

Valley forge army base: what should we know

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Valley Forge, the six-month encampment of the Continental Army of the newly formed United States of America was under the command of General George Washington. A light snow fell as 12, 000 weary men made their way up Gulph Road to the area selected only days before as winter quarters. Lewis Hurt, age 17, a private from Connecticut. Benjamin Blossom, age about 31 years, a soldier from Massachusetts. George Ewing, age 23, an Ensign of the Seventh Company in the Third New Jersey Regiment. Joseph Plumb Martin, age 15 when he enlisted in Connecticut's Third Company on July 6, 1776; age 16 when he arrived at Valley Forge. They came from Virginia, North Carolina, Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, New Jersey...They represented every state in the new union. Some were still boys — as young as 12 — others in their 50s and 60s. They were described as fair, pale, freckled, brown, swarthy and black. While the majority of the men were white, the army included both Negroes and American Indians.

Each man had few possessions and these he carried with him. His musket — by far the most popular weapon — a cartouche or cartridge box. If he had neither, the infantryman carried a powder horn, hunting bag and bullet pouch. His knapsack or haversack held his extra clothing (if he was fortunate enough to have any), a blanket, a plate and spoon, perhaps a knife, fork and tumbler. Canteens were often shared with others and six to eight men shared cooking utensils.

The first order of business was shelter. An active field officer was appointed for each brigade to superintend the business of hutting. Twelve men were to occupy each hut. The officers' hut, located to the rear, would house fewer

men. Each brigade would also build a hospital, 15×25 feet. Many of the Brigadier Generals used local farmhouses as their quarters. Some, including Henry Knox, later moved into huts to be closer to their men. The huts provided greater comfort than the tents used by the men when on campaign. But after months of housing unwashed men and food waste, these cramped quarters fostered discomfort and disease. Albigen Walden complained, “ my skin & eyes are almost spoil’d with continual smoke.” Putrid fever, the itch, diarrhea, dysentery and rheumatism were some of the other afflictions suffered by the Continental troops.

Little is known about the women, but there were women at Valley Forge. Junior officers’ wives probably remained in the homes of their husbands and socialized among themselves. The enlisted men’s wives lived and labored among the troops, some working as housekeepers for the officers; others as cooks. The most common positions were nurse and laundress. A washerwoman might work for wages or charge by the piece.

The army was continually plagued with shortages of food, clothing and equipment. Soldiers relied both on their home states and on the Continental Congress for these necessities. Poor organization, a shortage of wagoners, lack of forage for the horses, the devaluation of the Continental currency, spoilage, and capture by the British all contributed to prevent these critical supplies from arriving at camp. An estimated 34, 577 pounds of meat and 168 barrels of flour per day were needed to feed the army. Shortages were particularly acute in December and February. Foraging expeditions were sent into the surrounding countryside to round up cattle and other supplies. In

February three public markets opened. Farmers were encouraged to sell their produce. Fresh Pork, Fat Turkey, Goose, Rough skinned Potatoes, Turnips, Indian Meal, Sour-Crout, Leaf Tobacco, New Milk, Cyder, and Small Beer were included in the list of articles published in the Pennsylvania Packet and circulated in hand bills.

Entertainment at Valley Forge took many forms. The officers liked to play cricket (known also as wicket) and on at least one occasion were joined by His Excellency, the Commander-in-Chief. Several plays were staged including Joseph Addison's "Cato" which played to a packed audience. A common recreation was drinking, when spirits were available. And the soldiers liked to sing.

Throughout the winter and early spring, men were frequently "on command," leaving camp on a variety of assignments. Units were formed to forage for food, some were granted furloughs, and individuals regularly returned to their home states to recruit new troops. In January Jeremiah Greenman reported, "all ye spayr officers sent home to recrate a nother regiment & sum on furlow."

On February 23, Friedrich Wilhelm Ludolf Gerhard Augustin, Baron von Steuben, arrived at Valley Forge to offer his military skills to the patriot cause. Washington assigned him the duties of Acting Inspector General and gave him the task of developing and carrying out a practical training program. Foreign officers were an essential part of the Continental Army. They provided military skills, which the Americans lacked. Some, including Steuben, the Marquis de Lafayette and the Baron de Kalb came as

volunteers. Kalb quickly proved himself to Washington and Congress commissioned him a major general. Lafayette was given the command of a division of Virginia light troops in December 1777 and later took command of additional troops. Others, such as Engineer Louis Leb que de Presle Duportail were “covert” aid given leave from the French Army to provide assistance to the Americans. It was Duportail who designed the Valley Forge Encampment.

