

Washington's Plan of Attack at Trenton & the State of His Army

You will see excerpts from various works below which will inform you of the condition the Continental Army was in while readying for, and just following, the Battle of Trenton.

THE CONTINENTAL ARMY **By Robert K. Wright, Jr**

First Printed 1983-CMH [Center of Military History, U.S. Army] Pub 60-4
[Chapter 4, pages 78-

On 12 October 1775 Congress authorized the colony to raise a regiment. The assembly appointed company officers and began recruiting almost immediately, but it did not nominate field officers until November. The companies, recruited across the colony, assembled in the capital on 11 January 1776. At that point the officers objected to the appointment of Col. John Bull as commander and forced his resignation. John DeHaas, veteran of the French and Indian War, replaced Bull. The regiment, with eight companies in conformity with the Continental model, reached Quebec in time to participate in the closing moments of the siege.

On 9 December 1775 Congress authorized Pennsylvania to raise four more regiments. Congress appointed field officers in early January following the Committee of Safety's recommendations. Companies were raised by counties and grouped into regiments on a geographical basis. Pennsylvania did not call its units regiments but rather designated them as the 1st through 5th Pennsylvania Battalions. Cumberland County's local committee of safety petitioned the Committee of Safety to allow it to raise a full regiment, and Congress rewarded this enthusiasm on 4 January 1776 by directing Pennsylvania to raise a sixth regiment there. Congress appointed officers for it according to the county's wishes. One company of every regiment except the 1st Pennsylvania Battalion was armed with rifles, although Congress attached Capt. John Nelson's independent rifle company to the 1st for most of 1776. Congress had accepted that company, organized by the Berks County committee of safety, on 30 January. 26 ...

25. *JCC*, 3:291, 370; *Pennsylvania Archives*, 8th ser., 8:7306-8, 7314, 7324-25, 7345, 7356. As in the case of the first two New Jersey regiments, the initial strength of the Pennsylvania regiment was slightly increased to conform to the standard organization adopted for Washington's regiments.

26. *Pennsylvania Archives*, 1st ser., 4:693-94, 711; Force, *American Archives*, 4th ser., 4:501, 507-11; Smith, *Letters of Delegates*, 3:27-28, 31, 60, 80, 123-26, 167; *JCC*, 3:29, 101-2, 207, 418; 4:23-24, 29-31, 47-48. The 5th Pennsylvania Regiment absorbed Nelson's company in 1777.

Pennsylvania's contribution to the Flying Camp included two special units of state troops. They contained 1,500 men organized as the Pennsylvania State Musketry Battalion and the two-battalion Pennsylvania State Rifle Regiment. Pennsylvania had created them in March to replace the departing continentals. The former unit was expected to defend Philadelphia from British regulars; the latter could serve also on the frontier. The Pennsylvania state troops also included an artillery contingent, but rather than going to the Flying Camp, it remained near Philadelphia to guard the Delaware River defenses. 48 ...

48. Force, *American Archives*, 4th ser., 3:1819-20, 1828; 4:524, 1573-75; 6:961; 5th ser., 1:1317; 2:69, 80, 97; *Pennsylvania Archives*, 1st ser., 4:751-52, 780; 5:33; 8th ser., 8:7429-46, 7461-65.

[Chapter 5, pages 91-114]

Washington regrouped his forces behind the Delaware River. Units partially reequipped themselves with supplies brought forward from Philadelphia. Volunteers (associators) turned out from the Pennsylvania militia, and on 20 December Continental reinforcements arrived from the north. A British cavalry patrol captured Lee on 13 December, but Maj. Gen. John Sullivan took command of Lee's three brigades and marched them around the British to join Washington. As soon as Generals Schuyler and Gates learned of the fall of Fort Mifflin, they sent all the troops they could spare from Ticonderoga to bolster the Commander in Chief. Four regiments under Brig. Gen. Arthur St. Clair proceeded directly to Pennsylvania; three others diverted to Morristown, New Jersey, to threaten the British flank. 8 ...

