

# MY YEAR OF TRAINING TO BECOME A HESSIAN MUSKETEER

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A key component of JSHA is to educate the public. We have done this over the years in a variety of ways. We have provided speakers to talk on a variety of subjects at major history conferences, American Revolution Round Tables, genealogy organizations, and German culture organizations. Since joining the JSHA Board of Directors, I have personally spoken at a museum in Massillon, Ohio, delivered the keynote address to 2000 attendees at a Wreaths Across America event at New Bern National Cemetery, delivered history presentations with the good citizens of my home town in Tower City, Pennsylvania, and at several events in Virginia. Our annual meetings have included author talks, informal round table discussions, talks and displays on historical research, and some participation by military reenactment groups. In total, these methods help to inform and educate the public as well as our membership at large. Our number one method of education is the publication of history, culture and genealogy through our annual journal. It requires a significant amount of time to accurately craft a single article for the journal. I find it very educational to take on a subject and create a story. I hope I deliver new and interesting information about history from the American Revolution to the modern era.

But something was missing. I needed to figure out how else I could personally influence people to enjoy the history I love. I met Mr. Ben Williams, as he was dressed up as a Kapt'n (Capitaine in French) of the Regiment von Huyn, a Hessian reenactment regiment that operates in the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia (DMV) area. I mentioned that I was a direct descendant of a Hessian soldier and that was all it took. From that point forward, Ben encouraged me to join the regiment. He started the regiment while he was a history teacher in Maryland. Many years ago, this regiment participated in a JSHA annual meeting in Valley View, Pennsylvania and at events celebrating the 225<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the American Revolution in Saratoga and White Plains, N.Y., Trenton, N.J., and Yorktown, VA. Figures 1 and 2 show the regiment at a living history event at Williamsburg, Virginia in 2019.

I was added to the email list and attended several events to understand how the regiment operated.



I met some of the leaders and soldiers of the unit, which also included women camp followers and a set of musicians. I finally committed to training with the unit for the 2019 schedule of events.

Figure 1: Kapt'n Williams at Williamsburg.



Figure 2: Soldiers of the Regiment von Huyn with a young spectator.

My training started on a snowy Saturday in February in Upperville, Virginia. The first adventure included getting a uniform from the regimental supply officer. Just getting dressed is a 40-minute process. You start with a long sleeve shirt first then you put on your trousers and suspenders. The trousers fall just below your knee. Next, you put on your shoes and then pull on your gaiters which button up on the outside of your leg to a point 4 to 6 inches above your knee. The gaiters have thirteen brass buttons that you button from the bottom up. These were worn by soldiers to protect your lower legs as you patrolled through the underbrush of a forest. The gaiters are held in place by a small leather strap which fastens like a belt. A vest is worn next which is buttoned down the center and it ties in the back to keep the front nice and taut. Next, you add a coat which is normally dark blue, and is open in the front with hook and eye fasteners near the collar. The last piece is the neck stock which is black and is designed to protect the neck as it is made of leather covered with black wool. Unless you have long hair that can be pulled back bound in black ribbon, you must wear a wig. On top of the wig, you wear either a three-corner hat if you are a musketeer or a miter cap if you are a grenadier. A nice mustache can be grown or added for authenticity if you are a grenadier.

Personal equipment is added on top of your upper body which includes a sword belt with a sword in a scabbard, a bayonet in a scabbard, a cartridge box, a bread bag and a canteen. Then you are issued a flintlock musket which weighs about ten pounds and you are all ready to fall in and start training.



Figure 3: Fifer and Drummer in the snow.

It is one thing to research and write about Hessians, but it is another whole kettle of fish to don a uniform and perform like a soldier. Shocker number one was all manual of arms drills are given in German. It took me about 15 seconds to wish I had paid more attention to Dr. Danuta Lloyd during my two years of German courses at Ursinus College. I knew just enough to figure out some of the commands. My over two decades of marching band and Marine Corps drill allowed me to march and move the musket to the simple measured cadence of all movements involving a three count. Hessians were very deliberate in each movement and the marching pace is a short precise goose step stride. My first day included learning a whole host of new manual of arms commands and marching on snow covered ground. I now know what it must have been like at Trenton on December 26, 1776! Figure 3 shows a Fifer and a Drummer ready to deliver the marching cadence.

