

## A SOLDIER'S LIFE

Joseph Plumb Martin was enlisted in the Continental Army in 1776 to 1783. He was fifteen years old at the time of his enlistment. In 1780 Martin joined the Corps of Sapers and Miners, which was involved in the engineering and construction of structures such as trenches and earthen forts. The following excerpts are from his notes published under the title *Private Yankee Doodle*.

① New York, 1776

It now began to be cool weather, especially the nights. To have to lie as I did almost every night (for our duty required it) on the cold and often wet ground without a blanket and with nothing but thin summer clothing was tedious. I have often while upon guard lain on one side until the upper side smarted with cold, then turned that side down to the place warmed by my body and let the other take its turn at smarting, while the one on the ground warmed. Thus, alternately turning for four or six hours till called upon to go on sentry, as the soldiers term it, and when relieved from a tour of two long hours at that business and returned to the guard again, have had to go through the operation of freezing and thawing for four or six hours more.

② New York, 1776

When I arrived at the baggage, which was not more than a mile or two, I had the canopy of heaven for my hospital and the ground for my hammock [bed]. I found a spot where the dry leaves had collected between the knolls. I made the bed of these and nestled in it, having no other friend present but the sun to smile upon me. I had nothing to eat or drink, not even water, and was unable to go after any myself, for I was sick indeed. In the evening, one of my messmates found me and soon after brought me some boiled hog's flesh (it was not pork) and turnips, without either bread or salt. I could not eat it, but I felt obliged to him notwithstanding.

③ New York, 1777

The inhabitants here were almost entirely what were in those days termed Tories. An old lady, of whom I often procured milk, used always when I went to her house to give me a lecture on my opposition to our good King George. She had always said, she told me, that the regulars would make us fly like pigeons. My patients would not use any of the milk I had of her for fear, as they said, of poison. I told them I was not afraid of her poisoning the milk; she had not wit enough to think of such a thing, nor resolution enough to do it if she did think of it.

4) Danbury, 1777

We accordingly marched... on to Danbury, where I had ample an opportunity to see the devastation caused there by the British. The town had been laid in ashes, a number of the inhabitants murdered and cast into their burning houses, because they presumed to defend their persons and property, or to be avenged on a cruel, vindictive invading army. I saw the inhabitants, after the fire was out, endeavoring to find the burnt bones of their relatives amongst the rubbish of their demolished houses. The streets, in many places, were literally flooded by the fat which ran from the piles of barrels of pork burnt by the enemy.

5) New York, 1777

I was soon... ordered off, in company with about four hundred others of the Connecticut forces, to a set of old barracks, a mile or two distant in the Highlands, to be inoculated with the smallpox. We arrived at and cleaned out the barracks, and after two or three days received the infection, which was on the last day of May.... I had the smallpox favorably as did the rest, generally.... I left the hospital on the sixteenth day after I was inoculated, and soon after rejoined the regiment....

6) Fort Mifflin, New Jersey, 1777

We had... a thirty-two-pound cannon in the fort, but had not a single shot for it. The British also had one in their battery... which raked the fort.... The artillery officers offered a gill of rum for each shot fired from that piece, which the soldiers would procure. I have seen from twenty to fifty men standing on the parade [field] waiting with impatience the coming of the shot, which would often be seized before its motion had fully ceased and conveyed off to our gun to be sent back again to its former owners. When the lucky fellow who had caught it had swallowed his rum, he would return to wait for another, exulting that he had been more lucky or more dexterous than his fellows.

7) Ft. Mifflin, New Jersey, 1777

In the height of the cannonade it was desirable to hoist a signal flag for some of our galleys [ships] that were lying above us to come down to our assistance. The officers inquired who would undertake it. As none appeared willing for some time, I was about to offer my services. I considered it no more exposure of my life than it was to remain where I was. The flagstaff was of easy ascent, being an old ship's mast... While I was hesitating, a sergeant of the artillery offered himself. He accordingly ascended to the round top, pulled down the flag to affix the signal flag.... The flags were accordingly hoisted, and... the sergeant then came down and had not gone half a rod [5 1/2 yards] from the foot of the staff when he was cut in two by a cannon shot. This caused me some serious reflections at the time. He was killed! Had I been at the

same business I might have been killed, but it might have been otherwise ordered by Divine Providence, we might have both lived.

