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The Man Who Shot Simon Fraser

The Legendary Tim Murphy, Marksman of Bemis Heights

By Hugh T. Harrington



Brigadier General Simon Fraser was dead, shot through the intestines while rallying his troops that clear afternoon of October 7th 1777. The battle of Bemis Heights was at its climax. The patriot forces, energetically and enthusiastically led by Benedict Arnold, were being slowly pushed back by the British and Brunswickers. Throughout the fight General Fraser had been conspicuous by his leadership and courage. He was continuously riding up and down the lines rallying his troops without regard to his personal safety. Now he was mortally wounded. As Fraser was led from the field, the tide of battle turned and the Americans could claim another victory. So much is known fact. However, what exactly happened to bring about the death of Simon Fraser has led to much speculation.. Many accounts of the battle of Freeman's Farm on September 19, 1777, and of Bemis Heights on October 7, 1777, often called collectively the battles of Saratoga, have been written. Most have some comment on the shot that killed Simon Fraser. The distance of the shot, impossible

to determine now, has been cited as anywhere from 300 yards to 500 yards. What transpired to bring about Fraser's death has been matter of considerable literary license. One of the earliest accounts was written by a British Sergeant, Roger Lamb. In his Original and Authentic Journal of Occurances During the Late American War published in 1809, Lamb claims that General Fraser, on his deathbed, said he "saw the man who shot him; he was a rifle man, and aimed from a tree."^[1] The idea that in the midst of battle the General could have seen the distant marksman and recognize that the man had shot him seems very remote. In the Nov 10, 1835 issue of the Saratoga Sentinel,^[2] reprinted in William L. Stone's 1877 The Campaign of Lieut. Gen. John Burgoyne and the Expedition of Lieut. Col. Barry St. Leger, there appeared a letter of October 7, 1835 from Ebenezer Mattoon of Amherst, MA. Mattoon was a lieutenant in an artillery company during the battle. He was writing to correct the statement made by a battlefield guide that Fraser was shot by General Morgan's men. In his letter Mattoon states that the shot that killed Fraser did not come from Morgan's men at all. Mattoon says that he was helping a wounded officer leave the field when the "very dense" smoke cleared and he saw that "our infantry appeared to be slowly retreating and the Hessians slowly advancing, their officers urging them on with their hangers." He continues..."Just at that moment, an elderly man, with a long hunting gun, coming up, I said to him, 'Daddy, the infantry mustn't leave, I shall be cut to pieces.' He replied, 'I'll give them another gun.' The smoke then rising again, several officers, led by a general, appeared moving to the northward, in rear of the Hessian line. The old man, at that instant, discharged his gun, and the general officer pitched forward on the neck of his horse, and instantly they all wheeled about, the old man observing, 'I have killed that officer, let him be who he will.' I replied, 'you have, and it is a general officer, and by his dress I believe it is Fraser.' While they were turning about, three of their horses dropped down; but their further movements were then concealed by the smoke." The old veteran offered three reasons why he believed that he had witnessed the shot that killed General Fraser. "...the distance, by actual measurement, was within reach of a gun." The following day to settle a dispute as to the distance two sergeants, which he named, paced off the distance "from the stump where the old man stood to the spot where the horses fell, just twelve rods," or 198 feet, a distance within reasonable rifle range. Mattoon continues, "the officer was shot through the body from left to right as was afterwards ascertained. Now from his relative position to the posted riflemen, he could not have been shot through in this direction, but they must have hit him from the front." This may be problematical as the officer was on a horse and it seems likely that in urging the men forward he could be twisting in the saddle as well as the horse moving in different directions. Mattoon's third reason for believing Morgan's men did not fire the fatal shot is that "the riflemen could not have seen him, on account of the smoke in which he was enveloped." Since Mattoon was not at the position of the riflemen it would be difficult for him to conclusively