

A Journal of
The Battle of Bennington
as Kept by
John F. Denis
of the

Company of Captain Oliver Hanchett

Friday, 12 August 1977

The alarm rang at 8:15 AM, and I looked out to see a very overcast sky — perfect weather for the opening of any Bicentennial activity. I was very slow in gathering myself and I quickly fell off schedule. Breakfast was two slices of toast and a tall glass of orange juice. As soon as I started to move my kit into the car, a moderate rain began. To add to the frustrations my breeches popped one button just as I was about to leave. I was drenched in sweat before I was out the door.

After topping off the gas tank I was under way (from Springfield) at 10:40. I was still on Rte 291 when a nearly blinding downpour began and this continued unabated until just beyond Mt. Tom on Rte 91. To add further frustrations a quarter mile of roadwork up by Holyoke held traffic up for a good quarter hour. I kept my headlights on all the way.

At the traffic circle in Greenfield I switched to Rte 2, which is not a bad road except for those drivers who feel the state's speed limits are too liberal. Around the Mohawk Trail State Park the rain stopped a bit, but at the beginning of the great hairpin descent I found a fog that would do London proud. North Adams traffic was a touch sticky but by now the rain was over.

Rte 7 was easy to find right at the end of the Williams College campus. Again there were drivers who preferred to improve upon Vermont's 50 mph limit and I had to follow one all the way into Bennington. In Bennington there were occasional small orange signs along the road indicating the route to the camp, but these were so irregularly placed as to make me think I had missed my turns. Actually I found the site on my first go round. I pulled in at 1:00 PM and registered at a marquee set up at the rear drive of the Bennington Veterans' Hospital. Peter Murray and Terry Crean had arrived ahead of me.

I followed a dirt — now mud — track past a cornfield and into a recently mown hayfield. I had been warned against swampy areas which were noticeable because of their high grass. Just past the cornfield, at the very entrance to the camping area I found Peter and Terry all set up. I pulled in just beyond Terry's wagon and began to put up my old AEQ tent. Peter had just finished introducing me to Coleen Malone, a friend from the genteel state of New Jersey, when the officer in charge of registration came by in his jeep to tell us that all tents must move farther out on the field, as the nearer regions were reserved for heavy campers. I wasn't too troubled at this, but Peter had just concluded successfully his usual mighty struggle to pitch his tent. So with suitable observations on the officer's habits and lineage, Peter set down to move.

On the far north side of the field on the bank of Roaring Branch,

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a rather low creek, I picked a site near a family from the Militia. The tent went up next to a woodchuck hole, so I'll see how interesting a night I may have. Peter was soon alongside and I gave him a hand so his tent was up without much ado. Terry then came along to pitch his small tent with ours — his family would stay on their original site with the camper wagon.

Peter, Coleen, and I then set out across the camp to where we could see Peter Arnold and Dick Day with their tents. I took along my copy of Justin Smith so I could collect the rest of the Hanchett Co. autographs. After a brief chat with Peter, Dick, and Brian Phillips, we headed back for our camp. I planned to head to McDonald's for lunch, and I would do some shopping along the way. The stores were just about a mile drive away on Rte 67A. At McDonald's I got a Big Mac, a coke, and slow service. Across the street was a market where I bought Peter a case of Bud, ice, and a carton of Viceroy's.

Back at the camp I found some fellows from the 1st Pennsylvania Rifles set up to my left and men and families of the Royal Artillery to my right. Bob Lenington and his wife were also setting up tent near us.

I set to work on the journal. It remained quite sticky. At 4:24 PM the sun made its first appearance and low clouds continued to roll away across the hills. (Lengthy chat with George Brooks.)

In time I decided to head to McDonald's once again, for the others had generally gone off to town for a good dinner. Not wanting to leave my musket unattended, I took it from Peter's tent and headed toward Peter Arnold's area to find a guardian. Once at this part of camp I found Bob and Audrey Childs just arriving and looking for a site. Leaving my Bess with Bob Barnes, I joined the Childses and guided them through the quagmire to our part of the camp. By pulling my car forward a bit I made a space for their tent just next to Peter Murray's.

