

A Journal of  
The Rochambeau March to Yorktown  
as Kept by  
John F. Denis  
of the  
Regiment de Saintonge

Friday, 9 October 1981

After 22 months of preparation, we begin this night to bring the bicentennial period to a fitting close. The reality of this fact, the sense of an ending has not yet really hit most of us.

My largest problem of this day was the need to prepare lesson plans for six days for the benefit of my substitute teacher. Usually I am only able to see a day or two ahead, yet I managed to fill the planbook as required; and with this chore accomplished, I felt my excitement grow as the day advanced. It was as though I were facing AEQ-75 once again.

Upon completing the drive from Springfield to Lexington, I immediately set about double-checking the list of necessities which I had filled out two nights before. As each series of items was cross-checked, I loaded them into the car. At the conclusion of this business I found missing only the kielbasa which I had left in Springfield.

Farewells to Judy completed, I departed Lexington at 6:17 PM. The sky showed the same darkly melodramatic yet unproductive clouds that it had for the past several days. It was 50° at this time.

I drove out Rte 2A to Rte 2 and then over Sudbury Rd. to the lot behind the Sudbury Town Hall. Here a convoy was to gather for a 7 PM departure. I had pictured a rather large caravan, but at 6:44, when I arrived, there were about five vehicles.

Several weeks before, Les Longworth had offered me a berth in his van, and I had decided that this would be far preferable to the Rhode Island Natl. Guard busses.\*

At Les's arrival I was pleased to find that his van was towing a camper and that we would therefore have adequate room. Our little party included Leslie III, Adam Longworth, and the Wrong Reverend Newt Hinckley — Pere Raoul for this operation. Some dismay was expressed at the amount of kit which I was bringing, but we shall see whether I have erred.

There was no clear indication of how many had planned to join our convoy, and it was 7:25 before Lt. Ron Davis, commander of the convoy, got us under way.

The ride out Rte 20 and south on 495 was uneventful. The fun began when we attempted to find East Greenwich, R.I., site of our camping area. The CB set buzzed with confused directions and derisive retorts. Ron was soon dubbed with the "handle" "Froggy Leader," which he inadvertantly changed to "Foggy Leader." At this time the name seemed all the more appropriate.

The local authorities added to the confusion by not marking the entrance to the E. Greenwich High School, our campsite. We passed the school and moved several miles along before seeking help from a local citizen. With his information in hand, Les fell out of

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column — we had already taken another wrong turn — and led a mutinous line of vehicles to a street called "Avenger Drive." Sure enough, this was the school's driveway.

It was around 9:40 now. At the school we stopped to register. In the hallway between the auditorium and the cafeteria stood several tables. Signs listed the five French regiments and for each a registrar waited with a box of large manila envelopes, one for each registered participant. When the name was checked off against the list, an envelope bearing the participant's name and address was issued. Inside were a laminated id card and the reenactment medallion. If the participant had a car along, the envelope included id bumper stickers and travel directions for various stages of the march.

Heading back to our van, we found Capt Leo Zschau. Most of our comrades in arms had come down much earlier in the day, and now Leo directed us to the area taken by the Saintonge. A green dumpster had been spray-painted with the regiment's name and an arrow.

In an open field which lay between the school's driveway and a highway, campers and tents had been set up in two parallel lines. The second line being incomplete, we easily found a space in between Dan Moylan and George Hamilton.

The housekeeping situation was no problem for us, and the rest of our evening was spent in small talk with friends.

It was around 11 PM when we turned in.

#### Note

\*: Les's wife, Jane, would have the use of my car for the duration of this campaign.

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Snide comments were offered about people who can function as early as 5 AM. It was about 7 o'clock when I decided to rise. It had been cool overnight but not unpleasant. I was greatly helped this morning by a down-filled vest which Bob Childs had lent me the night before.

After dry-shaving in front of Les's side-view mirror, I headed for breakfast in the school cafeteria. There were two food lines, both offering scrambled eggs, English muffins, sausage patty, and hash brown potatoes. The whole thing was substantial enough, if not terribly tasty, and I washed it down with orange juice.

