

LOOSE FILES AND AMERICAN SCRAMBLE

WARGAMING BATTLES OF THE AMERICAN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE BY ANDY CALLAN



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THE RULES

Arthur Harman's recent series of articles on battles of the American Revolution in *Miniature Wargames* has, I hope, whetted readers' appetites for re-fighting these actions from this much neglected period. Anyone who has read Arthur's articles will immediately see how far from the truth are the popular myths of the war, which present a view of pipe-clayed redcoats helplessly shot down by wily frontiersmen. The Americans can hardly be blamed for propagating this myth, for it must be hard to come to terms with the fact that

the British, although usually outnumbered, managed to win most of the battles of the war. They did this, not with the rigid manoeuvres of the European parade ground, but through an intelligent combination of conventional drill and discipline, with flexible, fast-moving formations, and aggressive tactics. Such an innovative approach was ideally suited for the typically broken terrain of American battlefields and produced a fluid style of fighting in which successive waves of infantry attacked and counter-attacked, with the edge going to troops able to quickly re-form after an action. So, far from being rigid, one-sided affairs, most of the battles of the war were fast moving, close-run,



and unpredictable. Given the small numbers of troops involved (usually under 5,000 men a side) this makes the period ideal for wargaming.

To be realistic, though, the rules need to reflect the fast pace and special features of these actions. It is thus a mistake to think that you can just adapt a typical Seven Years' War or Napoleonic set, since these are usually designed for the relatively stately, large-scale engagements of the European theatre. So, it is probably best to start from scratch and design a set of rules that are tailor-made for the period. The final version of my own set, printed below, is the product of many revisions and playtestings, polished over the years through the experience of many a close-fought action. I don't expect they will suit everyone, and some of you may find the mechanisms a little unusual, but do give them a try before you write in to complain about apparent omissions or inconsistencies. Playability has been the keynote. I give some 'Designer's Notes' after the main body of the rules to explain the thinking behind some of the rule mechanisms.

SCALES

1 figure	10 men
1 inch	25 yards
1 turn	approx. 5 minutes
1 model gun	2 pieces of artillery

ORGANISATION

Infantry: in 'companies' of three figures on a base.

Unit size = 9 - 30 figures.

Cavalry: in 'troops' of two figures to a base.

Unit size = 4 - 12 figures.

Skirmishers: individually based. Fire in groups of three figures. Maximum unit size = 15 figures.

Artillery: each model gun has a crew of three figures and a team of horses.

One company/troop/base in each unit should be clearly identified as the Command Group (e.g. by using a flag or officer figure).

TRAINING

Each unit is given a basic efficiency grade at the start of the game, indicating its training and experience. This may vary in a campaign context, but the following should be taken as standard grades for the different categories of troops:

1st Class: Grenadiers, Light Infantry.

2nd Class: Regulars, Continentals, Rangers, Jagers.

3rd Class: Raw Regulars, Veteran Militia, Loyalists.

4th Class: Militia, Inexperienced Loyalists, European-led Indians.

5th Class: Other Indians.

ORDER OF PLAY IN A TURN (ALL MOVEMENT IS SIMULTANEOUS)

1. Compulsory Retreats/Routs following combat in previous turn.
2. Calculate Morale effects provoked by 1, above.
3. Firing.
4. Allocate Command Points. Move commanders and couriers.
5. Movement. Announce attempted advances to contact/charges.
6. Combat.
7. Re-dress ranks (according to training) of units that did not move this turn.

Author's Afterthoughts: Figure Scales

Most of today's rules are 'scale agnostic'. It would have been much better here to say that each regiment has so many stands and to use centimetres for 15mm or inches for 28mm (or 25mm, as it was back then).

Author's Afterthoughts: Time and Motion

Back in the 1980s, no rules were complete without figure, ground, and time scales. It was all part of a 'bottom-up' analysis of a battlefield action, based on a sort of 'time and motion' study which aimed to give wargaming a more 'scientific' respectability. None of this ever really worked, so these days writers rarely bother with such things.

Author's Afterthoughts: Simultaneous Movement

This was always more of an ambition than a practical reality but we all felt it was something we ought to aspire towards. IGO/UGO is less likely to cause cross-table arguments and one of today's card-driven turn sequences is probably best in terms of practicality.



