

Friday, 16 October 1981

This day marked the opening of the Yorktown bicentennial celebrations per se. Be it noted that I write these lines on the 2nd of November. Furthermore, whether from lack of time or lack of ambition, I failed to take any notes over these final four days. The basic schedule of events and my feelings about specific occurrences I have no doubt I can record accurately. It is little incidents, for which my memory can recall no context, which may be listed out of true sequence.

We were able to stay in bed this day until after sunrise since we did not have to be in uniform until late morning. Nevertheless, registration was to begin around 8 AM, so most of us got out and on to the road early enough to make the head of the line. (I believe we made use of the shuttle busses which had been provided for participants).

Word was that the registration facilities were to be set up near the intersection of Surrender and Union Roads, but at our arrival there were no Yorktown Bicentennial Brigade officials to be found. This lack of a specific target made it difficult to form a nice line, and as more of the troops arrived it was clear that a free-for-all could result the minute a booth was set up.

More than a few minutes late, a vehicle swung onto the field and deposited four or five uniformed colonials, a couple of long tables, and numerous sheets of paper. On the tables were placed caricature drawings of the different 18th century troops, the most common dividing line being nationality.

Of course it was a mess when we tried to line up now. One of the officials tried to convince us to form separate, shorter lines according to our divisions. I do not know how long it was before he got the fact that, with one or two exceptions, everyone in front of him was "French."

Les and I were quite close to the head of the line, and we could soon see that the help had not been hired for its clerical efficiency. Then a group of our camp followers was sent to cut in at the head of the line: they had camp tending duties to begin as quickly as possible. Then one of the clerks called all family groups to the head of the line: this would be more efficient. I think that Les was on the verge of st angling that quill-pusher.

When I finally got to the table, I had to produce an id (photo-bearing preferably) before being checked off the master list. For this I received a rather plain id/meal ticket. This business was rather a disappointment after the way things had been handled in Rhode Island.

There was a further problem for certain individuals. Some of the ladies had been confirmed verbally as participants some time ago, yet now their names were not on the master list. Palmer was on hand and promised to take care of it, and apparently he did just that.

I did not hang around this area but instead headed back to the camp — a good mile or so away — to clean my musket. On both sides of the road up in the area of the registration tables, the presence of the modern army was overwhelmingly obvious. On the south side of the road was the camp area. On the north were various weapon systems on public display.

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I had just about finished working on the Charleville when we were called to formation in an open area near Palmer's RV. It was about 10:30. The main point of the meeting was to settle details about our move to the 18th century area this noon. We had agreed that we should march in with full fifes and drums; therefore, Deuxieme Compagnie's muskets would have to be transported by vehicle to the French 18th century camp.

The meeting ran a little long, and there was a rush to get into uniform. At 11:47 the Saintonge Regiment stepped off and marched the full distance to the battlefield. Not knowing the proper route behind the siege lines — or possibly wishing to make the best impression — we put our route directly across the no man's land of 200 years ago.

The first structural remains to be found beyond the British defenses are the trenchworks of the Second Parallel. In the vicinity of Redoubt 9, a modern road breaks perpendicularly through the trenchwork. As one faces the Second Parallel, the British/Hessian camp lay to the left of the road, the Allied camp to the right, both camps being situated behind the trenches.

The French encampment was placed in the corner formed by the trench and the road and we were thus on the most conspicuous site in our army. The Allied camp formed a great hollow rectangle which was open to the road and to the woods. Tents — about a half dozen in depth — formed a line along the inside of the Second Parallel and extended for a good 120 yards from the road to the woods. A few tents were set along the wooded area, while tethered horses indicated the presence of the cavalry here. A good 80 yards across from and parallel to the first line of tents lay the great mass of the Continental Army in neat rows of white tents. The open space between the main lines was the parade upon which the army would muster before marching into action.

The French camp itself was set up in this fashion: The tents of a couple of dozen private soldiers were set up in two divisions so as to form a path dividing the camp in two and leading up to the commander's marquee. This axis, along which all tents were aligned, was parallel to the modern road. To the left of the commander's tent was a long and tall tent containing a long table. To the right of the commander's tent was the open work area where all camp activities would take place. All camp areas were roped off with yellow plastic cord along their perimeters. The plastic was a nice touch.

