

A soldier's vivid descriptions of the Revolutionary War earned him the title of...

Private Yankee Doodle

ON Sept. 15, 1776, 15-year-old American Army Private Joseph Plumb Martin found himself crouched in a trench near the East River in New York. Five British man-of-war ships were blasting cannonballs at him and his friends. Martin held his ears and wondered "which part of my carcass was to go first."

Through the tumultuous years of the Revolutionary War, Martin kept a diary. Many years after the war, he wrote in it the story of his experience as a private in George Washington's army. He starved at Valley Forge and froze at Morristown. Yet he never lost his sense of humor—or his patriotism.

The Fine Art of Retreating

Things got worse for Martin in that first battle. When thousands of British troops came in rowboats toward Martin and his compatriots, panicky American officers ordered a retreat. It soon became a stampede.

For the next 24 hours, Martin struggled through swamps and woods with nothing to eat. He finally found his regiment, and the next day they fought a battle with the British, driving them back.



Martin was happy to discover they could make the enemy retreat, too.

Holding the Fort

A year later, Martin found himself in another trouble spot. His regiment was ordered to defend a fort on the Delaware River. The British had captured Philadelphia (it was the American capital then). But if they could not seize this fort, their ships would not be able to use the river and their army would starve.

It was, Martin later wrote, "in the cold month of November," and he had "not a scrap of either shoes or

stockings to my feet or legs." The British pounded the fort day and night using heavy guns. Martin saw five men killed by a single cannonball.

Starvation Time

After three terrible weeks, General Washington ordered Martin and his regiment to evacuate the wrecked fort. They retreated to winter camp at Valley Forge. There they encountered another enemy: hunger. Night after night they dined, as Martin put it in his humorous way, "upon a leg of nothing and no turnips."

Even water was scarce. One night Martin paid another soldier three cents for a drink from his canteen.

Most of the army was barefoot. "They could be tracked by their blood on the rough frozen ground," Martin wrote.

Victory at Last

The war dragged on, and Martin fought bravely in several more battles. He was promoted to sergeant. In 1783, a few days after the key battle in Yorktown, Va., in which Martin also fought, the British Army surrendered.

After almost seven years in the army, Joseph Plumb Martin went home and wrote about his adventures. People liked his book so much they called him "Private Yankee Doodle."✦

—Thomas Fleming

READ MORE

You can read Martin's diaries in "Yankee Doodle Boy: A Young Soldier's Adventures in the American Revolution Told by Himself" (School and Library Binding, 1995).

You can also find selections from the diaries at www.mrbooth.com/edu/constit/diaries.html.

David Beck