

THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR SOCIETY LTD

SAFETY NOTES FOR FIRING PERCUSSION MUSKETS

‘Drill is the rock foundation of all discipline, without which no body of troops can train or fight’ Field Marshall B L Montgomery.

1. Follow the drills for the weapon as per Drill Manual, be it Federal or Confederate.
2. When firing at battle re-enactments, ONLY put gunpowder down the barrel (no paper, nothing else, when re-enacting). When you bite your paper cartridge pour the gunpowder down the barrel and then put the empty paper tube in your pocket or the front of your jacket to avoid littering. Authentic drill & firing displays can vary this, when you are not firing at or towards anyone.
3. Never actually aim at anyone, but always aim slightly off ‘or up’. Never fire your musket with black powder in it at any human being when that person or body of troops is closer to you than 15 metres. Never fire your musket at horses/cavalry when they are closer to you than 25 metres.
4. Muskets may be fired when in Skirmish order i.e. spread out, but only when you are in the ‘front rank’. Muskets may be fired by Sentries or others on patrol, but only subject to the above safety key rules.
5. Only ever use your weapons when on and at a re-enactment and participating in your Societies contracted re-enactment or training event. When travelling to and from home/the re-enactment, always make sure your weapons (including swords and bayonets) are well covered, out of sight in your vehicle, preferably locked in the boot. Never go off site e.g. to the shop or the pub with any gun bayonet or sword on you, unless you are in a formal parade, as part of the re-enactment scenario e.g. a march through Town for the local show.
6. When you have been issued with your ‘rounds’ or gunpowder, ensure it is kept in a safe place and away from any source of fire e.g. in your cartridge box with the flap down. Unused gunpowder / ammunition at the end of an event must be returned to the unit issuing officer for storage either on or off site. This is vital if you only have an acquire only gunpowder licence. If you have one of these you must NEVER leave the site of the re-enactment with any gunpowder (explosives). Good practice is to have an NCO check cartridge boxes to ensure they are empty, especially of loose gunpowder. If your unit lets you take gunpowder / ammunition home if you have an acquire & keep licence, that is a matter for unit regulations, but it must be transported & stored in the approved type of wooden containers.
7. After you have finished the official re-enactment for the day, ensure your gun is clear, empty and safe, and lock weaponry away securely e.g. in the boot of a car or securely padlocked under your camp cot bed in your tent. If this is not possible, then you must keep your musket with you at all times, even when sleeping, or the weapons are ‘stack arms’ and guarded in camp by a Sentry. Firing black powder as” blanks” from a percussion musket makes the barrel very dirty: it is particularly important to clear out the nipple and route through to the area of the main charge at the bottom of the barrel on a daily basis as the carbon deposits attract dampness, and by the following morning the gun is unlikely to function properly.
8. When firing in line using percussion weapons, the mid 19th century soldiers fought in two ranks. Make sure the front rank and the rear rank are dressed-off, so as to be one behind the other and the distance between soldiers when firing must be no more than your arm from your elbow to your fist i.e. you get your spacings by levelling your forearm and placing your fist in

the small of the back of the person in front with your elbow level with your side.

9. Following whatever the drills might be for your period/weapon, once it is loaded, the weapon must be kept at the shoulder or support arms in an American Civil War context or at Slope Arms or Advance in a Crimean War context, with the hammer down on the percussion cap and fingers away from the trigger i.e. keep in a recognised drill manual position at either shoulder, with the barrel pointing safely upwards.

10. On the command (given when at the shoulder) 'Ready!' both ranks Tee their feet and bring the Musket to the 45 degree position and cock the weapon i.e. with your right thumb, pull the hammer all the way back. On the command "Aim" or "Present" the rear rank take one short pace with their right foot to the right to position themselves in the gap between the two soldiers to their front and all level their muskets pointing towards the target. Keep your finger outside the trigger guard until the musket is levelled and steady, when the trigger finger should be carefully brought to the trigger.

11. On the command 'Aim', put the butt in your shoulder and level the gun at the enemy (subject to 'aiming-off' - see above). The rear rank must ensure that their muzzle is in front of the hands of the front rank holding their musket, but that their hammer/percussion cap is behind the ear of the front rank soldiers (so that you don't fire a percussion cap in somebody's ear, which hurts, or burn somebody's fingers). This positioning is vital and must be drilled into soldiers on a regular basis.

12. On the command 'Fire' everybody squeezes triggers at the same time, and the muskets fire a volley, at which point you automatically re-load and come back to the shoulder. "Recover Arms" is only used if a company is brought to aim and then NOT told to fire... If the troops are not to re-load after firing, the order is given "Shoulder Arms" when they await further instructions e.g. reload, advance or whatever. There are other fire orders e.g. Firing by Rank or firing by File. Always keep your muzzle up and never pointing in somebody else's face. When you are loading your musket always keep your muzzle pointing away from your face by a few degrees, so that, if it does discharge, the flash won't go in your face or anybody else's. Loading of a muzzle loading percussion musket takes place with the butt on the ground and the weapon held vertical and the gunpowder poured from the paper tube down the muzzle. If it does go off, usually (hopefully) only finger tips get burnt. Immediate immersion in a bucket of water for 5 minutes will usually elevate the burning pain.

