The Riflemen of the Revolution

THE VIRGINIA AND MARYLAND COMPANIES

By ELMO SCOTT WATSON

IN THE cool dawn of a summer morning 160 years ago a boy awoke and looked out from the window of his home in a little Massachusetts village. And this is what he saw:

"Suddenly, as though by magic summoned, the whole street was filled with men, marching silently and swiftly, with moccasined feet, their raccoon caps pushed back, the green thrums tossing on sleeve and thigh."

The boy rubbed his eyes. He must be dreaming! And yet—

"On they came, rank on rank, like brown deer herding through a rock run; and on the hunting-shirts, lettered in white across each breast appeared the words: 'Liberty or Death!'"

Spell-bound, the boy continued to watch that "torrent of dusty riflemen passing without a break." In another moment they were gone—their long loping stride had carried them through the village and out of sight around the bend of the road which led to Cambridge. But in the years to come, when that boy became a grandfather, he would tell his grandchildren: "Yes, I saw the riflemen as they marched north to help George Washington drive General Gage and his Britishers out of Boston-town."

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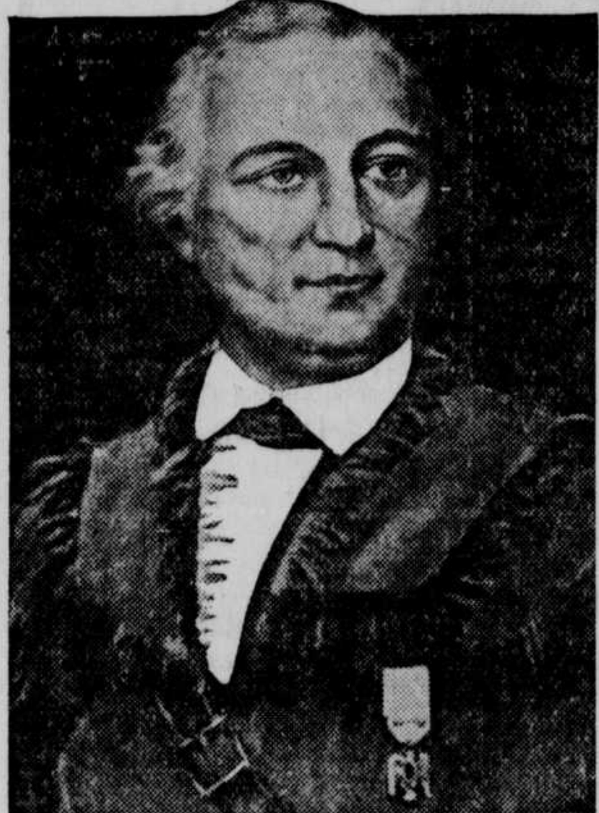
On June 14, 1775, the Second Continental congress passed a resolution that "six companies of expert riflemen be immediately raised in the Colony of Pennsylvania, two in the Colony of Maryland and two in the Colony of Virginia, and that each company as soon as completed shall march to join the army near Boston, to be there employed as light infantry under the command of the chief officer of that army." Pennsylvania's response was immediate and generous. She raised nine companies instead of six and by the middle of July her riflemen were on the march. By the end of that month two of the companies had reached Cambridge and by the middle of August the entire "Battalion of Riflemen," commanded by Col. William Thompson, Lieut. Col. Edward Hand, Maj. Robert Magaw and Captains John Lowdon, Michael Doudel, George Nagel, Abraham Miller, Robert Cluggage, James Chambers, William Hendricks, James Ross and Matthew Smith, had reported to Washington and had become the "Second Regiment of the Army of the United States."

Swift as had been the northward march of the Pennsylvania frontiersmen, they found, upon their arrival, that the riflemen of Virginia and Maryland had been no less prompt in answering the call of congress. Among the first of the sharpshooting gentry to reach the scene of action was a company from Frederick county, Virginia, commanded by a stalwart fellow whose leadership of these men who bore the long rifle would make him forever famous. He was Daniel Morgan.

Within two years he had become an ensign in the Virginia militia and during the Pontiac uprising of 1763 he rose to a captaincy. At the outbreak of Dunmore's war in 1774 he was one of the first to lead a company of frontier militia against the Indians.

Within ten days after receiving his commission, Morgan had raised a company of 96 Frederick county men, many of whom had served with him in the Dunmore war. On July 14, 1775, he started north from Winchester. His marching orders, according to tradition, was the laconic and alliterative command: "A beeline for Boston, boys!" Within 21 days he covered the distance of 600 miles, an average of nearly 30 miles a day, without losing a single man through sickness or desertion.

"The achievement of Morgan and his 96 men," says Nickerson in his book, "The Turning Point of the Revolution," "can be paralleled only by that of the five hundred men of Marseilles who in July, 1792, marched 500 miles from the torrid Mediterranean to Paris, dragging with them two little cannon, at the rate of 18 miles a day, and arrived like Morgan's company without losing a man. A third example of rapid and spontaneous organization combined with such astonishing endurance would be hard to find."



