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Inside the Campaigns

ROBERT MIDDLEKAUFF, THE GLORIOUS CAUSE (NY: OXFORD UP, 1982)

In the battle of Eutaw Springs, South Carolina, the last major action of the Revolutionary War before Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown, over 500 Americans were killed and wounded. Nathanael Greene had led some 2200 men into the Springs; his casualties thus represented almost one-fourth of his army. More men would die in battles in the next two years, and others would suffer terrible wounds. The statistics, although notoriously unreliable, show that the Revolution killed a higher percentage of those who served on the American side than any war in our history, always excepting the Civil War.[1]

Why did these men—those who survived and those who died—fight? Why did they hold their ground, endure the strain of battle, with men dying about them and danger to themselves so obvious? Undoubtedly the reasons varied from battle to battle, but just as surely there was some experience common to all these battles—and fairly uniform reasons for the actions of the men who fought despite their deepest impulses, which must have been to run from the field in order to escape the danger.

Some men did run, throwing down their muskets and packs in order to speed their flight. American units broke in large actions and small, at Brooklyn, Kip's Bay, White Plains, Brandywine, Germantown, Camden, and Hobkirk's Hill, to cite the most important instances. Yet many men did not break and run even in the disasters to American arms. They held their ground until they were killed, and they fought tenaciously while pulling back.

1. Peckham, *Toll*, 90, for Eutaw Springs; pp. 132–33 for the comparison of the Revolution and the Civil War.

In most actions the Continentals, the regulars, fought more bravely than the militia. We need to know why these men fought and why the American regulars performed better than the militia. The answers surely will help us to understand the Revolution, especially if we can discover whether what made men fight reflected what they believed—and felt—about the Revolution.

Several explanations of the willingness to fight and die, if necessary, may be dismissed at once. One is that soldiers on both sides fought out of fear of their officers, fearing them more than they did battle. Frederick the Great had described this condition as ideal, but it did not exist in ideal or practice in either the American or the British army. The British soldier usually possessed a more professional spirit than the American, an attitude compounded from confidence in his skill and pride in belonging to an old established institution. British regiments carried proud names—the Royal Welch Fusiliers, the Black Watch, the King's Own—whose officers usually behaved extraordinarily bravely in battle and expected their men to follow their examples. British officers disciplined their men more harshly than American officers did and generally trained them more effectively in the movements of battle. But neither they nor American officers instilled the fear that Frederick found so desirable. Spirit, bravery, a reliance on the bayonet, were all expected of professional soldiers, but professionals acted out of pride—not out of fear of their officers.

Still, coercion and force were never absent from the life of either army. There were, however, limits on their use and their effectiveness. Fear of flogging might prevent a soldier from deserting camp, but it could not guarantee that he would remain steady under fire. Fear of ridicule may have aided in keeping some troops in place, however. Eighteenth-century infantry went into combat in fairly close lines and officers could keep an eye on many of their men. If the formation was tight enough officers might strike laggards and even order "skulkers," Washington's term for those who turned tail, shot down.[2] Just before the move to Dorchester Heights in March 1776, the word went out that any American who ran from the action would be "fired down upon the spot."[3] The troops themselves approved of this threat, according to one of the chaplains.

2. *GW Writings*, V, 480.

3. Jeanette D. Black and William G. Roelker, *A Rhode Island Chaplain in the Revolution: Letters of Ebenezer David to Nicholas Brown, 1775–1778* (Providence, R.I., 1949), 13.

Washington repeated the threat just before the Battle of Brooklyn later that year, though he seems not to have posted men behind the lines to carry it out. Daniel Morgan urged Nathanael Greene to place sharp-shooters behind the militia, and Greene may have done so at Guilford Court House. No one thought that an entire army could be held in place against its will, and these commands to shoot soldiers who retired without orders were never widely issued.[4]

A tactic that surely would have appealed to many soldiers would have been to send them into battle drunk. Undoubtedly some—on both sides—did enter combat with their senses deadened by rum. Both armies commonly issued an additional ration of rum on the eve of some extraordinary action—a long, difficult march, for example, or a battle, were two of the usual reasons. A common order on such occasions ran: "The troops should have an extraordinary allowance of rum," usually a gill, four ounces of unknown alcoholic content, which if taken down at the propitious moment might dull fears and summon courage. At Camden no supply of rum existed; Gates or his staff substituted molasses, to no good effect, according to Otho Williams. The British fought brilliantly at Guilford Court House unaided by anything stronger than their own large spirits. In most actions soldiers went into battle with very little more than themselves and their comrades to lean upon.[5]

