A Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Dangers and Sufferings of a Revolutionary Soldier (published 1830)

Joseph Plumb Martin

Introduction (Secondary Source)[1]

The memory began like a fairytale or Greek myth. A young soldier walked along a forest road in the Highlands in the summer of 1780, the fifth year of the war. Turning a corner, about forty yards off, he saw a young woman who had "divested herself of some of her outside garments" in the heat of the day. As the soldier later recalled, she quickly slipped on her clothes and continued towards him, at first "seemingly quite unconcerned." She quickly changed her mind – clearly concluding "it would not be quite safe to encounter a solider in such a place" – and ran off through the underbrush. The soldier called after her – but she only ran faster. "She seemed," he thought, "in a violent panic" (*A Narrative of a Revolutionary Soldier,* 172).

The young woman's fear was well-founded. In the War for Independence, King George's Regulars and George Washington's Continentals alike robbed houses and barns, drove off livestock, and smashed up fences for firewood. Rogue soldiers assaulted women – a crime that propagandists either played up or covered up, depending on the predator's uniform. Despite deep-seated mistrust, under the right circumstances, soldiers and civilians could get on. But when? How?

One answer lay with the soldiers themselves. As soldiers, young Continentals were outsiders, strangers. If, however, civilians saw these soldiers as youths – as the overwhelming majority of soldiers were youths – they could fit them into a familiar place in their communities. Soldiers could win kindness from wary civilians and a warm spot by the fire when they reminded inhabitants of their own sons, when they hired themselves out as labor, and when they courted local girls.

The inhabitants' existing relationship with soldiers mattered immensely: had they suffered at soldiers' hands or did they miss their own lads who had gone for soldiers? Private Joseph Plumb Martin recalled the kindness of a "good old housewife" who "lamented that we had no mothers nor sisters to take care of us." Because her own sons had suffered hunger, cold, and filth in the army, she fed the teenaged soldiers "with as much ease and familiarity as though we had

belonged to the family" (*A Narrative of a Revolutionary Soldier*, 217). Emotional connection helped some civilians see the familiar youth within the soldier on their doorstep.

For their part, young soldiers could ease their relationships with civilians by presenting themselves as helpful and subordinate. When his Pennsylvania regiment traveled south to Yorktown, Samuel Dewees – who was little more than a boy – was left behind with some fellow musicians, invalids, and raw recruits. Billeted at a public house run by the Zeiglers, he became an accepted member of the household. "I drew my rations and handed them to the family," he recalled. "I lived here (I may state) at home, for I ate at the table with the family, and was treated as one of the family." When he wasn't practicing his fife, Dewees undertook "many little jobs of work for the family" (*A History*, 233). He lived with the Zeiglers for half a year. The boy soldier made himself no different from a hired hand or apprentice.

John Robert Shaw, a young British deserter who had joined the Continental army, showed how young soldiers could slip into civilian communities while still serving in the army. Garrisoned at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Shaw was doubly an outsider as a soldier and an Englishman. This proved to matter little in the ethnically diverse crossroads town. Indeed, after "a considerable time" in town, Shaw "began to grow weary of the single life" and "paid addresses to a certain young woman," Mary O'Hara, an Irish immigrant who worked for an inn-keeper. After a short courtship, Shaw reported they "were married at the home of Mr. Robert Johnson, a respectable citizen, who gave us a good dinner, and in the evening, I was conducted to the barracks, with my new bride, by a number of soldiers of the first respectability." Shaw had to bridge military and civilian spheres to support his wife, getting permission from his officers to work in the town and then scoring employment with a merchant in town "by the recommendation and interest of one Robert Gibson," a prominent townsman (*Autobiography*, 57-58). Work and marriage brought Shaw into the community's embrace.

Courtship proved fear and fascination could go hand in hand. As a song from 1778 put it, "Hark! the distant Drum, / Lasses all look frighted; / But, when Soldiers come, / Girls how you're delighted." Sally Wister, a Quaker teenager in Pennsylvania demonstrated exactly these feelings in October 1777. Her first encounters with Continental soldiers began with the terrifying appearance of dragoons at her father's door seeking to buy horses. Though bristling with weapons, they proved polite. The Wisters were fortunate an American general chose their well-appointed house for his headquarters – "which," Sally wrote to a friend, "secur'd us from straggling soldiers." With no predators to fear, the girls of the household turned hunters: "our dress and lips were put in order for conquest and the hopes of adventures gave brightness to each." With the girls stalking so many young officers, it was not surprising when one "fell violently in love with Liddy at first sight," while Sally herself swooned over a major from Maryland. "How new is our situation," she exclaimed, "I am going to my chamber to dream I suppose of bayonets and swords, sashes, guns, and epaulets" (*Journal and Occasional Writings*, 43-50). A surgeon at West Point wryly noted the military side of the battle of the sexes, describing how one young officer had been "mortally wounded – with one of Cupid's arrows, I mean, shot from the small blue eyes of a minister's daughter…" (Samuel Adams to Sally Preston Adams, 11 August 1779).

