

A Journal of  
The Trenton-Princeton Campaign

as Kept by

John F. Denis

Company of Captain Oliver Hanchett

My alarm went off at 7 AM, and I slowly gathered my gear and began to dress. Taking no chances on inclement temperatures in the Jerseys, I donned my thermals, one pair of regular socks and two pairs of long stockings, a wool sweater, my complete Concord uniform, a rifle shirt, my coat, and a scarf.

Judy was awake by 7:30 and prepared a bag lunch of two pot roast sandwiches, one cheese sandwich, crackers, and a piece of her birthday cake. Still full of cake from the night before, I had only a bowl of cornflakes and a glass of orange juice to breakfast.

By 8:20 we were saying our farewells and I was on my way to Sudbury. I noted the temperature as 14<sup>o</sup> F on a bank sign down the road a block or two. There was very little traffic — perhaps a half dozen cars — all the way into Sudbury Center this New Year's morning.

Shortly before 9:00 I pulled into the parking lot behind the town hall. I pulled in beside Joe and Winnie Rose, whom I had not seen in some little while. Slightly more than half of our fellow soldiers had arrived by now.

After exchanging greetings, we began to stow our gear aboard the Peter Pan bus. Having learned my lesson well with AEQ, I was traveling quite light, my baggage being a single roll of blanket, blanket leggings, and sleeping bag held by one belt. My musket, slings, and lunch I took into the passenger compartment.

At 9:13, the roll call having been taken by Capt. Palmer True, the bus rolled out toward the Massetts Pike. Joe and I had a long and pleasant chat about reenactments past and future, and the time flew by. The men of Sudbury offered us beer, and I was happy to take a can of Schlitz to chase my breakfast. Soon Capt. True came back to see if all was well with us, which it was. Joe and I split my lunch bag's contents, and I had some of his grapes.

It is not very long before you are out of the rather unpleasant East Jersey and into a very lovely, hilly, wooded country around Morristown. At 1:30 PM we were in the parking lot of Jockey Hollow National Park near Morristown. Here we left our bus and began a brief drill session to reacquaint ourselves with the Sudbury manual of arms, which is rather different from Concord's.

Soon we were marching the hilly mile toward that portion of the park in which the 2nd Pennsylvania had encamped in the winter of 1779-1780. Capt. True decided it best not to allow the flying of various company colors within our composite unit. (Most of our comrades are AEQ veterans of Ward's Co., while only three of us present are of Hanchett Co.) The captain took the opportunity of this march to put us through various moves in the manual.

The march was a bit strenuous for those of us out of practice, but I was quite warm with my coat buttoned and scarf tied. At length we arrived in a small vale and were brought to attention. Behind us was a replica of the hospital of 1780 and behind that a clear patch containing the doctors' failures. Up on a hillside before us were five cabins such as those which housed the Continental Army. 197 years ago there were a thousand such hereabouts.

Saturday, 1 January 1977

When we fell out, Joe and I climbed up the slope past several skiers to get a better look at the cabins. This area is remarkably heavily wooded. The air was cold, but comfortable, and but for an occasional small cloud the sky was clear as it had been all day. We soon learned that we might have stayed this night in these old style quarters, but snug though they were we were probably better off elsewhere.

About 3:10 PM the assembly sounded and we all plowed back to the road to reform. We marched "troop step" all the way back to the parking area where several visitors had gathered. We gave a brief performance of the manual and then fell out to the visitors' center where we would spend the night.

Joe and I walked the short distance to the old Wick's House, headquarters of Gen. Arthur St. Clair. This farm area is beautifully kept, but all sites are closed on New Year's Day.

About 5:00 the bus reappeared and dropped off our sleeping gear, and we all went about finding the softest bricks for our bedding.

The company then divided in two so that we could carpool in divisions to the home of the Maker and Bradshaw families in Morris-town for dinner. These hosts of ours also had arranged for our lodging here at the park. I went with the second division and was seated by 6:30. Ham, meatloaf, cole slaw, sweet potatoes, rolls, coffee, punch, and pie were delicious — better by far than we had expected on this trek.

By 8:00 we were back in quarters for the night. There was plenty of beer and fife and drum music. Lights went out around 11:00, but the noise and commentary continued till well after midnight. I've heard quieter boyscout camps.

So begins the "year of the bloody sevens."