Belief in the Holy Spirit surely sustained some in the American army, perhaps more than in the enemy's. There are a good many references to the Divine or to Providence in the letters and diaries of ordinary soldiers. Often, however, these expressions are in the form of thanks to the Lord for permitting these soldiers to survive. There is little that suggests soldiers believed that faith rendered them invulnerable to the enemy's bullets. Many did consider the glorious cause to be sacred; their war, as the ministers who sent them off to kill never tired of reminding them, was just and providential.[6]

Others clearly saw more immediate advantages in the fight: the plunder of the enemy's dead. At Monmouth Court House, where Clinton with-

4. *GW Writings*, V, 479–80; Ward, II, 786.
5. Otho Williams, "A Narrative of the Campaign of 1780," in William Johnson, *Sketches of the Life and Correspondence of Nathanael Greene* (2 vols., Charleston, S.C., 1822), I, 494; A. R. Newsome, ed., "A British Orderly Book, 1780–1781," *NCHR*, 9 (1932), 289.
6. For typical references to Providence, see Herbert T. Wade and Robert A. Lively, *This Glorious Cause: The Adventures of Two Company Officers in Washington's Army* (Princeton, N.J., 1958).

drew after dark, leaving the field strewn with British corpses, the plundering carried American soldiers into the houses of civilians who had fled to save themselves. The soldiers' actions were so blatant and so unrestrained that Washington ordered their packs searched. And at Eutaw Springs, the Americans virtually gave up victory to the opportunity of ransacking British tents. Some died in their greed, shot down by an enemy given time to regroup while his camp was torn apart by men looking for something to carry off. But even these men probably fought for something besides plunder. When it beckoned they responded, but it had not drawn them to the field; nor had it kept them there in a savage struggle.[7]

Inspired leadership helped soldiers face death, but they sometimes fought bravely even when their leaders let them down. Yet officers' courage and the example of officers throwing off wounds to remain in the fight undoubtedly helped their men stick. Charles Stedman, the British general, remarked on Captain Maitland who, at Guilford Court House, was hit, dropped behind for a few minutes to get his wound dressed, then returned to the battle.[8] Cornwallis obviously filled Sergeant Lamb with pride, struggling forward to press into the struggle after his horse was killed.[9] Washington's presence meant much at Princeton though his exposure to enemy fire may also have made his troops uneasy. His quiet exhortation as he passed among the men who were about to assault Trenton—"Soldiers, keep by your officers" remained in the mind of a Connecticut soldier until his death fifty years later.[10] There was only one Washington, one Cornwallis, and their influence on men in battle, few of whom could have seen them, was of course slight. Junior and noncommissioned officers carried the burden of tactical direction; they had to show their troops what must be done and somehow persuade, cajole, or force them to do it. The praise ordinary soldiers lavished on sergeants and junior officers suggests that these leaders played important parts in their troops' willingness to fight. Still, important as it was, their part does not really explain why men fought.

In suggesting this conclusion about military leadership, I do not wish

7. Benjamin Fishbourne and others, Orderly Book, June 12–July 13, 1778, BR96, HL.
8. Stedman, *History of the American War*, II, 38.
9. Roger Lamb, *An Original and Authentic Journal of Occurrences During the Late American War . . .* (Dublin, 1809), 362.
10. William S. Powell, "A Connecticut Soldier Under Washington: Elisha Bostwick's Memoirs of the First Years of the Revolution," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., 6 (1949), 102.

to be understood as agreeing with Tolstoy's scornful verdict on generals—that despite all their plans and orders they do not affect the results of battles at all. Tolstoy did not reserve all his scorn for generals—historians are also derided in *War and Peace* for finding a rational order in battles where only chaos existed. "The activity of a commander in chief does not at all resemble the activity we imagine to ourselves when we sit at at ease in our studies examining some campaign on the map, with a certain number of troops on this and that side in a certain known locality, and begin our plans from some given moment. A commander in chief is never dealing with the beginning of any event—the position from which we always contemplate it. The commander in chief is always in the midst of a series of shifting events and so he never can at any moment consider the whole import of an event that is occurring."[11]

The full import of battle will as surely escape historians as participants. But we have to begin somewhere in trying to explain why men fought rather than ran from Revolutionary battlefields. The battlefield may indeed be the place to begin since we have dismissed leadership, fear of officers, religious belief, the power of drink, and the other possible explanations of why men fought and died.

