

A Journal of
The Valley Forge Encampment
as Kept by
John F. Denis
of the
Fourth Middlesex Regiment of Massachusetts Militia

Saturday, 17 December 1977

I had gone to bed at midnight after a hurried last minute packing of small items, and now my alarm went off at 3:50 AM. Despite such short rest, I had no difficulty arising. With all of the extra clothing I would have to wear it was nearly 4:30 before I could begin packing the car.

The back porch thermometer showed 20°F and the sky was perfectly clear and sharp when I left at 4:37. There was virtually no traffic to trouble me as I drove over to Peter Murray's. I had no idea that Peter had so much kit to pack, and we had a little difficulty in trying to plan enough room for Joe Rose. The major problem was a large box full of camp gear.

We moved easily down Rte 128 and over to Waltham and found Joe waiting for us. In all our exertions we were carefully quiet so as not to arouse neighbors. Surprisingly, we had little difficulty this time in getting everything into my car, but Joe was so packed into the back seat that he could scarcely move.

I took Rte 2 out to Concord and then followed Sudbury Rd., as the route most familiar to me. Despite the foul weather of the past week, the roads were generally clear and dry. We hurried along for fear of being late, yet when we caught sight of the Sudbury town hall at 5:45 there were no more than half a dozen men ahead of us.

The bus seemed rather small, particularly in the luggage bays, but we were well ahead of the rush. Regretably, my canteen had tilted and spilled some of its contents in the trunk. We sampled some of the remainder, as it seemed fitting on such a morning.

At 6:00 the church bell rang, but many men had yet to arrive. In the east the sky was beginning to color gray with the coming sun and off to the south appeared a white bank of cloud. We were now hoping for snow, for Peter had heard from a Pennsylvanian that there was no snow at Valley Forge presently.

As more men arrived, Peter, Joe and I boarded the bus to make sure of good seats about halfway along the aisle. The joking started quite early. Finally at 6:25 the bus drove out in the half light in the direction of Hudson and Rte 495. Not two miles along the road the first cans of beer began to circulate. Now the one drawback to our bus was its lack of a lavatory, so some of us held off on the liquids. For the time being I was satisfied to take a few swigs from Peter's flask of "Godfather" — Scotch and Amoretta. It worked wonders for my sore throat. It wasn't until we were on Rte 290 that I took my first Schlitz.

The effects of the beer on some of our more liberal tipplers were obvious — often painfully — from here on. Our first stop was in the Willington, Conn. rest area at 7:43. At 9:34 we pulled into a New York rest area on the Cross River Parkway, due to popular

Saturday, 17 December 1977

— not to say vulgar — demand. By 10:35 we were pulling into the Vince Lombardi Rest Area on the Jersey Pike, lasting fifteen minutes. And by noon the calls for yet one more stop were loud and insistent from the back of the bus. At 12:15 Leo was the first from the bus at the Pennsylvania comfort station.*

It was around noon that we noticed an unpleasant overcast developing in central Jersey. It was certainly not cold enough for snow, and rain was totally undesirable. The ground snow had disappeared a dozen or so miles into Connecticut.

Aside from the beer and ale, the trip was enlivened with occasional fife and drum selections and eventual limericks and raunchy jokes. Some men contrived to sleep much of the way. The front of the bus was far quieter than the back, as is most often the case.

Not too long after the last stop we left the Penna. Pike in King of Prussia, and at 1:00 PM the bus pulled into the drive of Valley Forge National Park. We nearly ran over a Maryland outfit which was drilling in the lot and felt no obligation to move. Once we had stopped the word passed along to disembark. I waited until most others had left before starting to sling my gear down from the luggage rack. No sooner was I set than the word came back to reload the bus.

We waited now for further instructions, and we became so warm that windows had to be opened. I was in a bit of a stupor from warmth and lack of sleep, and the occasional swigs of "Godfather" to combat my cold did not help. At length a Ranger led us out along Port Kennedy Road to just past the Star Redoubt, and there we halted in a small carpark.

Our campsite lay below us at the foot of a long decline and at such a distance that it was hard to see the cabins at first. We stepped off at 1:20 carrying only our 18th century personal effects. The hike was easy, but the broken turf caused our lines to waver. About halfway down we had to step over a well-hidden drainage ditch. When we crossed the dirt road to our cabins, the muddy surface caused slipping.