Sunday, 2 January 1977

"The Three Camps" sounded at 7:00 AM, but as the lights were still off it was difficult to arise. The heat had been turned way down in the early morning hours, and I was glad that I had stripped no further than to my shirt and breeches. I had very little sleep, though I felt quite rested. The chatter, jokes, animal calls, and songs did not end until well after midnight only to be replaced by the snoring.

The weather was perfect again this morning. Breakfast — continental of course — was soon served, but I had only one Danish and some orange juice. Soon we were rolling our packs and policing the area.

Our bus arrived around 8:30 and we were quickly aboard. I had no idea of the temperature, but today I felt the need of the rifle shirt over the rest of my clothing. The blanket leggings are quite snug.

We drove down Rte 206 and through Princeton on our way to the National Guard air field near Lawrenceville. We arrived at this campsite around 10:15 AM, and soon we were inside a fair-size hangar where several hundred cots were already set up. The orders were for the companies and brigades to bunk together, so we stayed close to Ward Co.

There were many familiar faces in this building. I quickly found George Brooks and Jack Dwyer, my two shipmates from AEQ. Jack told me that eighteen members of Dearborn Co. had camped out for the full period of the Ten Crucial Days.

It was not long before we found Sarah and Peter Murray here, so Hanchett Co. began to fill out a bit.

Joe assumed command of our little band and went over to the HQ desk to sign us in. Information is still a bit sketchy at this point, but apparently there will be little for those of us in Hitchcock's Brigade to do this afternoon. One other brigade alone will be allowed to skirmish with the British on the Assunpink.

(Lunch was provided by Ward Co. from our \$25 travel fee: McDonald's Quarter-pounder, French fries, and Coke.)

Hand's Brigade left a little behind schedule, some seventy-eight muskets strong. Soon afterward Col. Woodbridge announced that all remaining units must be ready for safety inspection at 1:30 and aboard busses at 2:00 for the Second Battle of Trenton.

In the meantime a problem arose concerning Sarah and Sebastian. Capt. True informed us that it was a Ward Co. policy that no girls or musicians should march or appear in battle. Hanchett Co. was just too small to appear alone, so we thought to ask Jack Dwyer of Dearborn Co. if our two young members could march with him, and he graciously agreed.

Larry and Carl Zuelke joined us after a drive straight through from Masstts, and Dan and Bernadette McLaughlin also arrived from Brooklyn. Dan went along with Dearborn to keep an eye on our Sarah and Sebastian.

Ward Co. then fell in within an open space in the hangar for a brief drill. The detached members of Hanchett Co. fell in so as to fill out the uneven ranks of Ward's four squads, and I fell in at the rear of squad one.

We had no time to fall out when all units in Hitchcock's Brigade were called to order for inspection. No inspection took place here, but we stood for twenty minutes or so in the warm building wrapped in our winter gear and sweating.

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At length we moved out and boarded one of a dozen or more National Guard busses. The heat here was positively soporific, and I was yawning quite regularly before long. Our first stop turned out to be wrong — we were at the British position — so we had to reboard to be driven around the block to the parking lot of the state unemployment. Here we stood in a stiff, cold breeze for nearly half an hour until the safety inspection could begin.

When the sun was quite low in the west we marched out to take up our positions on the south bank of Assunpink Brook. The battle was to take place in a small public park where the stream runs perhaps thirty feet below the level of the surrounding ground.

As we approached our positions, we first passed before seven or eight field pieces of the 4 to 6-pound variety set on the heights. In order to be clear of their fire, we marched down some cement steps to the bank of the stream and then under a walkbridge until Ward Co. had formed two lines on the easternmost end of our army's line. Then the other infantry units began to file in behind us, until there were a full four firing lines, including one along the top of a tier of retaining stones.

The Assunpink is a stinking, greenish stream about twenty feet wide, which rolls swiftly over a number of wide flat rocks and pieces of trash at this point. Here we stood, I in the front line just opposite several tall trees on the north bank, and waited as the sun went lower. According to the word sent through the ranks, someone had forgot to send busses to transport the enemy.

As we waited, my feet grew cold in the snow and my hands began to numb. After twenty minutes or more, I handed Joe my musket and headed up some nearby steps to take a few slides. No sooner did I have my camera out than I heard Capt. True call us to prime and load. I hurried back to my place, followed orders, and then stood to wait again. Finally I pulled my gloves and mittens on again, and this shortly brought the British, as expected.

The first fire was given by our artillery, and from the blast those pieces gave I was glad we were well below their level and out of their view. Infantry fire began with a unit at our end of the footbridge and then was taken up on our far left.