The eighteenth-century battlefield was, compared with the twentieth, an intimate theater, especially intimate in the engagements of the Revolution which were usually small even by the standards of the day. The killing range of the musket, eighty to one hundred yards, enforced intimacy as did the reliance on the bayonet and the general ineffectiveness of artillery. Soldiers had to come to close quarters to kill; this fact reduced the mystery of battle though perhaps not its terrors. But at least the battlefield was less impersonal. In fact, in contrast to twentieth-century combat, in which the enemy usually remains unseen and the source of incoming fire unknown, in eighteenth-century battles the foe could be seen and sometimes even touched. Seeing one's enemy may have aroused a singular intensity of feeling uncommon in modern battles. The assault with the bayonet—the most desired objective of infantry tactics—seems indeed to have evoked an emotional climax. Before it occurred, tension and anxiety built up as the troops marched from their column into a line of attack. The purpose of their movements was well understood by themselves and their enemies, who must have watched with feelings of dread and fascination. When the order came sending them forward, rage, even madness, replaced the attackers' anxiety, while terror and

11. *War and Peace*, Book XI: 2.

desperation sometimes filled those receiving the charge.[12] Surely it is revealing that the Americans who ran from battle did so most often at the moment they understood that their enemy had started forward with the bayonet. This happened to several units at Brandywine and to the militia at Camden and Guilford Court House. The loneliness, the sense of isolation, reported by modern soldiers was probably missing at such moments. All was clear—especially that glittering line of advancing steel.

Whether this awful clarity was harder to bear than losing sight of the enemy is problematical. American troops ran at Germantown after grappling with the British and then finding the field of battle covered by fog. At that time groping blindly, they and their enemy struggled over ground resembling a scene of modern combat. The enemy was hidden at a critical moment, and American fears were generated by not knowing what was happening—or about to happen. They could not see the enemy, and they could not see one another, an especially important fact. For, as S. L. A. Marshall, the twentieth-century military historian, has suggested in his book *Men Against Fire*, what sustains men in the extraordinary circumstances of battle may be their relationships with their comrades.[13]

These men found that sustaining such relationships was possible in the intimacy of the American battlefield. And not just because the limited arena robbed battle of some of its mystery. More importantly, it permitted the troops to give one another moral or psychological support. The enemy could be seen, but so could one's comrades; they could be seen and communicated with.

Eighteenth-century infantry tactics called for men to move and fire from tight formations which permitted them to talk and to give one another information—and reassurance and comfort. If properly done, marching and firing found infantrymen compressed into files in which their shoulders touched. In battle, physical contact with one's comrades on either side must have helped men control their fears. Firing the musket from three compact lines, the English practice, also involved physical contact. The men of the front rank crouched on their right knees; the men of the center rank placed their left feet inside the right feet of the front; the rear rank did the same thing behind the center.

12. See Samuel B. Webb to Silas Deane, Cambridge, July 11, 1775, MHS, *Procs.*, 14 (Boston, 1876), 83.

13. (New York, 1947), especially chapter 10.

This stance was called—a revealing term—"locking." The very density of this formation sometimes aroused criticism from officers who complained that it led to inaccurate fire. The front rank, conscious of the closeness of the center, might fire too low; the rear rank tended to "throw" its shots into the air, as firing too high was called; only the center rank took careful aim according to the critics. Whatever the truth of these charges about accuracy of fire, men in these dense formations compiled a fine record of holding their ground. And it is worth noting that the inaccuracy of men in the rear rank bespoke their concern for their fellows in front of them.[14]

British and American soldiers in the Revolution often spoke of fighting with "spirit" and "behaving well" under fire. Sometimes these phrases referred to daring exploits under great danger, but more often they seem to have meant holding together, giving one another support, reforming the lines when they were broken or fell into disorder, disorder such as overtook the Americans at Greenspring, Virginia, early in July 1781 when Cornwallis lured Anthony Wayne into crossing the James with a force that was heavily outnumbered. Wayne saw his mistake and decided to make the best of it, not by a hasty retreat from the ambush but by attacking. The odds against the Americans were formidable but, as an ordinary soldier who was there saw it, the inspired conduct of the infantry saved them—"our troops behaved well, fighting with great spirit and bravery. The infantry were oft broke; but just as oft rallied and formed at a word."[15]

