. By offering independence to the Americans but refusing the other nations' demands, Britain was able to keep her enemies from banding together.

The **1783 Treaty of Paris** has ten articles. Perhaps most importantly, the British agreed to recognize American independence as far west as the Mississippi River. Americans agreed to honor debts owed to British merchants from before the war, and both sides agreed to return confiscated property. Congress ratified the Treaty of Paris on January 14, 1784, though both parties conveniently ignored provisions that didn't suit their interests. America's allies didn't make out so well with their treaties, collectively called the **Peace of Paris**. They reached none of their primary objectives, and both Spain and France were left deeply in debt.

Lesson Summary

British General Charles Cornwallis realized that his army's Southern Strategy wasn't as effective as he'd hoped. He moved his army north to Yorktown, Virginia, where he hoped to cut off the American forces. America and France began looking for an opportunity to attack. When a fleet from the West Indies set sail for Yorktown, the army had just one month to secretly get into position and surround Cornwallis. Following the **Battle of the Chesapeake**, the French navy controlled the water and 10,000 allied troops began bombarding the British defenses in a siege commonly known as the **Battle of Yorktown**. On October 19, 1781, General Cornwallis surrendered, ending the American Revolution, though America's allies fought at sea with Britain for two more years. In the 1783 **Treaty of Paris**, Britain pitted the allies against each other, offering American independence while ignoring the demands of other nations.

Sub-Topics: Each team member will complete one of the choices below:

- ☐ Identify General Cornwallis, explain his strategy at **Yorktown**, and the siege of Yorktown
- ☐ Describe the **Battle of the Chesapeake** and the role played by the French in securing a victory at Yorktown
- ☐ Describe what the **Treaty of Paris** accomplished for the Americans and their allies

Topic: The Young Continental Navy

The first sea battle of the Revolution was like a scene from the movie *Shrek*, where townsmen armed with pitchforks, swords, and axes gave chase to a hated loyalist.

Rather than give in to the owner of a merchant fleet who refused to sell his supplies unless the town gave him wood to build soldiers' barracks in Boston, the townsmen of Machias, Maine, had plotted to arrest the owner and seize the ships' cargo; however, the crew had spotted the militia, fled to the safety of the British military escort, and set sail. After commandeering one of the merchant ships, the militia armed themselves as best they could and overtook the British Navy schooner. After ramming her side, 40 patriots boarded the enemy vessel, killed her commander, and took control of the ship. The Battle of Machias occurred on June 12, 1775.

The U.S. Navy was officially created later that year, on October 13th, under the command of Esek Hopkins. The flag he adopted, called the Gadsden Flag, and its motto - 'Don't Tread on Me' - are recognizable even today as a symbol of patriotism.

When the Declaration of Independence was signed the following summer, the United States had just 31 ships. Some states had ships, which were added to the service, and Congress authorized the construction of many more throughout the war. The world's first military submarine was even built. Named the Turtle, the submersible could be fully maneuvered and was designed to attach explosives to the bottom of British ships in the harbors. Though the Turtle was documented as deploying twice, it never sank a ship.

To boost their maritime power, the Continental Congress and some states issued Letters of Marque to private ship owners, authorizing them to attack foreign ships during war. They were paid a percentage of the value they seized, so incentive was high. These commissioned private vessels were called **privateers**, and though their actions aren't well known, they played an important role in gaining independence.

A Sailor's Life

But even with 2,000 Letters of Marque issued, America's Navy was still tiny, and with no ships of the line, it couldn't face off against the British fleet. What they could do was impede British troop and supply movement in the freshwater of the American continent, raid English colonies, and capture British merchant ships throughout the Atlantic, the Caribbean, and even English waters. By 1777, the American Navy brought in 2 million pounds of gunpowder and saltpeter, a chemical used in explosives. One privateer alone was responsible for capturing 1,000 British cannons from the high seas. Another privateer - in just one victory - supplied 2,000 guns, 31 tons of musket shot, 7,000 round shot for cannon, and other ammunition. Estimates vary widely, but Lloyd's of London suggests that Yankee privateers commandeered 2,208 British ships, valued at almost \$66 million, at that time. If all those numbers seem a little overwhelming, it all adds up to this: the American Navy was pretty effective at capturing supplies from British merchant ships.

But seizing British ships did more than just bring in supplies. The Continental Navy kept an estimated 16,000 British soldiers and sailors out of battle, transported American diplomats and occasional troops, and helped defend several important cities - not to mention, more than a few personal fortunes were made.

Throughout the course of the war, about 55,000 Americans volunteered or were pressed into service onboard Navy vessels. Because sailors were paid well for their service (the average salary was \$9 per month), the Navy didn't have trouble finding volunteers. Out of all of them, one man stands out from the rest: John Paul Jones.

John Paul Jones

Born John Paul, the young Scotsman was apprenticed to a sailor at the age of 13, served on board many slaving missions, and earned his first command at the age of 21. He might have spent his entire life on board British merchant ships if not for a fateful trip to the Caribbean in which his crew mutinied. After killing one of the rebels, John Paul escaped to America in 1773 and added the surname Jones to avoid detection. He volunteered for naval service immediately when the war erupted in 1775. The following year, he defeated 16 British ships on a single mission.

Early in 1778, **John Paul Jones** commanded the first American ship to be formally recognized by the French, receiving a nine-gun salute. Jones then took the war to England's shores, attacking a seaside village in hopes of taking a hostage that could be exchanged for American prisoners of war. The voyage was unsuccessful, but the aggressive move caught the British off-guard and led him to His Majesty's Ship Drake, anchored nearby, which he successfully captured after barely an hour.

But Jones is perhaps most famous for his 1779 victory over His Majesty's Ship Serapis. When his ship's rigging became entangled, all but two of her guns were out of action, and with water pouring through several holes in the ship's hull, the British captain asked Jones if he was ready to surrender. He famously replied 'I have not yet begun to fight!' After hours of bloody hand-to-hand combat, the Serapis surrendered when a grenade exploded her ammunition. Though both the Serapis and the American ship were lost, Jones had still earned the surrender of a British warship and took Scarborough (an accompanying British ship) as a prize. This victory at sea brought international attention to the conflict between Britain and her rebellious colonies.

The new United States decided it didn't need a standing navy after the war and decommissioned the little force. The great John Paul Jones spent the next decade in Europe, first as a diplomat collecting money owed to Americans, and later as an Admiral in the Russian Imperial Navy under Catherine the Great. He died, alone, in France, and due to the onset of the French Revolution he was buried in an unmarked grave. His remains were located and brought home to America in 1906, and even though he couldn't stop Congress from disbanding the Revolutionary fleet, John Paul Jones is still considered to be the founding father of the US Navy.

Lesson Summary

Let's review. Naval operations in the American Revolution started shortly after the war had begun on land. Consisting largely of privateers, the Continental Navy concentrated its efforts on engaging English merchant ships. Their efforts helped supply the army and also impeded the arrival of British reinforcements. It was dangerous work, but higher pay kept the ships sailing throughout the war.

One of the most famous commanders was **John Paul Jones**, who captured three British warships and even launched an attack on an English village. His actions encouraged foreign navies to join the war, and soon the French, Spanish, and Dutch Navies were on America's side, diverting Britain's attention away from the colonies. After the war, the American Navy was disbanded.

Sub-Topics: Each team member will complete one of the choices below:

- Describe the **Battle of Machias (and the birth of the US Navy)**
- Identify **John Paul Jones** and explain his role in the early American Navy, including his battle with the HMS Serapis
- Describe the **impact of the colonial Navy** on the war effort