Having eaten, I walked to the hallway, where several vendors had set up their wares. I received no special discount despite having helped one group haul its boxed goods out of the storage area. I did pick up a quality medallion commemorating the Rochambeau landing of 1780, a rather good Rochambeau March tee-shirt, and a book on the French in Rhode Island, which turned out to be about contemporary characters rather than our predecessors.

There was a call to "fall in" in full dress at 9 AM, and I now headed for the camp, delaying en route just long enough to purchase the obligatory "RMY" mug. At \$15 this item cost twice what its sister AEQ mug had in 1975.

The business of dressing inside a small trailer is at best cumbersome, but it is greatly complicated by the character of a full French uniform. The 20-button gaiters are the great mischief-makers. In our hurry there were often three trying to share the cramped quarters simultaneously. I soon learned the challenge of trying to squeeze through a door while wearing cartridge box on right hip and sword on left.

Assembly was held in the narrow field between our camp and the highway. The ground was littered with much dead scrub which caught on gaiters and made marching quite awkward. Overhead the skies became more and more threatening.

In the end it was about 10:15 before the officers began to take us through drill. Col. Palmer True has finally found the right device to save his voice. Quietly he speaks a command to Sgt Major Warren Coulter, who very effectively barks the commands to the full regiment, Captains Leo Zschau and Joe Bausk repeating them to their companies. (I should note here an alteration in regimental organization, which has occurred since it was first developed. Originally there were to have been four companies, each with one lieutenant, the first and third with captains as well. At some point during our summer drills, these units were consolidated into two companies under the captains. The old "four-company system" is maintained only for use in combat.)

Numerous members of Saintonge were to straggle in at different times, but we were surprised at how many appeared to be absent at this time. In fact some of those missing from ranks were at this time sitting in campers trying to finish uniforms or were off seeking help for malfunctioning vehicles.

The drill itself was short enough. We let it go at a brief run through of the manual of arms. The "demi-tour" or about face caused the most trouble, with undergrowth tangling our feet.

Palmer passed on an outline of the afternoon's schedule and then

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dismissed us to pick up the one pound ration of black powder being issued by the march organizers. There seemed too little time to roll cartridges now, and I had already prepared 130, so I just spent a while visiting and working on this journal before lunch.

The lunch was a beef potpie with gravy and carrots. Although the crust was a touch doughy, the food was quite acceptable.

The camp was still quite deserted, and I decided to risk my uniform while rolling a few cartridges. Setting up the gear on the tailgate of Bob Harrison's truck, I rolled about ten before conceding that the wind was just a little too blustery.

Around 12:30 we fell in once again on the parade ground where we had drilled this morning. With the arrival of several more of our men during the morning, the ranks were now a bit more filled out.

Upon falling in, each company formed in three ranks, a sergeant to the right and a corporal to the left of the front rank. The Sgt Major stood to the center, facing the ranks and seeing to their ordering. Ens. Barry Real would fall in to the extreme right of the front rank, the sergeant of the Premiere Compagnie falling in just to his left and the first two companies aligning on the white, colonel's drapeau. At the center of our formation stood Ens. Bob Bruce with the kaleidoscopic regimental drapeau, and to his left I, as sergeant of Troisieme Compagnie, fell in, the last two companies aligning on us. Within the company, men were posted according to height, the tallest to the right of the column. In marching out, the men were first ordered to face "a droite" thus placing the taller men to the front of each company and forming the regiment into a column of threes.

Off we now marched through the camp as the Deuxieme Compagnie played fifes and drums. We moved a distance out along the driveway named Avenger Drive in our first full regimental performance.

We were to board Natl. Guard busses for the drive from East Greenwich to Providence, yet although vehicles appeared to be available we waited on the grassy slopes by the drive for sometime.

At 1:15 we boarded several of the busses. A portion of the available transport was army trucks a la AEQ, and Palmer advised us to get quickly to the busses so as to keep from soiling our uniforms on the dirty truck seats. By now large sections of sky were bright blue and the sun was warming us.

In time our convoy moved out, crossing the neighboring highway and advancing over some side roads before getting onto Rte 95. Our progress was remarkably slow, and Eric Vollheim soon was airing complaints about the entire matter of riding a bus, a vehicle to which he objects for reason of principle rather than claustrophobia.