Seeing the condition of our roadway, I decided against driving out and set out afoot for a hot dog vendor in the center of camp. For \$1.10 I got two good hamburgs and a small coke, and just as I began to eat Frank Records ran up to invite me for supper at his nearby trailer.

I followed Frank to his new "air-stream" where I met Tom Reed, already offering selections on his fire. We noted a gorgeous sunset which was beautifully reflected on the clouds and hills to the east. Frank set burgers on his grill and soon we were eating within his spacious trailer. Bob and June Barnes, Bob and Audrey Childs, Frank and Marge Records, Tom Reed, and I were the members of this housewarming party.

After food and talk, most of the men set out to join a jam session at the far end of camp. Bob Childs and I walked back to our area to get his car and go shopping. Along the way we helped push one car-trailer out of the mire.

Soon we were back at the store mentioned above where Bob selected groceries, while I called Springfield. It was about 9:20 PM by the store clock. I gave my mother directions to get here and hope that she and Judy will arrive by 10:30 tomorrow.

Back at camp I got into a talk with my neighbors from the Royal

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Artillery, who had great complaints at being short-changed in the action at Hubbardton. Terry Crean had rejoined me. He had been fortifying himself against the "cold" all day with Newburyport rum and was still about it. We then moved back to the center of camp where most of Hanchett Co. had by now settled.

I enjoyed a couple of Bill Dempster's beers and met many of my old comrades-in-arms around the campfire. Even Sarah and Sebastian were here. Jason Korell came by, and Thornton McGlamery joined us. There was some talk of the original battle and consideration of future events. Ben Soule and Anne sang some folk songs at the fire.

I headed back for the tents with Terry. He turned in right away. I spoke a bit with Peter Murray who did not take his meal very well, then I went into my car to catch up on the Journal. Turned in at 12:08 AM.

Some stars visible. Everything damp and cool. Distant fife and drum music continued for at least an hour.

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Camp noise and a gunshot awakened me far too early. A look outside showed that the perfectly clear sky of a few hours earlier had long been covered by overcast. It was cold enough for breath to be visible. By 7:10 AM I had managed to get myself out of the tent to look for a clean pair of stockings. The grass everywhere was soaked with dew. Someone was off playing "The Three Camps."

Peter Murray seemed to be feeling better, though he had nothing good to say about the restaurant he had visited last night. I joined Bob and Audrey Childs in the hike up to the breakfast area. Along the way a number of returning diners commented on the "rubber" eggs. Still we pushed on. The chow line stretched a good hundred yards out along the muddy road, but it moved quickly enough.

Breakfast: one serving spoon of cold scrambled eggs, two slices of cold chewy ham, a warm small biscuit, and tepid coffee. It was edible. We were joined by Frank and Marge Records at the long line of picnic tables near the National Guard mess kitchen. This food didn't require too much of our time.

I had left my musket with Bob Barnes over night and it was now locked in his car. While I awaited his return I set about collecting the rest of the Hanchett autographs. Some of the fellows were still preparing cartridges, and since Peter Murray's loader was jamming, I loaned them my brass measure. Once Bob Barnes had got me the musket, I walked back to my car to get the various slings.

A drill of the manual of arms was set for 10:00 AM, and Paul Hansell took sixteen of us through our paces with no difficulty. We marched up and down our muddy road a couple of times, and Paul was satisfied that we would do well in action — "a fine body of men," as he often says.

At this point I realized I had better get out to the main gate to meet Judy and my mother, who were to arrive there about 10:30. At first I was delayed by some fellow who was curious about my Navy Arms Brown Bess. Then in the parking area next to the cornfield I found Jack and Colin Chisholm, recently arrived and getting into uniform. At the H.Q. marquee I made inquiries and received registration cards and meal tickets for my two "camp followers."

I took up my position by the driveway entrance and watched a line of barely moving cars trying to enter the grounds. The road was already lined by parked cars, and only those camping were being allowed to park on the grounds. Furthermore, a state-wide firemen's muster was blocking the other end of the street, so the entrance to this place must also be the exit. Momentarily a young lady who had parked just before the driveway decided to leave. I stood in the vacated spot and not five cars down the road sighted Judy. With much helpful direction from Hanchett men — perhaps too much — the car was finally settled in the best of all possible spots.