The Saintonge campfollowers were quite busy at various tasks, but there was little time to observe them, for a park ranger was on hand for safety inspection. We fell into formation on the parade, and the ranger came along to sound the muskets and check the half-cock. As a sergeant I was detailed to sound the muskets of Troisieme and Quatrieme Compagnies. The result was a pair of dirty hands, for some of our boys had not been too meticulous this morning.

As soon as the barrel had been rung, the ranger checked the half-cock with a good, sturdy trigger pull. If the piece passed inspection, a small green adhesive dot was pressed onto the trigger guard. Our inspector was business-like yet pleasant to deal with — not so with all the rangers, we heard.

Returning from an officers' meeting, Palmer inquired of our

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success. Only one musket had failed, and this brought a scowl. Who failed? Bruce True. Well whose musket had he borrowed?! His father's. Oh.

The food service for the entire army was being handled in an area beyond the cavalry quarters. A long, open tent covered at least six serving tables allowing some dozen serving lines. The area in front of this tent was roped off so that half a dozen volunteers could check our official id's. One can only imagine how many cheapskates would rig themselves out in full uniform in order to get free meals. Those hot dogs and beans of this lunch would surely be worth a freeloader's efforts.

Dining was strictly alfresco and on the ground out behind the tent. It was at this time that the Saintonge received its first compliment. A Hessian grenadier expressed his pleasure at seeing worthy representatives of France. In our usual outfits it would be hard to get more than a sneer from a Hessian.

Back at the camp we had some time during which to look things over. A particular fruit concoction was being prepared over the fire. These fires in the 18th century camp areas were the only ones to be permitted in the park.

In the early afternoon there was a call to fall in in preparation for the grand entrance parade of the entire 18 century force. The French forces, Saintonge to the middle — I recall that regimental numbers seemed to influence placement — formed just outside the French camp with the column facing the road. The Continentals seemed to fill in the rest of the parade ground.

There was much bustle among the French staff officers at the front of the column as decisions were made and changed regarding the formation. ~~Most of the Saintonge companies were arranged to provide a six-man front, but Troisieme could best do it with five across.~~

Then occurred the first of several serious — shall we call them "breaches of etiquette"? Col. Mike Vaquer, commander of all French forces at Yorktown for this occasion, is also the commander of the Regiment de Foix. This regiment numbers about eight rank and file and therefore would look quite weak in the massed formation. Perhaps judging that the Foix's green facings were at least somewhat akin to those of Saintonge, Vaquer had his men assigned to fill in the final ranks of our companies. Naturally there was strong resentment at this violation of our self-regulated uniformity.

I understand that there was also some unpleasantness when we declined to brigade our musicians with the massed music. It was irritating enough that we would not be allowed our three drummers; there was no way that we would give away Deuxieme Compagnie as well.

It was the American division which led the parade this day, marching down the modern road and then turning right onto the field before the defense works. As we watched the Americans pass by us on the road, there seemed something quite strange about a few of the muskets. They had awfully slender barrels. And then it was clear that some men were marching with musket stocks and no barrels. I recall one company of which at least a third of the men carried only stocks. In considering this curiosity later, I could only surmise that such men had failed safety inspection and therefore had been

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denied access to the field with a faulty musket.

The weather was continuing fair as it had been all day. The sun was warm, but I noticed no particular discomfort caused by the wool coat.

When we marched out we had to maintain the beat of the massed music, which was off the the front of the columns. Occasionally an officer might call cadence, but frequently this was off from the actual beat so it was better left unsaid.

About fifty yards beyond the Second Parallel trenches the column wheeled right and advanced across "no man's land." In the vicinity of Redoubt 9 the column wheeled left and advanced in the direction of the several tall bleachers which had been erected in front of the British earthworks. Workmen were still hammering together and painting the presidential reviewing stand at this time.

As we approached the bleachers, which stood to the right of our line of march, the several units were identified by an announcer on the large p.a. system. Saintonge was assigned to the state of Maine and Soissonais to Massachusetts. Perfect.

A few dozen yards beyond the reviewing area, the column wheeled left to regain the road back to camp. At this point we were closer to the massed British music than to our own and this had an unfavorable effect upon our step.

And so we marched back into the camp to enjoy a few minutes' break. Alcohol was forbidden in the camps during the hours when tourists might be present, but I was quite happy to get some water. This water was to be found in a couple of wooden buckets by the campfire. Its surface was greasy with woodsmoke, and unidentified particles floated here and there, yet it tasted rather good and I saw no one refuse it. I remember how eagerly helpful Bradford MacInnis was in bringing the water and ladles around. All of the regimental children were helpful in running that camp.