So long was this trek that it was 2:40 when we finally stepped off the bus and onto a rather wide street, which runs alongside a large cemetery. Here there was more delay as units shifted into position and camp followers sought good locations from which to view the proceedings. At this point I had no idea of the afternoon's program.

I believe that it was now that I saw Crosby Milliman for the first time on this trek. He was mounted on a gray horse, bewigged, and decked out in a full general's uniform — dark blue coat with

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gold lacing all about it. It was said that his French officer's gorget was an original.

His outfit confirmed our earlier information that he would portray General le Comte de Rochambeau during the march to Yorktown. Now this might prove awkward during the coming week, for he would apparently be our supreme commander, and yet there was no love between him and the men of Sudbury.

I digress here in order to explain the source of animosity — or should I write sources? Back during AEQ, when Milliman portrayed Major R.J. Meigs and commanded the third division, there occurred a march over the Great Carrying Place. This 8-mile hike was turned into a divisional race, with Meigs's Division trying to catch and pass Greene's Division, under command of Tony Walker.

Now Ward Company — a principally Sudbury unit — was with Greene's and was quite loyal to its colonel. Joe Kolb, having falling back while tying a boot lace, found himself in short order marching with the van of Meigs's unit, where he overheard Milliman explain a gag to be played on Walker; as Meigs's passed Greene's, the men were to whistle "Waltzing Matilda."

Joe quickly double-timed ahead to warn his commander, and of course there was then no chance for Milliman to win. In fact the tables were turned, and as Milliman reached the end of the trail, he found the Sudbury men serenading him with his own tune.

The significance of the tune has never to my knowledge been explained, but one suspects a more than playful point to the game, for witnesses report that Milliman exploded and vented his rage on the eternally innocent Joe Bausk, threatening to evict him from the Expedition. Walker soothed his colleague and all seemed to blow over, save in the hearts of Sudbury men.

Les Longworth added that Milliman's accolades for the companies of his division at the final dinner in Quebec further stirred bad feeling among the other companies. I must confess that I myself had rather enjoyed sharing in some praise from my commander on that night, so I am partly guilty of any breach of good taste at that time.

The following summer, during the big bicentennial parade in Marlborough, another incident occurred of similar nature but more serious in detail. While waiting for the lead divisions to pass, the Sudbury Fifes and Drums began to jam at their side street staging area. Milliman stepped from the rear, drew his sword, and stalked toward the musicians. Expecting nothing more than horseplay, the men were shocked as he slammed the sword across Dick Ruquist's drum and ordered them to cease playing on penalty of eviction from the parade. Ruquist exploded with threats of physical consequences should sword touch drum once more, pointed out Milliman's complete lack of authority, and sent him scuttling away.

A few years later, when Milliman had marched from Sudbury to Concord on the 19th, an incident which might have passed without remark, seemed — in view of past experience — to firmly fix the cap of contempt on all views of the man. A stickler for authenticity and a collector of fine military antiques, Milliman appeared in sunglasses with his new hat wrapped in plastic for protection from the mist. Caustic observations about those who wear "breadwrappers" on their heads moved him to set himself aright.

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Now I had heard of a touch of shrewishness in the man back in '75, but I'd no direct unpleasantness from him. And after an experience such as the march to Quebec, I was content to overlook what may have been exaggerations by agrieved parties. A kind of affection for all involved has grown up over the passing time. Yet with the repeated complaints against this man by "comrades-in-arms" for whom I feel a much more immediate respect and affection, I must confess that at this time my feeling toward our "Rochambeau" was merely indifference.

As Milliman passed the Soissonais, his own regiment this time out, those men came to full salute. As he approached Saintoge, officers turned their backs and made no move to get us so much as to fall in. Milliman short-circuited the snub by not riding past us at this time.

The Soissonais now marched past, providing us the first opportunity to view them in formation. From certain individuals in their ranks we had heard much of their superior appearance over the past several months. Indeed their officers were very well decked out with full uniforms. In the ranks the numbers seemed quite impressive.