GENERAL RETURN, MAIN ARMY, 22 DECEMBER 1776. *This return of Washington's troops in eastern Pennsylvania became the basic document for evaluating the Army's ability to counterattack at Trenton, New Jersey, four days later. The 1776 version differs from the 1775 return because the later form now groups individual regiments into tactical brigades. This change was the major innovation of the Trenton and Princeton campaign. Returns in subsequent years normally listed only brigades and separate regiments. ...*

Washington knew that ending the year on a positive note would encourage recruiting. He also wanted to regain control of New Jersey. After exploring the possibilities and ordering the harassment of British garrisons, he decided to strike Trenton. His plan for a night attack was tailored to his available forces. The task of sealing the town off to prevent reinforcement or escape went to militia supported by a single Continental brigade. The actual assault was carried out by his other seven Continental brigades using coordinated columns. Washington shifted from the regiment to the brigade as the basic combat element for this counterattack because attrition had eroded the effective strength of most of his regiments to dangerously low levels. An additional innovation was that an artillery company directly supported each brigade.

A return of 22 December 1776 indicates that the infantry strength of the actual attack force—the seven brigades less detachments—totaled 33 field officers, 412 company officers, 368 sergeants, and 5,820 rank and file. These figures do not include St. Clair's four regiments, which did not submit a return.¹⁰ Only two of the brigades contained substantially more than the official strength of a regiment. On the other hand, the ratio of officers and sergeants to rank and file was higher than usual, and the artillery company added materially to the firepower of each brigade, particularly in adverse weather. At Trenton, and at Princeton a week later, Washington's brigade commanders used both of these factors to advantage. Improved control paid particular dividends as brigades executed complex maneuvers at night and adjusted to rapidly changing battlefield conditions. Washington's army destroyed Rall's brigade at Trenton, severely mauled a detached British brigade at Princeton, and maneuvered the British out of all but a small toehold in New Jersey. Thus in the space of little more than a week, Washington's small, veteran cadre shattered two enemy brigades and recovered most of New Jersey. In destroying the German auxiliaries' aura of invincibility as well, he robbed Howe of a major psychological advantage. Morale was generally restored. Washington spent the next several months digesting the lessons of this brief campaign, with its introduction to the techniques of mobile warfare. He rewarded those subordinates who had

performed well under pressure with his trust, and he concluded that the campaign had demonstrated the value of a brigade composed of several infantry regiments and an artillery company. Hereafter it became the basic element of the Main Army.

Rounding Out the Army

The retreat through New Jersey had made Washington acutely aware of Howe's numerical strength and specifically his advantage in artillery and cavalry.¹⁰ In a series of letters to Congress during December 1776, the Commander in Chief pressed for more men. Additional infantry regiments, more artillery, and a force of cavalry headed his list of needs. Congress, impressed by the December crisis, acted upon those requests within a month. As a result, the Continental Army of 1777 became a more balanced force than that envisioned on 16 September. Washington would be able to organize the Army into elements capable of competing with the British in open battle. ...

Unlike the south, the middle states were faced with a situation in which most existing enlistments expired on 31 December 1776 or shortly thereafter, and one in which regiments were on active duty outside the state. They turned to legislative liaison committees, establishing new arrangements which retained, through reenlistment, the 1776 regiments and added new ones as necessary. The new regiments depended on veterans of militia or state service, particularly with the Flying Camp, for their cadres. While this expedient created turmoil in some lines because of arguments over relative rank, it allowed each of the 1777 regiments to start with an experienced core.