In a short while there was a call to fall in once again. The National Park's own cartridges were to be distributed at this time. The Park Service issued its own for safety reasons, and these babies could scarcely be safer. Made of oaktag and dipped in a brown wax, they were next to impossible to open. Furthermore they were of such a diameter as barely to fit into our cartridge blocks. Within moments of handling these tubes, one's fingers were covered with a foul mess of wax and powder grains.

To top it off, there were not enough cartridges to fill the blocks. Sharing my original fifteen, I was soon reduced to nine. There were delays as officers went in search of more supplies.

I learned that these preparations were being made for the re-enactment of the assault on Redoubts 9 and 10. Earlier in the afternoon I had scouted Redoubt 9 and found it fully prepared for the assault with its ditch cleared of the usual thorny scrub and an abatis of leafy tree limbs carefully placed. Now I heard that only a handful of French would be permitted to make the assault: only two men from each Saintonge company would be assigned to this force.

The lieutenants were to draw lots or assign the men from their companies, but Ron Davis was not around. Impatient to move it along and eager to participate — a few years ago I had considered enlistment in the Light Infantry in order to get in on this action should

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it ever take place — I pulled rank and fell out with the assault force, telling the others in Troisieme Compagnie that the first one to join me could come along. Matt Sargent beat the crowd.

In the entire French force for the assault there were no more than thirty men. We were placed under the direct command of Capt. Dick Wilson of the Soissonnais, and we marched at the head of the French column.

It must have been after the 4 PM schedule when the army moved out in column to form its line behind the trench of the Second Parallel. We approached the trench perpendicularly from the wooded end of the camp, the assault forces turning right, the support forces left. This put the French assault force on the far right of the Allied line, right up against the road. This "position of honor" was historically inaccurate, the French having allowed it to the Americans throughout the original campaign.

From this position I could see the British inside Redoubt 9, about sixty yards away, and more British along the walls of the main defenses across no man's land. Thus far the only specific information which I had received was that the assault force would not shoot. Clearly this was incorrect.

I believe that artillery opened the action and then volleys of musketry picked up all along the line. Our force had been divided into three ranks in order to permit a more continuous fire. The front rank stood part way up the inner wall of the trench on a non-existent firestep. The second rank was down in the trench, and the third was practically out of the trench in order to find room to reload.

Precious time was wasted as we struggled to pull out cartridges jammed into the blocks and glued there by the wax. Some cartridges ripped open rather than come free and so caused a safety hazard. Seathrun O'Corrain, a drummer by training, was having a fine time trying to adjust his borrowed Brown Bess so as to avoid misfires; and I was trying to load my musket while offering advice to him. Mike Vaquer was behind our trench and clearly directing our efforts.

I had just fired my third round when I saw the Americans to our left rising out of the trench. There was Mark Schendeldecker, no longer an engineer as at Camden, waving his troops to the attack. Our officers did nothing other than watch the Americans go for the French redoubt, #9. There was no coordination of effort.

I still suspect a conspiracy on the part of someone in the Brigade of the American Revolution. The whole show was plainly set up from the start to squeeze the French out. Otherwise, why a hundred or so Americans to thirty French in the re-enactment of an action in which each had played an equal part? Clearly Vaquer was upset at the American move. Finally, only the Americans were provided with ladders to use on the ramparts.

The American sappers were cutting away the abatis before some one of our officers ordered us to charge. As I reached the redoubt ditch I found that my sword and bayonet carriage had flown up over my left shoulder. Somehow I had lost neither blade. I also found the few openings in the concrete fraising to be filled with Americans, more of them waiting in the ditch for a turn on the ladders.

My only chance for gaining entrance lay somewhere else. Of

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course the entire action had been done with bayonets sheathed. We had also let slack out in our musket slings so that our hands might be free to climb the walls. However, the slope into the ditch was so steep that I feared to take a tumble and break my back with a slung musket, so keeping the Charleville firmly in hand I raced down the slope.

Surprised to find myself unhurt and on my feet in the bottom of that ditch, I raced counterclockwise around the wall hoping to find a broken fraising.