We halted on the little dirt path which ran through our camp and then faced left in two lines. Palmer went off to speak with the rangers and soon we were all wandering around. The camp was quite simple in layout. To the north was one log cabin with shingle plank roof and a stone fireplace. Behind it stood a tall pine. In the center of camp, standing side by side along the path, were two more cabins, these with log chimneys. The one to the west was the only cabin to have a sod roof. The final cabin lay south of the path and had no fireplace at all. Behind these buildings, to the west, were the lower courses of three more cabins in the early stages of construction. To the north of us, about 30 yards away, were two more cabins, occupied by Pennsylvanians.

The musicians called me over early in the proceedings to meet a Pennsylvanian who had read my article in Yankee. He had enjoyed it.

Off to the south a few hundred yards I noticed a small battery and pointed it out to Joe. We checked with Palmer and then walked across the field to the guns. Parts of the field were quite soggy and the mud very slippery. We later were told that all of the land around the area is clay and does not absorb water. At the 3-gun

Saturday, 17 December 1977

battery we talked to a few tourists. Peter came along and joined us. Then a newspaper photographer asked us to pose around a cannon for him. I gave him my address and he promised to send copies of his paper.

We went on back to our camp at this point to see if anything was developing. Palmer was organizing the company for the weekend. We were divided into two platoons and each platoon into two squads. Peter, Joe, and I were placed in the second platoon (Lt. Jim Barry), third squad (Sgt. Peter Bacon). Assignments for kp duty during our five meals were handed out by squads. We drew duty for Sunday dinner. Then the cabins were distributed. Sergeants tossed coins for the squads, and Peter Bacon had no luck. We landed the hearthless hut. Then, while the other squads moved in, we discovered that the padlock on our door could not be opened. The rangers set off to find a good key somewhere, and we waited.

There were chores to be done. Some men set off for a water faucet some distance away. Gordon Savatsky set up his bullet molding gear inside one of the incomplete cabin frames. The Saturday evening kitchen crew began establishing its domain within another frame. The bus drove up on a hard road on the slope above us, and we all moved out to collect our sleeping gear and food supplies.

The afternoon remained overcast and cool, perhaps in the low 40°s. I don't believe it ever got warm enough to keep breath from condensing in clouds. Firewood would be important at night, but since my hut could not have a fire I was not interested. However, when the cooks reminded us that supper awaited a good blaze, I joined a gang and headed up to the woods on the slope above. There was much dead wood lying about, and some of it was quite dry. We did no cutting there, but hauled the trees and limbs down to the camp directly. There George Hamilton worked on the woodpile with a short, double-headed axe. I put my tomahawk to work and found it surprisingly effective.

The door to our cabin was still locked despite the efforts of several park rangers, and there were several threats to shoot it off. All of squad three's gear had to be piled on the roof or hung from protruding log ends. Muskets were neatly stood in pyramids of three.

During this period a woman from a Pennsylvania outfit, Ross's riflemen, came into the camp to see me. She recognized me from my picture in Yankee, and she praised the article highly. She hoped I would continue to write about such things.

Around 4:30 supper was ready, and I managed to be first in line. The kitchen was a masterpiece of improvisation. It was located within one of the incomplete cabin foundations, which rose to three levels of logs. In the northwest corner the fire was burning. A green log about four inches in diameter was set kitty corner, supported by two walls. From this log could be hung three iron cooking pots. On the southwest corner was set a wheel of cheese, along with Bob McLean's dirk for carving. Here was also the cider barrel with its spigot. Just inside the southeast corner was another barrel, filled with cans of beer and ale. The tourists were not supposed to see the cans.

Supper consisted of a large ladle of baked beans, cooked with additional molasses and mustard; half a round loaf of black

Saturday, 17 December 1977

(pumpnickel) bread; Twining's English tea with honey; and an apple. The beans and bread were quite tasty, but there was just enough of each for one serving. As I had not procured a tin cup, I could drink no tea — ale sufficed.

While I was eating, I was accosted by a local tourist. He talked of 1777, while my beans got cold. He seemed a nice enough chap and eventually found another ear to bend. During our talk, however, I began to speculate on why so few men had deserted such an awful situation 200 years ago. With no clothing and no food — or at least next to none — how could one think of traveling by foot to Massachusetts. At least here there was fire and crude shelter. Furthermore, between regulars and Tories to the east and Indians to the west, New York state would have been an impossible barrier. So here they stayed.

By 5:30 PM it had grown quite dark. Supper had ended, and each man was issued one ladle of hot water with which to clean his trencher and spoon. It was not an easy process. I put my trencher on the cabin roof to dry.