Left: Command Group (A), Artillery (B), Cavalry Troop (C), Infantry Unit (D), and Skirmisher Group (E).

COMMAND

This is exercised using Command Points (CPs). At the start of the game, determine the Command Points of each side's commander-in-chief. Unless these are determined by the scenario, the number of Command Points = Average Dice roll + 1.

Subordinate commanders (Brigadiers) always have an Average Dice x CPs. The actions possible to a commander are listed below, together with the cost in CPs.

- Move up to one dice (average or D6, as you choose) x inches = 1 CP.
- Give an order to a unit (or to more than one unit in the same Brigade to do the same thing): 1CP (Command range is 6").
- Write an order (in multiplayer games) = 2 CPs (note: a unit takes one full turn to react to a written order).
- Inspire troops in Combat (i.e., + 1 in combat calculation) = 3 CPs.*
- Rally one D. Point (see below) = 2 CPs*

*The Commander figure must be adjacent to the unit's command group.

Author's Afterthoughts: Command & Control

This is rather too complicated for its own good, something many of my rules were guilty of back then! It would probably be better to have just three classes of Commander (Poor, Average, and Good), who are allowed so many actions each turn, each costing one Command Point.



D.Points being recorded here on a micro dice.

D. POINTS

These represent the temporary Disorganisation, Demoralisation, and Desertion that can affect a unit's performance in action. Unlike casualties (see below) DPs do not have a permanent effect. The number of DPs on a unit may fluctuate up and down according to circumstances but never by more than five. According to their training, units may remove D. Points by re-dressing the ranks and otherwise sorting themselves out at the end of a turn. This varies according to training and circumstances.

- 1st Class units may remove up to 2 DPs per turn, if stationary and not in combat.
- 2nd Class units may remove 1 DP per turn if stationary and not in combat.
- 3rd Class units may remove 1 DP per turn if stationary, not in combat, and not under fire.
- 4th Class units may only remove DPs by a commander using his Command Points.
- 5th Class units only remove DPs if a commander-in-chief uses his Command Points.

Author's Afterthoughts: D. Points (DPs)

Demoralisation, Disorder, and Desertion. A mechanism that has stood the test of time - although the guys at *Little Wars* TV decided to change the abbreviation because of certain unfortunate modern associations...

As an afterthought to my afterthought (come on - keep up!), it's probably the case that D. Points here are too easy to get and too hard to rally off - I would be inclined to make rallying off a bit easier, especially for Regulars.

D. POINTS

Because the number of D. Points affecting a unit is constantly changing it is not practical to try and keep a note of them on paper. Some sort of counters placed next to the command group of the unit in question is a much better system since you can see at a glance how disordered a unit is - the enemy can see it too, which is only realistic since ranks would be wavering, etc. - and you can add or take away counters as required. The counters I prefer to use are little pebbles, sold as gravel for fish tanks in pet shops. These can be handled more easily than flat counters and don't look too out of place on the table.



MOVEMENT

In the close terrain typical of this war, movement rates were unpredictable and so all movement is randomised in the game. 1st/2nd/3rd Class units move one or two Average Dice (Player's choice) x inches.

4th/5th Class units move one AV.D or one AV.D and one D6 (Player's choice) x inches.

Skirmishers may move an extra D6 x inches if the player wishes. Cavalry may move an extra one or two D6 x inches if the player wishes.

All troops except skirmishers take 1 DP for each 1 or 2 rolled. In woods, take 1 DP for each 1, 2, or 3 rolled.

Movement Special Cases

Hessian Infantry: Move one AV.D or one AV.D +2" (not Jagers).

Cavalry: May only change speed by one or two dice in a turn (i.e., if a unit is at rest, it may only move off at up to two dice x inches, and if it is moving at top speed - four dice - it may only slow down to two dice on the next turn). In any move where it is the intention to close to contact, a cavalry unit must roll at least three dice whatever the distance to be covered, taking any penalties in D. Points. Couriers move up to four dice x inches.

On Roads: The player may choose their own roll on any Average Dice (thus limiting the random effect and preventing too much 'bunching' in marching columns).

Woods/Uphill: -1" from all dice rolled.



MANOEUVRE

Wheeling: Treat as uphill move. Pivot one end of line. Measure distance moved by outer figure. Take 1 DP.