During the Revolution, civilians might see the familiar form of a young man under the threatening guise of a soldier if he presented himself as a potential member of their community. These positive encounters stand out as exceptions, however. Historically, civilians suffer at the hands of soldiers – whether they be eighteenth century foraging parties searching for food or twenty-first century sentries at dusty checkpoints searching for insurgents. And yet non-combatants tend to fade into the background of war stories. Similarly, in the United States today soldier-civilian tensions are usually beyond our view, either far over the horizon or deep in the past. For the revolutionary generation, however, the demands of armies on inhabitants – and the burdens of occupation – were fresh memories. Rather than rely on young soldiers' interest in work or women, citizens of the new republic insisted on the Constitution's now-unremarkable Third Amendment, in which their consent and the due process of law would protect them from their soldiers.

Questions to Consider:

1. Context: Who is the author(s) (include a brief bio)? When did s/he write the piece (include some brief context)? Who is the audience? What was the agenda?
2. Why is the author so concerned about land?
3. What does the author say about the provisions during the war? Significance?
4. What is his reaction to the fact that soldiers are often vilified? Does he make a good argument? Why/Why Not?
5. What insights does this document have to offer about American society? Be Specific! [please be sure to consider author, agenda, bias, etc.]

Primary Source[2]

When those who engaged to serve during the war enlisted, they were promised a hundred acres of land, each, which was to be in their or the adjoining states. When the country had drained the

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[2] Joseph Plumb Martin, *A Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Dangers and Sufferings of a Revolutionary Soldier* (1830). First printed in Hallowell, Maine, by Glazier, Masters, and Co. in 1830. pp. 205-212.

last drop of service it could screw out of the poor soldiers, they were turned adrift like old worn-out horses, and nothing said about land to pasture them upon. Congress did, indeed, appropriate lands under the denomination of "Soldier's Lands," in Ohio state, or some state, or a future state, but no care was taken that the soldiers should get them. No agents were appointed to see that the poor fellows ever got possession of their lands; no one ever took the least care about it, except a pack of speculators, who were driving about the country like so many evil spirits, endeavoring to pluck the last feather from the soldiers. The soldiers were ignorant of the ways and means to obtain their bounty lands, and there was no one appointed to inform them. The truth was, none cared for them; the country was served, and faithfully served, and that was all that was deemed necessary. It was, soldiers, look to yourselves; we want no more of you. I hope I shall one day find land enough to lay my bones in. If I chance to die in a civilized country, none will deny me that. A dead body never begs a grave;—thanks for that.

They were likewise promised the following articles of clothing per year. One uniform coat, a woolen and a linen waistcoat, four shirts, four pair of shoes, four pair of stockings, a pair of woolen and a pair of linen overalls, a hat or a leather cap, a stock for the neck, a hunting shirt, a pair of shoe buckles, and a blanket. Ample clothing says the reader; and ample clothing says I. But what did we ever realize of all this ample store—why, perhaps a coat (we generally did get that) and one or two shirts, the same of shoes and stockings, and, indeed, the same may be said of every other article of clothing—a few dribbled out in a regiment, two or three times a year, never getting a whole suit at a time, and all of the poorest quality, and blankets of thin baize [woolen], thin enough to have straws shot through without discommoding the threads. How often have I had to lie whole stormy, cold nights in a wood, on a field, or a bleak hill, with such blankets and other clothing like them, with nothing but the canopy of the heavens to cover me. All this too in the heart of winter, when a New England farmer, if his cattle had been in my situation, would not have slept a wink from the sheer anxiety for them. And if I stepped into a house to warm me, when passing, wet to the skin and almost dead with cold, hunger, and fatigue, what scornful looks and hard words have I experienced.

Almost every one has heard of the soldiers of the Revolution being tracked by the blood of their feet on the frozen ground. This is literally true, and the thousandth part of their sufferings has not, nor ever will be told. That the country was young and poor, at that time, I am willing to allow, but young people are generally modest, especially females. Now, I think the country (although of the feminine gender, for we say "she" and "her" of it) showed but little modesty at the time alluded to, for she appeared to think her soldiers had no private parts. For on our march from the Valley Forge, through the Jerseys, and at the boasted Battle of Monmouth, a fourth part of the troops had not a scrap of anything but their ragged shirt flaps to cover their nakedness, and were obliged to remain so long after. I had picked up a few articles of light clothing during the past winter, while among the Pennsylvanian farmers, or I should have been in the same predicament. "Rub and go" was always the Revolutionary soldiers motto.

As to provision of victuals, I have said a great deal already, but ten times as much might be said and not get to the end of the chapter. When we engaged in the service we were promised the following articles for a ration: one pound of good and wholesome fresh or salt beef, or three quarters of a pound of good salt pork, a pound of good flour, soft or hard bread, a quart of salt to every hundred pounds of fresh beef, a quart of vinegar to a hundred rations, a gill [a quarter of a

pint] of rum, brandy, or whiskey per day, some little soap and candles, I have forgot how much, for I had so little of these two articles that I never knew the quantity. And as to the article of vinegar, I do not recollect of ever having any except a spoonful at the famous rice and vinegar Thanksgiving in Pennsylvania, in the year 1777. But we never received what was allowed us. Oftentimes have I gone one, two, three, and even four days without a morsel, unless the fields or forests might chance to afford enough to prevent absolute starvation. Often, when I have picked the last grain from the bones of my scanty morsel, have I eat the very bones, as much of them as possibly could be eaten, and then have had to perform some hard and fatiguing duty, when my stomach has been as craving as it was before I had eaten anything at all.

