

Signal Whistles

During the American Revolution our Continental Army organized Light Infantry companies as highly mobile units made up of riflemen known for their speed and marksmanship. Their primary role was as skirmishers in front of musket armed line units. Small shrill whistles made of wood, antler or bone played an important role in signaling commands to the sharpshooters of the Light Infantry, who could not rely upon the traditional beating of the company drum to relay field communications. Many poorly equipped Militia units who lacked drums also used signal whistles.

Ranger Whistle Commands. There is a series of "Ranger Digest" booklets published by Rick F. Tscherne (SFC, U.S. Army Retired), a former Airborne Ranger with a vast amount of specialized Infantry training and experience. The "Ranger Digest" booklets offer a wide variety of tips and information on combat survival techniques, improvising or modifying equipment or living in a field environment to help the soldier learn the tricks of his trade. These booklets (as of the Summer of 1996 there are five of them) are available in the U.S. Army PX or by mail from Ranger Rick's Books (11 Poppy lane, West Grove, PA 19390, phone/fax 610-869-4776). In "Ranger Digest Vol. V" there is a section where "Ranger Rick" describes a system of whistle commands he used as a squad leader and platoon sergeant to control his troops during actions on an objective such as raids, ambushes and movement to contact. He stated that whistles are much easier to hear over the noise of gunfire and explosions than voice commands and that he made all of his subordinate squad and fire team leaders carry a whistle to relay commands if his could not be heard or if units were spaced far apart. One long continuous blow of the whistle meant CEASE FIRE for everyone who did not have a clear enemy target in sight. One short whistle meant SPECIAL TEAMS OUT and dispatched security, demolitions, aid and litter, POW and search teams to perform their special assigned tasks on the objective or kill zone. Two short blows of the whistle meant SPECIAL TEAMS IN AND PREPARE TO MOVE OUT. Special teams were to quickly finish their tasks, return to their squads and, after a quick accountability and thumbs-up from the squad leaders, three short blows of the whistle meant MOVE OUT. "Ranger Rick" points out that while many units use star clusters or parachute flares to coordinate small unit actions, whistle commands will not destroy your night vision, illuminate your soldiers for the enemy to see and alert nearby enemy units of your activity. While gunfire can indicate the general vicinity of a firefight, a flare over the exact spot pretty much tells the enemy right where to send reinforcements. He also states that enemy survivors who escaped your initial assault or were laying low in the bushes and witnessed your efficient whistle commands could report they were attacked by a highly trained elite unit, thus forcing the enemy to a higher alert or readiness level and lowering their morale.

Choosing a Whistle. Besides their Militia use for short range small unit tactical communications, most outdoor survival experts place a whistle on the list of essential items for backcountry travel to summon help in case you become lost or injured. You won't find a much cheaper piece of potentially life-saving survival or tactical

communications equipment than a good whistle (an official U.S. Army whistle with lanyard costs about \$1 in the PX and doesn't cost much more in a surplus store). While any whistle will do, the Fox 40 and the Storm All-Weather (about \$6 each) are probably the best. Both are available mail order from Brigade Quartermasters (1025 Cobb International Blvd, Kennesaw, GA 30144) and the Fox 40 is available in the sporting goods section of Bi-Mart as an "official referee whistle." The Canadian manufacturer of the Fox 40 claims its "advanced patented 3-chamber design eliminates the troublesome pea, or cork ball" and that it "cannot be overblown ... the harder you blow the louder the sound." They further state the Fox 40 is "designed to cut through crowd noise, and carry over long distances." The Storm All-Weather whistle is described in the Brigade Quartermasters catalog as "positively the loudest human-powered whistle ever made" with a "revolutionary new dual chamber" which "blows 125% louder than a G.I. whistle" and that it "works in, on and under water and easily purges itself of sand, mud and snow." They claim it was "developed for military use ... with a power rating of 94.7 decibels, while focusing nearly 100% of the harmonic energy at the optimum 3125 hz range" and that it is "loud enough to be heard over the engine roar of rescue helicopters, under the surface by divers and for great distances on the water or land." Just why you would need to whistle for attention "over the engine roar of rescue helicopters" isn't clearly stated (maybe one blast is supposed to mean YES PLEASE PICK ME UP and two blasts means NO THANKS, YOU GUYS JUST GO AHEAD AND LEAVE ME HERE WITH MY BROKEN LEG). By the way, if you select either the Fox 40 or the Storm All-Weather whistle, be sure to also pack along a set of earplugs! Regardless of which type of whistle you choose, it wouldn't hurt to put a spare in your survival kit and be sure to use a lanyard to prevent loss.

Colonial Light Infantry and Militia units used signal whistle commands and it would still be useful for the Militia to develop and train with a system like the one described by "Ranger Rick."