These troops had been spread out when the British surprised them, but they formed as quickly as possible. Here was a test of men's spirits, a test they passed in part because of their disciplined formation. At Camden, where in contrast the militia collapsed as soon as the battle began, an open alignment may have contributed to their fear. Gates placed the Virginians on the far left apparently expecting them to cover more ground than their numbers allowed. At any rate they went into the battle in a single line with at least five feet between each man, a

14. Eighteenth-century tactics are discussed with discernment by R. R. Palmer, "Frederick the Great, Guibert, Bülow: From Dynastic to National War," in Edward M. Earle, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy: Military Thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton, N.J., 1943), 49–74; Willcox, *Portrait of a General;* and Wickwires, *Cornwallis.* For "locking" and other aspects of firing and marching, see Humphrey Bland, *An Abstract of Military Discipline* (Boston, 1747); [Edward Harvey], *The Manual Exercise As Ordered by His Majesty in 1764* (Boston, [1774]); Timothy Pickering, *An Easy Plan of Discipline for a Militia* (Salem, Mass., 1775).

15. *The Diary of Josiah Atkins* (New York, 1975), 38.

distance which intensified a feeling of isolation in the heat and noise of the firing. And to make such feelings worse, these men were especially exposed, stretched out at one end of the line with no supporters behind them.[16]

Troops in tight lines consciously reassured one another in several ways. British troops usually talked and cheered—"huzzaing" whether standing their ground, running forward, or firing. The Americans may have done less talking and cheering, though there is evidence that they learned to imitate the enemy. Giving a cheer at the end of successful engagement was standard practice. The British cheered at Lexington and then marched off to be shot down on the road running from Concord. The Americans shouted their joy at Harlem Heights, an understandable action and one for most of 1776 they rarely had opportunity to perform.[17]

The most deplorable failures to stand and fight usually occurred among the American militia. Yet there were militia companies that performed with great success, remaining intact under the most deadly volleys. The New England companies at Bunker Hill held out under a fire that veteran British officers compared to the worst they had experienced in Europe. Lord Rawdon remarked on how unusual it was for defenders to stick to their posts even after the assaulting troops had entered the ditch around a redoubt.[18] The New Englanders did it. They also held steady at Princeton—"They were the first who regularly formed" and stood up under the balls "which whistled their thousand different notes around our heads," according to Charles Willson Peale, whose Philadelphia militia also proved its steadiness.[19]

What was different about these companies? Why did they fight when others around them ran? The answer may lie in the relationships among their men. Men in the New England companies, in the Philadelphia militia, and in the other units that held together were neighbors. They knew one another; they had something to prove to one another; they had their "honor" to protect. Their active service in the Revolution may have been short, but they had been together in one way or another for a fairly long time—for several years in most cases. Their companies,

16. *VG* (Dixon and Nicholson), Sept. 6, 1780, contains an account of the extended disposition on the left. Ward, II, 722–30, provides a fine study of the battle, as do the Wickwires, *Cornwallis,* 149–65.

17. Tench Tilghman to his father, Sept. 19, 1776, Henry P. Johnston, ed., *Memoir of Lieut. Col. Tench Tilghman* (Albany, N.Y., 1876), 139.

18. Francis Rawdon to the Earl of Huntington, June 20, 1775, Hastings Papers, HL.

19. Charles Willson Peale Diary, Jan. 3, 1777, HL.

after all, had been formed from towns and villages. Some, clearly, had known one another all their lives.[20]

Elsewhere, especially in the thinly settled southern colonies, companies were usually composed of men—farmers, farmers' sons, farm laborers, artisans, and new immigrants—who did not know one another. They were, to use a term much used in a later war, companies of "stragglers" without common attachments, with almost no knowledge of their fellows. For them, even bunched tightly in line, the battlefield was an empty, lonely place. Absence of personal bonds, and their own parochialism, coupled to inadequate training and imperfect discipline, often led to disintegration under fire.[21]

According to conventional wisdom the nearer the American militia were to home the better they fought, fighting for their homes and no one else's. Proximity to home, however, may have been a distraction which weakened resolve. For the irony of going into battle and perhaps to their deaths when home and safety lay close down the road could not have escaped many. Almost every senior American general commented on the propensity of the militia to desert—and if they were not deserting they seemed perpetually in transit between home and camp, usually without authorization.

