Written by **Dennis Behreandt** on December 23, 2008

A Christmas to Remember

The general of this rag-tag army was cold too, but for the good of his men he tried not to let it show. Standing six feet, two inches tall and weighing nearly 220 pounds, the commanding officer towered over most of his men. Now, setting his square jaw and squinting against the falling temperature, he grimly reviewed the circumstances that brought him to this place.

A month before, Fort Lee had fallen. Coming on the heels of a similar loss at Fort Washington, the loss of Fort Lee was a disaster. The enemy had pressed the attack sooner than expected. Surprised, the rebel army hurriedly withdrew. There had been no time to save the fort's stores and provisions, and these, including irreplaceable blankets and cooking utensils, fell into enemy hands. Worse, the men had to abandon their 300 pitched tents. When the enemy occupied the fort, they found the rebel campfires still burning, breakfast boiling in the kettles suspended above.

Then began the retreat across the countryside. Always the enemy was at the rebel army's heels, chasing them, hounding them. Under the worst imaginable conditions, the general held together his retreating forces and maintained a semblance of order and discipline. Still, the pursuers felt victory was assured. One of their officers recorded that "many of the Rebels who were killed in the late affairs, were without shoes or stockings, and several were observed to have only linen drawers on, with a rifle or hunting shirt, without any proper shirt or waistcoat. They are also in great want of blankets." With the onset of winter and plummeting temperatures, the officer grimly noted that "in less than a month they must suffer extremely."

Finally, despite all privation, the general brought his army to the banks of a great river. Gathering all the boats in the region, he got his men across and, having posted guards at all the ferry crossings, ensured a measure of security for his troops. And here the situation had stood since December 6, 1776, with the British and their Hessian mercenaries on one bank of the Delaware River, and the American rebels under the command of General George Washington on the other.

A Precarious Position

But their security was only temporary. With winter setting in, the dark, swirling waters of the Delaware would begin to congeal. Already in the mornings, in the sloughs and along the banks, a thin crust of ice appeared. In the river channel, where the water ran faster and deeper, the swirling current carried great blocks and floes of ice. It wouldn't be long before a solid crust, several inches thick, would stretch

from bank to bank, allowing the British to march across at will. This, Washington knew, would mean his army's annihilation.

Then again, by the time the river froze, there might not be an American army. Many of his 5,000 soldiers were "entirely naked," Washington noted, "and most so thinly clad as to be unfit for service." Daily their numbers decreased due to sickness and desertion, and, with the new year approaching, most of the army's enlistments would expire. Washington — and America — would be left with barely 1,400 men with which to oppose more than 10,000 British and Hessian troops under British Generals Howe and Cornwallis. "[Y]our imagination can scarce extend to a situation more distressing than mine," Washington, in a gloomy mood, wrote to Lund, his nephew, on December 17th. "Our only dependence now is upon the speedy enlistment of a new army. If this fails, I think the game will be pretty well up, as, from disaffection and want of spirit and fortitude, the inhabitants, instead of resistance, are offering submission and taking protection from Gen. Howe in Jersey."

In Pennsylvania too, civilian confidence ebbed low. The streets of the nation's capital, nearby Philadelphia, were deserted. One Philadelphia resident saw "numbers of families loading wagons with their furniture [etc.], taking them out of town.... Great numbers of people moving.... All shops ordered to be shut.... Our people in confusion, of all ranks, sending their goods out of town." Finally, and hauntingly, he noted that the city was "amazingly depopulated." Having participated in the American retreat across New Jersey, and fully aware of the dire circumstances facing the young nation, Thomas Paine wrote his famous words. These, indeed, were "the times that try men's souls."

Bold Plan

With 1,500 Hessian mercenaries occupying Trenton just across the Delaware River from the American position, something had to be done. Colonel Joseph Reed, an adviser to George Washington and Trenton native, urged a last-ditch attack. "[S]ome enterprise must be undertaken in our present circumstances or we must give up the cause," Reed wrote to Washington on December 22nd. "Will it not be possible," he asked, "for your troops, or such part of them that can act with advantage, to make a diversion, or something more, at or about Trenton?"