At last Capt. True gave us orders to make ready, at which command our front rank knelt in the snow to get below the blast of the second rank. At the command "take aim" we found that we had to point upward to come close to the British positions. Immediately after our first fire we stood to prime and load for a second volley. The muzzle blast from the ranks behind us was disconcerting but not uncomfortable.

All along the line the muzzle flashes of volleys fired flared across the gloom. Though the redcoats were all but invisible to us on the far heights, their smoke and volley flashes made it clear just where they were.

On two or three occasions my flint slipped and caused misfires, but I did get off eighteen successful shots in volley. So dark was it becoming that I enjoyed the unusual sight of my own muzzle flash.<sup>1</sup>

Three times a redcoat flank company pushed onto the footbridge only to be repulsed. In looking at those silhouettes on the bridge I noticed that they had long since given up the pretense of shooting high and each man took deliberate aim at his adversary. Our wounded began to pile up around a small tree to my left.

A little after we received the order to cease fire, the British made a last push for the bridge and were repulsed. With this the

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battle ended.

We then marched back up the steps and off toward our busses in the last glow of light in the west. Transportation was catch as catch can, but this was no real problem. By 5:45 we were back in the hangar and watching the supper line grow. Supper was good roast beef, mashed potatoes, gravy, salad, bread, and fruit salad, which I ate sitting on the floor for want of table space.

After supper a giant jam session began, to which I was invited, but I declined. As it came about, I didn't know most of their selections anyway.

Eventually the music was pushed outside as half our lights were cut and a documentary on Jersey during the Revolution was shown. Interest was mixed. This show was followed by a presentation of slides taken of the Delaware Crossing and the Battle of Trenton a week earlier.

The March to Princeton was scheduled for 11:30 PM, but at 10:15 came the call to fall in on the far side of the hangar. There was a mad scramble, since there had been no forewarning. Brigade officers saw that all companies formed a single column of twos and that our number did not exceed 200. I believe there were a few more than 150 in all.

Rather than stand about indoors in our winter wrappings, we marched out into the parking lot, presumably to board the busses to Mill Hill Park, site of this afternoon's battle. Once in the lot we halted and then waited for a good long while. There was but one bus available. And so we stood and joked and stamped our feet and sampled various flasks. At one point we all marched to the far end of the lot and back. Then we waited once more.

The bus that finally got us had no heat, so someone had to stand by the driver to scrape the windshield for him. I was lucky to get a seat.

When we arrived at the park we found a large bonfire being tended by Dearborn Co. This one fire represented the many bonfires built by Washington's rearguard to screen his march to Princeton. Shortly before midnight our columns began to recreate this march. Unlike our predecessors we had our music to march to, along with a police escort. All along the freezing streets of Trenton, awakened citizens leaned from their windows or came out onto their porches to greet us. No one seemed upset at the commotion we caused.

We had been scheduled to cover three miles, but I am sure we went no more than two. All agreed that in that cold air we could have covered the full sixteen miles to Princeton with minimal fatigue.

As it was, we halted at the Trenton High School and reboarded our busses. Back at the hangar coffee and doughnuts were prepared for us. By 1:10 AM I was inside my sleeping bag and soon thereafter asleep.

#### Note

- 1: When my flint failed, I adjusted it and then took a shot on my own. After about the third such display of individual initiative, Palmer True chewed me out for messing up the volleys. Thereafter I was careful to be a "team player."

Monday, 3 January 1977

The lights were turned up and some music played at about 5:20 AM, considerably earlier than originally scheduled. I recall very little of these minutes save that my lack of sleep held me stunned. For a number of minutes I sat on my cot, staring at the clothing beneath it, and trying to figure out what to put on first.

There was a breakfast of sorts, but I was afraid of its hindering me on the battlefield, and so I avoided it. I later learned that I had missed nothing special.

Once dressed I followed the example of a number of other men around me and collapsed my cot. Once the cot was retied, I took it to the rear of a National Guard trailer parked inside the hangar. Perhaps twenty cots had already been disposed of. Fortunately Joe Rose and Peter Murray were slow in taking down their cots, so I had a place to sit for awhile.

At 8 AM our Peter Pan bus arrived as requested, and Ward Co. was boarding as we approached. Once Peter had given us another twenty-five cartridges each, Joe and I climbed aboard. The rest of the army was not due to set out until 8:30.