If we had got our full allowance regularly, what was it? A bare pound of fresh beef and a bare pound of bread or flour. The beef, when it had gone through all its divisions and subdivisions, would not be much over three quarters of a pound, and that nearly or quite half bones. The beef that we got in the army was, generally, not many degrees above carrion; it was much like the old Negro's rabbit, it had not much fat upon it and very little lean. When we drew flour, which was much of the time we were in the field or on marches, it was of small value, being eaten half-cooked, besides a deal of it being unavoidably wasted in the cookery.

When in the field, and often while in winter quarters, our usual mode of drawing our provisions, when we did draw any, was as follows: a return being made out for all the officers and men, for seven days, we drew four days of meat and the whole seven days of flour. At the expiration of the four days, the other three days allowance of beef. Now, dear reader, pray consider a moment, how were five men in a mess, five hearty, hungry young men, to subsist four days on twenty pounds of fresh beef (and I might say twelve or fifteen pounds) without any vegetables or any other kind of sauce to eke it out. In the hottest season of the year it was the same. Though there was not much danger of our provisions putrefying, we had none on hand long enough for that, if it did, we obliged to eat it, or go without anything. When General Washington told Congress, "the soldiers eat every kind of horse fodder but hay" he might have gone a little farther and told them that they eat considerable hog's fodder and not a trifle of dogs—when they could get it to eat.

We were, also, promised six dollars and two thirds a month, to be paid us monthly, and how did we fare in this particular? Why, as we did in every other. I received the dollars and two thirds, till (if I remember rightly) the month of August, 1777, when paying ceased. And what was six dollars and sixty-seven cents of this "Continental currency," as it was called, worth? It was scarcely enough to procure a man a dinner. Government was ashamed to tantalize the soldiers any longer with such trash, and wisely gave it up of its own credit. I received one months pay in specie [in kind] while on the march to Virginia, in the year 1781, and except that, I never received any pay worth the name while I belonged to the army. Had I been paid as I was promised to be at my engaging in the service, I needed not to have suffered as I did, nor would I have done it; there was enough in the country and money would have procured it if I had had it. It is provoking to think of it. The country was rigorous in exacting my compliance to *my* engagements to a punctilio, but equally careless in performing her contracts with me, and why so? One reason was because she had all the power in her own hands and I had none. Such things ought not to be.

The poor soldiers had hardships enough to endure without having to starve; the least that could be done was to give them something to eat. "The laborer is worthy of his meat" at least, and he ought to have it for his interest, if nothing more. How many times have I had to lie down like a dumb animal in the field, and bear "the pelting of the pitiless storm," cruel enough in warm weather, but how much more so in the heart of winter. Could I have had the benefit of a little fire, it would have been deemed a luxury. But, when snow or rain would fall so heavy that it was impossible to keep a spark of fire alive, to have to weather out a long, wet, cold, tedious night in the depth of winter, with scarcely clothes enough to keep one from freezing instantly, how discouraging it must be, I leave to my reader to judge.

It is fatiguing, almost beyond belief, to those that never experienced it, to be obliged to march twenty-four or forty-eight hours (as very many times I have had to) and often more, night and day without rest or sleep, wishing and hoping that some wood or village I could see ahead might prove a short resting place, when, alas, I came to it, almost tired off my legs, it proved no resting place for me. How often have I envied the very swine their happiness, when I have heard them quarreling in their warm dry sties, when I was wet to the skin and wished in vain for that indulgence. And even in dry warm weather, I have often been so beat out with long and tedious marching that I have fallen asleep and not been sensible of it till I have jostled against someone in the same situation; and when permitted *to stop* and have the superlative happiness to roll myself in my blanket and drop down on the ground in the bushes, briars, thorns, or thistles, and get an hour or two's sleep, O! how exhilarating....

Many murmur now at the apparent good fortune of the poor soldiers. Many I have myself seen, vile enough to say that they never deserved such favor from the country. The only wish I would bestow upon such hardhearted wretches is that they might be compelled to go through just such sufferings and privations as that army did, and then if they did not sing a different tune, I should miss my guess.

But I really hope these people will not go beside themselves. Those men whom they wish to die on a dunghill, men, who, if they had not ventured their lives in battle and faced poverty, disease, and death for their country to gain and maintain that Independence and Liberty, in the sunny beams of which, they, like reptiles, are basking, they would, many or the most of them, be this minute in as much need of help and succor as ever the most indigent soldier was before he experienced his county's beneficence.

The soldiers consider it cruel to be thus vilified, and it is cruel as the grave to any man, when he knows his own rectitude of conduct, to have his hard services not only debased and underrated, but scandalized and vilified. But the Revolutionary soldiers are not the only people that endure obloquy; others, as meritorious and perhaps more deserving than they, are forced to submit to ungenerous treatment.