It was the close inspection of the ranks, which ruined the first impression. Uniformity was the exception rather than the rule. Absurd white hunting frocks were evident. Women carried muskets and children musical instruments. Perhaps the first twenty or so men in wore good, passable uniforms of small clothes; from that point back it was a shambles. It could scarcely be credited that more than a handful would be admitted to Yorktown, where authenticity was a ferocious watchdog.

With the sky once again overcast, at 3:05 the parade stepped off, moving downhill along the street and then turning sharply to the right to enter the cemetery. As we moved along the cemetery drive, it was no more than fifty yards before we turned left. At this point our music fell out to form off to the side with the other music units, and their absence was quickly felt by the musket men, who had troubles keeping step.

The column took a second left very shortly and then halted along an asphalt walk. The divisions of our army were now ranged side by side, and the Saintonge was — I later noticed — placed next to the small gray monument to the French soldiers buried here.

There was a series of speeches delivered from a stand off to our right front. I could see little of the speakers. A priest fluent in French offered the opening prayer and included a translation. The mayor spoke for a bit. But the key figure seemed to be a certain professor of history from Providence College, who thundered on about the Irish and the British foe ad nauseam. For a professional man of history he was far too ready to slip from the topic at hand. All but dragging the current situation in Ulster directly into the proceedings, he was a keen embarrassment to many of us.

I should note a threat to safety which occurred during the prayer. We were ordered to perform the "genu en terre" and did so. However, the asphalt was slippery for leather-heeled shoes, and within seconds a man to the rear of Premiere Compagnie had slipped and nearly put his bayonet into the face of another.

Wreathes having been laid and battle ribbons awarded to the

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regiments, we faced front and marched counterclockwise around the area to pick up our music once again and to move on out of the cemetery. Commands unheard at the head of our company indicated that officers would have to take special care to pass the orders all along the line.

The column now marched along that first street upon which we had originally formed. The streets were almost devoid of traffic and pedestrians. At first we were inclined to pass it off as an indifferent neighborhood, but in time we found that all along the route the audience was never greater than occasional clusters of two or three individuals. There must have been a really great bowling match on television.

As we neared the bottom of the long slope, the sun once more broke through. To the right we turned and advanced up a steep slope to the grounds of the state capitol building. We now took a long way around so that the army might proceed in all its splendor up the front walk to the capitol steps, but we might have saved the shoe leather, for the front lawn was empty of spectators. Moreover, the smooth bricks of the walk further threatened those of us with leather heels.

The army halted with divisions formed side by side as before. The Soissonais was to our right and the Lauzun's Legion, with red-coated infantry from Dillon's regiment, stood to our left. Beyond these units I could see little.

From a lectern on the capitol steps we received yet another prayer in French. Governor Garrahy, the patron of the Rochambeau March, offered a few words and was clearly quite pleased at our turnout. A delegation of two Hungarian diplomats, their presence unexplained, presented a bronze plaque to the State of Rhode Island and requested that the governor take good care of it.

At the conclusion, our own Rochambeau came down from the steps to review the troops as artillery pieces blasted from the far side of the building. Saintonge was the one regiment to fail to present arms, and I could not help but think it something more than an oversight.

During the speech-making I had examined the crowd of spectators on the capitol steps. At least 40% were in Natl. Guard uniforms and present on assignment. Carefully gauging the rest of the group, I found that it would be an exaggeration to number them at as many as 120. Apparently only in publicity had our sponsors failed in their preparations.

Division by division the army now marched past the capitol steps and off to our left across the lawn. The manoeuvre went nicely enough until they marched us up a short, steep slope. Although to my knowledge no one fell down, few were able to maintain step and the lines wavered.

The column halted along the north side of the capitol building, and almost immediately ranks were broken in a charge for supper. It looked like the storming of a palace in the French Revolution as the armed mob swept up the stairs and over the verandas in search of food.

It was back at the front, just inside the main door, that tables had been set up bearing boxes of Col. Sanders-style chicken and

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fixings. Many troops sat in the hallways to eat, but I went back out and selected a granite banister as my table. The food seemed fair enough.