Reed's urgings corresponded with and bolstered Washington's own instincts. Since early December, Washington had been considering just such a plan. On the 14th he had written that he might, "under the smiles of Providence, effect an important stroke." By the 23rd, Washington had formulated a plan of attack and determined when to carry it out. To Col. Reed, "or in his absence, to [Lt. Col.] John Cadwalader," Washington wrote, "that Christmas-day at night, one hour before [midnight] is the time fixed upon for our attempt on Trenton. For Heaven's sake keep this to yourself, as the discovery of it may prove fatal to us, our numbers, sorry am I to say, being less than I had any conception of: but necessity, dire necessity, will, nay must, justify an attempt."

Washington's plan called for three divisions to simultaneously cross the Delaware River and attack Hessian positions. Cadwalader would take one division, about 2,000 strong, to engage in a diversionary attack against the Hessians quartered south of Trenton at Mount Holly. Brigadier General James Ewing would take 700 Pennsylvania and New Jersey militia to the the south end of Trenton to hold the bridge over Assunpink Creek and cut off a possible Hessian retreat. Finally, Washington himself would accompany the main body of troops attacking Trenton. These, 2,400 strong, were divided into two groups, one under General Nathanael Greene and one under General John Sullivan. It was a bold plan for it risked everything. If the Americans were put to rout, there was no hope of escape back across the Delaware River. If the expedition were to fail and the army lost, the dream of American independence

would die in Trenton.

Time for Action

At nightfall on Christmas Day, 1776, the first American troops boarded Durham boats, the largest being 60 feet in length and equipped with one mast. As they made way for the New Jersey shore, the weather quickly deteriorated and the river was choked with ice. Of the conditions, one American officer wrote, "It is fearfully cold and raw and a snow-storm setting in. The wind is northeast and beats in the faces of the men. It will be a terrible night for the soldiers who have no shoes. Some of them have tied old rags around their feet, but I have not heard a man complain." By 11 p.m., a winter storm was at full fury. "It was as severe a night as ever I saw … [with this] storm of wind, hail, rain and snow," wrote Captain Thomas Rodney.

The severe weather stymied both Cadwalader and Ewing. Washington, though, pressed on, finally reaching the Jersey side of the river after 3 a.m. "I have never seen Washington so determined as he is now," wrote an American officer. "He stands on the bank of the stream, wrapped in his cloak, superintending the landing of his troops. He is calm and collected, but very determined. The storm is changing to sleet and cuts like a knife."

Still, the terrible weather conditions were throwing Washington's plan into jeopardy. He was now behind schedule, with no hope of surprising the Hessians at daybreak. Moreover, the wet weather rendered the American muskets nearly useless. Alerted to this fact by a messenger from General Sullivan, Washington replied, "Tell General Sullivan to use the bayonet. I am resolved to take Trenton."

Marching south, Washington reached a fork in the road just a few miles from Trenton. Here, his force was split into two columns. To the right, the road followed the river and entered the city at its south side. General Sullivan made for Trenton on this road, while Washington accompanied Greene's troops into Trenton via the more northerly route.

The troops with Greene and Washington made contact with the Hessian pickets just before 8 a.m. on Thursday, December 26th. The Hessian post of 25 men under the command of Lieutenant Andreas Wiederhold exchanged a brief volley of fire with the American advance guard. Then, shouting "Der Fiend! Heraus! Heraus! (The enemy! Turn out! Turn out!), Wiederhold fell back toward Trenton. A second, more substantial force of Hessians also fell back toward town following a vigorous American charge.

Meanwhile, to the south, Sullivan's forces had arrived. After driving back a picket of Hessian jägers (literally "huntsmen"; a German light infantry corps armed with rifles), Sullivan took up position just north of the bridge over Assunpink Creek.