No luck until I had covered three quarters of the circuit and come to the back entrance. Inside I could see most of the Americans with the already captured British. French soldiers were just gathering on the parapet. I was so pooped from exertion — I wouldn't run to catch a plane — that I could barely join in the "Vive le Roi" to signal victory.

The French were not in a cheering mood at this point. We stayed clearly away from the Americans and there was much cursing and muttering against the treatment we had just received.

Looking around the ranks of the Americans I found one woman in a Light Infantry uniform. Clearly she represented Deborah Sampson, who had in fact been here in 1781. But Deborah had served as Robert Shurtleff in order to keep her gender a secret. However naive, no one here could be fooled into mistaking this Deborah for a Robert.

Now for years the BAR has boasted its authenticity, sneering at militia who have not quite got the right materials or precise clothing patterns. And of course the authenticity requirements for Yorktown were the strictest ever. Hadn't we all shaved this past summer for the sake of authenticity? Hadn't we all invested in reproduction spectacles?

Well not all of us. Beards could be found all through the ranks of the Americans. Worse, they could be found on the British. Oh yes, and then there were the sunglasses. What blaitant hypocrisy!

The shooting continued along the main lines of the two armies for a little while after the redoubt's capture. And then we just stood around waiting to march out. When neither the Americans nor the British to our front seemed ready to budge, Vaquer formed us up and marched us up onto the parapet. On this path we circled around the other troops to the gate and then marched out and back to camp.

For the rest of this day I did not hesitate to say that the "Alliance" was in very shaky condition indeed. When we got back to camp, the compliments which we received came from an officer of the Welch Fusiliers. I was finding that we had more in common with our "enemies" than with our "allies." Had Washington treated Rochambeau in so shabby a manner, he'd have awakened the next morning to find the French army aboard de Grasse's fleet.

Our activities for this day were now officially ended, so I thought it a good time to view the park's visitors' center. Young Les joined me in the hike. We walked around the defenses to the park entrance behind the Horn Redoubt for we were unsure that we would be allowed to climb over the ramparts directly.

In the area just outside the entrance it was clear that this bicentennial event was being handled like a state fair with all manner

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of activities unrelated to the event being commemorated. The Siege of Yorktown was being reduced to the status of a side show.

At the door of the visitors' center was the sign forbidding entrance to anyone carrying his musket. How hospitable. The perfect end to a perfect day.

This time we just went over the ramparts in order to get to supper as quickly as possible. En route to the Second Parallel I found an unoccupied telephone located under a small tree. I tried to call Judy but again had no luck.

I don't recall any details about our supper, but I recall being surprised at the quality. The army had declined to undertake kp responsibilities, and a private caterer had to be called in. Despite a clientel of reportedly more than 4,000, no one waited more than two minutes in line and the food was always hot.

On the way back to our 20th century camp several of us stopped by a vendor's stand along the Surrender Road. The items showed a certain quality, but I was not in a buying mood.

The walk home was in the dark, and I was surprised at how much traffic was running along the road. At the camp there were several gatherings of Saintonge people. In the distance we could hear but not see a grand fireworks display.

Leo was making the rounds of the camp in order to collect a list of specific grievances for Palmer to take to an officers' meeting. Oddly enough, after all that had happened, my complaint was about the troops who had not shaved. I suppose that after experiences such as the Battle of Princeton I have always expected us to get the shaft from the B.A.R., and therefore the afternoon's combat had not really surprised me. Again it was not that I had shaved as required that bothered me, for we could take pride in having a regiment which had done it right all the way. Rather it was that open hypocrisy which galled me, and I wanted them called on it although nothing might result.

Our regiment is a very special group of people, and the combination of good company and good wine soon soothed away much of the hard feeling from most of us. There would be no "mutiny" tomorrow.

The one word of the morning's activities was that a half dozen or so volunteers should be at the French camp by 8 AM to walk picket duty and talk with the tourists. Well, I figured that that was why I was here with the army, so I turned in fairly early.

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Another gorgeous day, the first hour of which was wasted in cleaning the Charleville and getting the uniform on. I hoped to find time for breakfast, but even as I approached the check station near the chow tent someone reminded me of the hour and I hastened straight to the French camp.

There was more activity than expected because of a battle about which we had not heard. Although the re-enactment of the initial request for a truce was on the printed schedule, there had been no mention of a role for the infantry. Presuming the action to involve artillery, I had forgot about it. There had been no further mention of it last night.

