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January 1778

Written by Andrew Stough



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On December 19th, Commander-in-Chief General George Washington and the Continental Army finally arrived at Valley Forge some twenty miles from Philadelphia to spend the winter in what to many minds today was perhaps a cold but safe hideaway for the winter. Forgotten or not known by many of today's young students is the fact that that Washington led a poorly fed, ragged, and partially clothed army whose passage could be traced by its bloody footprints left in the snow. The valley's name was derived from a forge, which had been burned by the British during the fall of 1777. The valley, naturally defended by the Schuylkill River on one side and steep bluffs on the other, left two sides to be fortified. At the same time that these sides were being fortified it was necessary to find shelter for the soldiers from the penetrating wind and cold.

Washington had 14 by 16 foot, 12-man huts built from standing timber found in the valley. Imagine felling trees, squaring and notching, dragging them by hand to the construction area then putting up the huts; and, doing that without clothing suitable to the frigid winter weather! Water for cooking and drinking was scarce. Since there were no springs, a small but inadequate stream was the only source of water. Easily contaminated, it became a source of sickness due to the poor sanitation practiced in the camp. Remarkably, despite the hardship, death and desertion there was not overall unrest among the troops.

Until everyone was housed, many men spent the night by the open campfires to stay warm and to survive the night. It was remarkable that most of the huts were up by the end of December but it took most of January to get the open spaces between logs chinked to stop the wind from whistling between the logs and to get a good draft established in the chimneys thereby allowing relief from smoky huts and fires that gave off little heat. Even so, life in the huts was never comfortable or really warm. During the building of the huts officers and men alike shared the discomforts of the camp. When the troops were housed, then, and only then, did Washington and his officers take up residence in homes nearby.

Food and clothing were extremely scarce. It was not unusual for men who would be inside a hut to remove some or all of their clothing in order to clothe those who had to stand guard or work outside. Some food, blankets, shoes and clothing were at hand but unavailable. Ward notes that for lack of a competent commissary and quartermaster to store and distribute supplies that hogsheads (barrels) of both food and clothing were unloaded in the snow and frequently covered by the next storm. Some were found but frequently the food was spoiled and the clothing unusable.

In the past Washington had not had a large supply train. This gave his army mobility to strike and disappear like a will-o'-the-wisp. The previous asset of a small-unorganized supply train now became a liability. The problem was complicated by many things. First, just who was responsible for funding and shipping supplies? The states considered themselves sovereign; the Congress considered the states to be subservient. Some states sent supplies for their troops to be used only for their troops; some states supplied nothing stating that if it was a continental army that it was Congress' responsibility. Congress thought it was the responsibility of all states to either furnish supplies or funds for the support of all troops in the Continental Army regardless of their state origin. Congress and Washington wanted an American Army. The states were reluctant to lose control over any state forces or assets and Congress had no ability to enforce obedience.

While the wrangling continued, Washington treated the troops as a unified command, spreading supplies over the entire army regardless of whence they came. Meanwhile the army was cold and hungry. In part, the problem of a lack of supplies was due to unscrupulous businessmen who charged exorbitant prices and sometimes furnished shoddy materials and weevily foodstuffs. It was not totally a lack of foodstuff and clothing but also in arrival and distribution. The army had suffered from lack of delivery and shortages in the past but it had never been as critical as at Valley Forge where different sources place force strength at 9,000 to 11,000 men. Foraging locally was not the answer. Due to British General William Howe's previous foraging there was nothing left in the immediate area to buy or to forage. The population had already been stripped and if it had not been, the patriot army would have received no assistance from the local people who were predominantly Loyalists, and/or Quakers who were predominantly loyal to the Crown.

