

The Christmas Night Crossing and the Battle of Trenton

by
Clay Craighead

After a series of defeats in New York in 1776, General George Washington's Continental Army retreated across the Jerseys and, on December 8th, escaped across the Delaware River into Pennsylvania. The British, unable to find boats, could not pursue Washington further so went into winter quarters, leaving a chain of outposts throughout New Jersey. The Trenton outpost consisted of three regiments of German soldiers, known as Hessians.

In desperate need of a victory, Washington decided to cross the Delaware River on Christmas Night to launch a surprise attack on Trenton. It had been expected that the 2,400 men, 100 or so horses and 18 cannons, might be ferried over by midnight and the army reach Trenton before daybreak. The river had been clear of ice on the 24th, but before noon on the 25th, was full of floating cakes of ice, however not very thick. As night fell, the army of 2,400 men began to cross the ice-filled river. A full moon would be shrouded by dense clouds so that the night would be extremely dark and by midnight a strong storm had developed, hurling sleet, hail and snow at the rebel army. According to John Greenwood:

We had to wait for the rest and so began to pull down the fences and make fires to warm ourselves, for the storm was increasing rapidly. After a while it rained, hailed, snowed, and froze, and at the same time blew a perfect hurricane.

For almost ten hours, boats moved continuously back and forth across the river, ferrying men, horses and cannon to the Jersey side. The entire crossing would be under the direction of Colonel Henry Knox. One soldier remembered that Knox's voice was heard above the crash of the ice which filled the river. According to Knox:

...the army... passed the river on Christmas night, with almost infinite difficulty.... The floating ice in the river made the labor almost incredible. However perseverance accomplished what at first seemed impossible.... The night was cold and stormy; it hailed with great violence....

It was nearly 4 AM before the entire army was assembled and ready for the march to Trenton. The ordeal of the crossing had taken much longer than expected and Washington feared the element of surprise would be lost; it would be after daybreak before the army could reach Trenton. The soldiers now faced an arduous nine mile march to Trenton with the weather continuing to be severe. John Greenwood described the march:

...we began an apparently circuitous march, not advancing faster than a child ten years old could walk, and stopping frequently, though for what purpose I knew not.

The army marched inland for about a mile, then south to Birmingham (now West Trenton). Here they halted for a brief rest and hasty meal and then the army was split into two divisions, one led by General Greene, accompanied by Washington, and the other by General Sullivan. Marching in separate columns for another four and a half miles through a fierce and relentless winter storm, they arrived at opposite ends of Trenton.

Contrary to popular myth, the 1,400 Hessians in Trenton had not been celebrating Christmas by drinking. If anything they were fatigued from the constant patrols, guard posts and duties that were required of them and every night, one of the three Hessian regiments had orders to sleep in uniform in case of an attack. Due to the intensity of the storm, one early morning Hessian patrol had been canceled and another shortened and as the battle began, the snow, sleet and freezing rain would quickly begin to affect the priming powder of the muskets and cause them to misfire.

After daybreak, at about 8:00 AM, the Hessian pickets on the outskirts of town were encountered, driven in and boldly pursued by the advancing Americans. The artillery was quickly brought forward and would play a decisive role in breaking up two enemy counterattacks. According to Colonel Henry Knox:

The storm continued with great violence, but was in our backs, and consequently in the faces of our enemy.... They endeavoured to form in the streets, the heads of which we had previously the possession of with cannon... these, in the twinkling of an eye, cleared the streets. The backs of the houses were resorted to for shelter. These proved ineffectual: the musketry soon dislodged them. Finally they were driven through the town into an open plain beyond.... The poor fellows... saw themselves completely surrounded.... and were obliged to surrender upon the spot....

Surrounded, outnumbered and overpowered, with their Colonel having received mortal wounds, and the weather having affected the musketry, the Hessians were left with no options but surrender. Nearly 900 Hessians were captured.

The American victory at Trenton was an incredible morale boost and the first battlefield victory of the war for General Washington. Though a small battle in terms of men, its impact was huge and most possibly saved the Revolution. The morale of the army and people, which before had been shaken by earlier defeats, were now, lifted from the depths of despair and what many had perceived as inevitable defeat. Washington had somehow pulled off a miracle and was now seen as a military genius. A turning point had been reached.

The British soon realized the impact of this American victory. General William Howe, in a letter to Lord Germain wrote:

It is with much concern, that I inform his lordship, the unfortunate and untimely defeat at Trenton, has thrown us farther back than was at first apprehended, from the great encouragement it has given to the rebels.

From Virginia, Nicholas Cresswell wrote:

The minds of the people are much altered. A few days ago they had given up the cause for lost. Their late successes have turned the scale and now they are all liberty-mad again.

The war however had not been won. Six more long years of fighting would grind on until a Peace Treaty was signed in 1783. But never again would the cause of American Independence be so vulnerable and so close to collapse than in the days preceding Christmas, 1776.