Paradoxically, of all the Americans who fought, the militiamen best exemplified in themselves and in their behavior the ideals and purposes of the Revolution. They had enjoyed independence, or at least personal liberty, long before it was proclaimed in the Declaration. They instinctively felt their equality with others and in many places insisted upon demonstrating it by choosing their own officers. Their sense of their liberty permitted, even compelled, them to serve only for short enlistments, to leave camp when they liked, to scorn the orders of others—and especially those orders to fight when they preferred to flee. Their integration into their society drove them to resist military discipline; and their ethos of personal freedom stimulated hatred of the machine that served as the model for the army. They were not pieces of a machine,

20. For a fine study of a Massachusetts town and its militia, see Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York, 1976); and for a general view of the colonial militia, John Shy, "A New Look at the Colonial Militia," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., 20 (1963), 175–85, is outstanding.

21. The conclusions in this paragraph were suggested by Edward C. Papenfuse and Gregory A. Stiverson, "General Smallwood's Recruits: The Peacetime Career of the Revolutionary War Private," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., 30 (1973), 117–32. The Nathanael Greene Papers in the Huntington Library contain materials which tend to confirm these impressions.

and they would serve it only reluctantly and skeptically. At their best, at Cowpens, for example, they fought well; at their worst, at Camden, they fought not at all. There, they were, as Greene said, "ungovernable."[22] What was lacking in the militia was a set of professional standards, requirements and rules which might regulate their conduct in battle. What was lacking was professional pride. Coming and going to camp as they liked, shooting their guns for the pleasure of the sound, the militia annoyed the Continentals, who soon learned that most could not be trusted.

The British regulars were at the opposite pole. They had been pulled out of society, carefully segregated from it, tightly disciplined and highly trained. Their values were the values of the army for the most part, no more and no less. To be sure, the officers were in certain respects very different from the men. They embodied the style and standards of gentlemen who believed in service to their king and who fought for honor and glory.

With these ideals and a mission of service to the king defining their calling, British officers held themselves as aloof as possible from the peculiar horrors of war. Not that they did not fight. They sought combat and danger, but by the conventions which shaped their understanding of battle, they insulated themselves as much as possible from the ghastly business of killing and dying. Thus the results of battle might be long lists of dead and wounded, but the results were also "honourable and glorious," as Charles Stedman described Guilford Court House, or reflected "dishonour upon British arms," as he described Cowpens. Actions and gunfire were "smart" and "brisk" and sometimes "hot," and occasionally a "difficult piece of work." They might also be described lightly—Harlem Heights was "this silly business" to Lord Rawdon. To their men, British officers spoke a clean, no nonsense language. Howe's terse "look to your bayonets" summed up a tough professional's expectations.[23]

For all the distance between British officers and men, they gave remarkable support to one another in battle. They usually deployed carefully, keeping up their spirits with drum and fife. They talked and shouted and cheered, and coming on with their bayonets at the ready "huzzaing," or coming on "firing and huzzaing" they must have sustained a sense

22. Greene to Governor Reed, March 18, 1781, Greene Papers, HL. On Feb. 3, 1781, Greene wrote Governor Nash that 20,000 militia would not provide 500 effective troops, the way they "come and go," *ibid.*

23. Stedman, *History of the American War*, II, 383, 360; Rawdon to the Earl of Huntington, Aug. 3, 1775, Sept. 23, 1776, Hastings Papers, HL.

of shared experience. Their ranks might be thinned by an American volley but on they came, exhorting one another to "push on! push on!" as at Bunker Hill and the battles that followed.[24] Although terrible losses naturally dispirited them, they almost always maintained the integrity of their regiments as fighting units, and when they were defeated, or nearly so as at Guilford Court House, they recovered their pride and fought well thereafter. And there was no hint at Yorktown that the ranks wanted to surrender, even though they had suffered dreadfully.

The Continentals, the American regulars, lacked the polish of their British counterparts, but at least from Monmouth on, they showed a steadiness under fire almost as impressive as their enemy's. And they demonstrated a brave endurance: defeated, they retired, pulled themselves together, and came back to try again. These qualities—patience and endurance—endeared them to many. For example, John Laurens, on Washington's staff in 1778, wanted desperately to command them. In what amounted to a plea for command, Laurens wrote: "I would cherish those dear, ragged Continentals, whose patience will be the admiration of future ages, and glory in bleeding with them."[25] This statement was all the more extraordinary coming from Laurens, a South Carolina aristocrat. The soldiers he admired were anything but aristocratic. As the war dragged on they came increasingly from the poor and the propertyless. Most probably entered the army as substitutes for men who had rather pay than serve, or as the recipients of bounties and the promise of land. In time, some, perhaps many, assimilated the ideals of the Revolution. As Baron von Steuben observed in training them, they differed from European troops in at least one regard: they wanted to know why they were told to do certain things. Unlike European soldiers who did what they were told, the Continentals asked why.[26]

Continental officers aped the style of their British counterparts. They aspired to gentility and, often failing to achieve it, betrayed their anxiety by an excessive concern for their honor. Not surprisingly, like their British counterparts, they also used the vocabulary of the gentleman in describing battle.

