



## The Concept Of Discipline In General Washington's Army

When we think of the American Revolutionary War, we tend to think in terms of the antagonistic actions of Great Britain which forced the colonies to react, the memorable battles that ensued, the eloquent speeches of the delegates to the provincial and continental congresses, and the biographical sketches of the more prominent, or at least notorious, military and political leaders. The things that we tend not to think about are the things which were either immoral to our sense of humanity or which would be inclined to shatter our idealized concept of the morality of our Patriot forefathers. One such thing will be discussed here: the concept of discipline meted out by General George Washington. It is hoped that you will not misinterpret what is stated here as being defamation toward the Father of our nation, but rather as an indication of his humanity. George Washington was, after all, a human being despite our veneration of him.

A society, if it intends to survive and grow, requires a certain amount of discipline. Laws, rules and regulations tend to be created for the common good. Although everyone may not agree on the rightness of any particular law ostensibly put into effect for the common good, it is difficult to disagree with the concept that rules are something that a society needs to

survive. The fact that the United States of America has succeeded in retaining its identity as a democratic nation after over two hundred years is evidence of the benefit of laws enacted for the common good. The lack of rules and regulations breeds chaos and disunity. Constant turmoil and disruption can be seen in many other countries which have not been built on a solid foundation of laws.

In the same way that our forefathers understood the concept that the society, as a whole, requires rules and regulations to maintain its stability and order, General Washington knew that lack of discipline in the army (a society in and of itself) would lead to disorder. Soon after accepting his commission to the rank of Commander-In-Chief of the Continental Army, General Washington began to issue General Orders to the rank and file. The General Orders defined the rules and regulations by which the army was to be governed. In them we can see how General Washington struggled with the lack of discipline in the fledgling national army.

This essay should begin by noting that the General Orders issued by General Washington were not all "negative". On 02 September, 1776 General Orders were issued in which Washington stated that:

*"The General hopes, after the inconveniences that have been complained of, and felt, that the commanding Officers of Corps will never, in future, suffer their men to have less than two days provisions, always upon hand, ready for any emergency - If hard Bread cannot be had, Flour muft be drawn, and the men muft bake it into bread, or ufe it otherwise in the moft agreeable manner they can."*

On 02 July, 1775 George Washington assumed command of the army assembled around Boston and set up his headquarters at Cambridge. Two days later, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 1775, General Orders were issued to the rank

and file in which General Washington stated his intentions that the army would be operated in an atmosphere of order and discipline. A portion of those General Orders follows:

*"The Continental Congress having now taken all the Troops of the several Colonies, which have been raised, or which may be hereafter raised for the support and defence of the Liberties of American; into their Pay and Service. They are now the Troops of the UNITED PROVINCES of North America; and it is hoped that all Distinctions of Colonies will be laid aside; so that one and the same Spirit may animate the whole, and the only Contest be, who shall render, on this great and trying occasion, the most essential service to the Great and common cause in which we are all engaged.*

*It is required and expected that exact discipline be observed, and due Subordination prevail thro' the whole Army, as a Failure in these most essential points must necessarily produce extreme Hazard, Disorder and Confusion; and end in shameful disappointment and disgrace.*

*The General most earnestly requires and expects, a due observance of those articles of war, established for the Government of the army, which forbid profane cursing, swearing and drunkenness; And in like manner requires and expects, of all Officers and Soldiers, not engaged on actual duty, a punctual attendance on divine Service, to implore the blessings of heaven upon the means used for our safety and defence.*

*All Officers are required and expected to pay diligent Attention to keep their Men neat and clean; to visit them often at their quarters, and inculcate upon them the necessity of cleanliness, as essential to their health and service. They are particularly to see, that they have Straw to lay on, if to be had, and to make it known if they are destitute of this article. They are also to take care that Necessaries be provided in the Camps and frequently filled up to prevent their being offensive and unhealthy. Proper Notice will be taken of such Officers and Men, as distinguish themselves by their attention to these duties."*

General Orders were issued the following day which included the following injunction:

*"The Adjutant of each Regiment is required to take special care, that all general orders are communicated, as well to the private men, as to the officers, that there may be no Pleas of Ignorance, they will be deemed answerable for all the consequences which may follow a neglect of this order."*

From the very beginning, General George Washington used the General Orders as a means to announce the names of those men who refused to follow orders and respect their fellow man's property. A portion of the first General Orders, issued on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July, 1775 included the announcement that a Court Martial was to be held to consider the fate of a Quarter Master by the name of John White, who had been accused of drawing out provisions for more men than the regiment consisted of. The General

Orders issued on the 4<sup>th</sup> announced the Court Martial for a trial of William Patten, who was charged with "leaving his post on guard"; David Wells and Gideon Cole, who were charged with "sleeping on their posts as sentinels"; John Scott, who was charged with "insulting the Centry and attempting to pass the guard at Boston"; and James Foshe for "theft". On the 6<sup>th</sup> of July, 1775 the General issued General Orders which stated in part:

*"It is with inexpressible Concern that the General upon his first Arrival in the army, should find an Officer sentenced by a General Court-Martial to be cashier'd for Cowardice. A Crime of all others, the most infamous in a*

*Soldier, the most injurious to an Army, and the least to be forgiven; inasmuch as it may, and often does happen, that the Cowardice of a single Officer may prove the Distruction of the whole Army: The General therefore (tho' with great Concern, and more especially, as the Transaction happened before he had the Command of the Troops) thinks himself obliged for the good of the service, to approve the Judgement of the Court-Martial with respect to Capt. John Callender, who is hereby sentenced to be cashiered. Capt. John Callender is accordingly cashiered and dismissed from all farther service in the Continental Army as an Officer."*

Despite the apparent harshness of his actions in respect to discipline, Washington's stance was necessary to 'whip' the army into shape. The General's punishments of the army's miscreants were seldom so harsh that they resulted in death, but they did set examples to the rest of the men.