It is a pity that something had not been said, for I am sure that most of Saintonge would have been on hand for the fireworks. As it was, the six of us who had come to walk the perimeter were now being issued the damned "cardboard" cartridges. As we struggled, we were joined by two more men of Saintonge.

It was exasperating to have such a small showing when the other French regiments were coming along at nearly full strength. There was just no way to send back for reinforcements in time.

One of our number began to do a great deal of bitching and moaning about this turn of events. He had come up to do a little light guard duty and then to go off as a tourist. He didn't want to mess up his musket by firing today. It seemed pretty clear to me that one enlists in such an army as ours with the intention of being the show rather than looking at it. A soldier comes as a soldier, a tourist as a tourist, and seldom the twain do meet. I kept my thoughts to myself.

Despite our small showing, the Saintonge was placed at the head of the French column. The only colors to be carried into combat were the white colonels' drapeaux and we therefore left the regimental flag in the camp.

Then the Soissonnais came up to join the column and all of that regiment's colors were flying. On two separate occasions I heard Vaquer send the order back that those flags were to be returned to camp.

Around 9:30, without music, we advanced in column toward the road, wheeled left toward the trench, and then wheeled left again to march along the back of the trench. Today the position of the Allies would be correct to some extent, and so we had to march west while American units in the trench marched past us to the east. Curiously we were brought to halt at a point where the head of the French column — namely Saintonge — was placed almost directly under one of the park's Betsy Ross flags.

Lt. Ron MacInnis was duty officer this morning and so was our commander. His biggest responsibility lay in having us make the adjustments of position which the staff officers wanted. Our column faced "a droite" and then marched into the trench.

At first it was expected that we should form two ranks and take turns on the firing line, but at the end of the manoeuvring we were formed as one rank because of the space to be covered.

At our location the trench was so deep that when standing on the bottom level one could see nothing of the battlefield. There was a narrow earthen firestep which permitted one to see easily over



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the parapet. Here we dug in toe holds and waited for further orders.

There was a considerable space of waiting prior to the action. The American Light Infantry to my left — I was the last man on the left of the French line — began to sing, led by someone with a remarkably good voice. I was informed by the American ensign that this corps was formed of men from various units.

I think that it was the artillery which opened the action once again. There was a battery operating over by Redoubt 9. Our muskets had been loaded since shortly after our entering the trench, so we wasted little time in beginning to fire. The commanders wished a battalion volley to begin our action, and John Seitz, Adjutant of the Soissonnais, was to pass on the command. But a single command is lost on a firing line about 200 yards long, and the volley was ragged.

From here on it was the individual units which fired volleys for the most part. I can recall doing most of my shooting at a tree off by the main road. The British were standing atop their parapets instead of behind the ramparts, and frankly they looked ridiculous. I was pleased that the American volleys lacked precision.

We were having the usual problems getting the thick cartridges free from our blocks, until Garth Moss and I worked out a system. I would pull a cartridge for each of us from his block for each volley until he ran out. Being able to get directly at his block I had better leverage on the cartridges. Once his block was cleaned out, he would begin to empty mine in the same fashion. The system worked rather well.

Our lines kept up a pretty lively fire which was to cease once the British drummer appeared to beat for parley. I wondered how anyone would hear him over all the gunfire or see him amid all the redcoats on the distant parapets. We were beginning to run out of ammunition. How ironic if we were forced to seek the truce first.

Two more Saintonge men, happening along with a view to relieving the active sentries, now jumped into the trench to join us. Since no ammunition was being delivered, Ron advised us to slow down on volleys. In fact we were down to one per man when the shooting stopped.

It now occurred to me that we were at the proper place 200 years almost to the minute after the original beating of the drum. That felt good.

We rested our muskets on the parapet now and watched from the firestep, but I could see nothing in particular. When I looked to my right along the Second Parallel there were sights to make the blood boil. In the center of the Soissonnais line was a clown in a green jacket, with a round hat, and carrying a blunderbuss. What the hell was he doing in the middle of the French ranks when dressed like a militia man? Behind the trench stood ensigns of the Soissonnais still carrying their regimental colors. That they had heard the orders against carrying the flags was plain from the way in which one of them had his flag half furled. There is no way that any commander worthy of his office should have allowed these flagrant violations of regulations.