

Sons of Liberty   Support the Cause   Follow Us On Facebook

#### Main Menu

Home  
 George Washington  
 Biography  
 Battles  
 Life and Times  
 Washington's Guards  
 Revolution by Month  
 Founding Philosophy  
 Audio  
 FAQ

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#### January 1777

Written by Andrew Stough



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"The battle, sir, is not to the strong alone, it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave."

- Patrick Henry, March 23, 1775, ( Richmond, Virginia)

The above, taken from a Pacific Legal Foundation Letter, is so typical of the patriot army, which, undernourished, only partially clad and poorly armed, stood off Britain and Germany's finest.

Despite its many shortcomings the army was so re-invigorated by its success in the Battle of Trenton that Washington decided to invade New Jersey again (at Trenton) on the night of the 30th and into the morning of the 31st of December, 1776. On January 2nd, 1777, British General Charles Cornwallis who had been rounding up men scattered by the Christmas battle, turned his full attention to General George Washington. The British attitude toward the Rebels was such that British Commander-in-Chief General William Howe, like his predecessors, underestimated the strength and resiliency of the Americans. Since in his mind, the rebels were trapped, Howe decided to rest his troops and destroy Washington the following day.

Washington was beginning to be known as the "Gray Fox" for his ability to slip away and elude the British. Rather than stay and fight a pitched battle with Cornwallis, he pulled yet another trick out of his hat. This time he left a cadre to keep fires going as if a host of troops too numerous for Cornwallis to tackle was encamped for the night. The next morning when British Rangers approached the camp they found nothing but dying embers. Therefore, there was no second Battle of Trenton and the fox hunt was back on.

When day broke on January 3rd, Washington was long gone from Trenton - busy engaging two regiments of British troops leaving Princeton, New Jersey, to join Cornwallis. The British commander then called up a third regiment armed with cannon from the town. Strengthened by cannon, the Redcoats charged with bayonets, hurling the Americans backward and killing the American commander. Washington spurred his horse forward and with his encouragement and Alexander Hamilton's cannon the day was saved. Casualties for the Redcoats, was, perhaps 400 men and the decapitation of King George III's head in a painting. The decapitation was caused by a cannon ball striking the king's portrait in the College of New Jersey where British troops were quartered. American losses in the forty-five minute encounter were 40 killed and 100 wounded.

Washington's plan was to defeat the British at Princeton, then move on to New Brunswick to seize the main British supply depot to re-supply the American army for the long cold months ahead. In addition, there was stored a treasure in sterling silver to pay the troops during the winter.

It had been Washington's hope that he could seize all this and also drive the British from New Jersey. The troops had come too far, and done too much, to be capable of fighting another battle especially with fresh British troops hurrying to try and bag the ole fox. Washington turned his worn out men toward the hills and found at Morristown a defensible winter camp for the second winter of the war. The troops had marched all the way to Pennsylvania, crossed the Delaware twice and were now encamped at Morristown, New Jersey, two-thirds of the way back to New York City.

Cornwallis was so confused by such unorthodox tactics that he abandoned the chase. Consolidating his troops at New Brunswick and Amboy, he abandoned his previous strategy of retaining scattered troop outposts in New Jersey.

Thus the 1776 campaign actually ended in 1777. True, no great or decisive battles had been won. Losses to the army in men and material had been severe and certainly regrettable but there had not been sufficient casualties to drain the army. Won was a renewed confidence and pride for the army that had survived all that the British had thrown at them.

Morristown, a strategic location, gave Washington not only a defensible position to spend the winter but a

location close enough to New York to give him a vantage point to watch over Howe. Much has been said of the hardships encountered during the remainder of the encampment. Actually I find no great reference to conditions being worse at Morristown in the winter of 1777 than at Valley Forge the following year, but it is alluded to.

Probably the difference between the hardships of Valley Forge  is that at Morristown a winning army wastes away as enlistments expire with no assurance that the warm winds of spring will bring recruits. Valley Forge was the opposite. Library of Congress logo dragged under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.  
under the nose of Howe's veteran army. That army did not sink into near oblivion as at Morristown but day by day, month by month, gained strength and professionalism. When the first balmy days of spring arrived at Valley Forge, Washington was in command of a professional army that could and would meet the British Army on its own terms at Monmouth.

Jan 15th, 1777. The people of New Connecticut declared their Independence from the Throne. (The tiny Republic later became the state of Vermont.)

References: U. S. Army Historical Series " American Military History": Don Higginbotham's "The War of American Independence"; Robert Leckie's "George Washington's War".

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