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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

THE FORGOTTEN BATTLE THAT SAVED WASHINGTON'S
WINTER CAMPAIGN OF 1776:

A Study of
The Second Battle of Trenton and Maneuver Warfare

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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Introduction

In the fall of 1776, many felt the American Revolution was all but over¹. George Washington and his rag-tag army had suffered defeat after defeat at the hands of the British. Men were deserting the army in alarming numbers, local militias were turning a deaf ear to the call for arms, and Congress evacuated the capital of Philadelphia in anticipation of its fall to the British. There was seemingly nothing that could be done to stop or prevent a British victory. Nothing except a campaign so simple yet brilliant in its conception and design that it would forever change the course of world history by its success. It was a campaign that utilized maneuver, surprise, and audacious boldness. It was also a campaign that, because of the dire circumstances that generated its birth, its execution risked the very cause it was designed to save. The campaign was General George Washington's Winter Campaign of 1776. The actions that "set the conditions for success"² of this campaign, however, occurred during the often overlooked and under studied Second Battle of Trenton.

The English historian George Trevelyan would write the following about George Washington's Winter Campaign of 1776, "It may be doubted whether so small a number of men ever employed so short a space of time with greater or more lasting results upon the history of the world."³ These few but eloquent words truly capture the magnitude of Washington and his army's accomplishments during that now infamous ten-day period. Even at his surrender at Yorktown some years later, General Cornwallis would admit the strategic importance of the campaign by saying, "Fame will gather your brightest laurels from the banks of the Delaware rather than the Chesapeake."⁴

The victory was decisive and as noted above, brought Washington and his army worldwide recognition. Yet, after the First Battle of Trenton, the British still remained in New

¹ Arthur S. Lefkowitz, The Long Retreat: The Calamitous American Defense of New Jersey 1776, pg 138

² Dr John Matthews, professor and Assistant Dean at USMC Command and Staff College, MCU, Quantico, Virginia, comments to author, September 2001.

Jersey. The attack had not been enough to cause their withdrawal. In fact, the attack caused the British to increase their level of alertness, consolidate their forces, and have their most able general, Cornwallis, sent down with an additional 1,000 men to add to the nearly 7,000 already assembled with the mission to attack and destroy the Americans.

The American army could not have withstood the full force of the British army had it attacked during the hours of daylight on 2 January 1777. The British would have forced their way across the fords and bridge, pinning the Revolutionaries against the Delaware River where they would have then destroyed it and with it any hope of an independent nation. But the British were stopped until nightfall. They were stopped because of the actions, leadership, and tactical abilities of Colonel Edward Hand during the Second Battle of Trenton.

The Second Battle of Trenton occurred on 2 January 1777. It was this battle, which consisted of a six-hour delaying action, that prevented the British forces under Lieutenant General Cornwallis from crushing the American army against the Delaware and allowed General Washington to execute his brilliant and daring flank maneuver resulting in the success at Princeton as well as Washington's successful movement into Morristown for winter quarters. Edward Hand's actions on 2 January 1777 not only "set the conditions for success"⁵ for Princeton and Washington's Winter Campaign but also "the Revolution was saved from collapse."⁶

This paper will conduct an analysis of Washington's Winter Campaign with particular emphasis on the Second Battle of Trenton and the actions of Colonel Edward Hand. The analysis will show that the actions of Colonel Hand not only saved General Washington and his army from assured destruction, but prevented the extinction of the Revolution as well. This analysis will be conducted through the lens of two prisms.

³ Colonels R. Ernest and Trevor Dupuy, An Outline History of the American Revolution, pg 73

⁴ Ibid, pg 76

⁵ Dr John Matthews

⁶ Don Cook, How England Lost the American Colonies 1760-1785, pg 263

The first will be that of a historical presentation of the facts and circumstances dealing with the campaign. The second prism will be through the lens of a field grade infantry officer in the United States Marine Corps with twelve years of experience and study in the tactical and operational levels of warfare. This will include dissecting the campaign and exploring it within the tenets of maneuver warfare. While the American Revolution and maneuver warfare are not commonly found in the same sentence, an examination of Washington's Winter Campaign reveals that it is indeed a dazzling example of maneuver warfare and the tenets that make it such a powerful doctrine. To ensure commonality of language, it will be first necessary to discuss maneuver warfare as it is presented in Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (MCDP 1), Warfighting.