Change Formation: Takes one turn. Take 1 DP (2 DPs if under fire).

Limber up/unlimber: Takes two turns. Take 1 DP (2 DPs if under fire).

Cross minor obstacle (e.g. small stream, gully): Takes one turn. Take 1 DP (2 DPs if under fire).

Cross major obstacle (e.g. abatis): Time and penalties determined by players.

Cross fence/wall or about face: Takes ½ move (roll dice as normal but halve total). Take 1 DP if cavalry or if under fire.

COLLISIONS/ INTERPENETRATIONS

Each unit takes 1 DP.

Retreating or Routing units move round supports that are better formed (i.e., have less DPs), but run through and collide with units equally or worse formed.

Author's Afterthoughts: Randomised Movement

Love it or hate it... but justified here, certainly more so than in other theatres, because of the particular features of the typical American terrain. And what about 'Average Dice'? (six-sided, but numbered 2/3/3/4/4/5 so they give the same 3.5 average score as a D6 but with a more even spread). Does anybody still use these? Rerolls can give a similar effect.

MORALE

- Troops ignore the retreat of friendly units with a lower training grade but take 1 DP if such a unit routs past within 6".

- If equal/higher grade unit retreats past within 6" take 2 DPs.

- If equal grade unit routs past within 6" take 2 DPs and 1 Casualty.

- If higher grade unit routs past within 6" take 3 DPs and 1 Casualty.

FIRING

1) Artillery: Three classes of gun are recognised:

Light: Less than 3 pounders (e.g., 'gallopers' or 'grasshoppers').

Field: Most guns. 3-6 pounders were in general use.

Heavy: 9 pounders and upwards. Rarely in use in the field in this theatre.

Ranges:

Long: 10" to 36" (minus 6" for light, plus 6" for heavy).

Short: under 10".

Effect: Roll one D6 for each model gun firing, modified as follows:

- + 1: Heavy gun.
- +1: Target in column or limbered artillery.
- + 1: Firing at same target, at same range, as in previous turn.
- 1: Firing at new target.
- 1: Each DP on gun firing.
- 2: Target in fieldwork or stone building.
- 2: Target in skirmish order.
- 1: Light gun.

At long range inflict 1 DP for final total of 4 or over.

At short range inflict 1 DP for total of 2 or 3, inflict 2 DPs for total of 4 or 5, inflict 1 DP and 1 Casualty for total of 6 or more.

2) Infantry:

Note: Only skirmishing infantry may fire and move in the same turn.

Ranges: Musket 0"- 8". Rifle 0"- 10".

Effect: Roll one D6 for each company or group of three skirmishers firing, minus the number of DPs on the firing unit. Halve the total if firing at artillery or skirmishers, halve again if target in fieldwork or building. Halves round up.

E.g.: A seven company unit with 2 DPs firing at skirmishers would roll $(7-2) = 5 \div 2 = 2\frac{1}{2}$, rounds up to three dice.

Inflict 1 DP for throws of 6 only. Skirmishers roll again for throws of 5, with subsequent $4/5/6 =$ inflict 1 DP.

Casualties

If a unit under fire has already sustained the maximum number (i.e., 5) of DPs, any subsequent DPs caused by fire combat or morale only are taken as casualties.

Loss of one 'casualty': Remove one company (three figures) of infantry or one troop (two figures) of cavalry. A gun that receives a casualty is knocked out.



COMBAT

Occurs when a unit advances to within 4" of an opponent. Each side throws 1 Average Dice, plus or minus the following:

- + 3: Each Training grade higher than the opponent.
- + 3: Defending fort or stone building.
- + 2: Defending fieldwork or wooden building.
- + 2: Making bayonet attack (option open only to British regulars. Declare before attack).
- + 1: Terrain advantage (e.g. uphill, behind stream, gully, wall, fence, etc.).
- + 1 or 2: General with unit (depends on how many CPs he spent on 'inspiring troops').
- 3 in skirmish order
- 3 being attacked in flank or rear
- 2 each DP on the unit
- 2 each casualty suffered
- 1 outnumbered*
- 2: outnumbered 3:2*
- 3: outnumbered 2:1*
- 5: outnumbered 3:1 or more*

* For these purposes one cavalry figure = three infantry; one gun = six infantry.

For two units attacking one, the attackers total up all their factors and divide by two.