8. Sullivan, *Letters and Papers*, 1:302; Force, *American Archives*, 5th ser., 3:1125, 1260; Gates Orderly Book (Gates' General Orders for 5-18 Nov 76); Gates Papers (Gates to Schuyler, 30 Sep 76; to Ward, 9 Nov 76; to Hancock, 27 Nov 76; to Col Joseph Vose, 8 Dec 76; to Washington, 12 Dec 76; Robert H. Harrison to Gates, 26 Nov 76; Schuyler to Gates, 26 Nov 76; St. Clair to Gates, 27 Nov 76; Heath to Gates, 14 Dec 76); Fitzpatrick, *Writings*, 6:414-16, 419.

THE PRIVATE SOLDIER UNDER WASHINGTON

BY

CHARLES KNOWLES BOLTON

ILLUSTRATED

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

NEW YORK ::::::::::::::: 1902

[Excerpt from Chapter 2]

Weak as the Continental army was in the autumn of 1776, it undertook two important duties; part of the forces held the Hudson above New York to check any advance of the British toward Canada or New England; another wing of the army kept to the banks of the Delaware to guard the highways to Pennsylvania and the south. On December 22d (just before the battle of Trenton was fought) the return of the army then encamped on the banks of the Delaware gives a total of 10,106 men; of these 3,357 were sick, absent on duty or on furlough, making thirty-three per cent ineffective.²⁸ It was the current belief that affairs had come to a critical pass, requiring a successful battle to awaken enthusiasm and quicken enlistments for the next campaign.²⁹ Washington's capture of nearly the whole British outpost at Trenton on Christmas night accomplished what was needed, but in order to follow up the success he was driven to a fresh bounty of \$10 to keep the discontented men together for another month.

²⁸American Archives V., vol. 3, col. 1401.

²⁹American Archives, V., vol. 3, col. 1514.

THE AMERICAN CRISIS I December 23, 1776

Philip S. Foner, *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, Vol. I, p.49-57.

With Additional Notes by

Moncure Daniels Conway, *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, Vol. I, p.168-179.

William M. Van der Weyde, *The Life and Works of Thomas Paine*, Vol. II, p.263-278.

[page 49]

On Christmas eve, 1776, Washington and his decimated forces were rowed across the Delaware to launch a surprise attack upon the slumbering Hessians who were stationed below Trenton. Before the soldiers embarked to battle the floes, a blizzard, and the swift current of the river, they listened, at Washington's command, to a reading of Paine's new pamphlet. The opening words alone -- "These are the times that try men's souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it NOW, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman " -- inspired the ragged Continentals and played a crucial role in the gaining of the much-needed victory against overwhelming the enemy forces at Trenton. The pamphlet roused the entire continent. Even Paine's bitter enemy, Cheatham admitted that it had a dynamic effect on the Revolutionary cause. "The number," he writes, "was read in the camp, to every corporal's guard, and in the army and out of it had more than the intended effect. The convention of New York, reduced by dispersion, occasioned by alarm, to nine members, was rallied and reanimated. Militiamen who, already tired of the war, were straggling from the army, returned. Hope succeeded to despair, cheerfulness to gloom, and firmness to irresolution." -- *Editor Foner*.

[page 168-169]

The first "*Crisis*" [mentioned above as being read to the troops] was printed in the *Pennsylvania Journal*, December 19, 1776, and opens with the famous sentence, "These are the times that try men's souls"; the last "*Crisis*" appeared April 19, 1783, (eighth anniversary of the first gun of the war, at Lexington,) and opens with the words, "The times that tried men's souls are over." The great effect produced by Paine's successive publications has been attested by Washington and Franklin, by every leader of the American Revolution, by resolutions of Congress, and by every contemporary historian of the events amid which they were written. The first "*Crisis*" is of especial historical interest. It was written during the retreat of Washington across the Delaware, and by order of the Commander was read to groups of his dispirited and suffering soldiers. Its opening sentence was adopted as the watchword of the movement on Trenton, a few days after its publication, and is believed to have inspired much of the courage which won that victory, which, though not imposing in extent, was of great moral effect on Washington's little army. -- *Editor Conway*