Chapter 1

Maneuver Warfare

“Maneuver Warfare is a warfighting philosophy that seeks to shatter the enemy’s cohesion through a variety of rapid, focused, and unexpected actions which create a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which the enemy cannot cope.”

Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1, pg73

In 1989, the Marine Corps issued Fleet Marine Force Manual⁷ 1-1, Warfighting, and changed the way the Marine Corps as a whole was to think about and approach warfare. Largely based upon the teachings, writings, and thoughts of Carl von Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, Warfighting sought to become not only the Marine Corps’ principal doctrinal publication for warfare, but to become a document that taught Marines how to think as well. The basis for that thinking would be maneuver warfare.

Maneuver warfare is based upon “rapid, flexible, and opportunistic maneuver.”⁸ It focuses not only on physical maneuver but maneuver “in time” as well.⁹ Generating a faster operational tempo in relation to that of the enemy is given more of a priority than relative physical strength. Maneuver warfare utilizes concepts such as speed, surprise, centers of gravity, and critical vulnerabilities in relation to the enemy in order to gain an advantage. While these terms generally have commonly accepted meanings, it is important to ensure an understanding of their meaning in relation to maneuver warfare. Accordingly, the following definitions are provided;

⁷ FMFM-1 would later be reissued as MCDP-1

⁸ Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1, Warfighting, pg 72

- Speed. Speed is the ability to move, think, and react faster than that of the enemy. This relative speed drives operational tempo, which if faster than that of the enemy, will lead to a point where he is no longer able to cope with the fluidity of the battle and he will succumb to the will of his opponent. “Speed is a weapon.”¹⁰
- Surprise. Surprise is the ability to move, attack, or operate in a place or manner that the enemy is not prepared to react.¹¹ The success of surprise is measured by the effect upon the enemy. If he is not able to recover and react to the action in a timely manner, the success of the surprise is significant. Accomplishing that level of success through surprise is difficult. “It often means doing the more difficult thing – taking a circuitous direction of attack, for example, in the hope that the enemy will not expect it.”¹² MCDP 1 lists three manners by which surprise can be achieved; deception, ambiguity, and stealth.¹³
- Center of Gravity. The enemy’s center of gravity is that thing or factor that is critical to his success. Without it, it will make him more vulnerable to his opponent’s efforts to break his will. A center of gravity can be a place, such as a capital or key terrain; it can be a person such as a charismatic general or president; it can also be an “intangible”¹⁴ such as morale or the will of the people. Most of the time, the enemy will not have a single center of gravity. He is also likely to have separate centers of gravity at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war.

⁹ Ibid, pg 72

¹⁰ Ibid, pg 40

¹¹ Ibid, pg 42

¹² Ibid, pg 43

¹³ Ibid, pg 44

¹⁴ Ibid, pg 46

- Critical Vulnerability. This is a weakness in the enemy that presents an opportunity to attack, either directly or indirectly, his center of gravity. It is an enemy vulnerability that “if exploited”¹⁵ will do substantial damage to the enemy. Assessing the enemy’s critical vulnerability is a method to focus your efforts in order to achieve the defeat of the enemy in the shortest time and with the least cost. “A critical vulnerability is a pathway to attacking a center of gravity.”¹⁶

These concepts or principles coupled with a focus on generating a superior operational tempo in relation to the enemy enable a smaller force to defeat a numerically superior one. The defeat of a force, as defined in maneuver warfare, does not, however, necessarily equate to its complete physical destruction.

Attrition warfare, as demonstrated in the trench warfare associated with World War I, pitted strength, or surface, against an enemy strength (surface). This was a very costly, in material and manpower, form of warfare. It is not a feasible option for a smaller force with limited resources. Maneuver warfare views the destruction or defeat of the enemy as destroying his will to fight. The goal of maneuver warfare “is to render the enemy incapable of resisting effectively by shattering his moral, mental, and physical cohesion...rather than to destroy him physically.”¹⁷ This is accomplished utilizing the aforementioned principals and maneuvering friendly strength against an enemy weakness or gap.

A simple summation of maneuver warfare would be the focus of one’s strengths against an enemy’s weakness at a speed relatively faster than the enemy can act or react, in order to shatter his cohesion and his will to fight.

¹⁵ Ibid, pg 47

¹⁶ Ibid, pg 47

¹⁷ Ibid, pg 73

Chapter 2

“Retrograde Motion of things...”