The three of us walked over to my campsite where we quickly dug into a lunch of ham and cheese sandwiches and root beer. We felt that it would be best to move quickly up to the battlefield ahead of the mobs. It was quite a hike. We got directions from an officer returning from his tour of the field. Just beyond a business parking lot a small dirt road led upward to higher ground which was our part of the battlefield. Unsure of the exact location

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of Herrick Division's activities, I strolled over to a log redoubt where some men were preparing the exploding ammunition wagon. This was indeed the Hessian redoubt and all of our activities would be screened from most spectators by a thick line of trees and undergrowth. There was a possible location behind the battlefield, but as the access was not easy the girls opted to stay near the grandstands.

It took me seventeen minutes at a quick-step to get back to camp. After a short beer with Terry Crean I had some need of a visit to a "sentry box," but it was even more important that I get my ammunition. My regular cartridge box was less than half full when Ron Davis called the company out for inspection at 1:00 PM. Once the safety inspection and a brief run-through of our manoeuvres was over I scarcely had time to grab cartridges to fill the rest of the box. There was no chance to get an extra box from Ben Soule, I had to leave Peter Murray's full canteen behind, and the sentry boxes faded behind us as Ron marched us off to the field by the driveway to await the words of John Stark (Sam Hall).

It was a long wait filled with danger. Somebody's skittish horse got away and began to charge through the gathered army. No one seemed to be able to control him, and drummers who kept on banging away just egged him on. I didn't see how the matter was resolved. Arthur Rawlings joined us at about this time, and Mel Fuller of Coburn's (musketless but with a sword) fell in with us too. A bit off to our left we spotted Palmer True and the boys of the 4th Middlesex Militia, our sometimes companions.

About 1:55 Sam Hall gave us Stark's stirring speech promising success or Molly Stark's widowhood. We responded with 3 (or 4) huzzas. And so Herrick's Division set out at the head of the army to flank around behind the Hessians.

The cold morning had long since given way to a hot, sticky, and sunny afternoon, though by now a few darkening clouds threatened some rain. We moved up the East Road and once we began the ascent Ron ordered us to a rout step. Mel and I chatted all along about past experiences. At the top of the hill the line swung left into the dirt drive leading to the spectators' area. Here we halted to wait some more and began to chat with friends from the 4th who had drawn up across from us. Joe Rose mentioned a possibility of joining some of these folks for a trip to Brandywine in September — more information to come.

At length certain companies (the 4th Middlesex was Second Company in our divisional line) began to lead our way into the undergrowth covering the northern fringe of the battlefield. A path of sorts had been cleared for us about two persons wide. Some of the growth had been cut away, but many sapling stems had simply been pressed to the ground and on small slopes caused leather bottomed shoes to slip. Groups of tourists were already waiting at points along the trail. Even Sarah and Sebastian were moving onto the field today, taking turns carrying Dan McLaughlin's musket. Hanchett Co. moved in a double line so that we could simply face left and be in firing position.

We were Fifth Company in Samuel Herrick's Division and so located to the left of our line. Our initial position was fairly open to view and back along the path, perhaps 60 yards or more from the

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Hessian log redoubt, which was in view. The right of the division curved around to the front slightly and stretched downward into a slight depression which circled around the Hessian position on the high ground. Actually the enemy position was only slightly higher, if at all, than our left. On a boulder in front of our line stood Col. Herrick (Don Quinn of Arlington) in his green coat, sword in hand, directing our moves. Moving along before our line to the left, acting as an adjutant, was the former captain of the Menotomy Minute Men, who had commanded at my first battle, the Jason Russell House, back in April of '75.

Back on the parade ground each of Herrick's companies had told off four men to act as skirmishers before the general action. Peter Murray, Peter Arnold, Bob Appleyard, and advanced about ten yards along with the others, and at Herrick's order gave two volleys and then rejoined the ranks. This was about 2:55 PM and a little before the scheduled opening of hostilities; however, I later heard that the various British forces had opened fire elsewhere long before most American units were in place. Judy said that there was a good twenty minutes of firing before anything more than distant smoke could be seen from the main viewing stands.

