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## September 1777

Written by Andrew Stough



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Morgan's Rifles and an admonition to British Officers; Britain at Valley Forge; Battle of the Clouds.

General George Washington, as the Commander-in-Chief had the responsibility for the total strategy by which the war was fought; field commanders were responsible for the tactics by which battles were won or lost. Washington was also responsible to Congress for his own and his commanders' actions; even though he was not always the appointing official as in the case of General Gates and some other officers. He was also responsible for the procurement of all supplies, ordnance and manpower, most of which had to be wheedled from Congress. The states could and did furnish some troops and their total support.

Events were unfolding in both the north and central area of the thirteen states. Washington, realizing the gravity of the situation in the north sent General Benedict Arnold and Colonel Daniel Morgan to help the Northern Army against British Generals Barry St. Leger and John Burgoyne who were on the way south from Canada, but in separate campaigns.

The departure of Arnold, a brilliant leader and bold tactician, and Morgan's riflemen left a very large hole in the main Army's fighting capability. Other rising young officers might offset the loss of Arnold and Morgan but the loss of the riflemen were not so easily replaced. Riflemen came from the frontier and were accustomed to hunting or fighting Indians in the wilderness. Therefore, they avoided fighting in the open but fought from cover where they were most effective; officers and artillery men being their favorite targets. Their rifles were so deadly that a young English officer wrote to fellow officers in the British Isles that, "if they were posted to America that they should settle their affairs and say their final goodbyes before leaving England." American riflemen were deadly accurate; few shot by them survived. British regulars and Hessians despised, no they hated, Morgan and his men, or any other riflemen for that matter. European soldiers were accustomed to and preferred the open field where cannon and the bayonet were most effective.

As September dawned Washington was encamped on the Neshaminy pondering British General Sir William Howe's next move. To remedy the loss of Morgan's rifles he selected a company of good men taken from six regular brigades. Placing them under the command of General William Maxwell of New Jersey with the instruction to "constantly be near the enemy and to give them every possible annoyance." On September 2nd, Washington instructed Maxwell that the enemy was about to move and "to be prepared to give them as much trouble as you possibly can".

Howe's army moved on the 2nd of September toward the Christina River through what was apparently heavily wooded country. British forces, not liking to fight in wooded or brushy country, were slow and cautious in their advance. It was well that they were cautious, about nine o'clock in the morning Maxwell's men opened fire from tree cover along the road. A hotly contested running fight erupted with the British unable to pin the ranging woodsmen down due to what the British assumed was an impenetrable swamp in the American rear. The British force did in time disperse Maxwell's men who were forced to flee to the security of the main Patriot army. The lion's tail had been twisted but the results of the sortie were negligible. With approximately 30 men lost to each side, the engagement could hardly be called more than an harassing action, but it would make the daily life of the British common soldier a little less desirable by reducing morale.

Prior to this time British sick and wounded had been sent back to the fleet. On the return journey supplies were brought to Howe's army, eliminating much of the necessity for foraging. On August 6th, all connections with the fleet had been severed as the ships withdrew into Chesapeake Bay and beyond.

Howe's initial destination on his march to Philadelphia was a camping place between Aiken's Tavern and Iron Hill. Progress was slow, not only because of the country and the possibility of harassment by flanking riflemen, but because of the large and clumsy van, typical of British military movements. Ward notes that Howe's march included a large herd of foraged cattle. Once encamped, the soldiers set about to forage the countryside for more livestock; bringing in hundreds of head of cattle and sheep and 100 horses to add to their supply. Howe's foraging actions, a standard practice in European armies, increased to a higher pitch any ill will that was

already felt by American civilians. At this time any ill will was directed toward the King and not at Parliament. British foraging actions furthered local support for the Revolutionary Cause.

Howe then continued his measured march on Philadelphia with little harassment until he approached Brandywine Creek, a deep and swift running stream that was more a river than a creek. On September 11th, the Battle of Brandywine Creek occurred about 10 miles north of Philadelphia, Delaware, and a few miles inside the Pennsylvania border. It was here that Washington engaged and fought. He entrenched the troops to Howe's rear effectively closing off any further use of the river as a defensive barrier.