As mid November 1776 approached, it could be said that the continental army was not doing well. On the 16th, Fort Washington in New York City was surrendered to the British with a loss of more than 2,800 Continentals captured. A few days later, on the 20th, Lieutenant General



Cornwallis led his Redcoats on a daring cliff assault that resulted in the capture of Fort Lee in New Jersey. Under the cover of darkness, Cornwallis moved his force across the Hudson River and marched them, single file, up a narrow and slippery path. Once at the top, Cornwallis formed them for what British Ensign Glyn would describe as “a very rapid march”¹⁸ toward Fort Lee. Luckily, a local farmer had spotted the British attack forming and got word to General Nathaniel Greene of the impending attack. Greene and most of his men were barely able to evacuate the fort with the clothes on their back before the British Forces entered. One hundred and five, however, were not quite fast enough and fell capture to the attacking British. One Englishman noted that “The rebels had fled like scared rabbits, and in a few moments after we reached the hill near their entrenchments, not a rascal of them could be seen.”¹⁹ In fact their departure was so abrupt that Greene lost a great deal of supplies that had to be left behind. These supplies were to later prove to be of great value with the approaching winter as they included over 300 new tents, all their blankets, and mess kits. Only by great fortune was the ammo and powder removed from the fort a few days earlier. The saving of the powder was one of the few positive things that would happen to General Washington and his army that fall.²⁰

Following the evacuation of Ft Lee, General Washington and his Army crossed the Passaic River and took refuge in Newark. It was during these five days that Washington began to

¹⁸ Richard Ketchum, Winter Soldiers, pg 164

¹⁹ Ibid, pg 168

²⁰ Ibid, pgs 163-168

realize the dire situation he and the revolution were facing. The combined losses from Forts Lee and Washington were staggering. Over 3,000 men were either captured or killed, and 150 cannon, 12,000 rounds of shot, 2,800 muskets, and 400,000 cartridges were all lost. This in addition to the tents, food, and other supplies left behind by Greene and his men. In terms of men and equipment, it would be the worst loss of the entire war. Following the fall of Forts Washington and Lee, Washington's army was split in three parts. General Heath had four Brigades at Peekskill with 5,400 men on the rolls although only 3,200 were effective, Washington had 5,000 men with him and General Lee was in North Castle, NY with 3 divisions of 10,000 men of which 4,000 had either deserted or were sick.²¹

In November, Washington had sent a letter to the New Jersey Governor, Thomas Livingston, who was also a Brigadier General of militia, to ready his forces should the British start to move west from New York. Livingston replied to Washington on 9 November "At any time of an apprehended invasion, I shall be ready to call out what numbers of the militia you think proper...but whether they will obey the orders, God only knows..."²² On the 16th of November after the fall of Fort Washington, Governor Livingston put the order out to his battalion commanders that their battalions be ready at a moments notice for the anticipated invasion of New Jersey by the British. Despite his pleading, the militia of New Jersey would not come out for Washington as the loss of five major battles, nearly 5,000 troops, and the ragged shape of the Army had most people in New Jersey convinced the war was all but over.²³

The five days rest in Newark was a needed one for Washington and his men as the next three weeks would find them retreating across New Jersey with General Cornwallis at their heels. During this three weeks, Washington and his men would march over 100 miles and continue to elude the British and prevent a major encounter as Washington believed it would have surely led

²¹ Ibid, pgs 168

²² Dwyer, pg 30

²³ Dwyer, pgs 32-33

to the destruction of the Continental Army²⁴. The men were in such pitiful condition that Judge Thomas Jones described them as an army of “half starved, half clothed, half armed, discontented, ungovernable, undisciplined wretches.”²⁵ General Washington himself, while always providing a stern chin in front of his men, also had doubts as to the survival of his army and the cause for which they were fighting. In a letter to his brother, Washington displayed a moment of personal frustration in which he complained about Congress’s lack of action in approving longer enlistments.²⁶ He also shared with his brother his personal feelings, stating, “I am wearied almost to death with the retrograde motion of things...” Despite his doubts and frustrations, Washington did not stop planning.