In town, one of the Hessian officers roused Johann Rall, the Hessian commanding officer, who had fallen into a drunken slumber after an exuberant Christmas celebration the previous night. Now, however, he acted with dispatch and assembled his troops. These were hardy veterans, well-trained and battle-hardened. Indeed, the three regiments present, named Rall, Knyphausen, and Lossberg, had each played a significant part in the recent defeat of the Americans at Fort Washington. In Trenton, they turned again to face their foes.

The Americans, though, had chosen their positions well. Two streets, King and Queen, ran nearly parallel north and south through the town. At the north end of King Street two fieldpieces under the command of Captain Alexander Hamilton opened fire. One block to the west four artillery pieces under the command of Captain Thomas Forrest blazed down Queen Street. The Hessian regiments under Rall

and Lossberg tried to advance on Hamilton's position, but they broke and fell back in disarray as shot from the American artillery tore through their lines. On nearby Queen Street, Forrest's artillery engaged two Hessian guns and knocked them out. Meanwhile, to the south, General Sullivan advanced into town and engaged the Knyphausen regiment.

The battle now broke into a melee. American troops swarmed through the city, fighting from house to house. All the while, the Americans had worked to dry their firearms and now their efforts began to bear fruit. As Rall assembled his men for a bayonet charge intending to clear the main streets, the American fire intensified. When Rall's charge fell apart under the withering barrage, the Lossberg regiment made a similar attempt, but it too ended in futility.

Seeing the rout in progress, Rall began to order his men to fall back to an orchard at the southwest corner of town, but American bullets cut him down before his retreat could begin. Some of his men fell back anyway, but found themselves surrounded by American forces. There, they surrendered. Just to the east, the Knyphausen regiment too found itself overwhelmed and with no way to escape. With hats raised on the points of their swords, the Hessian officers surrendered. It was 9 a.m. or a little later, and the ferocious battle had lasted slightly more than an hour.

A Providential Victory

Considering all that went wrong — including the fact that two of the three divisions intending to take part in the battle never crossed the river — the results were better than Washington could have expected. On the American side, only four men, two officers and two private soldiers, were wounded in the course of the battle. Of the Hessian force, 22 were killed and 92 wounded. A total of 948 prisoners were taken, including 32 officers. Also captured were six brass artillery pieces; six wagons; 40 horses; 1,000 firearms; various other military accoutrements; and 40 hogsheads of rum, which Washington ordered destroyed.

More important than the spoils was how the American victory affected both sides. "The effects of this successful enterprise were speedily felt in recruiting for the American army," wrote historian David Ramsay in his *History of the American Revolution*, published in 1789. "About 1400 regular soldiers whose time of service was on the point of expiring, agreed to serve six weeks longer…." Moreover, the Hessians abandoned several outposts near the Delaware River, and the British, who arrogantly believed they had nothing to fear, were staggered by the American victory. The British commander, General Howe, thought it simply stupefying "that three old established regiments of a people, who made war a profession, should lay down their arms to a ragged and undisciplined militia."

Just two weeks before the battle, George Washington had written that success depended on the smiles of Providence. And indeed, God's good graces seemed to reside with the Americans as they boarded their Durham boats on Christmas Day, 1776. Against all odds they carried the battle to the well-trained, well-fed, and well-rested Hessians and won the day. In a letter to his wife, written just two days after the battle, on December 28th, Henry Knox observed that "Providence seemed to have smiled upon every part of this enterprise." The famous, and agnostic, British historian Sir George Trevelyan best summed up the episode. "This was a long and severe ordeal," he wrote, "and yet it may be doubted whether so small a number of men ever employed so short a space of time with greater or more lasting results upon the history of the world." The victory was a great gift to the cause of liberty and the independence of the nation. It was a miracle fit for Christmas.