
BROADSIDE

A Journal of the Wars for Independence for Students

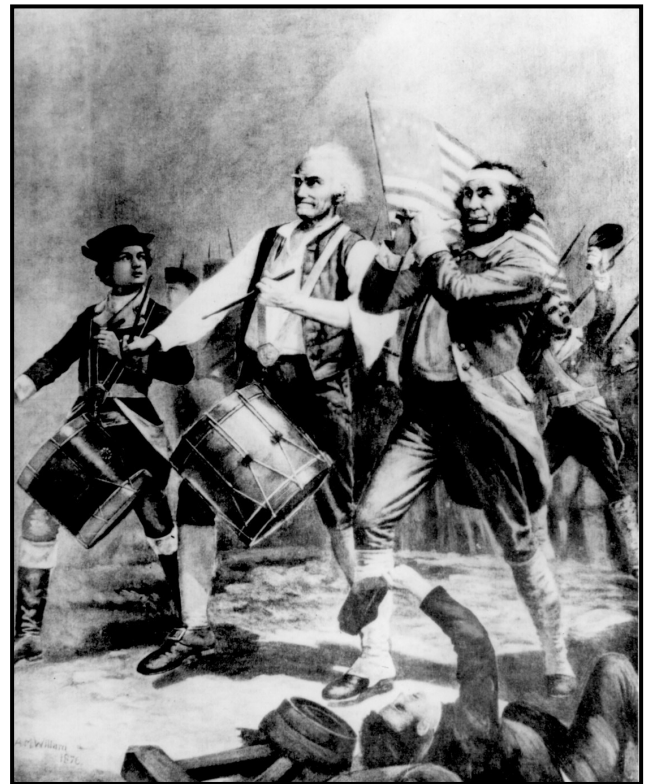
JOSEPH PLUMB MARTIN

The Voice of the Common American Soldier

Unlike in the years after the Civil War when soldiers by the thousands published their wartime memoirs soldiers who fought during the War for Independence did not. However one did and his memoir, published in 1830 is considered a classic as well as a useful tool by historians for understanding the life of the common soldier in the Continental Army. Joseph Plumb Martin grew up in Connecticut and at the age of 70 and living in Maine took up the pen and wrote, *A Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Dangers, and Sufferings of a Revolutionary Soldier, Interspersed with Anecdotes of Incidents that Occurred Within His Own Observations.*

Like many memoirs it cannot be taken at face value and some historians believe that Martin embellished his tale adding fanciful descriptions of various actions. However, many Revolutionary War re-enactors consider it a crucial primary source from which to draw inspiration in order to perform effective First Person Interpretation of the average soldier in Washington's Army. Also setting Martin's history of the war apart from other accounts is that it is a narrative from someone in the ranks. Readers freeze with Martin at Valley Forge; they share his other privations, too. Hunger was a constant companion. This is not a heroic account of the war. Martin's heroism is rooted in the experience endured by the common soldier, the backbone of the American Continental Army.

When Martin first entered the war at age 15 he was a Private. By the time the war concluded at Yorktown in 1781 he had risen to the rank of Sergeant in the Continental Army. He was 22 and he had grown up quick in army life.



A.M. Willard's 1876 painting, *Spirit of '76*, depicts common American soldiers of the Revolutionary War (National Archives)

By the time he reached Yorktown he had been promoted to Sergeant and was attached to a unit of sappers who first dug Washington's parallel of entrenchments placing Cornwallis' army under siege and then cleared the way for the Continental Army to assault British Redoubt Number 10 which forced the British hand. His account of the assault on Redoubt Number 10 is compelling as it is insightful, Martin writing:

“At dark the detachment was formed and advanced beyond the trenches and lay down on the ground to await the signal for advancing to the attack, which was to be three shells from a certain battery near where we were lying. All the batteries in our line were silent, and we lay anxiously waiting for the signal. The two brilliant planets, Jupiter and Venus, were in close contact in the western hemisphere, the same direction that the signal was to be made in. When I happened to cast my eyes to that quarter, which was often, and I caught a glance of them, I was ready to spring on my feet, thinking they were the signal for starting. Our watchword was “Rochambeau,” the commander of the French forces' name, a good watchword, for being pronounced Ro-sham-bow, it sounded, when pronounced quick, like rush-on-boys.

We had not lain here long before the expected signal was given, for us and the French, who were to storm the other redoubt, by the three shells with their fiery trains mounting the air in quick succession. The word up, up, was then reiterated through the detachment. We immediately moved silently on toward the redoubt we were to attack, with unloaded muskets. Just as we arrived at the abatis, the enemy discovered us and directly opened a sharp fire upon us. We were now at a place where many of our large shells had burst in the ground, making holes sufficient to bury an ox in. The men, having their eyes fixed upon what was transacting before them, were every now and then falling into these holes. I thought the British were killing us off at a great rate. At length, one of the holes happening to pick me up, I found out the mystery of the huge slaughter.

As soon as the firing began, our people began to cry, “The fort's our own!” and it was “Rush on boys.” The Sappers and Miners soon cleared a passage for the infantry, who entered it rapidly. Our Miners were ordered not to enter the fort, but there was no stopping them. “We will go,” said they. “Then go to the d ——— 1,” said the commanding officer of our corps, “if you will.” I could not pass at the entrance we had made, it was so crowded. I therefore forced a passage at a place where I saw our shot had cut away some of the abatis; several others entered at the same place. While passing, a man at my side received a ball in his head and fell under my feet, crying out bitterly. While crossing the trench, the enemy threw hand grenades (small shells) into it. They were so thick that I at first thought them cartridge papers on fire, but was soon undeceived by their cracking. As I mounted the breastwork, I met an old associate hitching himself down into the trench. I knew him by the light of the enemy's musketry, it was so vivid. The fort was taken and all quiet in a very short time. Immediately after the firing ceased, I went out to see what had become of my wounded friend and the other that fell in the passage. They were both dead. In the heat of the action I saw a British soldier jump over the walls of the fort next the river and go down the bank, which was almost perpendicular and twenty or thirty feet high. When he came to the beach he made off for the town, and if he did not make good use of his legs I never saw a man that did.”

Martin left the military when the war ended and eventually settled in Maine where he got married in 1794 to Lucy Clewley. That same year he became embroiled in a testy land dispute with former Continental Army Chief of Artillery Henry Knox. Martin lost the dispute and as a result lost land. A personal appeal to Knox fell on deaf ears. Together, with his wife they eked out existence farming on what little parcel of land that remained his and had five children.

Like many former Continental Army veterans Martin repeatedly struggled to receive a pension which had been promised by Congress. His was finally approved in 1818 and for the rest of his life he received \$96 a year for payment of his service to the new nation. His idea to write his memoir may have been driven in part to secure additional financial support. The book at the time never gained a wide readership and Martin died twenty years later. His story was lost to the dustbin of history. More than a century later, it was rediscovered, and was republished in 1962 as *Private Yankee Doodle*. Visitors to Valley Forge National Historical Park can stroll the perimeter of Washington's famous encampment site by walking the Joseph Plumb Martin Trail.



Martin's account of the Revolutionary War provides a glimpse into the lives of common soldiers. Julian Scott depicted common soldiers in his Valley Forge wood engraving from 1877 (Library of Congress)

Activity

Ask students to read a short excerpt from Martin's book. Next, have them research the wartime chronicles of soldiers from other American wars, comparing and contrasting those with Martin's account. Students should indicate similarities as well as differences and then be able to account for them.