

**General Washington's
Badge of Military Merit
and the
Noncommissioned Officers
Who earned it.**

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**Magazine Article
4 November 2002**

Three Noncommissioned Officers received special recognition for their acts of heroism during the Revolutionary War. It became obvious during the course of my research that historians made little if any reference of these NCOs in accounts written about the period. This includes the personal memoirs of one of the NCOs' commanding officer. This papers' purpose is to give the reader the most complete account possible of these three soldiers and their acts of valor while realistically portraying the events leading to their recognition by General Washington.

Both the Purple Heart and the Congressional Medal of Honor can trace their history back to the Badge of Military Merit. After the defeat of the British forces at Yorktown, Washington moved the Continental Army Headquarters to Newburgh, New York where he could keep a watchful eye on the British garrisoned at New York City. General Washington continued to improve the living conditions and training of his soldiers in order to insure their morale remained high. He was very suspicious of British intentions despite their request to begin peace negotiations received on 4 August 1782 (Freeman, 498). Suspecting a trick to deceive America, Washington believed that so long as there was doubt, the country should maintain its readiness and prepare with more vigor than ever for any eventuality. He created this award on 7 August 1782 in order to recognize unusually meritorious service, plus an unblemished record. He designed it specifically for the lower ranks, where decorations were non-existent in European armies. As Washington intended, "the road to glory in the patriot (or "citizen's" according to Fisch, 3) army is thus opened to all" (Badge, 1). It is reasonable to assume that Washington created this award not only for reasons stated, but also to also keep his soldiers focused on the potential for future battles. Apparently satisfied with his actions, including creation of the Badge,

Washington stated on 14 September that the Army, "was better organized, disciplined, and clothed" than it had ever been (Freeman, 498).

Existing documents describe the Badge as a "Figure of a Heart in Purple Cloth or Silk edged with narrow Lace or Binding" (Badge, 1). The soldier would wear the Badge on the left breast of the uniform coat and entitled the wearer to, "pass and repass all Guards and Military Posts, as freely and as amply as any Commissioned Officer," without challenge (Osgood, 515). In addition, the name of the soldier would be entered in a "Book of Merit" (Badge, 1). This book has been lost. Only one award of the three survives and is on display in the Continental Army Headquarters Museum in Newburgh.

General Washington awarded Sergeant Elijah Churchill and SGT William Brown their badges and certificates at Continental Army Headquarters at Newburgh, New York on 3 May 1783. Sergeant Daniel Bissell, Jr. received his award on 10 June 1783 (Badge, 1).

Sergeant Churchill, a carpenter from Enfield entered the 8th Connecticut as a private on 7 July 1775. On 7 May 1777, he re-enlisted for the duration as a Corporal in the 2nd Continental Light Dragoon Regiment, later renamed the 2nd Legionary Corps, and received his promotion to Sergeant on 2 October 1780. Army leadership cited him for gallantry in action at Fort St. George near Brookhaven on Long Island, at Coram, New York in November 1780, and at Fort Slongo near Tarrytown, New York, in July 1781 (Badge, 1).

In the fall of 1780, a group of Tory (Americans loyal to the British Crown) refugees from Rhode Island had turned St George's manor house in the town of Brookhaven on Long Island into a fort. The fort was triangular in shape and consisted of a 12-foot high palisade connecting the original manor house, a "strong little fort with two guns," and a second "strongly barricaded house" (MacMillan, 623-4). SGT Churchill left as part of a force of two companies of

dismounted dragoons (mounted infantry) from Fairfield, Connecticut at about 1600 on 21 November 1780. The unit sailed across 20 miles of Long Island Sound in open boats during a severe storm. Blown off course by the gale, the 80 to 100 man raiding party reached Long Island at 2100, a few miles from its objective at a place called "Old Man's., Major Benjamin Tallmadge, the commanding officer, decided to set out towards Fort St. George. High winds, rain, and presumably zero visibility forced Tallmadge to turn back after four or five miles. The raiding party returned to the shelter of the concealed overturned boats until the following evening. Departing the boats on the night of the 22nd, the force arrived two miles from Fort St. George at 0400 on 23 October. Major Tallmadge then divided his force and assigned two small detachments to "subaltern officers of high spirit" (Tallmadge, 46). I believe one of these subalterns was SGT Churchill although Tallmadge did not identify these subalterns by name. Tallmadge's plan called for the two detachments to each attack one wall of the fort while the main body attacked the third. The British firing on the main body led by Major Tallmadge would be the signal for all three groups to attack. Major Tallmadge moved forward with the main body once the two detachments had moved into concealed positions. Shortly before dawn the pioneers in the main force were fired on when they were within 40 yards of the fort. The attack proceeded as planned and the fort was taken in less than ten minutes by bayonet. After the fort had surrendered, Tories in one of the barricaded houses fired on the raiding party assembled in the center of the fort "elated with victory." Tallmadge's entire force loaded and returned fire. Tallmadge and his soldiers stormed the house, broke into it with axes, and once the house was secured, "a considerable portion of those who had fired after the fort was taken and the colors struck, were thrown headlong from the windows of the second story to the ground" (Tallmadge, 46). After Tallmadge ordered the slaughter to cease, it was noticed that the loaded ships by the