Some supplies were foraged, but from a distance. Captain McLane and Company with the aid of some Oneida Indians were successful in taking cattle from British detachments driving herds from the Wilmington area to Philadelphia for slaughter. It is noteworthy at this time to mention the role of two minorities at Valley Forge - Women and Blacks! A thaw in early January allowed Patriot women from Philadelphia to drive ten pairs of oxen to Valley Forge to be slaughtered. They also brought 2,000 shirts that they had sewn and smuggled out of Philadelphia. A Negro girl, Mary McDonald came to join the army with her potatoes, apples and nuts for the troops. Martha Washington also came bringing with her medicines, she remained to tend the sick and wounded by some of her own hand. CASAB is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Black soldiers, estimated at a total of 25,000 men over the course of the war, served in both American and British forces. While few in number compared with the total force, they had been with the army since Breeds Hill and would remain through Yorktown and beyond. Oliver Cromwell, a black man, was with Washington crossing the Delaware to Trenton in 1776, remaining with the army through Yorktown. Peter Salem, another black man at Valley Forge, was at Breeds Hill and was credited with firing the shot that killed Major John Pitcairn, the officer who had given the order; "Disperse ye rabble" at Lexington in 1775. Peter Salem served in the Continental Army for a total of seven years.

General Nathanael Greene was appointed to cure the supply problem. By March the supply problem was solved with the establishment of an efficient commissary and quartermaster service. However, no amount of efficiency and industry can overcome the lack of money to purchase supplies, nor to offset the chicanery of those who stand to prosper from the sale of supplies in a wartime economy.

Unfortunately, during those dark days there were many desertions by desperate men. Some simply went home; some even went to Philadelphia in order to find food, clothing and shelter by seeking service with Howe; who paid sixteen dollars for every American soldier who brought his musket and swore allegiance to the King. Ward notes that those who answered this call were mostly not American born.

Then there were those who were not surviving at all. Medicine being what it was meant that those who were only sick were kept in the same huts with those terminally ill from smallpox and typhus. When a man died, his clothes and blankets were taken to be worn by the living. Anyone unfortunate enough to wear the same clothes or to be moved into a sick hut and given the same blankets that had covered small pox or typhus victims was almost surely given a sentence of death. At first the dead were buried in marked graves. Men visiting the graves of dead comrades frequently fell into a state of melancholy, which resulted in a general lowering of camp morale. For the benefit of all, Washington ordered the dead buried in unmarked graves. Men were not the only victims; horses too, were dying for lack of forage. Over 500 horses died, adding to the already rampant sanitation problem.

Part of the problem was Washington's success in obtaining long enlistments. Had Washington only to cope with the small numbers of men encamped in previous winters, the problems at Valley Forge would not have been so great. In previous years, by January 1st, the bulk of the army was either going home or had already departed. The difference could be seen in the number of holdovers from 1777, variously given as eight to eleven thousand men. Previous winter encampments had been small and an army in name only. In January of 1778 it was an army in numbers, but, in it's weakened state not an effective one. Morale in the camp was remarkable, considering first, that compared to the total encampment, desertions were relatively small. Secondly, that despite the great number of sick or dying men and the hardships endured by the rest, there was no great unrest or despondency in the camp. The "Band of Brothers" which Washington had envisioned, and prayed for, had formed at Valley Forge. It was a direct result of men coming together to serve in a common cause and to serve until that cause was realized. They were united in this brotherhood; strengthened by an unspoken belief that they were no longer partizan soldiers from different states but members of the Continental Army. Their conversion to a national army might well be covered by the motto "E Pluribus Unum."

During this time Benjamin Franklin was in France assuring the French and other Europeans that the majority of Americans were solid supporters of the Revolution, and regardless of the burden, would accept nothing less than total independence. Later sources including former president John Adams stated that at best there was no more than one-third of the population who supported the Revolution. Other sources have confirmed this assessment, with one-third loyal to George III, some of whom some would fight for him; many more who were merely loyal, but would not help put down the Revolution in any way. The final one-third were, of neither conviction and were not getting into the argument either way and did not care which side won. Fortunately, simple statistics do not tell the whole story. That one-third who believed in the Revolution believed intensely and were willing to give everything they had, including their lives, to the cause of liberty and independence.

January 1778 departs with this band of patriots struggling to secure their huts, many still sitting and dozing by campfires at night to keep from freezing. It was this quality of tenacious belief and activity that eventually won independence from Great Britain and George III.

References: Christopher Ward's "War of the Revolution", Encyclopedia Britannica "The Revolutionary Years", Red Reeder's "Revolutionary War", Robert Lawson's "The American Revolution", Judith Spiegelman's "With Washington at Valley Forge" and R. Conrad Stein's "Valley Forge".