(It might be noted here that in the example given above, John Callender reentered the service as a volunteer cadet in the New York Artillery. His court-martial was revoked by

General Washington in 1776 after Callender proved his bravery in the action at Long Island. He was taken prisoner and later exchanged and became the Captain-Lieutenant of the 3rd Connecticut Artillery Regiment. It was later noted that his act of "cowardice" consisted of withdrawing his guns because the cartridges that had been issued to him were too large.)

On 10 July, 1775 General Orders were issued which include the notice of a Court Martial and a unique form of punishment:

*"The General Court Martial of which Col. William Prescott was president having tried William Pattin of Col. Gridley's regiment, and found him guilty of 'threatening and abusing a number of persons, when prisoner in the Quarter Guard.' The Court sentence the prisoner to ride the wooden Horse, fifteen minutes. The General approves the sentence, and orders it to be put in execution at the head of the regiment."*

The "wooden horse" on which William Pattin was sentenced to ride was, more than likely, a 1770s version of the pillory and stocks in which criminals were forced to stand or sit to endure verbal derision and pelting by onlookers. The only source I could find to describe the "wooden horse" was *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, published in Edinburgh in 1789. The definition given in that volume was simply: "A machine which soldiers ride by way of punishment." As noted previously, the punishment would certainly not have led to death for the accused, but it would most

definitely have been a great embarrassment to that man and a possible deterrent to others.

It should be pointed out that despite the fact that General Washington advocated the use of punishment to control behavior in the army, the sentences for those found guilty were suggested by the members of the Court Martial. Perhaps General Washington hoped that the wording of the General Orders might be enough to scare the less brazen offenders-to-be to rethink their intended actions. On 03 September, 1776 General Washington issued the following General Orders:

*"Some instances of infamous Cowardice, and some of scandalous Plunder, and Riot, having lately appeared, the General is resolved to bring the offenders to exemplary punishment - the Notion that seems too much to prevail of laying hold of property not under immediate care, or guard, is utterly destructive of all Honesty or good Order, and will prove the ruin of any Army, when it prevails. It is therefore hoped the Officers will exert themselves, to put a stop to it on all future occasions. If they do not, ere long Death will be the portion of some of the offenders."*

The punishments meted out by the Courts Martial, and approved by General Washington, ranged from an Ensign who was ordered to be

confined to his tent for three days for "offering to strike his Colonel, and for disobedience" to being lashed and drummed out of the service.

John Willar, a private in the Pennsylvania Line, was ordered to receive one hundred lashes and to be drummed out of the army with a halter around his neck after he spoke "disrespectfully of His Excellency Genl. Washington and Congress, also drinking a health to King George." The giving of lashes across a man's bare back started out at thirty in 1775, but by the war's end the number most often given was one hundred.

A Lieutenant Grey of Colonel Lamb's Regi-

ment of Artillery was found guilty of, among other things, "behavior unbecoming the character of an officer and gentleman". He was sentenced to be discharged from the regiment, after having his sword broken over his head.

It appears, from certain of the General Orders, that there was some effort to have the punishment fit the crime. On 26 April, 1776 General Washington's General Orders included the following note:

*"The General approves the proceedings of the above Court Martial, and orders that Serjt. James Henry and Corpl. John McKenney, as they have not paid for their Cloathing, to be ftripped and difcharged the Company..."*

As a final comment on the subject of discipline in the army of General George Washington, it should be noted that General Washington was not opposed to employing the

most extreme of punishments to men convicted by the Court Martial. His General Orders of 18 May, 1779 provides evidence of this fact.

*"At a General Court Martial of the line whereof Colonel Gunby was Prefident April 30<sup>th</sup>. 1779, Thomas Carfon, George Garnick and Thomas Cane of the 6<sup>th</sup> Virginia regiment; alfo James Johnfton and William Hitchcock of Colo. Gift's regiment, were tried for 'Breaking into and robbing the houfe of Mr. Van Noorftrand an inhabitant, of a number of valuable articles on the night of the 29<sup>th</sup> of March laft' and found guilty of the charge exhibited againft them being a breach of the 16<sup>th</sup> Article of the 13<sup>th</sup> Section of the Articles of War and alfo of General orders. Thomas Cane, James Johnfton and William Hitchcock fentenced to receive one hundred lafhes each, and on confideration of Thomas Carfon and George Garnick being more atrociously guilty than the others, the Court do fentence them to fuffer death (two thirds concurring in opinion).*

*His Excellency the Commander in Chief confirms the fentence and orders Thomas Carfon and George Garnick to be hung tomorrow morning eleven o'clock. Alfo Robert Perry, now under fentence of death. The others to receive their ftripes at the fame time."*

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarterly Meeting

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarterly Meeting of the Blair County Chapter, SAR will be held on Saturday, April 10, 1999 at the Kings Family Restaurant in downtown Altoona. The meeting is scheduled to begin at 12:00 noon.

### WEBSITE UPDATE

I have completed work on a webpage for the Blair County Chapter. It resides on my own website at the URL address: {<http://www.motherbedford.com/BlairSAR.htm>}. The "Mother Bedford" website is devoted to a history of Bedford County during the American Revolutionary War and contains excerpts from the book *Mother Bedford And The American Revolutionary War*, which Closson Press plans to have published this spring. Links have been attached to the Blair County Chapter page to the NSSAR homepage, the PASSAR homepage and the NSDAR homepage. The Blair County Chapter page has also been attached to the Revolutionary War Webring to make it easier for web surfers to find additional sites. If you have internet access, please visit the site. I hope you enjoy it.