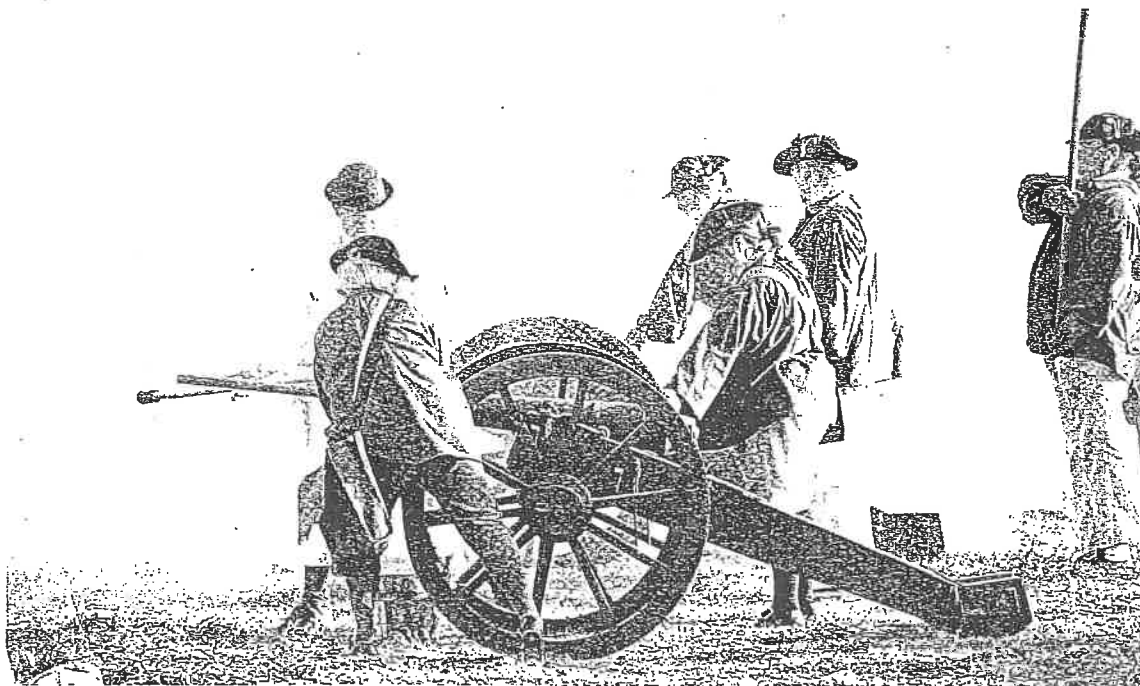
8 Philadelphia, 1781

And here, or soon after, we each of us received a MONTH'S PAY, in specie [gold or silver coin], borrowed, as I was informed, by our French officers from the officers in the French army. This was the first that could be called money, which we had received as wages since the year '76, or that we ever did receive till the close of the war, or indeed, even after, as wages.

9 Virginia, 1781

The greatest inconvenience we felt was the want of good water, there being none near our camp but nasty frog ponds where all the horses in the neighborhood were watered, and we were forced to wade through the water in the skirts of the ponds, thick with mud and filth, to get at water in any wise fit for use, and that full of frogs. All of the springs about the country, although they looked well, tasted like copperas water or like water that had been standing in iron or copper vessels.... I was one day rambling alone in the woods when I came across a small brook of very good water, about a mile from our tents. We used this water daily to drink or we should almost have suffered.

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# ILLUSTRATIONS OF A SOLDIER'S LIFE

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