Over the course of the late Winter and early Spring, I trained with the regiment about every three weeks for about three to four hours a session. The biggest event of the year was scheduled for May 4-5 at Mount Vernon Estate and we wanted to do our best. We drilled at multiple locations throughout the DMV. Several of the new soldiers like me needed lots of repetitions to build muscle memory to make it look like the drill was second nature. Most of the soldiers of the regiment live in the DMV but others come from as far away as Michigan, Southern Virginia, and Pennsylvania. Once you have learned the basic field movements, it is fairly easy to snap back into drill rhythm with the rest of the troops.

Another element of our training is singing German songs from the Revolutionary War period. The songs are a combination of hymns, patriotic songs in support of the German prince, songs to build up the military spirit before battle and songs of toasts during meals. This part of the training is normally conducted at a local restaurant or in camp after a battle. We order food and drinks then break out the instruments and song sheets to entertain the other patrons. It is grand fun and another way to educate the public on Hessian practices. Figure 4 shows



Figure 4: Singing Practice

soldiers of the regiment preparing for the next song at Hunter's Head Tavern in Upperville, Virginia.

My first big event was Mount Vernon. My first assignment was as a wounded officer for my living history character. My knee was bandaged up and I had a cane to walk with a bit of a limp as shown in Figure 5. Several thousand visitors descend upon Mount Vernon for this two-day event. We had a living history encampment set up next to the British Army reenactors and the



Figure 5: Kapt'n and his wounded officer.



Figure 6: Regimental Encampment with troops and visitors.

public was free to walk through the site to learn colonial history as shown in Figure 6. We demonstrated manual of arms for the visitors and answered questions concerning the Hessian experience in the American Revolution. Children are often very curious about all that we do.

Author Rick Atkinson paid a visit to the Hessian Camp and I was able to renew my relationship with him as we had met at the American Revolution Conference in Williamsburg, Virginia, in March 2019. He asked lots of questions as part of his research for a second volume on the American Revolution. He had a talk on his first volume of the Revolution Trilogy – The British are Coming at the Mount Vernon event. One of the advantages of being a reenactor is you get to meet lots of interesting people and tell them about Hessians and their part in the Revolution. I ate lunch with Rick and later in the Summer he had his assistant contact JSHA to get detailed information on our organization for inclusion in his second volume.

One of my assignments at Mount Vernon was to represent the Hessians at a gathering of 30 other historic characters for an hour-long session for visitors. Each character was given two minutes to explain who they represented and how they fit into the American Revolution. My past studies of Hessians in the Revolution prepared me for just such an assignment. After each character had a chance to speak, visitors could ask additional questions. We broke up into small groups so people could ask more questions. This was another great opportunity to educate the public.

In the afternoon, the British and Hessian reenactors formed into a column and marched out to the field of battle as shown at Figure 7. Our attack was against the Continental Army that was positioned behind hastily prepared defensive positions. Both armies had support from artillery and cavalry forces. The spectators were lined up along a fence near the crest of a ridge that extends from the Mount Vernon plantation house. The battle

reenactment kicked off with a short artillery duel. Then the British forces along with their Hessian allies formed for battle and proceeded to the attack. As a Junior Officer, I followed the two ranks of grenadiers and musketeers assisting any soldiers who may have gotten “wounded” and was ordered to “Draw swords” for the final assault on the Continentals. The troop movements, horse charges, noise and smoke from artillery and musket fire were a great show for the spectators and quite exciting for the participants.

After the battle, we mustered opposite the spectators to field questions and get feedback on what they saw. When the crowd broke up, we retired to our encampment for refreshment and

socializing. Once we struck up some Hessian music and singing, lots of people gathered around to listen and ask more questions. Small cooking fires were soon lit as the soldiers prepared for staying overnight at the encampment.

On day two of the Mount Vernon event, torrential rain arrived to ruin the day’s planned battles. We took the opportunity to visit some of the sutler tents to purchase equipment and uniform items. Sutlers are suppliers that



Figure 7: Regiment in march column.



Figure 8: Music in the rain at Mount Vernon

follows an army and sell items to the troops. My first purchase was period-specific shoes. One needs good footwear to soldier all day. The rain refused to let up, so we gathered under a fly tent and sang more songs as shown at Figure 8. Breaking camp in the rain was not fun but a necessary task. The rain finally let up and we packed up the wet gear before heading home.

Training continued through the summer in preparation for our next big event in October at Mount Harmon Plantation in Maryland. We worked hard on the manual of arms, firing from two and three ranks as well as bayonet drill. We marched everywhere to practice turning movements of all sorts. Marching in summer on cut hay was nearly as slippery as marching in the snow.