A lecture by a historian named Reed was scheduled for 7 PM, and most of us planned to walk the mile and a half to the visitor center to attend. There was little to do now. We visited various huts to check out the accommodations. This was important to squad three, since the next night we would switch to a better cabin. Fires were roaring away on the hearths (The rangers had earlier delivered a small load of good fire wood by truck). In one cabin a certain magazine was making the rounds, and it's a wonder all the print hadn't worn off it already.

Our camp was provided with a single "sentry-box," which was in remarkably good condition and only 50 yards to the south. Still, it could be quite uncomfortable to use if the mercury fell very far. We had heard that 200 years before many men had refused to leave their huts to answer Nature's calls, and we had no desire to be that authentic. Joe knew of indoor facilities about 300 yards to the north and across Port Kennedy Road. We set out through the dusk and tried not to lose our shoes in the occasional patches of mud, which we could feel but not see.

We managed to cross the road without being run down, and we did find the cinderblock building. It had no doors for protection from cold, but what was worse: there were no lights in the men's room. One would either risk the ladies' room or stay with the company sentry box.

It was during this walk that I began to notice problems with my vision. I seemed to have some blind spots. It might have been the darkness or the fact that my spectacles are so small that my peripheral vision is lost. More likely it was the sign of a migraine coming on. By the time we had returned to camp, I was sure that I could not attend that lecture. Just about the time the others were leaving, I was in the sentry box. I returned to my cabin and waited outside while the nausea hit. It was a short walk up the slope toward the woods, and up by the hard road I lost my supper. Feeling better, though with a headache behind my right eye, I went back to climb in my bunk.

Peter was already in the sack in the bunk above mine. The bunks

Saturday, 17 December 1977

lined the two side walls, four on either wall. Each bed consisted of two one inch planks set side by side and nearly six feet long. The upper berth was exactly sixteen inches above the lower, and sixteen inches above the upper was another plank for storage and protection.

I took off one shoe and then, considering my conditio, left the other one on. Sitting on my bunk, I quickly discovered that I could not get inside my sleeping bag — in fact it was hard enough simply lying down in so cramped a space. My coat served as a blanket, and my rolled army blanket as a pillow. Neither worked, so I bundled my coat for a pillow and unrolled my blanket as a cover.

In all too short a time I was up again, first to the sentry box and then to the woods, fortunately for the last time. It was quite col by now. Once again in the hut I found that I was suffering from the chills, or perhaps it was simply the cold — there was a two inch gap between the door and the frame which was next to my head. Peter offered me his army blanket and helped me to get it around my feet, since I could not sit up enough to reach even my knees.

The others returned to the hut probably not long after 9:00 PM and candles were lighted in the lanterns. It had been a long day and all were tired, so there was little of the customary chatter. I later learned that some thirteen soldiers had fallen asleep on the lecturer.

There were three catalytic heaters in our hut, one of them directly below me, yet I could feel heat only when I placed my hands within three inches of one. This cold and the difficulty of finding a comfortable position kept me awake for what seemed like hours. In the small hours of the morning I finally pulled one blanket up over my head and tucked my hands into my armpits, and I felt a little warmer.

Note

- *: The driver insisted that the next stop beyond King of Prussia was Valley Forge and that he would have us there in fifteen minutes. As I recall a tomahawk was part of the argument that persuaded him to pull over now.

Sunday, 18 December 1977

Bicentennial of the first, national Thanksgiving

By 3 AM rain was falling and I dozed off again. The rain stopped for awhile, but by 4 AM when I had to step outside the rain had begun again in earnest.

At 6:30 someone played "The Three Camps," but no one in our squad stirred. We were cold now, and rising could only make it worse. The heaters had run out of fuel, but that made no appreciable difference. As I lay there in the increasing light, I could now see holes in the ceiling. Putting on my glasses, I counted 39 holes through which gray light came. Even without windows or chimney this hut was well ventilated. There seemed no point in lying abed any longer, so I arose. I then noticed that those holes in the roof were actually one-inch gaps between the overlapping shingles.

I stepped out into a steady drizzle and found the path churned to total mud, parts being covered with water. The small thermometer which I had left outside on the eave of the cabin read 32°, as it had at 4 o'clock. The precipitation was still rain, but it was turning to ice on tree branches and on our buildings.

By 7:00 the breakfast crew was at work. Our "gruel" was actually Quaker Oats, but it was badly prepared.* Each man scooped the oatmeal flakes into his trencher and the added hot water from a cooking pot. Of course this oatmeal was uncooked and had little flavor. We added chunks of brown sugar or drips of honey to flavor this stuff, but the rainwater didn't help its consistency. The black bread was good, and I missed the tea again. Clean up was easy — we simply left our trenchers out in the rain.