On our right the companies began firing about now, and Ron Davis called for the front rank to advance with muskets already loaded and primed. I could see two light infantrymen inside the redoubt and to the left of them a dozen or so "dragoons" — actually members of the 1st New Hampshire Regt. At the command we aimed — typically I set my sights on the light blue Hessian flag — and fired with good success. Ron then ordered first rank back to prime and load and second rank forward to fire. This was our old technique for firing at Quebec. For the first three rounds all seemed to go smoothly, but as I advanced with my fourth cartridge loaded we saw a Hessian officer advancing with sword, hilt up, held above his head. Although it was pretty obvious that he wished to parley — it was far too early for a surrender — a few shots were taken farther down the line. There was no word just then as to the matter, but I later heard that there was great confusion among our enemies over just what the program was. And so the "best of enemies" exchanged information before going on to exchange shots.

The shooting resumed before too long and by stages we advanced a few yards. Then came the first of two separate requests from the adjutant to give way to our left to cover the smaller Sixth Company, which was gathering to move into the line of trees which was on our far left and covered an enemy fieldpiece. It was just as well that we received this opportunity, for Fourth Company showed a tendency to advance and so overlap our right flank and obscure our field of fire.

Our first extension to the left put Frank Records just to the right of an 8-foot boulder, and for a time this was the advanced position for our firing line. The front rank was now standing at the edge of a thick growth of weeds standing five to seven feet high. From here you could see only the blue flag and Col. Baum, who was mounted. Each round burned away the tops of weeds. It was a real treat when the adjutant ordered fixed bayonets, the first time I've had use of it in action in three years. I could see no evidence of

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enemy bayonet advances thus far.

Around this time our two ranks began to melt into each other so that the firing rank was always larger than that loading. I know that, while I continued to move with the orders given to "number one rank," from time to time I found myself aligned with different partners. Ron got a bit upset over this and made several attempts to reorganize and control the ranks. Some men were using paper left in the barrels and fired out, but the divisional officers ordered an end to this for fear of starting brush fires. Then there was concern over possible double loads. The adjutant yelled that we would need every cartridge singly to cover the whole battle.

Again came an order, this one to withdraw "gracefully." I found three trees and thick scrub behind me, which I plowed through with some difficulty. My loose shoes were now filling with twigs and other trash. For the second time we shifted left and then advanced, bayonets now resheathed. This advance put five of us to the left of the tall boulder (ten in both ranks) and left the firing line out of view of the captain. Now we also enjoyed a fairly open field of fire around the left end of the redoubt wall. And so we continued to fire as before on orders. Ben Soule would clamber up onto the boulder and lie atop it to take careful aim at the enemy for each of his shots.

At about this time a girl with rifle and rifle shirt came up along our lines looking for a company to join. She had missed most of the battle now having been sent from the field because she was dressed as a woman and then again because she was too young. She admitted to being fifteen, but I told her to keep quiet about it, take a place at the end of our line, and follow the captain's orders. Since she had made her rifle from a kit, I figured correctly that she must know how to use it. Most likely this would be her only chance at a Bicentennial battle. She did well.

There was now a halt in our firing as an army ambulance moved down between our lines to the right. Later in the evening I learned that some participant had suffered a heart attack. Fortunately since there were no designated casualties today, he was quickly spotted. As someone noted, had he fallen at Hubbardton he would have gone unnoticed.

With the departure of the ambulance, firing resumed. Now as we were still aligned on the boulder we were warned that the ammunition wagon, which was maybe 25 yards in front of me, was about to go up. I was in the loading rank now, and we all crouched down. The wagon sides and the ammunition box were made of styrofoam. Loose black powder and two or three proper size firecrackers were set off by electric wires — fine lot of smoke and noise.

We now advanced ten yards into Hessian fire and then withdrew before their bayonet advance. As they withdrew the entire divisional line now moved in causing great crowding at the curve of the line. Several companies now took cover to fire from behind the redoubt wall.

Around this time, though I did not see it, Col. Baum was "shot" from his horse. I had now loaded my 22nd cartridge when Hessian resistance collapsed and officers called for cease fire. Firing stopped almost immediately and we all dumped our loads and cleared our priming. Col. Baum was carried writhing from the field for the benefit of TV cameras.

Oliver Hanchett Co. now drew up in a double line and prepared to

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leave the field. The order of units for this parade was unclear, but we were about at the middle of the American section. Our fans, including Judy and my mother, walked alongside the army. Along the rocky path we saluted General Stark and then continued our stop and start pace at rout step. Once off the field and onto the hardtop we returned to regular marching order and moved back to the camp.

