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**GUNS & PATRIOTS**

## Timothy Murphy: Legend of a Sniper

[aarmstrong](#) | Tuesday Nov 30, 2010 3:01 AM

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A little known hero of the American Revolution was Timothy Murphy. Born the son of immigrant parents from Donegal, Ireland, Timothy and his parents settled in Shamokin Flats now known as Sunbury, Pennsylvania.

Timothy didn't learn to read nor to write, but he became an expert marksman. In 1775, he and his brother John enlisted in Captain John Lowdon's Company of Northumberland County Riflemen. As such, they served in the Siege of Boston, the Battle of Long Island, and skirmishing in Westchester. Timothy later became a Sergeant in the 12th Regiment of the Pennsylvania Line. In that capacity he served at Trenton, Princeton, and New Brunswick.

After hitting a seven inch target at 250 yards, Timothy's proven ability with the rifle made him sought after by an elite organization, Morgans's Rifle Corp. Timothy was transferred to that group and in August of 1777, Timothy became one of the 500 hand-picked men sent to reinforce the Continental forces opposing General John Burgoyne's invasion of the northern part of New York.

At the Second Battle of Saratoga (the Battle of Bemis Heights) Timothy is reputed to have fired two shots that found their mark and sent the British command of the battle into complete confusion. The first shot killed Sir Francis Clerke and the second cut off the life of General Simon Fraser. It was reported Timothy did this sitting in the crook of a tree branch and at a

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distance of approximately 300 yards.

At this point, Timothy returned to the main army and along with the rest of them, suffered through Valley Forge. General Washington ordered the northern dispatch of three companies of riflemen to garrison the Schoharie Valley forts and to conduct patrols of Indian lands to the south and west. He was part of Sullivan's Expedition against the Iroquois.

When his service expired in 1779, he returned to the Schoharie Valley to settle. He joined the 15th Regiment of the Albany County Militia. Resuming his patrolling to the various New York counties, he developed a reputation as the "Terror of the Tories and Indians".

At this time, he took a liking to the daughter of a local farmer and started scouting the land of her father more often until the father forbade it. His response was to elope with the daughter, Peggy, after securing leave of his commander, and they were married by the nearest Priest. He told the father he would take his new bride to Pennsylvania and this encouraged the father to be reconciled to the marriage.

This Schoharie Valley was a major supplier of wheat to the Continental Army. This made it a constant source of attacks by the British. The British forces increased by Tories and Indians to almost 1000 who stood ready to sweep down on the valley.

The New York frontier was constantly attacked by civil and guerrilla warfare leaving the settlers no choice but to build three forts (Upper, Middle, and Lower) in order to defend themselves. There being an inadequate number of Continental troops left the largest portion of defense the responsibility of the local militia.

Shortly after dawn on September 17th, 1780 the British column was bypassing the Upper Fort but was spotted by a local farmer out after his cows. He immediately fired the alarm gun. All settlers concentrated at the Forts. Realizing that surprise was impossible, the raiders began burning buildings and destroying livestock and crops if not known to belong to the loyalists. With this the militia made ready the defenses of the Middle Fort.

The British raided the Schoharie Valley and attacked the Middle Fort. It was then that both Timothy and Peggy reached a pinnacle of fame with their neighbors. Peggy worked along side of Timothy molding bullets, loading muskets, and swearing to pick up and use a spear if the ammunition ran out.

Timothy and his group of skirmishers left the fort to obtain a clearer picture of the situation, but were forced back into the fort by enemy

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gunfire.

The British Colonel John Johnson, tried to subdue the fort with cannon and mortar fire. The shelling being ineffective, accomplished nothing more than to explode in a room full of feather bedding that had been put up. This caused Johnson to attempt another fruitless plan by sending forth a party under a flag of truce to demand the surrender of the fort.

Major Woolsey of the Regulars was about to admit them to the fort. The objections of his officers who thought it a ruse to see the state of affairs within the fort delayed his order.

Timothy knew the ammunition was critically low. The women had been boiling water, and preparing spears and pitchforks for the final attack. Timothy, who had seen the fate of prisoners and the horrors thereof, fired a rifle ball over the heads of the truce party and they retreated. Again, they approached and again Woolsey ordered they be allowed admittance. Once more Timothy fired over their heads. When they approached for the third and final time, Woolsey threatened to shoot Timothy on the spot if he disobeyed. Timothy declared "I'll die before they have me prisoner" and he fired for the last time.

At this point, Woolsey ordered the fort to show the white flag and Timothy threatened to shoot anyone attempting to run the flag up. Woolsey's nerve broke and he left his command and went to the cellar of the fort. It was there that the commander of the local militia found him and convinced him to relinquish his command.

Johnson mistakenly felt there was no diminishing of the fort's resistance and abandoned the siege and burned all he could in his march to the Lower Fort.

The loss of wheat and livestock was a great loss to the Continental Army and the supply had been greatly diminished, but the forts held. Fortunately, much of the grain had been hidden and the livestock turned out in expectation of the attack and the residents of the valley started to rebuild their reserves.

Timothy reenlisted in 1781 in the Pennsylvania Line under General Wayne and he was there for the final battle of Yorktown.

Peggy and Timothy had five sons and four daughters. After Peggy died in 1807, he married Mary Robertson and they moved to Charlottesville. Together, they had four more sons.

Timothy never did learn to read nor write and never applied for a veteran's grant nor pension; yet, he was still able to acquire a number of

farms, a grist mill, and became a local political power.

After returning to Fultanham in 1818, he died of cancer at age 67.

In 1929 The State of New York put up its own marker honoring Timothy. At its dedication Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt said:

*This country has been made by Timothy Murphys, the men in the ranks. Conditions here called for the qualities of the heart and head that Tim Murphy had in abundance. Our histories should tell us more of the men in the ranks, for it was to them, more than to the generals, that we were indebted for our military victories.*

The information for this article is attributed to: New York State Military Museum And Veterans Research Center, NYS Division of Military and Naval Affairs

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