docks were beginning sail away. The soldiers leveled the guns of the fort on the ships and secured them. Tallmadge's men burned and destroyed the fort, the shipping, and whatever supplies that the 54 prisoners and close to 250 non-combatants couldn't carry. The dragoons began their march back at 0800. While in route to the boats, Tallmadge selected 10 to 12 men and then rode the 8 miles to the King's magazine at Corum on horses captured at Fort St. George. SGT Churchill was on this raid, participated in the "vigorous charge" on the guard, and then set the ammunition magazine on fire. The group then returned to the main body and continued the march to the boats arriving at 1600. Departing before sunset Tallmadge and his force arrived back at Fairfield at 0100 on 24 November 1780 (Tallmadge, 40-2).

Sergeant Churchill took part in a second raid with a force of about 100 men against the British outpost called Fort Slongo. Fort Slongo was an embankment forming a square of about 50 feet made of perpendicular set trees filled with earth. It was notorious as a staging point for Tories who frequently raided neighboring farms and stole cattle, produce and other supplies to be used by the British. The fort had a usual complement of between 80 and 140 men. On 21 October 1781 at 2100 Sergeant Churchill left Westport and arrived at Long Island at 0400. During the dawn attack the blockhouse and supplies were burned, and 21 prisoners were captured. SGT Churchill was the only soldier to be wounded. The raiding party returned safely to Connecticut following the attack. Part of the order awarding him the Badge of Military Merit reads:

"That Sergeant Elijah Churchill of the 2nd Regiment of Light Dragoons, in the several enterprises against Fort St. George and Fort Slongo on Long Island, acted in a very conspicuous part; that at the head of each body of attack he not only acquitted himself with great gallantry, firmness, and address; but that the surprise in one instance, and the success of the attack in the other, proceeded in a considerable degree from his conduct and management; ... " (CSSAR, 2).

Sergeant Brown, a native of Stamford, Connecticut, enlisted as a corporal in the 5th Connecticut Regiment on 23 May 1775, and re-enlisted as a private on 9 April 1777 for the

duration of the war with the 8th Connecticut. The new regiment again promoted him to Corporal on 8 May 1779 and then to Sergeant on 1 August 1780. During a period of unit consolidation, the Army transferred SGT Brown first to the 5th Connecticut on 1 January 1781, and then to the 2d Connecticut on 1 January 1783.

General Washington awarded Sergeant Brown the Badge of Military Merit for his actions in the capture of a British fortification at Yorktown on 14 October 1781. During the siege of the British in Yorktown it became necessary to capture two British redoubts forward of the main British defenses. The British defended the northern strongpoint named Redoubt #10 with 70 men. Obstacles consisted of an abatis of crossed fallen trees, the branches cut off with a slanting stroke leaving them like sharpened spikes, and a fraise or wall of upright, pointed timbers planted with points upward.

In a combined attack the French would attack Redoubt #9 to the south while the Americans attacked Redoubt #10. On the evening of 14 October Colonel Alexander Hamilton, in charge of a force of miners and sappers, advanced with axes to reduce the abatis. The soldiers fixed bayonets and did not load their muskets in order to avoid the possibility of an accidental discharge revealing the forces' presence. Nevertheless, the British in the redoubt immediately detected and fired upon the Americans once they reached the obstacle. SGT Brown as part of a 20 man 'forlorn hope' did not wait for the reduction of the obstacles. Along with a Lieutenant Mansfield, he led their men through and over the abatis, crossed the ditch, tore down the fraise, and rushed up the high ground to the British position. They captured the redoubt in ten minutes with total casualties to the force, 9 killed and 31 wounded. Records reveal Sergeant Brown with a bayonet wound to one hand as one of the wounded (MacMillan, 892). By comparison, the French force waited for the reduction of similar obstacles in their assault against Redoubt #9 and suffered

heavier casualties as a result. The capture of both redoubts and the use of cannon against the British from these positions, quickly helped convince General Cornwallis to surrender. His surrender also shocked King George into negotiating for peace in 1782. The award citation for the Badge read in part:

"That Sergeant Brown of the 5th Connecticut Regiment in the assault on the enemy's left redoubt at Yorktown, in Virginia, on the evening of the 14th of October 1781, ... conducted a forlorn hope with great bravery, propriety, and deliberate firmness, and his general character appears unexceptionable." (CSSAR, 2).