There were no tourists as yet, and there seemed little point in starting our activities now. Most of us returned to our cabins. We rolled up our sleeping bags and prepared the rest of our modern kit for packing on the bus at 9:00 AM. Now we noticed for the first time the leaks which had begun in the mud plaster of the log walls. So far the bunks were unaffected, but in time the clay floor grew quite wet.**

Tourists would not arrive for another two hours, if at all. So we all stood around wondering how our predecessors had filled in such boring periods. It was too dark inside to read or write. Attempts to restart the heaters failed. The floor became wetter and water began to run in along the roof beams.

Now word came around that a move from our camp had been proposed. Somewhere there was a dry, heated railway station which was being offered to us. It was soon obvious that men from other huts would have to leave. The sod roof was now saturated and water dripped down on everything. The floors of the other huts were already awash. Yet so far squad three's cabin was in fairly good condition, so we considered staying.

The bus came along about 9:00 and immediately we began moving all our gear. The field was more a mess than ever before. A glance at my thermometer showed the same 32° degrees as the past four times. I gave it a tap and it sank to 28°.

Once aboard the bus we moved out onto Port Kennedy Road and headed west a short way, at last turning into a parking lot and down a long drive to the railway station. This building had been abandoned

Sunday, 18 December 1977

by the railroad some time ago but was maintained by the park. A real men's room was located near the entrance. There was a short hallway, then a ticket office, and finally a large waiting room, where most of us laid out our sleeping bags. There was also room in the basement, but the concrete did not look comfortable.

Shortly after this move had been completed, Joe and I set out to find Dan McLaughlin, whose camper we had spotted in the parking area just above our new quarters. Other troops inhabited a row of four cabins along the drive, and a half dozen tents had been set up there as well. We approached Dan's camper, but then noticed a cafeteria-gift shop nearby which was open. The thought of hot food was irresistible.

Upon entering the shop we first went to the souvenir room in hopes of finding some good books and pamphlets. Unfortunately the offerings were more along the lines of knick-knacks and toys. The clerk told of how bad business had turned since '76. The shop had made only \$7 the day before, and it would most likely go out of business. I found a pewter, felt-lined snuff box with the image of a Spanish coin engraved on it, and I bought it as a box in which to put coins.

In the cafeteria we ordered hot dogs and birch beer. The food was only luke warm, but it tasted so good that we ordered a second round. As we left we promised to spread the word about this place, and that seemed to please the ladies.

It was just 11 o'clock when we knocked on the door of Dan's camper, yet he and Bernadette were just rising. We were offered hot chocolate, but the milk had gone rancid. Dan had come along as a member of the New Jersey Light Infantry. Because of his late arrival the night before, he had been unable to find his outfit. We talked of things in general for a while, and then Joe and I left. This was squad three's day for KP.

We were actually located in a rather nice area, for the Potts House, Washington's headquarters, was situated about a hundred yards from where we were. Joe and I took a detour to look around the building and then discovered that it was open. In we went to find that the only other tourists were a soldier and his wife. The rangers and guides were most hospitable — they put my soaked cocked hat on Alexander Hamilton's hearth to dry before the fire. We wandered along the hall and up the stairs to view the rooms. There was not very much, but the little there was impressive.

Setting off through the backyard, we negotiated our way around a sea of puddles and jumped a small stream. The rain continued and made the ground quite slippery. The guides had told of a teenager who had stepped too close to the edge of the nearby stream, which feeds the Schuylkill, slipped over, and drowned.

Back at the station we found that a fire had already been started in the driveway, right up against the concrete station platform, so that it was protected by an overhang. Somehow Peter, Joe, and I were in charge for Sunday dinner, but this was easy duty. The menu was: tenderloin chunks, potatoes, and carrots. Our job was to distribute two of each to every man; cooking was the problem of the individual. Most of the men simply skewered the meat and potatoes on a bayonet or ramrod. One inventive fellow diced his vegetables,

Sunday, 18 December 1977

put them into a topless beer can, and boiled them in some beer.

Toward the end of our duty, I looked to my own cooking. I had brought along several shish kebab skewers, but they were too short to place in the fire. I was afraid to discolor my ramrod or bayonet in the fire. Peter kindly put the meat on his ramrod. And so we sat around looking for all the world like a great hobo convention.

There were drawbacks to this meal. I was kept splitting wood, much of which was wet. Few men could gather around the fire at one time, so dinner was rather drawn out. The smoke kept shifting and chasing us about the platform, the only breathable air being out in the rain. The meat cooked well, charcoal enhancing the flavor of steak; but the potatoes were burnt black on the outside and remained raw within. We ate the carrots raw. As always the ale helped greatly.

