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THE SARATOGA RIFLEMAN

by Donald Norman Moran



Timothy Murphy, to say the very least, was a Revolutionary War hero. He served with distinction on the frontier, and then with famed General Daniel Morgan as a rifleman. Although time has diminished his fame, he was the most famous marksman of his day.

Tim was born in the vicinity of the Delaware Water Gap in 1751. His parents, Irish immigrants, were Thomas and Mary (Lundy) Murphy. About 1759, his parents moved further west into Pennsylvania, settling in an area known as Shamokin Flats, now the town of Sunbury.

AUGUST 28TH

POOR RICHARD'S ALMANACK

Ah simple Man! when a boy two precious jewels were given thee, Time, and good Advice; one thou hast lost, and the other thrown away.

— Benjamin Franklin, 1743

It would appear that Murphy, following the custom of the time, was indentured or apprenticed to the wealthy Van Campen family and went with them to Wyoming County, Pennsylvania. That area was virtually the center of the wilderness then, and was exposed to frequent Indian raids, with their scalping and home burning. Timothy grew up with a hatred of the Indians who had committed these outrages. Tim grew up, out of necessity, an accomplished frontiersman.

He enlisted on June 29th, 1775 in Captain John Lowdon's Company of Northumberland County Riflemen. History was fortunate, as one of Timothy's companions, Aaron Wright, kept a diary that records their adventures.

Lowdon's crack Company was sent to Boston, making the 600 mile march in record time. There they participated in the siege of Boston. He was also involved in the debacle in Brooklyn, the Battle of White Plains and the retreat across New Jersey.

In 1777, he was selected as one of 500 hand picked riflemen to go with General Daniel Morgan to Upstate New York and help stop General John Burgoyne and his invading British Army. Tim not only helped defeat the British, but was a major contributor to the Victory. As the battles around Saratoga raged, the British, having been pushed back, were being rallied by Brigadier General Simon Fraser. General Benedict Arnold (still a good guy at the time of Saratoga) rode up to General Morgan, pointing at Fraser and shouted ". . . that man on the gray horse is a host in himself and must be disposed of". Morgan gave the order for his best marksmen to try and take him out. Timothy Murphy climbed a nearby tree, finding a comfortable notch to rest his double barreled rifle, took careful aim at the extreme distance of 300 yards, and squeezed off a shot. General Fraser tumbled from his horse, shot through the midsection. He was taken from the field and died the next day. Another British Senior officer, Sir Frances Clarke, General Burgoyne's chief Aide-de-Camp, galloped onto the field with an important message. Murphys second shot dropped him. He was dead before he hit the ground!

These two unerring shots did more than anything else to shatter the morale of the British and to turn the tide of the most important battle of the Revolution. As soon as General Fraser fell,

a panic spread among the British lines. It was increased by the sudden appearance of American General Tenbroeck and his 3,000 New Yorkers. General Burgoyne personally took command of the area, not could not rally his demoralized men. The whole British line caved in and men scrambled for the entrenchments around their camp.

These two shots earned Timothy the nickname of "Sure Shot Tim". Your editor seriously doubts that Tim Murphy was equipped with the famed, Golcher (or Goulcher) doublebarreled rifle at this time, as some historians have speculated. John Golcher, the maker of this was from Eaton, Pennsylvania but was most active after the war. Murphy probably had one of these legendary weapons, but in his later life. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Murphy did shoot both Fraser at 300 yards.

Following the battle, Morgan's Rifles were sent back to the main army and joined them at Valley Forge. The following Spring, when the British evacuated Philadelphia, General Washington led his Army in pursuit, catching up to them at Monmouth Court House.

Tim did not take part in the battle. However, the next day, June 29th, 1777, Tim and three fellow riflemen captured an elaborate coach belonging to a retreating British General.

Shortly thereafter, General Morgan's legendary riflemen were ordered to the Mohawk Valley of New York to help stem the Tory and Indian Raids. Murphy tracked down and killed the notorious Christopher Service, the Tory leader. He also participated in the action at Unadilla on October of 1778. He and other riflemen assigned to protect the frontier were pursuing the raiders that sacked the Cherry Valley. They caught up to them at Unadilla and annihilated them.

In late 1779 Tim's term of enlistment in Morgans Rifles expired and he returned to the Schoharie and enlisted in Captain Jacob Hagers Company of Colonel Peter Vrooman's Albany County Militia. He was scouting with Captain Alexander Harper in the Delaware County forests during the Spring of 1780. They were ambushed and taken prisoner by the Indians. They were bound and taken to Oquago. During the night the two men freed each other while 11 Indians slept; they then collected and hid their captor's firearms. Then, methodically knifed all but one before escaping.

During the terrible action at Schoharie Valley October 15th through the 19th of October 1780, Timothy Murphy accomplished his most astounding feat! Sir John Johnson with a force of between 800 and 1,500 Regulars, Tories and Indians attacked the Valley.

About 200 American Militiaman, including Murphy, found themselves besieged in "Middle Fort". Major Woolsey, the Commanding Officer, decided to surrender the fort. As he went to pull down the flag, Murphy fired a warning shot. Woolsey, tried to haul the flag down a second time, and again Murphy fired. Woolsey ordered Murphy arrested, but the majority of the officers and men of the fort sided with Murphy and the surrender (and possible massacre) was averted. After a long siege, Johnson gave up, stating it would be too costly for him to continue the attack. As a result of the stubborn resistance, led by Murphy, the attack failed and Johnson was forced to return to Canada. Murphy and his rifleman buddies harassed Johnsons force all the way back to Canada.

Early in 1781 Tim Murphy reenlisted in the Continental Army and served under General "Mad Anthony" Wayne, fighting against Lord Cornwallis across Virginia, and finally, when joined by the George Washington and his main army and the French, defeated him at Yorktown.

Tim Murphy was married twice. His first wife, Peggy Pleck, who died in 1807, gave him five sons and four daughters. His second wife, Mary Robertson gave him four more sons.

Although he never learned to read or write, Tim acquired a number of farms, a grist mill and became a local political leader. He was of medium height, dark complexion and well built. He died in 1818 from cancer of the neck, he was 67.

More information on murphy may be found at:

<http://www.dmna.state.ny.us/historic/articles/murphy.htm>

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