

How did the British and French train their troops during the colonial eras?

From what I saw in movies, during many battles throughout the 1700s to early 1800s involving the French or British armies, rows of troops from both sides would fire volleys of bullets into each other and many soldiers would get hit and fall, but the rest of the soldiers would hold their ground or advance without flinching, and I was wondering how were these soldiers trained to be so disciplined and why would anyone sign up for war, as they would likely die.

The question above was asked on a history discussion forum. Some of the answers given there are listed below.

ANSWER #1

Most deaths were from disease, not battle. For example, see necrometrics.com/wars19c.htm – Peter Diehr yesterday

ANSWER #2

1 There are two questions here that should be treated separately. 1) How were troops trained? and 2) why would men sign up? If you are interested in the second, I'd remove the emotional language. Young men sign up for war for a variety of reasons - deceitful manipulation by recruiters, patriotism, uniforms, regular pay, the chance for plunder, the chance for adventure, and the chance for something other than the prospect of ceaseless, familiar and soul numbing labor. – Mark C. Wallace yesterday

ANSWER #3

Most jobs in those days, farm and factory work, was nearly as dangerous as the military. In the military, young men at least got a uniform, two or three meals a day, and a place to sleep, which was more than many farm or factory workers could count on. And a few were attracted by opportunities for travel and adventure and plunder.

Battles were bloody when fought, but fortunately few and far between. As to training, it helped that most men of the time (other than officers) were illiterate, and could be drilled relentlessly to march and shoot without thinking, and be "numb" to the death around them.

ANSWER #4

as all battles in the period were decided by one side giving way and giving up the fight by running or fleeing, the men were not robots and morale was a very important factor and it soldiers failing to be steady and press forward or whole ground was a regular occurrence

casualties in battle were often not particularly huge, the volleys often rapidly obscured vision, (musket gunpowder produced lot of smoke) the hit rate with muskets was ridiculously low in general, whole range of factors, such levelling not readily understood by many. these were confusing battlefields, noise and smoke.

the superior morale in the ability of the troops to remain steady under fire was a crucial factor. the principal factor in troop quality rather than the skills in shooting and fighting.

the British did not use conscription, and generally their troops were better paid. However the enlistments tended be those with few other choices. the Scots, Irish and kings German subjects were often very large parts of the British army.

"For much of the 18th century, the army was recruited in a wide variety of places, and many of its recruits were mercenaries from continental Europe, including Danes, Hessians and Hanoverians.[3]

These mercenaries were hired out by other rulers on contracted terms. Other regiments were formed of volunteers such as French Huguenots. By 1709, during the War of the Spanish Succession, the British Army totalled 150,000 men, of whom 81,000 were foreign mercenaries"

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recruitment_in_the_British_Army#18th_and_19th_centuries

pre revolutionary France from what I can research did not use conscription either (for regular units in peace time) but when short or wartime unofficial impressment rather than conscription was used.

http://www.napolun.com/mirror/web2.airmail.net/napoleon/FRENCH_ARMY.htm

"The French royal army of the 17th and 18th centuries had consisted primarily of long-service regulars together with a number of regiments recruited from foreign mercenaries. Limited conscription for local militia units was widely resented and only enforced in times of emergency."https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conscription_in_France

SIDE
COMMENT

This reminds me of a point about bayonets I should try to track down - some theories are that bayonet charges saved a lot of lives because the fear of them caused men to flee while they would otherwise be more willing to trade shots back and forth. – [pluckedkiwi Jul 14 '16 at 16:09](#)

ANSWER #5

In typical European armies, troops were trained on a conscription basis. The training is a mix of the general background of the soldiers and what was expected of them in a battle. However, there were also volunteer armies and large-scale mercenaries, but mostly we're talking conscription.

In a European conscription army, men would be called or pressed into service largely at random, willingly or unwillingly, and particularly from the lower classes. For an unpopular war or service (like a navy), conscription gangs that would grab whomever they could. A popular war may see a lot of volunteers, though. Those from the upper classes/nobility would usually have an out or buy a commission and be an officer.

Because it was conscription and because there was usually war already at hand, training would be short and simple. Everyone walk together, move at the same time, fire at the same time, etc. In 17th and 18th century war theory, a massed group was viewed as the most effective presentation of force and fire, because most battle was with edged weapons. Muskets existed but were overrated, as mentioned in other posts. The bayonet was seen as the ultimate "battlefield sweeper," and only a massed group can do it with the required effect. It wasn't until the American Civil War that the bayonet charge was shown to be very risky to the charger, and in WWI it was suicidal.

Military training seeks to create a desired response in the soldier when exposed to combat. Even today military training seems harsh and simplistic and repetitive and it is (and I've been through it in my service), it is on purpose because those actions need to become the soldier's automatic behavior when really bad stuff starts to happen around him. In the age we're talking about, the soldier needed to stay in line and do what the officer told them. The officer often felt free to shoot/stab soldiers who didn't do the right thing because they needed to assert their authority over the situation to overcome the battle.

It is CRITICAL in battle (then and now) that everyone does what they are supposed to do. If someone doesn't, then things start to fall apart. Because lives and nations are on the line, you get draconian rules to ensure everyone does what they are supposed to do.

So, if you are standing in a regimental line with bayonet attached, you were probably pressed into service, had a brief military course and are doing what everyone else is doing because the officer behind you is calling the shots and will shoot you too if you don't behave. Also, the 17th and 18th century army is likely operating without much support so you are probably very hungry, cold and getting sick. You'll ravage local farms as you march by for food and warmth. In those times, when an army came through your village – even your own army – you'd probably lose your food and some possessions.

As mentioned in other posts, the kill rate in 17th and 18th century fighting wasn't as bad as Hollywood makes it to be. Disease was a worse killer than bullets or edged weapons. Morale and not breaking and running was a very important part of the formula, as mentioned by @pugsville. When the shrapnel and bullet kill rate eclipsed that of edged weapons and disease, things began to change into modern warfare.