Ward Co. moved out well ahead of the rest and so was first to arrive at the staging area, a shopping center. As there were no signs to be seen, I am not certain of the location, but a check of a none too detailed road map suggests Clarksville as the place. Our wait was rather lengthy, so we stayed on the bus. Joe went over to a nearby vending machine and got a copy of a local paper with a rather good account of yesterday's actions and a number of photographs, including Joe's.

By 9:00 or so the other troops began to arrive, and we were ordered off the bus to form up by brigades. I believe that there were four brigades: Mercer's, Hand's, Sullivan's, and Hitchcock's. Ward's Co. was assigned to Hitchcock, the very end of the army.

The sky was bright with not a cloud to be seen, and there was very little breeze from the north. Standing still in the parking lot soon allowed the bitter cold to seep through my seven layers of clothing, and I was quickly chilled.

Organization was not terribly good, for although the army was all in order we still stood about until well after the proper starting time. There was confusion as to whether our column should be threes or fours. Officers from the Brigade of the American Revolution, wearing continental uniforms and purple sashes were placed in command of the various brigades. Our "Col. Hitchcock" was a fellow from Georgia. He was somewhat tall, a bit hefty, wore his hair no longer than mine, and had a bushy black mustache.

When at length we formed a column of fours, we were ordered to advance the column around the parking lot. And we halted again. The sky was cold and cloudless, and we saw a great hot air balloon come floating down from the north. Its riders waved their greetings and we responded in kind.

Once we had been thoroughly chilled, we began to move out, this being about 9:30 or so. There was much cursing as we crossed patches of ice and slipped and crashed into other ranks. Our officers began to come off like a gang of martinets, as they bellowed their displeasure with our awkwardness. I doubt if any of us much respected any officer above the rank of captain.

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And so we set off down a clear, straight road to the northwest. This road, which I believe was state route 533, crossed through farmland set in a rolling plain. The local inhabitants watched as we passed, and we waved to the children when we saw them. After but a short stretch we were ordered to "route step," but it was easier to march to the drums.

We crossed a short bridge over what appears on my maps to be an arm of Stony Brook which juts out to the southwest from a sharp bend in that stream. On the other side the road turned right to parallel the stream for a few hundred yards and then ran off to the left and straight north toward Princeton. Along this stretch a few of the troops disappeared into the woods, having felt the effects of breakfast.

This land between the two stretches of Stony Brook was quite flat with occasional wood lots between great fields. From time to time individuals would fall out of the line of march to step into the snowy fields and take photos of our progress.

After a mile or more the column approached the last bridge over Stony Brook. A rumor was passed along that we would soon meet skirmishers. I saw a number of men deploy out toward the trees lining the stream and assumed them to be our flankers, but as I got nearer the bridge I realized that these were just more fellows answering nature before the battle. Along the roadway stood several camp followers with muskets in hands and backs demurely turned toward the woods.

Shortly beyond the bridge the column abruptly turned right onto a snow covered track which ran beside someone's driveway. On the four to five inches of packed snow we stumbled, slipped, and broke formation. To our left was a white house whose owners smiled to watch us plod through their backyard and toward yet another line of trees. This path seems to have been the back route by which most of Washington's army had approached Princeton exactly 200 years before.

On the far side of this final dozen yards of woods was an open field upon which the army was marched into an "L" formation along the south and west sides. Hitchcock's Brigade was the last in line and so held the northwest position. This field seemed at least a hundred yards wide at this point. Although fairly flat where our army was now stationed, the field declined rapidly to the north, so that in that direction there was nothing to be seen but another slope perhaps half a mile away across the hidden road into Princeton. Along the northern end of our field several pieces were being worked into position to fire upon the British.

As we drew up to wait, still more men headed into the woods. Peter Murray gave up his breakfast at this time, and I was very happy that I had taken none.

Very soon Colonel Hitchcock introduced to us a Brigade officer of lower rank who was to teach us a special evolution for the coming battle. Our column was to wheel left by ranks so as to form a double line of battle facing east. When the manœuvre was complete, the odd ranks would form the front line, the evens the rear. All would have gone smoothly but for a certain lack of foresight by our drillmaster.

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After our first rehearsal of this move at which time all ranks wheeled left, we were ordered to "about face" and then "wheel right." As a result every man was in a different position from where he had started and odd ranks were now even. After four such dry runs the situation was hopelessly confused. Our drillmaster then disappeared without any further effort to clear up matters.

Some artillery fire then began and in a few moments Mercer's Brigade began the descent to the place of battle with members of the Philadelphia City Cavalry as guides. It was not very long before the other brigades were on their way, and soon we stood alone on this upper part of the field, unable to see any of the battle.