Recalling Palmer's advice about the advantages of the busses over the trucks, several of us set out to find seats in the convoy now lining the street across the statehouse grounds. It was 6:15 when I boarded, but it was 6:45 before we set out. Since all of the troops had long since been on the vehicles, I assume that the delay was required in order to coordinate traffic control. Once we had set out, our movement was slow but steady.

We later learned that Winnie Rose, who was to have been picked up by a friend, was left behind. She had with her her son Joey, who was born only this past July. Since he is not yet fond of chicken dinners, she sought out a place to feed him privately. Joe Rose suspects that his son may be the only baby ever to have dined in a broom closet of the state house of Rhode Island.

It was 7:23 when most of us got back to East Greenwich in the dark. Somewhere en route I had noticed a temperature reading of 48°.

There was activity up at the school itself this evening. In particular there was a showing of Errol Flynn's "Charge of the Light Brigade" in the auditorium.

No campfires were allowed — at least no wood had been provided. There was an impromptu gathering around a lantern, and soon two more lanterns were added to our "fire." Empty bottles and cans were thrown on the fire as "logs," and in good time there was music aplenty, albeit without the Longworth guitar. Newcomers to the regiment found this to be one of the more endearing aspects of our activities.

We roused more of the neighbors until Palmer himself turned his lights back on and came to join in. Bad timing, for within minutes everyone was drifting off for sleep.

I note here that early this morning I had torn the rotting liner of my sleeping bag. Down feathers everywhere. I stitched the wound as best I could at noontime, but it was clear that I would not be able to use the bag as more than a mattress for the rest of this trip.



Sunday, 11 October 1981

This being our first day for convoy travel we rose early enough. It was cold. I tried shaving indoors, but I found that the mirror fogged too readily and I made a horrible job of it.

Breakfast was the same as Saturday's and again was quite welcome.

The sky was quite clear, and we were treated from time to time to vees of low-flying Canada geese en route to or from their ponds.

Our bachelor pad on wheels was one of the easiest homes to prepare for the road, for it was never unhitched and never leveled from campsite to campsite.

While the others were breaking camp, I hitched a ride into town with Mark Dodge. He was in search of gas, and I hoped to find a Sunday newspaper. From the gas station I spied a CVS down the block. There was a short wait for its official opening, and then I picked up a Providence paper. In it I found but one photograph — Crosby Milliman and a Natl. Guard general — below which was a brief notice of yesterday's activities. With such media support it's no wonder that we had drawn such throngs.

Upon arriving at the campground we found the whole Saintonge Division drawn up in four parallel lines. I suppose we presented a sight not uncommon in St Jo, Missouri, in the 1850's. There was much noise at our tardy return, yet we still had plenty to wait before setting off.

During the anticipatory lull, Leo came along to introduce his attack frog. On his head squatted a stuffed, felt froggy with tongue jauntily extended from the side of his mouth. He was a birthday present who had arrived with a fifth of Wild Turkey in his arms.

At 9:14 came the call to move out, and so one last time we headed up old Avenger Drive and left across the overpass. I did not follow our route too closely in these early stages, but I did note that we soon were on Rte 49, a remarkably rough and narrow road over which to send a convoy. I believe that at least in the early stages we were quite close to the original path followed by Rochambeau.

Along one particularly steep stretch we found the transport vehicle with all of our artillery sitting by the side of the road in an apparent breakdown. It was on such long hills that one could best get a grasp of the size of this operation.

The citizen band radios, which most of our vehicles carried, were set by pre-arrangement on Channel 7 for the convoy. I have heard it said that efforts had been made to reserve 7 for us exclusively, and in fact there was almost no chatter from the outside to be heard.

Now the CB's were without doubt of great benefit in the long run, but within the hour novelty was giving way to irritation with the blather. Deadly earnest voices would call out information of dubious importance, and a dozen or more voices would relay the message up or down the line. Les made several attempts to lighten things up, but "deadly Earnest" was clearly in charge.

In time we moved over to Rte 52 and then onto 32/2. As we rode along we began to dig into the bagged lunches which we had picked up from the cafeteria after breakfast. There were cold cut sandwiches, potato chips, apples, and canned soda — not a bad meal.

Near Hartford we moved onto Rte 84 for the rest of the run across Connecticut. I believe that Saintonge was moving as far across the state on this first day as any division.