With spring the balance shifted. New recruits arrived daily. Reluctantly, Nathanael Greene accepted the appointment as Quarter Master General and began to correct the problems with supplies. Under Steuben’s direction the Continentals had become professionals, if not career soldiers. Morale improved as confidence grew. General Orders, Tuesday, May 5, 1778 announced the alliance with France and plans “to set apart a day for gratefully acknowledging the divine Goodness.”

On June 19, 1778, six months to the day following their arrival, the Commander-in-Chief General George Washington and the Continental Army departed Valley Forge and marched to Monmouth, New Jersey to engage the British in battle just nine days later. This was the army that would continue to victory at Yorktown.

The Treaty of Alliance between France and the United States was concluded at Paris, February 6, 1778 and ratified by Congress May 4, 1778. The treaty provided for a defensive alliance to aid France should England attack, and that neither France nor the United States would make peace with England until the independence of the United States was recognized. The knowledge of the Alliance came to Washington on May Day, 1778. One week later

General George Washington issued the following general order: “ It having pleased the Almighty Ruler of the universe to defend the course of the United States, and finally raise up a powerful friend among the princes of the earth, to establish our Liberty and Independence upon a lasting foundation, it becomes us to set apart a day for gratefully acknowledging the Divine goodness, and celebrating the important event which we owe to His Divine interposition. The several brigades are to assemble for this purpose at nine o’clock tomorrow morning, when their chaplains will communicate the information contained in the postscript of the Pennsylvania Gazette of the 2nd instant, and offer up a thanksgiving and deliver a discourse suitable to the event. At half past ten o’clock a cannon will be fired which is to be a signal for the men to be under arms. The Brigade Inspectors will then inspect their dress and arms, and form the battalions according to the instructions given them, and announce to the commanding officers of the brigade that the battalions are formed. The commanders of brigades will then appoint the field officers to the battalions, after which each battalion will be ordered to load and ground their arms. At half past seven o’clock a second cannon will be fired as a signal for the march; upon which the several brigades will begin their march by wheeling to the right by platoons, and proceed by the nearest way to the left of their ground by the new position. This will be pointed out by the Brigade Inspectors. A third signal will then be given, on which there will be a discharge of thirteen cannon; after which a running fire of the infantry will begin on the left of the second line and continue to the right. Upon a signal given, the whole army will huzza, ‘ Long Live the King of France.’ The artillery then begins again and fires thirteen rounds; this will be

succeeded by a second general discharge of musketry, in running fire, and a huzza, ' Long Live the Friendly European Powers.' The last discharge of thirteen pieces of artillery will be given, followed by a general running and huzza, ' The American States.'"

The Commander-in-Chief and staff were the guests of the Jersey troops during the religious services of the day, after which the general officers of the command joined him at the Potts mansion, whereat was served one of those famous dinners for which Washington always manifested a fondness. The length and breadth of Washington's exuberance upon the arrival of the good news can not be more effectively shown than in the fact that two soldiers awaiting execution in camp were pardoned and restored to the ranks by him in testimony of his joy. When we consider how rarely the Commander-in-Chief modified or reversed the finding of his courts martial, we may realize the meaning of this gift of life to men who, perhaps, did not deserve it.

The Encampment saw basically two periods of severe cold. The first period was at the end of December, with a low of 6 Degrees, and the second being at the end of March with a low of 8 Degrees. The low in January reached 12 Degrees, and February was 16 Degrees. The troops arrived at Valley Forge on the 19th of December and eight days later, the deepest single snow of the season fell, which was followed by the most severe cold. They were plagued by bouts of cold, which would thaw and then refreeze. You can imagine what a muddy mess it would have been working on drills.

There were three continued snowstorms, but not of a blizzard-like quality, more of which were moderate to heavy covering. " There was heavy snowfall" according to Dr. Muhlenberg on the 8th of February, " deeper now than we have had the whole winter," but was washed away by a heavy rainfall within the next 2 to 3 days. The heavy snowfall of the 8th, compounded by the heavy rainfall brought some flooding conditions...which made roads impassable. Between the cold and freezing temperatures, there were even some above average warm temperatures during the encampment when some thaws set in. These included some days around Christmas and then approximately three periods in January lasting for several days at a time.

With a lack of proper clothing, and the inadequacies of the temporary military housing in the log huts, built during some foul weather, it was not a pleasant winter for the Continental Army. But through it all, they persevered, and we can thank them for our freedom.