13. If your musket fails to discharge, the immediate action is to put another percussion cap on the nipple and fire again. If it still fails to fire, elevate your muzzle and retire 5 paces to the rear of your body of troops, reporting the matter to the nearest NCO. Rectify the problem, if necessary using a nipple prick (which you ought to have either in your hat or in your percussion cap pouch), or using a tool to remove the nipple, to clear any blockage into the barrel. When you are ready to rejoin the ranks and continue fighting, report that to your NCO. If you have to use your ram-rod to sort the problem out, always show your NCO that its back in its slot NOT in the barrel, before you re-join the ranks.

14. If you get into hand-to-hand combat, NEVER do that with a loaded musket. Always clear your gun safely (even by firing up in the air) OR – if you have no chance to clear your gun safely – then fall down dead on the ground and quietly remove the percussion cap from the nipple and put the hammer down, so that in a mêlée your gun is always safe, and not likely to have an accidental discharge that blows somebody's head off.

15. When firing in a battle, keep your wits about you. When a volley goes off from a large body of troops, the roar might deceive you into thinking your musket has gone off when per-

haps it hasn't. Therefore always be aware of the slight kick in your shoulder when your musket does fire and, in looking down the barrel, make sure a flash/smoke comes out of the end of your musket, as far as you can!

16. When in line, NEVER step back or step forwards. That way you might either blow somebody else's head off, or get your own blown off by somebody else. Always put short barrelled gun firers in the front rank and ideally always have three band muskets throughout the unit. Any two band muskets or cavalry carbines must always be in the front rank firing. As will be noted from above points, front rank firers need to make sure that they do NOT lean forward with their left hand to hold their musket, but grip it with their left hand close to the trigger guard, with their left elbow resting on their front body at about 90 degrees. It's easier to bear the weight of the musket that way, and you avoid getting your hand too far down the barrel, thus running the risk of rear rank firers scorching your fingers when they fire.

17. At the end of a battle your unit leader must always go through the 'capping-off' procedure to ensure all guns are empty of any charge. This must be done before you leave the battlefield. When the command is given 'Prime'(ACW) or "Cap" (Crimean) whereupon you put a percussion cap on the nipple only, hammer down gently, and stand at the shoulder position. Then the usual commands 'Ready, Aim, Fire' are given, and all the percussion caps go off. Sometimes there is a 'boom' when a soldier finds out the musket was not clear and it was loaded with a charge. If this happens again, then everybody has to cap-off together again, until you get to the point where the person in charge of the unit is satisfied that nobody has any gunpowder down their barrel. At this point the 'Spring Rammers' procedure is adopted. The unit goes into open order, and ramrods are bounced in the barrel in front of an Officer or NCO as they come down the line. Ideally each empty barrel ought to 'ping'. After this a leader, with a degree of confidence, can dismiss his troops to their duties.

18. One safety aspect when using a percussion musket must be practised by the individual soldier so they are safe. Never put a live percussion cap on first and then start loading gunpowder from the muzzle. The gun might get banged or kicked, the cap discharge, and you get your hand blown off. Therefore it's hammer down either onto the nipple or with a used or dead percussion cap on it, pour in the gunpowder from the muzzle with the butt on the ground and the barrel slightly away from your face, tap the butt on the ground to seat the gunpowder in the bottom of the barrel, bring the musket up to be the "Ready" 45 degree position i.e. muzzle in the air, butt to your right hip and firing mechanism close to your right hand and belt, remove a percussion cap from your pouch and fit it onto the nipple securely, and then (keeping the muzzle elevated) ease the hammer back down onto the percussion cap, controlling it with your thumb and your forefinger squeezing the trigger. If the hammer is let fall or snap, the rifle will discharge and be unsafe. Your nearby comrades will not be happy with you! Therefore controlling the fall of the hammer carefully, so the percussion cap does not go off, is important. Also, never use the ramrod when re-enacting against others at an event. The risk of forgetting to take it out, and discharging it down the field, at the risk of 'kebabing' somebody in the opposition, is unacceptable. Ramrods are used to spring rammers and occasionally, when safety supervised by an NCO, to clear a blockage in a weapon that is failing to fire. When you have nobody in front of you, and it is safe to do so, e.g. when filming, or doing an authentic firing display, then proper authentic drills using ramrods as in battle in the 19th century, is acceptable, but for the bulk of normal re-enacting they are NOT used at all in the loading process.