As Washington pulled across New Jersey, he knew that the only protection for his army

was the western banks of the Delaware River. He sent a dispatch out to have all boats 70 miles above and below Trenton taken to the crossing sites near Trenton. He knew the Delaware was the only obstacle that would give him and his army some temporary respite from the wrath of Lieutenant General Cornwallis and his 10,000-man army. Despite continuing to plan as he moved across the wet and cold marshes of New Jersey, “Washington considered his army and the American cause to be in the gravest danger.”²⁷

Washington sent letters to Congress telling them of the current situation and

of his plans to cross the Delaware in the vicinity of Trenton in order to escape being crushed by Cornwallis. Washington was quite frank in his letter telling Congress that “Happy should I be, if I could see the means of preventing them”²⁸ from crossing the Delaware River and moving against Philadelphia. The march across New Jersey was an exhausting one for Washington and



²⁴ This was in agreement with Washington’s Grand Strategy of “posts” as he described in a letter to Congress on 8 September, 1776 stating, “...the war should be defensive...a war of posts...avoid a general action...protract the war.”

²⁵ Ketchum, pg 195

²⁶ Ibid, pg 162

²⁷ Christopher Ward, The War of the Revolution, pg 280

²⁸ Ibid, 286

his rag-tag army. The weather was cold and wet, the roads mostly muddy. His men were tired, poorly clothed, mostly without boots, and barely keeping one pace ahead of General Cornwallis who was at their heels the entire way. Morale was at an all time low. One American officer in describing the mood of the army wrote in his diary, “A thick cloud of darkness and gloom covered the land and despair was seen in almost every countenance.”²⁹ Washington did not even take a rest as he entered Princeton, pushing right through in order to get his men across the river and to relative safety. By the 7th of December, Washington had started getting his army across the Delaware for what Washington believed to be a short rest before the British pursued him.

General Howe was pleased with the success of his campaign thus far. He had beaten the American Rebels at every encounter and was convinced the following spring would bring an end to the uprising. To further deteriorate Washington and his army’s morale, as well as to begin to heal the divide between the people and the crown, Howe issued a Pardon Proclamation that offered a full pardon to all those who took up arms against the crown provided they take an oath of allegiance to King George III within 30 days. This proclamation further exasperated the problems Washington and Governor Livingston were facing in trying to get the Jersey militia to come out and support the army. After having seen the shape and condition of Washington’s army as it headed west, many in New Jersey were convinced the war was almost over and the cause hopeless. So in great numbers they took General Howe up on his pardon. The people of Philadelphia had also heard of the numerous defeats of their army and that the British Army was certain to fall upon them by Christmas. So as Congress packed up and moved to safer ground in Baltimore, many citizens in Philadelphia packed up their belongings and headed away from town. Washington tried to stem this flow of fear and doubt with a pardon proclamation of his own for any who swore allegiance to the King but the effect was not quite as dramatic as that achieved by Howe.

²⁹ Ibid, pg 285

As Washington fled across New Jersey, Howe was not too worried about him getting “away” to the other side of the Delaware. His deputy, Henry Clinton, wanted to land a force on the Delaware, in front of the rebel army in order to block their escape, to be the anvil to Cornwallis’s hammer and end it. Howe thought otherwise and sent Clinton to seize Newport, RI instead so that the British Fleet might have another port for the winter. Howe was more concerned with the start of the social season in New York City, which was to commence with his receiving Knighthood from King George III for his stunning successes thus far in America. Howe’s initial aiming point for New Jersey was not even the Delaware, but Brunswick, a point mid-way across the Jersey plains³⁰. Howe’s cautiousness was not without merit. Howe understood that in order to crush any feelings or thoughts of the rebel army’s ability to defeat the British, he needed to create an impression of British invincibility. Howe knew that “nothing would fire patriot morale more...than a victory, even a small one by the rebel army over his resplendent force.”³¹ But a lack of resistance from the rebels and the aggressiveness of Cornwallis allowed Howe’s normal cautious self to allow his lines to move further west and become overextended. But he would pursue no more and on 13 December, Howe ordered Cornwallis to stop the campaign for the winter. When they stopped, Cornwallis had a line of forward posts across western New Jersey at Pennington, Trenton, and Bordentown with Brunswick (see Diagram #1) as a supporting base of operations. Although these posts were isolated and not mutually supporting, both Howe and Cornwallis “felt nothing but contempt for an enemy who, they believed, was not only incapable of mounting a winter offensive but who would, in all probability, not be able to survive the winter as a force to be reckoned with.”³² Howe would tell Lord Germain back in England that the posts were a bit extended but as Europeans do not fight in the winter, he felt assured they would be safe. Of course Howe forgot to realize the George