We traveled to Dillsburg, Pennsylvania, in September for 2019 Oktoberfest at Dill's Tavern. We reviewed all we learned over the summer months as a final practice session before the Mount Harmon event. Between drill sessions, we interacted with the public and sang our songs in an old historic barn. We were loud enough to draw in some visitors who asked questions about the songs and our training. We did one more round of marching and drilling before heading home.

The regiment mustered on Friday, October 11, 2019, at Mount Harmon Plantation to set up an encampment along with our British allies. Tents were erected for sleeping and for storing supplies along with equipment to support the regiment for the weekend. We shared a cooking fire with a British Regiment.

On Saturday, we had the morning to practice our drill and to fire our flintlock muskets. This was the last step on the path to joining the ranks with the grenadiers and other musketeers.

An hour before we moved out, our sergeant reviewed formations, tactics and marching maneuvers. Shortly after 1:00 p.m. the Hessians took their position within the British brigade. After a motivating speech by the British Commander, the line of units faced to the right and marched in column to our defensive position. The march cadence was timed with drumbeats and music from the band. Our route of march took us on a road next to the spectators which allowed them to get a close look at our movements and take many pictures.

We occupied a defensive position on a hill as shown in Figure 9 and awaited an attack by the Continental Army. We used a three-line firing technique where the first rank would fire, move to the left then to the back of the formation while the second rank moved forward to the firing position. Once the second rank fired, it moved to the left and to the back of the formation while the third rank moved forward to the firing position. This technique allowed a steady rate of volley fire as well as time to reload when you were in the back rank. This was the same technique used in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century on the battlefield. It is a ballet of movement with deadly effectiveness. If a soldier's weapon misfired, it was easy to have them move out of the rotation and repair the musket.

On Sunday, after religious services and some reorganization of forces to account for casualties from the battle on Saturday, we formed up for another motivating speech by our British commander. Our mission was to take back the ground we had given up the day before when we were forced to withdraw. We had an easy march to our attack position and the Hessians were placed in the center of the line as shown on Figure 10. We halted for a time to allow the artillery to soften up the Continental defenses and to allow our cavalry to probe to find a weakness in the enemy's lines. We moved slowly forward keeping alignment with the British on our left and right. As we moved forward, we were finally in musket range. We loaded our muskets and on command, the whole British and Hessian force fired as one large volley. We reloaded and fired another collective volley. We reloaded but were ordered to move forward and then we ended up in a swale, a low or hollow place, especially a marshy depression between ridges. The swale allowed us to take some refuge from artillery and musket fire. We moved to the top edge of the swale and unleashed a volley. We quickly reloaded and fired another volley. We then withdrew to the swale, checked for casualties and were ordered forward again. We occupied the edge of the swale and fired volley after volley as quickly as we could.



Figure 9: The Regiment occupying a defensive position.



Figure 10: Regiment formed in line for battle

The Continental Officers could see that our position in the swale was giving us an advantage. To force us out of the swale, the officers sent out their cavalry to move us out of the swale by force of horse and saber. The trained and disciplined Hessians were ever on watch for such a tactic. When the alert word "Cavalry" was given, we formed into an infantry square, a tactic as old as the Roman Legions. Figure 11 shows our infantry square with cavalry horses swirling all around us. We repelled the attack and were not forced from our position.

After the cavalry attack, the British on our right moved forward as they had less enemy to their front. We were ordered forward with them. Once we drew even with them, we were commanded to load and fire and then move forward again. We came within 50 yards of the Continental position but could not force them to



Figure 11: Infantry Square during a cavalry attack.

withdraw. As we moved back to the swale, we would stop and fire a volley, then withdraw again. As daylight started to fade, the British commander ordered a general withdrawal.

Thus, this ended my first offensive battle reenactment. Safety was always our priority. It was constantly on our minds and was emphasized throughout the event. We always elevated our muskets when firing and never fired when any reenactors were within 25 yards. I now understand why the Hessians were the most disciplined soldiers in the American Revolution. Figure 12 is Musketeer Schwalm prepared for future operations.

Training over the course of the year has given me a much better appreciation of the Hessian military during the American Revolution and allows me to better educate the public at future events. To see additional pictures and videos of the Regiment von Huyn in action, visit Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/regtvonhuyn/>.



Figure 12: Musketeer Schwalm

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