Their troops, innocent of such polish, spoke with words from their immediate experience of physical combat. They found few euphemisms for the horrors of battle. Thus Private David How, September 1776,

24. Rawdon to the Earl of Huntington, June 20, 1775, Hastings Papers, HL.
25. To his father, March 9, 1778, in William Gilmore Simms, ed., *The Army Correspondence of Colonel John Laurens in the Years 1777–1778* (New York, 1867), 136.
26. Sheer and Rankin, *Rebels and Redcoats*, 354.

in New York, noted in his diary: "Isaac Fowls had his head shot off with a cannon ball this morning." And Sergeant Thomas McCarty reported an engagement between a British foraging party and American infantry near New Brunswick in February 1777: "We attacked the body, and bullets flew like hail. We stayed about 15 minutes and then retreated with loss." After the battle inspection of the field revealed that the British had killed the American wounded—"the men that was wounded in the thigh or leg, they dashed out their brains with their muskets and run them through with their bayonets, made them like sieves. This was barbarity to the utmost." The pain of seeing his comrades mutilated by shot and shell at White Plains remained with Elisha Bostwick, a Connecticut soldier, all his life: A cannon ball "cut down Lt. Youngs platoon which was next to that of mine[;] the ball first took off the head of Smith, a Stout heavy man and dashed it open, then took Taylor across the Bowels, it then Struck Sergeant Garret of our Company on the hip [and] took off the point of the hip bone[.] Smith and Taylor were left on the spot. Sergeant Garret was carried but died the Same day now to think, oh! what a sight that was to see within a distance of six rods those men with their legs and arms and guns and packs all in a heap[.]"[27]

The Continentals occupied the psychological and moral ground somewhere between the militia and the British professionals. From 1777 on their enlistments were for three years or the duration of the war. This long service allowed them to learn more of their craft and to become seasoned. That does not mean that on the battlefield they lost their fear. Experience in combat almost never leaves one indifferent to danger, unless after prolonged and extreme fatigue one comes to consider oneself already dead. Seasoned troops have simply learned to deal with their fear more effectively than raw troops, in part because they have come to realize that everyone feels it and that they can rely on their fellows.

By winter 1779–80 the Continentals were beginning to believe that they had no one save themselves to lean on. Their soldierly qualifications so widely admired in America—their "habit of subordination,"[28] their patience under fatigue, their ability to stand sufferings and privations

27. Henry B. Dawson, ed., *Gleanings from the Harvest-field of American History*, IV: [Diary of David How] (Morrisania, N.Y., 1865), 28; Jared C. Lobdell, ed., "The Revolutionary War Journal of Sergeant Thomas McCarty," New Jersey Historical Society, *Proceedings*, 82 (Newark, N.J., 1964), 45; Powell, "Bostwick's Memoirs," *WMQ*, 3d Ser., 6 (1949), 101.
28. Laurens to his father, Jan. 14, 1779, Simms, ed., *Army Correspondence*, 108.

of every kind—may in fact have led to a bitter resignation that saw them through a good deal of fighting. At Morristown during this winter, they felt abandoned in their cold and hunger. They knew that in America food and clothing existed to keep them healthy and comfortable, and yet little of either came to the army. Understandably their dissatisfaction increased as they realized that once again the suffering had been left to them. Dissatisfaction in these months slowly turned into a feeling of martyrdom. They felt themselves to be martyrs to the "glorious cause." They would fulfill the ideals of the Revolution and see things through to independence because the civilian population would not.[29]

Thus the Continentals in the last four years of the active war, though less articulate and less independent than the militia, assimilated one part of the "cause" more fully. They had advanced further in making American purposes in the Revolution their own. They had in their sense of isolation and neglect probably come to be more nationalistic than the militia—though surely no more American.

Although these sources of the Continentals' feeling seem curious, they served to reinforce the tough professional ethic these men also came to absorb. Set apart from the militia by the length of their service, by their officers' esteem for them, and by their own contempt for part-time soldiers, the Continentals slowly developed resilience and pride. Their country might ignore them in camp, might allow their bellies to shrivel and their backs to freeze, might allow them to wear rags, but in battle they would not be ignored. And in battle they would support one another in the knowledge that their own moral and professional resources remained sure.