GEN. DANIEL MORGAN

When the Frederick county riflemen reached Cambridge, there occurred a dramatic incident in which there was a touch of pathos as well. For these Virginians from the beautiful Shenandoah valley and the wooded slopes of the Blue Ridge mountains were George Washington's neighbors. Their coming gave that harassed commander one of his few bright moments at a time when the petty bickerings and intrigues of intercolonial jealousy were making his task of building an army seem well-nigh impossible.

Seeing the dust-covered riflemen file into camp, the commander-in-chief reined in his horse and asked whence they came. Their leader answered with words that must have been music to Washington's ears.

"From the right bank of the Potomac, sir!"

"FROM THE RIGHT BANK OF THE POTOMAC, SIR!"

said Daniel Morgan, and Washington was so moved by this reply that he dismounted at once and went along the company front, shaking hands with each man while tears rolled down his cheeks.

At the same time that the riflemen of Frederick county, Virginia, were speeding north with Dan'l Morgan, another company of sharpshooters from another Frederick county—Maryland—was also on the march. It was commanded by Capt. Michael Cresap, the son of Col. Thomas Cresap, a well-known Maryland pioneer. Young Cresap had been an Indian trader at Redstone, near the present site of Brownsville, Pa., in 1772. The next year found him making his first bid for fame as a settler on lands beyond the Ohio, claimed by George Washington. Here he persisted in staying, despite Washington's offer to pay him for any improvements he had made if he would depart and despite the threat of a lawsuit if he didn't move.

But it remained for an incident at the opening of the Dunmore war to make the name of Michael Cresap famous all along the frontier. For he was unjustly accused of murdering the family of the great Mingo chief, Logan, who had confused that massacre with another killing in which Cresap, as leader of a party of rangers, had been involved.

Cresap and his riflemen, 22 of whom had served with him in the Dunmore war, left Frederick on July 18, 1775, and marched the 500 miles to Cambridge between that date and August 8. It would be interesting to know what Washington's feelings were when this erstwhile squatter on his Ohio lands entered his camp in Cambridge. Did His Excellency welcome his arrival any the less gratefully than he had that of the Virginia and Pennsylvania sharpshooters. It is not likely that he did, for in the greatness of George Washington there was no room for petty prejudices.

These riflemen, be they Marylanders, Virginians or Pennsylvanians, were men of the same stripe. They were, as Washington Irving describes them, "stark hunters and bushfighters, such stalwart fellows as Washington had known in his early campaigns." Incidentally, in all Washington's orders he persisted in calling them "Riffle Companies"—proving again that he was better as a general than as a speller!

Now that Washington's "Riffle Men" are here, take a look at them as they swagger through the shady streets of Cambridge town, "exciting," so Irving tells us, "much gaze and wonder among the rustic visitors to the camp."

They are dressed for the most part in flannel shirts, cloth or buckskin breeches, buckskin leggings and moccasins. Over these they wear fringed hunting shirts, some of brown linen, some of buckskin, bleached white, and a few of linsey woolsey. On their heads rest small round hats or coonskin caps, the sign and symbol of the frontiersman.

But the most striking part of their costume is the display on it of the words "Liberty or Death!" Lossing, in his "Field Book of the Revolution," says that the legend was spread in great letters across their hunting shirts, whereas Graham, Morgan's chief biographer, places it on their headgear. But the place where it appeared is immaterial. The sentiment was the thing that counted most and it was Patrick Henry's stirring speech in old St. John's church in Richmond which gave them the motto that was their rallying cry on many a hard-fought field of the Revolution.

The remainder of their costume is in keeping with its Indian origin, even though not all of them, like Cresap's men, are painted like red men. Into the leather belt which holds the hunting shirt in at the waist are thrust the tomahawk and that keen-edged weapon which has caused their redskin enemies to call all frontiersmen the "Long Knives" or "Big Knives." The shot pouch, which contains the small round balls of lead, the bullet mold and some flax or tow for cleaning the rifle, hangs from a strap across the shoulder. There, too, is the powder horn, scraped and scraped until it is almost as thin and transparent as isinglass.

In the hollow of their arms or slanting across their brawny shoulders is tossed carelessly the long rifle which is so soon to become the terror of "Tommy Gage's Lobsterbacks." For, during the siege of Boston, many a British soldier learned to his sorrow that it was not safe to show his head within 200 yards of these "d—d widow and orphan-makers," as they called the riflemen. Significant of their deadly accuracy is the statement of Thacher that "at a review, a company of them, while on a quick advance, fired their balls into objects of seven inches diameter, at the distance of 250 yards."

During the autumn of 1775 three companies of riflemen—Morgan's Virginians and Smith's and Hendricks' Pennsylvanians—accompanied Arnold and Montgomery on the expedition to Quebec. Hendricks was killed during the assault in December and Morgan and most of the riflemen were taken prisoners. On January 1, 1776, the army was reorganized, the Pennsylvania Battalion of Riflemen became the First Pennsylvania Regiment of the Continental army and were placed under the command of Edward Hand as colonel. Later in the year Morgan returned to the army through an exchange of prisoners and became colonel of the Eleventh Virginia regiment (later designated as the Seventh) composed of remnants of the company he had led north from Frederick at the opening of the war and other sharpshooters recruited for the regiment.