determine what they could or could not see through the smoke. However, he does make a strong case for someone other than a member of Morgan's riflemen having made the shot. In a footnote to the letter of Ebenezer Mattoon, William L. Stone states "Still, there seems no doubt that Murphy, by the orders of Morgan, shot Fraser; see Silliman's visit in the Appendix where he speaks of Morgan having told his friend, Hon. Richard Brent, to this effect." In his 1895 Visits to the Saratoga Battle-Grounds 1780 - 1880 Stone reprints the Mattoon letter and adds a footnote which says "there can be no doubt that the old man, to whom the writer alludes, shot an officer; but that he killed Gen. Fraser cannot be correct, since not only was Murphy positive that he fell before his rifle, but several authors have stated that Fraser told his friends after he was wounded, 'that he saw the man who shot him, and that he was a rifleman posted in a tree.'"^[3] Regrettably, Stone does not give us the source of Murphy being "positive" that he had shot Fraser. However, when one turns to the Appendix (page 384-386) in Stone's Campaign of Lieut. Gen. John Burgoyne and the Expedition of Lieut. Col. Barry St. Leger to seek the citation regarding Murphy one finds "the following anecdote, related to me at Ballston Springs, in 1797, by the Hon. Richard Brent, then a member of Congress, from Virginia, who derived the fact from General Morgan's own mouth." He then goes on to describe the battle and General Fraser "all activity, courage and vigilance, riding from one part of his division to another, and animating the troops by his example." He describes the shooting: "Colonel Morgan took a few of his best riflemen aside; men in whose fidelity, and fatal precision of aim, he could repose the most perfect confidence, and said to them: 'that gallant officer is General Fraser; I admire and respect him, but it is necessary that he should die - take your stations in that wood and do your duty.' Within a few moments General Fraser fell, mortally wounded." Mention of Timothy Murphy, despite the citation by William Stone in his own book, is conspicuous by its absence. It seems that William Stone desperately wanted Timothy Murphy to be the marksman that shot General Fraser. In the body of his book (Stone, William L., The Campaign of Lieut. Gen. John Burgoyne and the Expedition of Lieut. Col. Barry St. Leger, p. 61-62) Stone seems to combine what was mentioned in his Appendix as coming from Morgan with his own interpretation. He states that, "Morgan...took a few of his sharpshooters aside, among whom was the celebrated marksman Tim Murphy, men on whose precision of aim he could rely, and said to them, 'that gallant officer yonder is General Fraser; I admire and respect him, but it is necessary for our good that he should die. Take your station in that cluster of bushes and do your duty.' Within a few moments a rifle ball cut the crupper of Fraser's horse, and another passed through his horse's mane. Calling his attention to this, Fraser's aide said, 'it is evident that you are marked out for particular aim, would it not be prudent for you to retire from this place?' Fraser replied, 'my duty forbids me to fly from danger.' the next moment he fell mortally wounded by a ball from the rifle of Murphy and was carried off the field by two grenadiers." With no evidence of Murphy even being among the sharpshooters Stone still credits Murphy with making the fatal shot. Tim Murphy is first mentioned in Jephtha R. Simm's History of Schoharie County and Border Wars of New York published in 1845^[4]. In Simm's version of the story Morgan "selected a few of his best marksmen" and "instructed to make Fraser their especial mark." "Timothy Murphy...was one of the riflemen selected..." As Fraser came into range each had "a chance to fire, and some of them more than once, before a favorable opportunity presented for Murphy; but when it did, the effect was soon manifest." Simms states that "the fact that Murphy shot Gen. Fraser, was communicated to the writer by a son of the former." In the preface to his book Simms says that he began researching his book in 1837 from "the lips of many hoary-headed persons of intelligence then living, whom I visited at their dwellings..." It is supposed that the unnamed son of Timothy Murphy is one such person. As far as can be determined Timothy Murphy was not identified as the marksman until this book was published in 1845. In 1856 appeared Life of General Daniel Morgan of the Virginia Line of the Army of the United States by James Graham. Graham had married one of Morgan's