The meaning of these complex attitudes is not what it seems to be. At first sight the performance of militia and Continentals seems to suggest that the great principles of the Revolution made little difference on the battlefield. Or if principles did make a difference, say especially to the militia saturated with natural rights and a deep and persistent distrust of standing armies, they served not to strengthen the will to combat but to disable it. And the Continentals, recruited increasingly from the poor and dispossessed, apparently fought better as they came to resemble their professional and apolitical enemy, the British infantry.

These conclusions are in part askew. To be sure, there is truth—and paradox—in the fact that some Americans' commitments to Revolu-

29. S. Sidney Bradford, "Hunger Menaces the Revolution, December 1779–January 1780," *MdHM*, 61 (1966), 5–23; Worthington C. Ford, ed., *Correspondence and Journals of Samuel Blachley Webb* (3 vols., New York, 1893–94), II, 231–32.

tionary principles made them unreliable on the battlefield. Still, their devotion to their principles helped bring them there. George Washington, their commander in chief, never tired of reminding them that their cause arrayed free men against mercenaries. They were fighting for the "blessings of liberty," he told them in 1776, and should they not acquit themselves like men, slavery would replace their freedom.[30] The challenge to behave like men was not an empty one. Courage, honor, gallantry in the service of liberty, all those words calculated to bring a blush of embarrassment to jaded twentieth-century men, defined manhood for the eighteenth century. In battle those words gained an extraordinary resonance as they were embodied in the actions of brave men. Indeed it is likely that many Americans who developed a narrow professional spirit found battle broadly educative, forcing them to consider the purposes of their professional skill.

On one level those purposes had to be understood as having a remarkable importance if men were to fight—and die. For battle forced American soldiers into a situation which nothing in their usual experience had prepared them for. They were to kill other men in the expectation that even if they did they might be killed themselves. However defined, especially by a Revolution in the name of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, this situation was unnatural.

On another level, one which, perhaps, made the strain of battle endurable, the situation of American soldiers, though unusual, was not really foreign to them. For what battle presented in stark form was one of the classic problems free men face: choosing between the rival claims of public responsibility and private wishes, or in eighteenth-century terms, choosing between virtue—devotion to the public trust—and personal liberty. In battle, virtue demanded that men give up their liberties and perhaps even their lives for others. Each time they fought they had, in effect, to weigh the claims of society and liberty. Should they fight or run? They knew that the choice might mean life or death. For those American soldiers who were servants, apprentices, poor men substituting for men with money to hire them, the choice might not have seemed to involve moral decision. After all, they had never enjoyed much personal liberty. But not even in that contrivance of eighteenth-century authoritarianism in which they now found themselves, the professional army, could they avoid a moral decision. Compressed into dense formations, they were reminded by their nearness to their comrades that they too had

30. *GW Writings*, V, 479.

an opportunity to uphold virtue. By standing firm they served their fellows and honor; by running, they served only themselves.

Thus battle tested the inner qualities of men, tried their souls, as Thomas Paine said. Many men died in the test that battle made of their spirits. Some soldiers called this trial cruel; others called it "glorious." Perhaps this difference in perception suggests how difficult it was in the Revolution to be both a soldier and an American. Nor has it ever been easy since.

II

The first contact that a new recruit had with the army could only have left him with the need for reassurance. The army was a bewildering collection of men, strange rules, and new routines. The recruit, fresh, say, from a Maryland farm where he worked for wages and his keep, had enlisted after a good deal of persuasion by local officers who had a quota to fill. He signed up for three years in return for a ten-dollar bounty and the promise of one hundred acres at the end of his service.

When the recruit made it to camp near Annapolis, he was told that the Maryland line would soon set out for Pennsylvania where the main army lay, its officers busy speculating about General Howe's intentions. Officers thought about such matters; enlisted men had other things to do. There were others to get to know. Some, the recruit learned, had entered the army for reasons very different from his own—and under very different terms. The army, in fact, consisted of several sorts of organized units: the militia, usually serving for a few months at most, owed its origins to the English Assize of Arms. More directly, long before the Revolution each colony had approved legislation requiring military service and depended upon towns and counties to supervise it. In actuality, not everyone served in local communities, but the principle of service was well established. And when Congress created the Continental Army in June 1775, the militia formed its core.