At this point Washington had not learned the value of cavalry for reconnaissance. Failure in the battle was the result of accepting the word of local farmers that there were no more fords in the vicinity. Howe, using his cavalry for reconnaissance discovered another ford 12 miles upstream that Washington was not aware of. Howe used the ford to cross the creek undetected. He then proceeded to use both a frontal attack in the center and an enveloping movement using the troops from the unguarded ford to turn the American flank, then, to attack it's rear in what became a run for safety for many Continentals. Washington was not seriously defeated but he lost 1,000 men (some sources say 1,300) to Howe's 600 and was pushed back 12 miles northeast toward Chester, Pennsylvania. Losses would have been greater if the army had not been protected by a stubborn rear guard action by General Nathanael Greene's troops. While Greene protected the army's rear, 19 year old General Marquis d' LaFayette showed his mettle by halting the retreat at the bridge into Chester, allowing a reorganization of the force to begin.

September 18th; for the first time we hear of Valley Forge. Howe went into the valley to seize Patriot stores, establishing a post on October 20th. The post was evacuated after the burning of the forge and houses. This would be Washington's camp for the winter season of 1777 and 1778. The arriving Americans will find an excellent defensive location with many trees but little other signs of former habitation.

The "Massacre" at Paoli, Pennsylvania occurred on the night of September 21st. Patriot General "Mad" Anthony Wayne with a complement of 1,500 men had bivouacked for the night near the town of Paoli. Wayne planned to spend the night while he awaited reinforcements prior to attacking Howe on the 22nd. Howe, learning of Wayne's presence, dispatched 1,500 men under General Grey. Surprised, Wayne's troops were unable to withstand the bayonet and sword attack. The attackers were unusually brutal in their attack, slashing men repeatedly with sword or bayonet. When the battle ended, 53 Americans lay dead, while many others were repeatedly and viciously attacked. One such victim who survived the massacre had been bayoneted 13 times.

While Washington had been beaten badly and the army required to make a run for it, there was not a panic, no arms or equipment were thrown away in flight, and few prisoners were taken by Howe's force. By the following morning, all units were reforming to become operational. Once again the Continental Army had shown that it could suffer defeat and still survive and have the will to continue to fight.

Perhaps Continentals could not best a British army in open battle but neither could a British army decisively defeat or destroy them; a fact that was observed with interest and pleasure by Britain's enemies.

While this was taking place, Congress was showing some agility and fortitude of it's own. That they could not be trapped, taken prisoner, or executed. Nor would they panic and drop the reins of government. They would be just as obdurate and persistent in their resistance to the Crown as the Revolutionary Army. First, Congress when warned by Washington called on troops to assist in their move. Carrying the Liberty Bell and all revolutionary records with them they first moved to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, then as things worsened they moved to York in western Pennsylvania. This was well beyond Howe's ability to reach them if he was to capture and invest Philadelphia.

Congress continued it's work without cessation, uninterruptedly functioning as the head of government. Howe made no attempt to follow them but continued to push on toward his prize, Philadelphia, at the time America's largest city and currently the seat and heart of the Revolution. King George III had been ecstatic over the news of Ticonderoga being recaptured. For the King it was a vindication for its humiliating loss to what was seen as a rag tail militia from Vermont. News of the capture of Philadelphia was a reassurance that the rebels had been thoroughly thrashed and the end of civil disobedience in the American colonies would soon be over.

Following Brandywine, Washington tried several times to come to battle. He was finally able to challenge Howe at what is referred to as the "Battle of the Clouds" on September 16th. But a battle it was not because when the two armies were drawn up and ready to engage a powerful storm descended, miring Howe in a bog of mud on the lowlands. Washington was left on high ground but with all his gunpowder soaked by the rain. Left with no alternative, Washington was forced to withdraw to Reading for new supplies of powder and to refit. Howe was now able to enter Philadelphia, unopposed on the 26th of September and had fully invested the city on September 27th.

References: Christopher Ward's "War of the Revolution"; Marcus Cunliffe's "George Washington, Man and Monument" ,Encyclopedia Britannica "The Revolutionary Years", Red Reeder's "Bold Leaders of the American Revolution", and Richard Ketchum's "Saratoga",

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