At the conclusion, we put the remaining meat on ramrods to cook and finished it off. I believe that there were plenty of vegetables left. Clean up was a matter of washing ramroads and trenchers. The fire was simply allowed to die. Some men had built a fire in the station's fireplace, but it was too small for many to use.

After 2 o'clock Dan drove down to the station to pick up Joe and me for a trip to the visitors' center. There were few people in the center at this time. We spent a few minutes selecting books to buy and then toured the small museum room. This contained one brass fieldpiece which had been captured at Saratoga.

In the theater a movie had just begun, so we hurried inside and saw a film with virtually no dialogue describe the winter at Valley Forge. When the film ended, we discovered my old AEQ shipmate Jack Dwyer and his wife, sitting in front of us. There was congenial talk and comparison of experiences, and then a second short film (on Yorktown) began. At the end of the show, as we were leaving, Jack mentioned a side trip to the Washington Memorial Chapel on Port Kennedy Road. As an afterthought I dashed back to the shop to buy a bronze Valley Forge medal.

We decided that we might as well check out the chapel. Apparently this building had been raised, in part at least, by the D.A.R. It was a rather impressive small-scale Gothic. Unfortunately the gift shops were closed, for they appeared to have quite a selection of items. Inside the chapel proper, preparations were afoot for the Christmas holiday. The choir was practicing, and not to the director's satisfaction. Trees were being prepared for decoration. Boughs of evergreen were being strung all about.

From the chapel we moved down a corridor to the museum, where Dan treated all to admission. It was a rather murky place. Displays seemed not to have been touched since first established, thirty years ago. Nevertheless, the collection of items was most impressive. The outer room concentrated on the revolution and contained many fine arms and accoutrements. In one case stood the tent in which Washington had stayed before moving into the Potts House. Here there was also a mannequin in Continental uniform, carrying the musket of David Brown, captain of Concord Minute Men.

In the back room were numerous items of daily life, many of which had been Washington's. There were also more firearms, some pre-

Sunday, 18 December 1977

revolutionary. A number of famous paintings hung on the walls.

I was really way too weary to spend time even in so fascinating a museum. We chatted a short time with the guard, who talked of the theft of a Ferguson rifle some five years back, and then we headed back to camp.

At the railway station supper was just being served as we arrived. "Pepperpot Stew" — Dinty Moore's plus spices — was served from pots in the fireplace. Half a loaf of black bread was also issued. Once again I opted for ale. The wheel of cheese was still available, and for dessert there were two molasses cookies per man. I had seconds on the stew, but somehow they could not get rid of it all.

After supper there was music, the drummers doing their best to break the heads. I wasn't able to keep up on the fife. There was one young fellow who had sacked out on top of my sleeping bag some-time earlier, and almost nothing would wake him.

The Park Service had originally scheduled the movie Northwest Passage for the evening's entertainment, but just as at Trenton last January the film was lost in the mail. Three park films would be shown. Rides for a limited number of men were arranged, and by 6:45 the station was all but deserted. The dirty cook pots were left unattended.

A card game began in one corner of the room. The infamous magazine continued to make the rounds. I set to work on my journal, although the light was not good and my eyes hurt from lack of sleep. After a while several of us began to toast our damp shoes in front of the fire. By this time I had changed into my one dry pair of socks.

Joe had a cold which was really bothering him by now. He took a few pills and climbed into his bag and slept. Outside the rain had eased a bit.

Around 8:30 the film-goers returned with much noise and commotion. A damper was turned on the activity when Palmer came in to inform us of tomorrow's schedule. Reveille would be at 5:00 AM. Now the men began to prepare for sleep, or so I thought. By 8:55 I was lying atop my sleeping bag — it was too hot indoors to crawl inside — with my blanket over me. The lights were turned down around 9:30 and I prepared for some badly needed sleep.

The noise did not go down. In one corner by the fireplace a general discussion of the world's problems began. The two sleepers nearest me set up a snoring like chain saws. More talk came from another room. And of course the trains continued to roll through.

I hadn't been sacked out too long when the room was brightened by the flashing red lights of a dozen or more firetrucks along the drive. Everyone was up to see. Two scouts then reported that there had been a chimney fire in one of the local huts. The firemen had simply pulled the chimney down.

Once the excitement had ended, most of us settled down once again. The noise persisted, however, and I don't believe that I got much more than three hours sleep.