

A CHRISTMAS TO REMEMBER

By: Nathan William Skelly

Five months after the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, the army of the new American republic was faltering in its quest to win independence from Great Britain. The initial bright, illuminating fire of the American Revolution seemed perilously close to being prematurely extinguished. The Continental Army had met near disaster at Long Island and White Plains. Thousands had been captured at Fort Mifflin. The ranks of the army had been thinned by desertion, sickness, and death. The future of the new nation did not appear promising. Soon, however, General George Washington, the commander of the Continental Army, would deliver a surprising and unexpected Christmas present to the country. A present that would make the Christmas of 1776 memorable forever.

After suffering several defeats, Washington had retreated south that December toward Trenton, New Jersey. He might have been captured there by General William Howe, except for his foresight in commandeering every boat and barge along the Delaware River for seventy miles. The British would have to build their own transportation to follow him across to Pennsylvania, and so he escaped at least temporarily. Washington, however, knew the situation was dire. His men were bedraggled and freezing. They were ill equipped and ill clothed; many did not even have shoes. Washington's own account of his troops noted that many were "entirely naked and most so thinly clad as to be unfit for service." The weather was dismally cold with snow, ice, and sleet in abundance. Washington acknowledged the bleakness of his situation in a letter to his brother, John Augustine, on December 18th: "I think the game is pretty near up ...No man, I believe, ever had a greater choice of difficulties and less means to extricate himself from them."

To make matters worse, Washington now had a new enemy besides the British: time. The approaching end of the year meant the expiration of many of his soldiers' one year commitments, and they were anxious to return home. Morale was low and the conditions were horrible. The thought of going home was very inviting for many of his soldiers. Washington knew the size of his army would be even more reduced with the coming year. Time was running out.

Finally, in late December, Washington received an early Christmas present from one of his spies, John Honeyman. Honeyman reported that the cautious General Howe was suspending military operations for the winter, even though Philadelphia was within his grasp. Howe was withdrawing his army to winter quarters at Staten Island, Manhattan, and Rhode Island. The Delaware River was jammed with sheets of ice, and Howe felt the river, militarily speaking, was utterly impassable. Honeyman reported that Howe had left a garrison of German soldiers, commanded by Colonel Johann Gottlieb Rail, to guard Trenton. Furthermore, Honeyman implied there was a lack of discipline among

these Hessian troops, and they intended to celebrate Christmas in the traditional German manner with a huge party!

Washington sent Honeyman back to Trenton and told him to assure Colonel Rail that he had nothing to fear from the American troops. He was instructed to inform Rail that the Americans were demoralized and in retreat from their earlier defeats in New York. In actuality, Washington was using this opportunity to develop a plan of attack to retake Trenton. He proposed to his officers a variation on Indian fighting tactics using a strategy of surprise attack and fast withdrawal. His plan called for transporting his tattered army back across the impassable Delaware River, marching to Trenton, and attacking the Hessians from different angles. While the logistics seemed daunting, the plan was a true offensive, and it offered the American soldiers a chance to redeem themselves.

Late on Christmas Day, Washington began to move his troops. The river current was extremely rough, and huge ice floes slowed their progress. The bitter cold penetrated the soldiers' flesh, and sleet covered their ammunition. The icy conditions resulted in a longer transport time across the river for the men, artillery, and horses than Washington had anticipated. By four in the morning however, he was ready to march on Trenton. As they marched, the feet of his shoeless men frequently tinged the snow with blood.

Washington had hoped to surprise the Hessians under cover of darkness. With day breaking, he realized this would be impossible. The additional time required to cross the river had put him behind schedule, but he was not deterred. Positioning his men on three different sides of Trenton, Washington was able to flawlessly execute his attack. Fortunately, many of the Hessians were still inebriated and hung over from their partying, and an element of surprise was still possible. The battle lasted only about an hour, and the Americans were able to win a decisive victory. The Continental Army captured nearly a thousand Hessian prisoners, and Colonel Rail was mortally wounded. The army's success was even more evidenced in the small number of American losses; only two officers and two privates were wounded. The spoils for the American army "included forty horses, six brass cannons, a thousand weapons, four wagons of baggage, three wagons of ammunition, and twelve drums."

While the Battle of Trenton was not a battle of strategic military importance in itself, it did greatly bolster American morale. News of the victory at Trenton "ran through the army and the country like a bolt of electricity." It was America's first major victory of the war, and the success was heartwarming. American soldiers were now more eager to stay in the army and continue the fight. American citizens felt encouraged and more confident. Washington had given the new country its first Christmas present.

The Continental Army's success at Trenton changed the complexion of the war "from a dying pallor to a ruddy glow." The fires for independence were reignited. Washington's victory was precisely the gift the country needed. It restored confidence in the army of the new nation and helped assure Americans that they could win their war for independence. Suddenly the prospects for the New Year and the future appeared

bright. The victory at Trenton made the Christmas of 1776 special for Americans forever.