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Foundation
*Telling the Army Story...
one Soldier at a time*

Voices of the Past

REVOLUTIONARY WAR

Highlights:

- With French support the Continental Army forced the surrender of Lord General Cornwallis at Yorktown.
- Surrounded and cut off from escape, Cornwallis waited in vain for reinforcements from General Clinton in New York.
- The British defeat at Yorktown broke the will of the British Government. Though two more years would pass before the final peace treaty was finished, the Battle of Yorktown marked the end of major combat in the American War of Independence.

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Let Freedom Ring: The Battle of Yorktown

(Virginia, 1781) American Patriots fired the first shots of the American Revolution at Lexington and Concord in April 1775. By the summer of 1781, the United States had been at war with England for over six years. For the Continental Army, perpetually short of money and supplies, simply remaining intact and able to fight was a major accomplishment. A deep belief in the cause and an enduring faith in their leader, George Washington, kept the Army together.

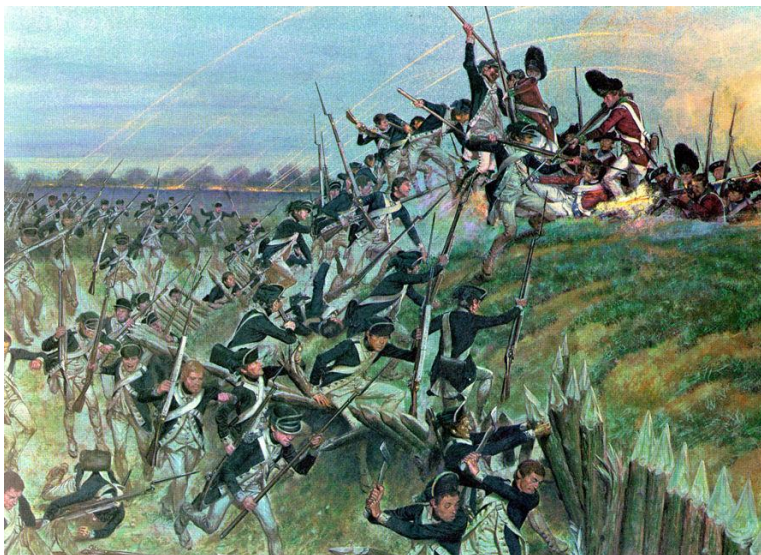
Washington knew that the key to victory lay in preserving the Army. He knew that he could not defeat the entire British army, but he could defeat the British spirit. If he could keep fighting long enough, the British would tire of the war and sue for peace.

In the summer of 1780, the Americans received a major boost to their cause when 5,500 French troops,

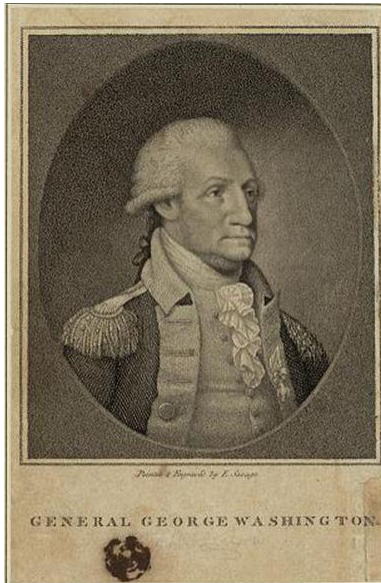
commanded by Comte de Rochambeau, arrived at Newport, Rhode Island. France had provided supplies for the Continental Army from the beginning of the war, but after declaring war on England in 1778, French King Louis XVI agreed to send troops and naval assistance to the United States.

When Rochambeau arrived, the British were fighting on two fronts. General Henry Clinton, commander of British forces in North America, occupied New York City, having failed in his attempts to conquer the northern and middle colonies. General Lord Cornwallis' army operated in the south, and had already captured Savannah and Charleston. Washington and the Continental Army occupied a position along the Hudson River above New York City.

In the spring of 1781, Washington met



"Yorktown, 14 October 1781" by H. Charles McBarron. Image Courtesy of the Center for Military History.



General George Washington.
Image Courtesy of the Library
of Congress.



Reconstruction of a private's
uniform of the Continental Army
(New England Regiment), circa
1780. Image Courtesy of the
Center of Military History.

with Rochambeau to plan an attack on Clinton. Washington wanted to coordinate the attack with the expected arrival of a French fleet. Rochambeau marched to join Washington outside New York City in July, only to learn that the French fleet was sailing to the lower Chesapeake Bay.