There were delays along the way, and what little water there was was passed along the line — I got far less than a mouthful. It was very hot and hazy, and the stuff in my shoes was awful by now. Then a hundred or so yards from the campsite entrance we halted. From here each company was to file through the gate in a column of twos so that each man could receive his bronze medallion.

Judy and my mother stayed by the car, so as soon as Hanchett Co. was beyond the gate I climbed back through the bars to see the girls off. At the car I was able to sit and empty my shoes. After the goodbyes I went back into the camp. There were still three or four companies waiting at the gate. There were even bigger mobs at the sentry boxes, so I continued back to my car.

Once the musket was away I got out the cans of root beer left over from lunch. They were warm, but I drank two of them gladly. Audrey Childs offered some cheese and crackers. Bob and Jackie Bowen were visiting our area and we all had a congenial chat.

Our great need was for ice and, as some was said to be on sale at the hot dog stand, I went there. Of course the full supply had already been sold out and would not be replaced until 7:30 PM, so a trip to the store was required. My car being the only one not blocked in, I set out with the shopping list. Other soldiers were in line, and that Petco store must have set a new record in beer sales. I got a 6-pack for Bob Childs, split a case of Bud with Peter Murray, bought a 6-pack of grape soda for my sweet tooth and seven pounds of ice.

Back at camp I quickly took off my shoes and put on my moccasins, which afforded much relief. In short order I finished two beers and four grape sodas. All this while I was pestered with questions by a four year old nephew of one of the Royal Artillerymen, as I had been yesterday. I managed to shake him off by getting back to work on the Journal.

In a while all the couples in my area got into cars and set out in search of showers reported at the local high school. I stayed behind to keep an eye on things and continued on the Journal. For supper I took the last three ham and cheese sandwiches. The sky now had a thick haze and as darkness fell a cool breeze came up from time to time. Lines were forming for the "Ox-Roast," but I figured they would be too long.

When it became too dark to write, I picked up my musket and a beer and set out to find the location of the 4th Middlesex. The campground was much larger than I had first realized and many of the tents were deserted for the chow line. I found no one I recognized and so headed back toward my tent; then through the dark I spotted Palmer True with two plates of beef. He invited me to follow him back to his company's area.

I got to talking with Russ Longworth* and we were quickly joined

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by Gordon Savatsky. We compared notes on the battle and I learned about activity on Herrick's right. As at Ft. Anne, the 4th's front rank knelt and both ranks fired together. The front rank could see absolutely nothing through or over the undergrowth. We went on to discuss past and future campaigns. There was some talk that Tony Walker has plans afoot for Saratoga.

Some of the younger members of the 4th returned from the Military Ball having been turned away because their outfits were too informal. Then along came Bob McLean in full formal highland gentleman's kit. His broadsword would certainly gain him admittance.

In time I wished all a good night and moved back toward my area. Again there was no one about, so I made my way over the drying mud toward Hanchett Co.'s central area. Brian Phillips, Dick Day, and Peter Arnold sat around a fire, where I joined them. Peter mentioned plans for Stoney Point in the fall of '78. We talked some of the decline of Dartmouth, and he commented on my sounding like an old reactionary. Eventually all of my friends turned in, and I went back to my tent.

Although the camp was generally more quiet than it had been on Friday night, there were a couple of parties going on around my area. I spread out my sleeping bag and lay down for a while. Not feeling sleepy, I sat in the opening of my tent. I then realized that for the first time in a long while I was bored. I began to think of going back to Springfield and skipping the parade. When Bob Childs drove in I made up my mind and told him so, pleading lame feet, which I did have. When Peter Murray arrived I had already struck my tent.

At 11:40 I started to drive from the camp. The road was fairly clear all the way, though in North Adams I saw distant lightning. I followed the same route as I had coming up. I was at home by 2:10 AM Sunday.

P.S. My decision was proved right. On Monday evening I learned that the Sunday parade in Bennington was closed to most colonial units. Apparently the jealousy of the mustering firemen won the day. The camp was breaking up by mid-morning of Sunday.

Note

*: Obviously this was Les Longworth.