

Washington crossing the Delaware



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George Washington saved not only the continental army at the battle of Trenton, but he also saved and breathed new life into the cause of Independence. After knowing seemingly knowing nothing but defeat and hardship for the latter half of 1776, Washington knew that not only he, but the neophyte country known as the United States, needed a miracle. History dictates that he most certainly delivered that miracle and saved the cause, but what were the effects of his victory?

What is the importance of his crossing of the Delaware? The crossing at the Delaware river has become over the years, the symbol of American spirit and resolve. Numerous historical evidence indicates the hardships and hazards that accompanied the crossing that fateful December night. But to discuss the effects of the crossing, one must set the stage of events first. In the winter of 1776, General George Washington and his fledgling continental army stood on the precipice of annihilation.

After suffering a series of disastrous defeats which resulted in the loss of New York city and its surrounding areas, Washington gathered the shattered remnants of his once proud army and retreated across the Delaware river into Pennsylvania. Washington knew that the life of not only his army, but the cause was ebbing away daily, more so with their disastrous string of defeats. With low morale, constant desertion, sickness and hunger facing his men, he also knew that there was one other chief problem which would befall him at the end of the year; the expiration of the soldiers enlistments.

When the continentals drove the British troops out of Boston in March of 1776, Washington had seventeen thousand troops under his command. By December of 1776, through not only combat but the attrition of war and

what entails with it, he now commanded a mere four thousand seven hundred men. At the end of December when the enlistments for the soldiers ran out, he would be fighting with only twelve hundred men. In a letter that Washington wrote to John Hancock who was residing with the Continental congress in Philadelphia at the time, Washington wrote, " Ten more days will put an end to the existence of our Army.

Washington was not exaggerating when he said this. He had no doubt in his mind that come the end of the year the expiration of enlistments would cause an exodus of his fighting force. Aside from the threat of the ending enlistments, there was also the Hessian mercenary force across the river at Trenton, which Washington had no doubt that they would cross the Delaware river once it was frozen over and suitable to do so. Washington also realized that if he could end the year with a tremendous victory, it would do wonders not only for the cause, but for recruiting more soldiers to fight for it.

With nothing to lose and everything to gain, Washington decided that he would attack the Hessian mercenary force on December 25, 1776. The Hessians were feared by the continental army, and rightfully so. They were some of the Europe's best trained troops at the time and their memories of their massacre of American troops at the Battle of Long Island, lay fresh in their minds. The need for self-preservation seemed almost as strong as the need to avenge the brave soldiers lost. Washington's staff strongly advised him from attacking the Hessians in broad daylight, even crossing the river at night.

Their seemed to be a prevalent feeling that the Hessians would destroy the Continentals, even though they had the Hessians outnumbered (the Hessians in Trenton were around fifteen-hundred men). While the Continentals had numbers on their side, the Hessians had several things they did not. The Hessians were billeted in houses no doubt with fire places and were relatively safe and comfortable from the cold. The Hessians were also no doubt well fed and well cared for. On the contrary, the Continental soldier at the time had barely any adequate provisions at all.

They were ill fed and ill equipped to face not only the Hessians but the driving winter which was upon them. Most of them wore no shoes, if any shoes at all. On the night of the crossing a major, John Wilkinson, had seen spots of red in the snow, "tinged here and there", he wrote, "with blood from the feet of men who wore broken shoes." Washington had also lost a significant number of weapons and material during the retreat across the Delaware. Taking over the Hessian garrison in Trenton would not only be a good psychological boost for his troops, but it would also be a start in obtaining much needed supplies for them as well.

On Christmas night 1776, Washington assembled his army to cross the Delaware. Several writings on that fateful evening indicated the hardships and perils of the crossing itself. Thomas Rodney who was there that night described it as, "It was a severe night as I ever saw. The frost was sharp, the current difficult to stem, the ice increasing, the wind high, and at eleven it began to snow." When the Continentals cross the Delaware, all accounted for and behind schedule, they began their march onto Trenton, New Jersey.

John Greenwood, a fifer in the Continental Army described the march. What I suffered on the march, cannot be described.

They who were with us know best about these things, others cannot believe the tenth part, so I shall say nothing further. 3" Exhausted, starving, frightened and freezing, the Continentals commenced battle with the Hessian at Trenton around eight in the morning, catching most of the Hessian unaware, most of which were still sleeping. From the start of the engagement, the continentals were fully in control of the tempo of the battle and seized the initiative. The Hessians became completely surrounded and their units became isolated and they were forced to surrender.

They also suffered heavy losses with twenty-two men dead, eighty three wounded, and nearly one thousand and one hundred troops captured by the Americans. The American's only suffered two dead and five wounded. (statistics differ to a varying degree on the casualties and material obtained by Washington and his men). Washington had originally planed to march the army further to Princeton and New Brunswick, but after consideration and discussion from his staff, dropped the plan.

He ordered his troops to recross the Delaware, where they took back with them not only the Hessian prisoners, but much needed quipment and supplies needed to sustain his army. The battle despite its seemingly small proportion increased not only morale among the men which had been dangerously low to begin with, but also their confidence. They had defeated one Europe, even one of the world's most respected troops at the time. Despite the victory and the bold gamble it was, there was still the issue of the expiration of enlistments. Washington seized the advantage and the

boost the victory had given him, and two days after the battle, only a few days before the expiration, implored his exhausted, underfed and underpaid troops to stay longer.

Fifty years after, a sergeant whom was present at the time gave his account of what Washington said to a group of soldiers. " My brave fellows, you have done all I asked you to do, and more than could be reasonably expected. But your country is at stake, your wives, your houses, all that you hold dear. You have worn yourselves out with fatigues and hardships, but we know not how to spare you. If you will consent to stay but one month longer, you will render that service to the cause of liberty, and to your country, which you probably can never do under any other circumstances.

The present is emphatically the crisis that will decide our destiny. " 3 Before this gambit, there were some members of the Congress and even Washington's own soldiers and staff whom questioned his military ability and handling of the army. The victory at Trenton, and later at Princeton, quelled these fears. Faith was not only renewed in him, but also in his army. The victory also had a tremendous effect upon morale not only within the troops but in Congress as well. The victory also broke the psychological hold that the Hessians had over the Continentals as well.

They knew now and fully realized that they were a capable army as any in the world. The defeat of the Hessians also caused the British to abandon their efforts of protection to the loyalist leaning peoples of New Jersey. When looking at the crossing of the Delaware and the victory at Trenton on a tactical scale, it seems to be a minor engagement. But the significance and

the psychological impact, saved the not only the continental army, but it pulled the cause out of the depths of a sea of despondency and defeat.

Over the years the American people have come to see the crossing of the Delaware, as a symbol of American resolve, and that we as a people will never give into tyranny and oppression.

Bibliography

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