Count highest grade unit for training comparison.

Result: Compare scores. If side A's total is, say, +3 and side B's is -2; then side A is the winner by a total of +5 and B is the loser by -5. Consult the following for the effect on each unit:

+4 or more: Easy victory. Take 1 DP. 1st/2nd/3rd class troops obey orders. 4th/5th class pursue (see below).

+2/3: Successful action. Take 1 DP and (if facing infantry or artillery and not in a fort, building, or fieldwork) one casualty. Halt one turn.

+1/0/-1: Standoff. No clear result. Both sides halt. Action continues next turn. Both take 1 DP and (unless infantry facing cavalry, or facing a bayonet attack, or in a fort, building or fieldwork) one casualty.

Author's Afterthoughts : Plusses and Minuses

Very much 'of their time'
and far too many of them
here in Firing and Combat
to be user-friendly.

-2/-3/-4: Driven Back. Take 2 DPs and one casualty. Retreat one move at maximum speed (no deduction for about face).

-5/-6/-7/-8: Defeated. Take 2 DPs and two casualties. Retreat at maximum speed behind next line of friendly troops, or next terrain obstacle if no support.

-9 or more: Routed. Run away at maximum speed to beyond artillery range of enemy or next terrain obstacle (whichever is the further). Take -1 DPs and two casualties.

Note: Pursuit continues until the enemy outdistances the pursuers or is destroyed by them.

Cavalry who get a standoff result against infantry or artillery act as if driven back.

Generals who attach themselves to a unit may not quit that unit until the combat is resolved, and they must share the fate of that unit (i.e., risking retreat/rout and getting caught up in a pursuit).



RISK TO COMMANDERS

If a unit to which a commander is attached (e.g. for rallying purposes, or to give an order, etc.) takes a DP from enemy fire, or takes a casualty in any circumstances, roll one D6 to see if the commander is hit (maximum of one such roll in any one turn):

1 = Hit. Roll again:

4/5/6 = Light wound. Lose 2 CPs.

2/3 = Serious wound. Retire from field. Loses all CPs.

1 = Killed.

Formations Permitted

	Regulars	Militia	Light Infantry
Line	Yes	Yes	Yes
Column	Yes	Yes	Yes
Skirmish	No	Yes	Yes

Note: Line is the normal fighting formation for both infantry and cavalry. Column is used only on the march except that regulars may also use it as an attack formation when assaulting a fieldwork, bridge, or defile. Regulars are too sensible to consider skirmishing, but militia are happy enough to do it (Minutemen, etc.) even though the effectiveness of untrained skirmishers is questionable.

Author's Afterthoughts: Combat outcomes

Taking the overall combat result as the difference between the Winner's and Loser's scores is useful, because it allows for a wide range of outcomes for the two sides.

COMMAND POINTS

Keeping a record of how Command Points are used is equally important. The system I have settled on, after much experimentation, is to use a little gadget made up of cork tile and mapping pins. Each commander has a small rectangle of cork tile marked so:

Movement (1)						
Orders (2)						
Rally 1D (2)						
Combat +1 (3)						

The figure in brackets is the cost in Command Points of each command action.

Give each commander as many mapping pins as he has Command Points. At phase 4 on each turn the commander's CPs are allocated by putting the pins in the appropriate boxes. Six is the maximum number of boxes needed,

since the maximum Command Points score is Average Dice +1. Thus, a four-point general could, say, move two dice x inches and then rally one D. Point, or he could issue two orders. But he couldn't move two dice x inches and add one in combat since this would cost a total of five CPs. Using the cork tile and pins this is immediately clear to the players.

Author's Afterthoughts: Battlefield Clutter

This little gadget is far too fiddly and intrusive. Simplifying the Command Points (see 'Author's Afterthoughts: Command & Control') would help.

DESIGNER'S NOTES



THE ADVANCE TO CONTACT

A couple of points to note:

1) You'll find that an attacking unit can avoid coming under fire from the defender before the combat calculation if they carefully time their attack (so that their unit starts its move outside musketry range [8"] but ends it inside the combat range [0" - 4"]). This does take some careful timing and a good deal of luck (since movement is randomised) but does give a particularly finely-judged advance an appropriate reward.