In June, 1777, Washington, convinced that the sharpshooting ability of these frontiersmen from Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia might prove a decisive factor in the war if concentrated in one unit and led by the right officers, decided to organize such a corps. As a result the "Corps of Riflemen" or the "Corps of Rangers," (Washington used both names in referring to it) came into existence. It was also known as "Morgan's Riflemen" and "Morgan's Partizan Corps" because its colonel was Daniel Morgan. Richard Butler of the Ninth Pennsylvania was made lieutenant-colonel and Capt. Joseph Morris of New Jersey became major.

The captains, according to Wilkinson's Memoirs, were Samuel J. Cabell, Thomas Posey, Gabriel Long of Maryland (other authorities list him as a Virginian), Van Swearingen of the Eighth Pennsylvania, James Parr of the First Pennsylvania, Hawkins Boone of the Twelfth Pennsylvania, Matthew Henderson of the Ninth Pennsylvania and a Captain Knox whose former affiliation is unknown. The corps consisted of approximately 500 men, transferred from the various regiments serving in the Continental line. Of this number Pennsylvanians supplied 193 officers and men, Virginia, 163, and Maryland, 65.

The riflemen soon justified Washington's faith in their ability and they behaved so gallantly as to win special mention from His Excellency in a letter to congress. In it he spoke of "their conduct and bravery where they constantly advanced upon an enemy far superior in numbers and well secured behind redoubts."

When the threat of Burgoyne's invasion loomed on the northern horizon, the commander-in-chief decided that General Gates needed these rangers more than he did. In a letter to Gov. George Clinton of New York he said: "I am forwarding as fast as possible to join the Northern Army, Col. Morgan's Corps of Riflemen, amounting to five hundred. These are all chosen men selected from the army at large, well acquainted with the use of rifles, and with that mode of fighting which is necessary to make them a good counterpoise to the Indians, and they have distinguished themselves on a variety of occasions since the formation of the corps, in skirmishes with the enemy."

Morgan and his men were destined to distinguish themselves even more in the Saratoga campaign. They were invaluable both in the desultory sniping attacks on Burgoyne's camp and in pitched battle. Under the leadership of the dashing Benedict Arnold they won laurels on the bloody field of Freeman's Farm and added to them at the decisive Battle of Stillwater, although Gates basely deprived both Morgan and Arnold of the credit that was justly theirs. In fact, it was at Stillwater that one of the riflemen fired another "shot heard 'round the world." For when a ball from the rifle of Timothy Murphy, the Pennsylvanian, struck down Gen. Simon Fraser, Burgoyne's ablest subordinate, he sealed the doom of luckless "Gentleman Johnny's" army and made Saratoga the "turning point of the Revolution."

Early in 1778 Morgan, whose health had been broken by the hardships he had undergone, returned to his home in Virginia to recuperate. Thereupon Major Posey, successor to Major Morris, who had been killed in an engagement during the winter of 1777, became commander. But the "Old Wagoner" was back in the field in time to lead his riflemen to further honors at the Battle of Monmouth. Soon afterwards he gave up the command again. The corps was broken up and various companies assigned to different regiments.

The disbandment of Morgan's Rifle Corps prevented the establishment of what might have been a splendid tradition in the history of American arms. A recent historian has pointed out that "some 35 years before congress authorized the raising of ten companies of border riflemen, George II had looked to the highland border of north Britain for a regiment to have the virtues peculiar to the frontier, and ten companies were raised from the Highlanders whose duty had been to 'watch upon the braes' This regiment became the Black Watch, famous today. The famous American rifle corps would have had its identity preserved in the American army if a similar useful traditionalism had prevailed in the United States. It has not and there are no Morgan's Rifles."

It is true that there are no "Morgan's Rifles" in the American army today. But the glory of that name is imperishably preserved in the record of their achievements on the battlefields of Saratoga and Monmouth and along the trail which Sullivan, the "Town Destroyer," blazed through the gloomy forests of the Iroquois country from Tioga to Genesee Castle. And so long as the story of the struggle for American liberty is repeated, so long will "The Riflemen of the Revolution" be a shining name in the annals of our nation.

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Do women make more noise than motor cars?

According to an American professor of physics, yes. Giving evidence in an action to restrain a factory from making an excessive amount of noise, he described experiments with a sound meter which he had carried out in the district. These showed that women talking in their homes made 40 times more noise than the factory, and 50 per cent more noise than passing cars.

Apparently women talk more loudly in America, for experiments in this country show "loud conversation" as only double the noise of a suburban street, and two-thirds that of a pneumatic drill at 20 feet distance.

But the worst noise of all, according to one distinguished scientist, is one we can't hear. A few months ago he showed the congress of radio biology how ultra-sound waves could burn the fingers of a man holding a glass tube, although the tube itself was not heated. He claimed that it was possible to be killed by these vibrations, which were really sounds, although they could not be perceived by the naked ear.

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