Washington changed his strategy: he would fool Clinton into thinking the Continentals were planning to attack New York while instead sneaking away to the south to attack Cornwallis. Washington ordered the construction of large camps with huge brick bread ovens where Clinton could see them to create the illusion that the Continental Army was preparing for a long stay. Washington also prepared false papers discussing attack plans on Clinton, and let these papers fall into British hands. Leaving a small force behind, Washington and Rochambeau set out for Yorktown in mid-August. By early September, they were parading before the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. They arrived in Williamsburg, 13 miles west of Yorktown, in mid-September.

Clinton had ordered Cornwallis to provide a protected harbor for the British fleet in the lower Chesapeake Bay. Cornwallis chose Yorktown because of its deep-water harbor on the York River. His army spent the latter part of the summer fortifying the town.

The French fleet reached the Chesapeake Bay at the end of August and dropped off 3,000 French troops to wait for Washington and Rochambeau. On September 5, the French engaged the British fleet in the Battle of the Capes. The British were defeated and returned to New York to repair their ships. The French fleet remained in the Chesapeake to establish a blockade. By the end of September, approximately 17,600 American and French soldiers had gathered in Williamsburg to attack the 8,300 British soldiers in Yorktown. Cornwallis realized his predicament and

sent word to Clinton asking for help. Clinton responded that a British fleet with 5,000 men would sail for Yorktown from New York on October 5.

Cornwallis' main line of defense included ten small enclosed forts (called redoubts), batteries with artillery and connecting trenches. The Americans and French marched to Yorktown on September 28 and began digging a trench 800 yards from the British defense line. Washington's strategy was to dig trenches through which he could move his heavy guns close enough to Yorktown to pound Cornwallis into surrender.

By October 9, the trench was finished and the artillery moved up. The heavy cannons pounded the British mercilessly, and by October 11 had knocked out most of the British guns. Cornwallis received the unfortunate (for him) news that Clinton's departure from New York had been delayed.

During the night of October 11, the allies began a second trench 400 yards from the British and spent the next few days bringing up artillery and strengthening the new line. The new line could not be completed, however, because the British redoubts #9 and #10 continued to hold out. Washington ordered a surprise nighttime Infantry assault. On the night of October 14, 400 French stormed redoubt 9 and 400 Americans stormed redoubt 10, capturing them in less than 30 minutes.

The British tried desperately to break out of their encirclement. Early in the morning on October 16, they attacked the allied center in a failed attempt to take out the French battery there. Later that night, they tried to evacuate by small boats across the river to Gloucester Point. A violent windstorm arose at midnight, however, scattering the boats and preventing escape.

Realizing the situation was hopeless, Cornwallis sent forth a British drummer

Let Freedom Ring: The Battle of Yorktown

on October 17, followed by a British officer with a white flag and note indicating a request for a cease fire. Cornwallis and Washington sent notes back and forth numerous times that day as they negotiated what had once been unthinkable: the surrender of a major British army unit to the Continental Army.

The next day, October 18, four officers--one American, one French, and two British--met at the Moore House, one mile outside Yorktown, to settle surrender terms.

On October 19, in an incredible spectacle, Cornwallis' army marched out of Yorktown between two lines of allied soldiers--Americans on one side and French on the other--that stretched for more than a mile. The British marched to a field where they laid down their arms before returning to Yorktown. They had no way of knowing that on that very day, Clinton sailed for Yorktown from New York with 5,000 troops.

News of the surrender spread quickly. Throughout the United States, Americans celebrated. London was shocked. The Continental Army returned to the Hudson River, while the French army remained in Yorktown and Williamsburg for the winter. Clinton and Cornwallis returned to England where they engaged in a long and bitter public controversy over who was to blame for the British defeat at Yorktown.

Though the British still had 26,000 troops in North America after Yorktown, their resolve was gone, their spirit broken. Tired of the long and costly war, uncertain of their ability to replace Cornwallis' captured army, and mired in other military struggles around the globe, the British had had enough. In March of 1782, the British Parliament passed a resolution ending the war. On September 3, 1783, the British signed the Treaty of Paris to end the war and acknowledge American independence.

Sources

Portions of this article courtesy of the National Park Service

<http://www.nps.gov/york/historyculture/history-of-the-siege.htm>

"Yorktown, 14 October 1781" by H. Charles McBarron. U.S. Army Center of Military History.

<http://www.history.army.mil/images/artphoto/pripos/revwar/Yrktn.jpg>.



"Surrender of Lord Cornwallis" by John Trumbull. Image Courtesy of the Architect of the Capitol.