During the remainder of the war, after designating militia regiments from the New England states as Continentals, Congress relied on all the states to raise Continental units, as well as militia. Congress contracted to pay for the recruitment and service of Continentals while the states continued to meet expenses of local units. This system introduced competition for men—at the cost of corrupting soldiers and of impairing morale. Competition took the form of bidding for men, with bounties serving as bids. As the Congress and the states tried to exceed one another, bounty jumpers made their appearance, cheerfully collecting

bounties for repeated enlistments. This practice disturbed honest men who, if they were unfortunate enough to enlist when bounties were low, felt somehow doubly betrayed.

When the Maryland recruit arrived, the veterans questioned him about the bounty he had received. His experience matched many others, and as the ante went up he found himself among the discontented. Washington attempted to soothe these men by urging Congress to add one hundred dollars to their pay as a one-time reward for early service. Congress delayed until 1779, when it passed the necessary legislation.[31]

Not even the payment of inflated bounties filled the Continental and militia regiments. Congress created twenty-seven Continental regiments from militia already in service at the opening of 1776; in September, after the disaster on Long Island, it authorized the raising of eighty-eight battalions, adding another sixteen in December. None of these quotas were met, and in 1779 a major reorganization was approved calling for eighty regiments. The next year this number was reduced to fifty-eight.

The recruit knew little of these plans. Most of his fellows, he discovered, had been drafted, or "levied," as conscription was sometimes called. The states appointed the conscription officers who worked through local authorities. Substitutes for those drafted were accepted, and the practice of hiring such men became common. Epping, New Hampshire, once met its entire quota by hiring substitutes from nearby towns. The result was, of course, that those on active service came increasingly to be drawn from the poor and propertyless.

Such men, including the Maryland recruit, probably did not expect much in the way of food, clothing, and pay from the army. They did not get much. Congress intended that they receive a generous ration of meat, vegetables, and bread every day. This good intention remained nothing more than an intention for most of the war, as men in the army went hungry and often nearly naked. The bloody tracks at Valley Forge made by men without shoes appeared in later campaigns as well. The hunger may have been worse at Morristown in winter 1779–80 than at Valley Forge. That winter was the coldest of the war and made Valley Forge look almost balmy by comparison. Early in the winter, Lt. Colonel Ebenezer Huntington wrote of the sufferers there—"Poor fellows, my heart bleeds for them, while I Damn my country as void

31 Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763–1789* (Bloomington, Ind., 1971), 390–93, esp. 391.

of gratitude," a curse that must have been repeated in January, when the cold and hunger were older.[32]

III

The Maryland soldier knew no more than any other ranker of the organization behind this state of affairs, which is to say that he knew very little. He may have been aware that the official apparatus for supplying the army began with Congress. If he did not know it, he soon learned for the army laid most of its problems at the door of Congress—and well before the war ended most of the country agreed with the army.

Shortly after it created the Continental army in June 1775, Congress established quartermaster and commissary departments charged with providing the supplies the army required. The immediate inspiration for these agencies was similar institutions of the British army. Similar yet different, for Parliament had long since turned the whole business of supply over to the Treasury, which let contracts for all the things the army in America needed. The Treasury, which devoted most of its energies to other matters, cooperated with the colonial secretary, the secretary at war, and the commissary department in America. These agencies and later the navy board worked out arrangements with London merchants and their agents which succeeded rather well in sending out food, clothing, fuel, medicines, and forage.[33]

The British worked against tremendous obstacles, perhaps the most formidable of which was the distance involved. The long voyage across the Atlantic forced the Treasury to look ahead. Even so there were mistakes and close calls with starvation very much on Henry Clinton's mind in 1779 and 1780, for example. Occasionally too, ships laden with provisions sailed to the wrong ports. After the British evacuated Philadelphia, two victualers from Cork put into the Delaware bound for the city, unaware that the hungry mouths there were American—not British.[34]

32. Ford, ed., *Corr. of Webb*, II, 232. See also "Letters of Ebenezer Huntington, 1774–1781," *AHR*, 5 (1899–1900), 702–29.

33. *JCC*, II, 94. For a first-class study of the British system, see Norman Baker, *Government and Contractors: The British Treasury and War Supplies, 1775–1783* (London, 1971). See also these fine studies: David Syrett, *Shipping and the American War, 1775–1783* (London, 1970), which deals with the transport of supplies across the Atlantic; and R. Arthur Bowler, *Logistics and the Failure of the British Army in America, 1775–1783* (Princeton, N.J., 1975), a study of the army's supply services in America.

34. Bowler, *Logistics*, 122–38.