Sergeant Daniel Bissell was the last soldier to receive the Badge of Military Merit. Sergeant Bissell, from East Windsor, enlisted on 7 July 1775, as a fifer in the 8th Connecticut Regiment. Later he volunteered for the duration as a Corporal in the 5th Connecticut. He became a Sergeant on 1 September 1777 and ended the war with the 2nd Connecticut. He served with credit at White Plains, New York; and both Trenton and Monmouth, New Jersey where he received a slight wound.

SGT Bissell received the Badge for his actions while acting under Washington's direct orders to pose as a deserter in New York City from 14 August 1781 to 29 September 1782. He allowed himself to be carried on the Continental Army's official reports as a deserter while obtaining information on the strength of the British forces in New York City and Long Island (Badge, 1). Upon his arrival in New York, SGT Bissell presenting himself as a loyal colonialist, learned that deserters were no longer protected from being pressed into service in the British Navy. In order to avoid this, he volunteered and was accepted into Benedict Arnold's Corps. He then became too sick to either perform regular duties, or escape. Gradually recovering, SGT Bissell secured himself a position as a quartermaster sergeant moving supplies to British units.

This duty required him to travel throughout Long Island, allowing him to completely observe and later report the exact status of British forces in the area.

SGT Bissell was able to report exact strengths, by unit, on Staten Island. He also gave detailed descriptions and drawings of the two forts on Staten Island including the exact locations of 24-pound cannons clear along with the best location to attack the forts. The opportunity to escape finally occurred while on a foraging mission on 27 September 1782. A facsimile of Sergeant Bissell's certificate follows:

"I, George Washington, Commander-in-Chief of the American Army, &c., &c., &c.

"To all persons to whom these presents shall come sendeth Greeting:
"Whereas it hath ever been an established maxim in the American service, that the Road to Glory was open to all, that Honorary Rewards and Distinctions, were the greatest Stimuli to virtuous actions, and whereas Sergeant Daniel Bissell of the Second Connecticut Regiment, has performed some important service, within the immediate knowledge of the Commander-in Chief, in which his fidelity, perseverance and good sense, were not only conspicuously manifested, but his general line of conduct throughout a long course of service, having been not only unspotted but highly deserving of commendation.

"Now, therefore, Know Ye, that the aforesaid Sergeant Bissell, hath fully and truly deserved, and hath been properly invested with, the Honorary Badge of Military Merit, and is entitled to pass and repass all Guards and Military Posts, as freely and as amply as any Commissioned Officer whatever; and is further Recommended to that Notice which a Brave and Faithful Soldier deserves from his Countrymen.

"Given under my hand and seal, in the Highlands of New York, this ninth day of May, A.D. 1783.

[L.S.]

(Signed)

George Washington

(Registered) JONATHAN TRUMBULL, *Secretary.*"

It is unknown why the Badge of Military Merit fell into disuse after the war. The best guess is that the dismantling of the army after the war prevented the concept of recognizing the lower ranks from turning into a tradition. More disturbing is the lack of reference to these NCOs in the memoirs of the officers commanding these soldiers and in the works of historians published

since the Revolutionary War. Colonel Benjamin Tallmadge listed by name in his memoirs three soldiers not in his unit who stumbled across a spy outside the unit sector. Their act revealed the treason of Benedict Arnold and his intent to reveal the plans of West Point to the British. Col Tallmadge had the opportunity to question the spy and this may explain why it, and those involved, received such detailed attention in his memoirs. Having said that, there was no mention of SGT Churchill by name in Colonel Tallmadge's memoirs. Perhaps the Badge while being emphasized by General Washington was considered of little importance to everyone else. SGT Brown's actions receive no mention in most histories of the Battle of Yorktown, which is strange as one of only three Badges were awarded for actions in taking that key British strongpoint, Redoubt #10. The only references with information on SGT Bissell were either in the NCO Museum at Fort Bliss, or in an obscure book on the history of Hartford County, Connecticut written in 1886.

Hopefully this work will be taken as a small step in correcting the lack of knowledge and appreciation for the sacrifices and actions of these NCOs, and that they will receive the "Notice which a Brave and Faithful Soldier deserves of his Countrymen" from the reader.

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