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Voices of the Past

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REVOLUTIONARY WAR

Highlights:

- Early defeats demonstrated that the Continental Army needed training in European-style tactics.
- Because winter weather made fighting difficult, 18th century armies settled into semi-permanent camps in the winter.
- Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben trained Washington's Soldiers into a professional fighting force during the encampment at Valley Forge.
- With the return of good weather in the spring, Continental Soldiers revealed their new skills and achieved an important victory at the Battle of Monmouth.

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Cold-Hard Training: Winter Camp at Valley Forge

(Pennsylvania, 1777-1778) In 1777, the British, hoping to bring about a speedy conclusion to the American Revolution, decided to capture Philadelphia, the patriot capital. The British commander-in-chief, Sir William Howe, landed at the head of Chesapeake Bay with nearly 17,000 troops. General George Washington marched his 12,000-man army from New Jersey to oppose them.

British soldiers in the 18th century ranked among the best in the world. Although the Continental militia had scored a few early victories using hit-and-run frontier tactics, the practice of sniping from behind rocks and trees could not prevail against the thoroughly trained and professional British regulars for long. By comparison, the British perceived the Continental Army as inexperienced and incompetent.

The Continental Army lost several battles in Pennsylvania, notably at Brandywine and Germantown, and lost possession of Philadelphia. But the Soldier's performance exceeded expectations, and they emerged from these experiences with a renewed confidence in their fighting abilities. They only needed a little more training to reach their full potential.

As winter set in, Washington, anticipating the traditional pause in major operations that characterized warfare in the 18th century, began making plans for a winter camp. In choosing a site, Washington had to balance the Continental Congress' wish for a winter campaign to dislodge



MAJOR GENERAL BARON STEUBEN.

Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben.
Image Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

the British from Philadelphia against the needs of his weary and poorly supplied Army. He chose to encamp at Valley Forge, twenty miles northwest of Philadelphia.

From there, the Army was close enough to maintain pressure on the British yet far enough away to prevent a surprise attack. The Soldiers who entered camp on December 19, 1777, were upbeat despite the poor supply situation. Rather than wait for deliverance, the Soldiers obtained supplies, built log cabins, fashioned makeshift clothing and gear, and cooked subsistence meals of their own

"I have just returned from spending a few days with the army. I found them employed in building little huts for their winter quarters. It was natural to expect that they wished for more comfortable accommodations, after the hardships of a most severe campaign; but I could discover nothing like a sigh of discontent at their situation...On the contrary, my ears were agreeably struck every evening, in riding through the camp, with a variety of military and patriotic songs and every countenance I saw, wore the appearance of cheerfulness or satisfaction."
- Anonymous visitor to Valley Forge December 1777

concoction. The food supply, though never abundant in the early months of the encampment, was usually adequate.

Shortages of clothing caused severe hardship for many Soldiers, but many had a full uniform. The better equipped units patrolled, foraged, and defended the camp. Under the direction of military engineers, the men built a city of 2,000-odd huts laid out in parallel lines along planned military avenues. The troops also constructed miles of trenches, five earthen forts (redoubts), and a state-of-the-art bridge over the Schuylkill River.

Disease, not cold or starvation was the true scourge of the camp. Records reveal that two-thirds of the nearly 2,000 men who perished died during the warmer months of March, April, and May, when supplies were more abundant. The most common killers were influenza, typhus, typhoid, and dysentery. Dedicated surgeons, capable nurses, a smallpox inoculation program, and good camp sanitation helped keep the death toll low.

Perhaps, the most important outcome of the encampment was the Army's

maturation into a more professional force. The Continental Army was primed and ready to move on to the next level just as a charismatic former Prussian army officer, Baron Friedrich Wilhelm Augustus von Steuben, arrived in camp in February of 1778.

Von Steuben's hands-on training program helped the Army become a more proficient marching machine. The Baron inspired a "relish for the trade of soldiering" that gave the troops a new sense of purpose and helped sustain them through many trials as they stuck to the task of securing independence. On May 6, 1778, the Army joyously celebrated France's alliance with and formal recognition of the United States as a sovereign power. In response to the expected arrival of the French, the British changed their war plans and evacuated Philadelphia in June.

Washington rapidly set out to bring on a general engagement with the enemy. On June 28, at the Battle of Monmouth, N.J., Washington's men demonstrated their improved battle prowess when they forced the British from the field, an important victory for the reformed Army. By summer, Washington could claim that the war effort was going well.

Valley Forge was not the darkest hour of the Revolutionary War, but a place where an already accomplished group of professionals stood their ground, honed their craft, and thwarted one of the major British offensives of the war.

Sources

Portions of this article courtesy of the National Park Service.

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General Washington and Lafayette visiting the army at Valley Forge, 1777. Image Courtesy of the Library of Congress.