great granddaughters. He had access to oral family history as well as Morgan's papers. Graham describes the shooting^[5] of Fraser (which Graham spells with a "z"): "Selecting twelve of his best marksmen, he [Morgan] led them to a suitable position, when, having pointed out to them the doomed officer, he told them to kill him when next he came within reach of their rifles. 'He is a brave man; but he must die' - the only observation which fell from Morgan's lips besides his directions to his men - betrayed the struggle of generosity with duty in his breast. He afterwards said, that he attentively and somewhat anxiously observed his marksmen, when, a few minutes having elapsed, and Frazer re-appearing within gun-shot of them, he saw them all raise their rifles and, taking deliberate aim, fire." Of note is that Tim Murphy was not mentioned by James Graham who gives a very plausible scenario. As was mentioned by others it seems that more than just one man was ordered to shoot Fraser. If Morgan intended on making sure that the mission to shoot the distant officer was successful, it seems reasonable that he would assign several marksmen to the task. This is especially true if the target was distant and moving. Don Higginbotham's 1961 Daniel Morgan, Revolutionary Rifleman,^[6] incorporates Timothy Murphy into the scenario: "At this point General Fraser, with the light infantry and the British 24th Regiment, attempted to form a line slightly to the rear of Riedesel's men to cover their movement. Mounted on a grey horse, Fraser rode back and forth shouting encouragement to his troops. Believing Fraser's efforts were prolonging the contest, Morgan called on rifleman Timothy Murphy to shoot the brave Scottish General. Murphy, a skilled Indian fighter and a fine marksman, climbed a tree and trained his double-barreled rifle upon Fraser. Allegedly his first shot severed the crupper of Fraser's horse, his second creased the horse's mane, and his third struck the General." Higginbotham cites as his source a conversation between Joseph Graham (a British officer) and Daniel Morgan in November or early December of 1781, and which is described by Graham in the 1853 Virginia Historical Register^[7] [p. 210.] However, the conversation as included in the 1853 Virginia Historical Register contains no reference of Murphy. Higginbotham takes the liberty of inserting Murphy's name in brackets within Graham's description, as follows: "Me and my boys' had a bad time until 'I saw that they were led by an officer on a grey horse - a devilish brave fellow.' Then 'says I to one of my best shots [Murphy], says I, you get up into that there tree, and single out him on the ...horse. Dang it, 'twas no sooner said than done. On came the British again, with the grey horseman leading; but his career was short enough this time. I jist tuck my eyes off him for a moment, and when I turned them to the place where he had been - pooh, he was gone!'"^[8] Higginbotham continues that Charles Neilson, whose father served in Gate's army, recorded the same story. Neilson's version appears in William L. Stone, Burgoyne's Campaign and St. Leger's Expedition, Albany 1877) pp. 249-250, but Neilson provides no sources for his statements. Graham's description is the only primary source known to exist and in it Tim Murphy was not mentioned. It may have been Tim Murphy to whom Morgan gave the order but Tim Murphy was not mentioned by name. Higginbotham was in error, or at least did not cite his sources accurately, when he attributed the shooting to Murphy based on Graham's conversation on pages 73-74 and inserted the name "Murphy" in brackets on pages 270-271. It may be that this version of the story got blended in with the Simms story and other secondary accounts. It seems that through repetition the story evolved and grew. The story of Tim Murphy's involvement in the shooting of Fraser has not ended. In the 1997 Saratoga, Turning Point of the Revolutionary War,^[9] Richard M. Ketchum tells the story of Morgan ordering Tim Murphy to "get rid of the man on the gray horse." Murphy, from a tree fires a double barreled rifle three times. The first shot cut the horse's crupper, the second shot hit the horse's mane, the third shot hit Fraser. Ketchum cites no primary nor contemporary source for the story. Despite obvious practical difficulties such as loading and firing a double barreled rifle from a tree and observing hits on the crupper and mane from 300 to 500 yards the story has gained new life. The matter of the use of a double barreled rifle or even the existence of such a weapon would certainly be highly questionable. The possibility that no such rifle existed in 1777 shall be left to experts in the field. After sifting through many versions of the shooting of Simon Fraser we are only able to say that Timothy Murphy may have been involved. While it took over 60 years for Murphy's name to be associated with the shooting, it may be significant that no other name has ever been connected with the shot. Of course, many scenarios could easily account for the identity of the sharpshooter becoming lost. Without discounting the value of oral history it certainly would make the case for Tim Murphy stronger if someone other than his son, more than 50 years after the fact and 20 years after Murphy's death, would have named Murphy as the shooter. One wonders why Murphy was not given credit during his own lifetime. The 1856 version of the story by James Graham, great grandson-in-law of Morgan, who describes Morgan as assigning several men to the task seems entirely plausible and practical. On balance it appears far more likely than ordering one man to the job. Whether Tim Murphy actually made the shot that killed Simon Fraser is something we may never know. Perhaps some long lost diary or letter will surface and provide the answer. One wonders what Tim Murphy himself would tell us. Or, perhaps of more interest, what he would think of his legend. However, as modern and respected historians choose to perpetuate what may only be legend, it appears that when the legend becomes fact then it may be best to continue the legend.

References

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- [5] Graham, James, Life of General Daniel Morgan of the Virginia Line of the Army of the United States, p. 162.
- [6] Higginbotham, Don, Daniel Morgan, Revolutionary Rifleman, p. 73-74.
- [7] Graham, Joseph, Virginia Historical Register, p. 210.
- [8] Higginbotham, Don, Daniel Morgan, Revolutionary Rifleman, p. 170-171.

[9] Ketchum, Richard M., Saratoga, Turning Point of the Revolutionary War, p. 400.

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