

The Most Trying Hour

December 19th, 1777... Twelve thousand American farmers, shopkeepers, and militiamen, only a third of whom even had shoes on their feet, staggered into their winter quarters at Valley Forge. After suffering a string of defeats, these soldiers hoped to rest and recuperate over the winter months, but a lack of food and supplies would cause the winter ahead to be remembered as one of the most trying times of the American Revolutionary War.

General George Washington had originally decided to spend the winter months near the Schuylkill River in Pennsylvania, in an area known as Valley Forge, after the British army captured Philadelphia in July of that year. Only twenty-five miles from the city, this location would allow Washington to monitor General Howe's movements and theoretically prevent any sallies. In reality, though, the American forces were in no position to fight even a skirmish. Only 12,000 strong, they had suffered numerous defeats and few victories in the fall of 1777, and only a short time before the American army arrived at Valley Forge, a British raid had stolen 4,000 barrels of flour, enough to feed the American army for months. As for supplies, poor communications caused delays and mistakes. Once, 6,000 blankets intended for the army were sent by the Continental Congress in the opposite direction of Washington's army, and in the end, only 200 of them arrived at the encampment. Nevertheless, Washington made the best of his circumstances and immediately put his men to work gathering supplies, building shelters, and guarding the camp. Until his army had wooden shelters, Washington lived in a tent alongside his soldiers instead of the nearby mansion offered to him by the owner in an attempt to bolster the waning morale of his troops. The winter proved to be longer and

harsher than expected--bitter cold temperatures failed to bring enough snowfall to provide a steady water supply, and the little snow on the ground turned to slush, keeping the soldiers damp and shivering. The animals fared even worse than the men, however, and by the end of the encampment, more than 700 of the draft animals had died, limiting the army's future mobility. In April, the first signs of Spring began to appear. For the first time the men ate their fill when as the river ran with fish once more. The cold slackened, and American supply trains began rolling into camp.

Like the change of season, at Valley Forge the atmosphere felt like the tide of war was changing along with the weather. Skirmishes were won more often than they had been in December and January, and raids on Tory supply caches garnered flour, cattle, and clothing. The most trying time of the American Revolution had past, and the farmers, shopkeepers, and civilians turned soldiers that had retreated into Valley Forge months before marched out possessing a new morale and better organization than ever before.

Bibliography

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