

Triumph of the Common Man

by

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Standing fast, despite a second thundering broadside tearing through the hull of the *USS Bonhomme Richard*, Marine First Lieutenant Richard Dale shouted, "Fire!" As one the *Richard's* guns roared, their cannon shots slicing through the gaining darkness and smoke on their one-way trip to the *HMS Serapis*.

Marine Lieutenant Dale and the Marines and sailors with him were the epitome of early Americans fighting for freedom. Using a converted merchant ship, these courageous souls faced a British war frigate rated at 44 guns.¹ Not only was the British ship better equipped in both the number and quality of guns, but the men aboard the *HMS Serapis* were trained by the most powerful navy in the world at the time.² Despite these seemingly long odds, our brave patriots confidently went on to defeat the *HMS Serapis* and her crew in a fierce naval engagement.

The soldiers, Marines, sailors, and countless other patriots who fought and died for the freedom of America and for the principle that "all men are created equal" were ordinary farmers and tradesmen.³ These simple men were the patriots who went down in history because through their sweat and blood, they made the dream of America a reality. A story of triumph, these common men brought the words of the Declaration of Independence off the page and into their own lives, their children's lives, and the lives of every American generation that has followed.

Perhaps nowhere else did these brave men show themselves more of this spirit in one night than on Christmas night of 1776. On that Christmas night, many were hundreds of miles from home and a fierce winter storm made the distance seem all the farther. Enduring these harsh conditions, men stood, some without shoes, in the snow behind General Washington as they waited for boats to push through the ice-filled waters of the Delaware River. After crossing the

river, the soldiers marched to Trenton with the conditions worsening.⁴ The march took them straight into the battle of Trenton where the Americans swiftly surprised and then easily defeated a body of Hessians guarding the town. They braved these horrible conditions to win the day, raising morale and faith in the army and proving to all - this young nation was determined to win its independence.

These men fought on despite losing battles, losing friends and retreating with little more than threadbare clothing and often without shoes in the winter. Thomas Paine summed up why these brave men decided to endure hardships when he wrote, "that which we obtain too lightly we esteem too lightly."⁵ Paine knew and communicated by fighting for independence; the benefits of freedom would be well worth whatever price they and their loved ones needed to be paid⁵. Without these brave patriots' sacrifices and suffering, America wouldn't have earned its independence.

In the long war, there was one winter that embodied this suffering, the winter of 1777-1778 where the army camped at Valley Forge. The Revolutionary War was looking grim for the patriots. In the fall of 1777, the British took Philadelphia, and defeated a brilliantly planned, however poorly executed, surprise attack at Germantown just outside Philadelphia. Once winter had set in, General Washington decided to encamp on high plateau about 20 miles from Philadelphia in a place called Valley Forge. It was here the problems all started to manifest themselves. There was a continual lack of food and clothing for the soldiers. For example on Christmas, they only had fire-cakes, a poor pancake at best, to eat. If the lack of food and clothing wasn't hard enough, disease was rampant in the camp with epidemics of small pox, dysentery and typhus due to the cramped conditions.⁶ Despite these horrible conditions, the

patriots trained and grew into a cohesive army hardened to win independence for themselves and fellow countrymen.

Any lesser army would have succumbed to the disease and hardships of that winter. However the Continental Army emerged in the spring of 1778 with high morale, capable of engaging and forcing a draw with the British army in a regular pitch battle.⁷ Valley Forge is a testament to the fortitude of our forefathers turning the war in favor of American even after suffering what is undoubtedly one of the worst winters an army has ever endured. This belief in fighting for freedom is why America remains a great nation despite all of the worldly changes. Whether on land or at sea, our forefathers fought and suffered to earn their freedom. These patriots, although they were just common people, paved the way for the world's greatest democratic nation.

Today we can envision ourselves standing proudly on the conquered deck of the *HMS Serapis*, gazing through Lieutenant Dale's eyes at the shattered remains of the once great British frigate, *HMS Serapis*. We can imagine hearing the entire crew of *USS Bonhomme Richard* shouting delightful cheers at the sight of the *Serapis* lowering her colors, surrendering to a group of patriots. These cries of victory have echoed America's freedom through 240 years, and represent its indomitable spirit.

Endnotes

¹ Smith, Charles Richard, and Waterhouse, Charles H., *Marines in the Revolution: A History of the Continental Marines in the American Revolution, 1775-1783*. Washington: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1975. Print. p. 225.

² *Ibid.*, p. 232.

³ Divine, Robert A., T. H. Breen, George M. Fredrickson, and R. Hal Williams, *America, Past and Present*. 6th ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2003. Print. p. 148.

⁴ McCullough, David, *1776*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006. Print. p. 277.

⁵ "Thomas Paine Quotes." BrainyQuote.com. Xplore Inc, 2012. accessed 2 December 2012. Web. http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/t/thomas_paine.html.

⁶ Avery, Ron. "The Story of Valley Forge." USHistory.org. Independence Hall Association, 2011. accessed 22 December 2012. Web. <http://www.ushistory.org/valleyforge/history/vstory.html>.

⁷ Avery, Ron. "The Story of Valley Forge." USHistory.org. Independence Hall Association, 2011. accessed 22 December 2012. Web. <http://www.ushistory.org/valleyforge/history/vstory.html>.