2) The +2 for a bayonet attack is a bonus open only to British regulars, who used the tactic to good effect to put the frighteners on their opponents. Note however that the bayonet attack is a two-edged weapon (sic) since, if you only get a standoff result, then the defender doesn't take a casualty. This reflects the fact that the attacker has dispensed with any firing during the advance but has still been subject to the defender's fire. The advantage thus passes to the defender, with the opposing sides going into the next round with the attacker on minus four (-2 for a D. Point, -2 for a casualty) and the defender on only minus two (-2 for a D. Point). The lesson for the British player is therefore - only use a bayonet attack to enhance an already likely victory, or as a risky last resort to get out of trouble. Steady Continentals are unlikely to be impressed by it.

MANOEUVRE

Under these rules you get some idea of how difficult it is to put a complicated plan of action (or even a fairly simple one!) into effect.

The terrain is assumed to be broken up by trees, scrub, and fences (this was typical of AWI battlefields) which all get in the way of parade ground manoeuvres. The ability of well-trained troops to quickly re-dress their ranks gives them a decisive advantage.

WHY LOOSE FILES?

I came across this one quite by chance in an obscure publication by the John Rylands University Library of Manchester - *Sir Charles MacCarthy, Soldier and Administrator 1768-1824*, by A.P. Kup, JRULM 1977. MacCarthy was killed in battle against the Ashanti in 1824 but as a young man he had been friends with David Dundas, who successfully introduced Prussian-style discipline and order into British Infantry regulations in the 1790s. This was not universally welcomed, and the booklet quotes a letter to Dundas from General William Harcourt (a veteran of the battle of White Plains) who doubted whether all British officers would be up to understanding Prussian methods "and, upon the whole, whether loose files and American scramble would not have been preferred". This shows the value of sheer serendipity - something you wouldn't come across by just doing an internet search.

COMMANDERS

Commanders are usually kept busy straightening out the mess manoeuvring units get themselves into. Beware of getting your general shot at, as the loss of all those useful command points can have unpleasant and decisive results. Note that while most commanders can steady a unit in defence by keeping a close eye on them (i.e. spending 3 CPs on 'inspiring troops in combat'), a general has to be above average to be capable of raising spirits while leading his men in an attack (the 'hat waving' style of leadership) since moving costs him CPs; he'll need to be exceptionally charismatic to lead a dashing cavalry charge.

TROOP TRAINING

Quality is immeasurably superior to quantity. You'll find that seasoned regulars can absorb a lot of punishment, sort themselves out quickly, and then come back for more. Militia units, on the other hand, have limited usefulness and life-expectancy, so are best placed behind some sort of cover and told to stay put. Manoeuvre with them at your peril as they soon fall into disorder and become good for absolutely nothing.

SKIRMISHERS

Are easily seen off by regulars determined to use the cold steel. Skirmish fire is primarily of nuisance value but can soon become alarmingly destructive if not dealt with promptly.

CAVALRY

You'll see why cavalry didn't play much of a part in this war. Under these rules they are exceptionally difficult to handle to good effect since they usually fall into disorder too easily to be of much use against steady troops. A successful cavalry charge is thus a great rarity, but when it does come off it can be wonderful to behold.

FINAL WORDS: LOOSE FILES REVISITED

I produced a simplified version of *Loose Files* for one of the 'Paper Soldiers' series of books I did with Peter Dennis - *Wargame the American Revolutionary War* (Helion 2018). On reflection I probably went a little too far with some of the changes – beware the Law of Unintended Consequences! If it ain't bust, don't fix it!

So, overall, what do I think now of 'Loose Files and American Scramble'? Well, it's good to see it's still remembered after all these years when I get people coming up to me at shows to tell me how much they enjoyed playing it. One chap even told me it was something of a life saver for him, as it gave him a project that took his mind off things at a very difficult time.

The reason it has been successful, I believe, is because it doesn't try to do too much. It just sets out to recreate the smaller battles of the American War of Independence and that's all. In so doing it meets the requirements of the three classical dramatic unities of time, place, and action.

There are some things I wouldn't do in quite the same way if I was writing it today, in the light of another forty years of rules writing experience, but overall I'm proud of what I achieved there.

And it's a belter of a title!

THE MINIS IN THE PHOTOS

All the figures seen in this article are from Perry Miniatures' American War of Independence (metal and plastic) range. Thanks to Alan P for the loan of his collection.