Our order to move came through the walkie-talkie carried by a National Guard sergeant who stood close to our colonel. The command may have come from a helicopter which swept over the area from time to time.

When the colonel ordered us to wheel into line of battle, naturally we fouled up, which pleased him very little. Fortunately no one could see us at the top of the field. Once we had shifted into a proper formation, we were ordered to look to the left toward the VII Massetts Line on whose flag we would guide. Suddenly there was a rebel yell and their ensign unfurled the Confederate Stars and Bars. I believe the word apoplectic best fits the colonel's condition at this point. The offending banner was quickly refurled and the thirteen star flag of Francis Hopkinson replaced it.

We advanced a short distance onto the field and then at the command we began a great left wheel of the two sixty-man lines. Several men in Ward's Co. seized the left elbows of the men to their right so as to lock our formation, and this worked quite well. Once our lines faced north we advanced a few dozen yards to the beginning of the downward slope. The field piece to our left continued to fire as we halted.

Before us lay the clean white battlefield. The various American brigades were formed into fairly steady lines off to the right and left, while in the center was an open area which we were meant to take. The British right was held by the Xth Foot and the left by Highlanders, the XLIIInd. In the center were small bands from various units. There was considerable gunfire, most of it from the Americans, as usual. Behind the road at the back of the battlefield were several thousand spectators.

We were late getting into action already, and now we just stood and watched the proceedings. The colonel yelled down to his second to count off every fourth man in our front line as light infantry for skirmish duty, and he was none too polite in his manner. As my good luck would have it, I was counted off as were three others from Hanchett Co. We skirmishers then advanced ten paces in front of the brigade.

As I stepped forward, I reslung my cartouche to hang directly in front of me for ease in loading. Again we advanced, then we stopped to load, and then we rushed into that gap on the double. No more than two dozen yards from the enemy we halted, knelt, and gave fire.



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My flint failed to spark and I hurried to adjust it.

A second volley was ordered and this time my double load exploded neatly. A third time we stood to load and knelt to fire on command, and again my Bess did her work. There was no effect on the enemy.

On command we stood and began our slow withdrawal back to our lines. Ten or so paces back we again loaded and gave a standing fire on order, and then we were turned about to double time back up the slope. I can march as far as most, but I was not prepared to race up a snowy incline with all my equipment.

Suddenly up on the rise several Rhode Islanders to our left began firing toward us. We yelled at them and they soon stopped. I think they were desperate for any targets at this late point in the battle.

Once back at our lines we skirmishers reformed in the back line, again to await further orders. Enough time passed now for me to take several slides of the battle from this excellent vantage point. As we watched, the Xth Foot opened fire against an American line that had moved in against its right flank.

Finally we began to advance down the slope, and as we did we were ordered to open ranks for the withdrawing troops before us. Somehow that great gap that had yawned earlier had by now begun to tighten over on the right as one of the brigades shifted to its left. Seeing this development, our colonel immediately ordered "oblique left," which is a deft maneuver, save that only veterans of Brooklyn — three of us — had ever done it before. Once again the colonel was displeased with our inefficiency, but we were headed in the right direction momentarily.

Perhaps something was distracting the colonel, for he failed to notice the left of his brigade obliquing into a small stand of trees. His temper was not improved by this, and he quickly had us oblique right, which adjustment caused a collision between our right and those Rhode Islanders who had somehow become detached from us earlier. I thought our colonel would soon be jumping on his hat.

At last we received the order to load and, once the front line had knelt, fire. There was more consternation when some of the men failed to elevate their musket barrels sufficiently. As we loaded once again, the Xth began an advance a la bayonette against the Americans on their flank. This was sufficient to scatter the opposition, and by the time we were clear to fire, the enemy had marched from the field. And so the closing fire in the Battle of Princeton was a salute aimed back up the slope by Hitchcock's Brigade.

Now we stood in the snow for a while, waiting for the parade to begin. Again organization seemed less than perfect. After the confusion of the battle I began to understand something about the apparent lack of discipline in the early Continental Army: Men would seldom follow commands of officers they did not know because such officers might not be trustworthy in action. I would much rather have followed Palmer True into this battle.

At length we marched the mile down the main road to Princeton University, where the original battle had ended. The crowds along the way were far larger than those in Trenton and were quite enthusiastic.

The march ended in the yard behind Nassau Hall where we arrived