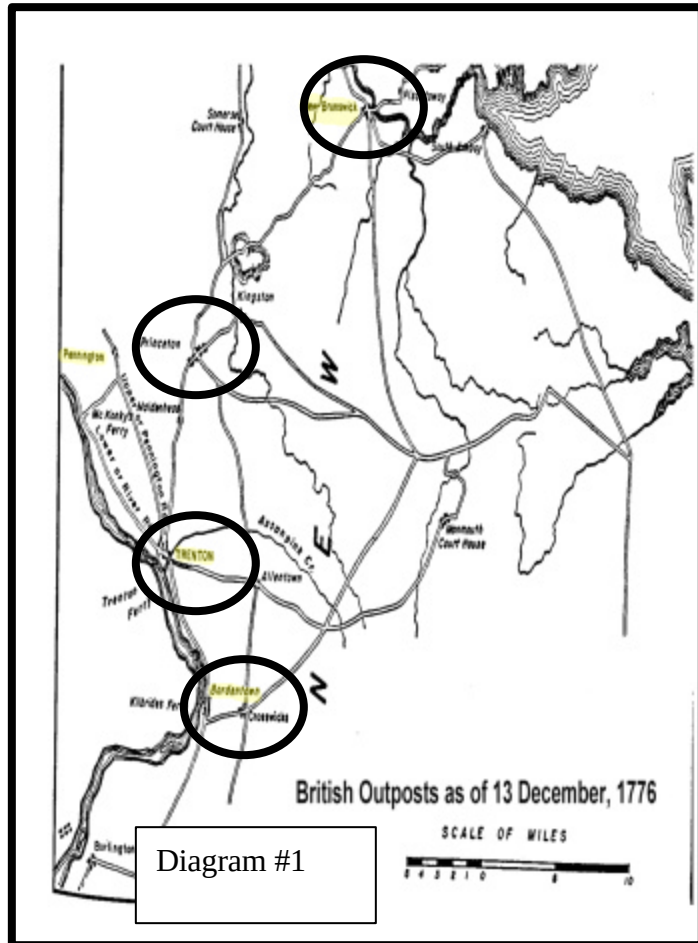
³⁰ Richard Palmer. The Way of the Fox pg 129

³¹ Ibid, pg 127

³² W.J. Wood, Battles of the Revolutionary War 1775-1781, pg 59

Washington was not European. The 13th of December also brought news that would not be considered good until many years after the war, the news of Major General Charles Lee's capture.

In addition to the problems and challenges Washington faced with enlistments that would soon expire, a lack of supplies and support from Congress, not to mention the British, he also had to deal with Major General Charles Lee who thought he should be Commander-in-Chief. Lee, a former British officer with impressive experience, commanded a great deal of respect among the soldiers of the army and Congress. Following the fall of Fort Washington, Lee wrote a letter to Colonel Reed and blamed Washington for the loss of the Fort stating "I lament with you that fatal



indecision of mind which in war is a much greater disqualification than stupidity or even want of personal courage.”³³ He continued his letter writing campaign and in a letter to Benjamin Rush in Philadelphia, Lee states he had foreseen and predicted all that had fallen upon the army at Fort Washington and Lee and that if he was in charge, “I could do you much good, might I dictate one week.” Lee was convinced that he was a better soldier than George Washington and “he was no man to let grass grow under his feet where he detected an opportunity.”³⁴ The threat to Washington's position as Commander-in-Chief from Lee was quite real and gaining some

³³ Ketchum, pg 160

³⁴ Ibid, pg 161

recognition in Congress as the fall of 1776 continued to bring defeat after defeat for the army and the very cause for which they were fighting.³⁵ That threat would disappear on 13 December when after slowly moving to execute Washington's orders to meet him and join forces on the west side of the Delaware, Lee was captured in Baskin Ridge, NJ. Following his capture, Major General John Sullivan assumed command and promptly marched the remains of Lee's army to join forces with Washington, who was in the process of getting his army across the Delaware.

On the 8th of December, as the last of George Washington's troops were ferried across the icy Delaware, the situation facing the Revolution was one of despair. It would prove to be the "darkest hour"³⁶ for the young Republic of the United States. The numerous defeats at the hands of the British and the long withdrawal across the swamps of New Jersey had plunged the morale and physical condition of the army to a low abyss. Washington would describe it as a "melancholy situation. Our little handful is daily decreasing."³⁷ With the capture of over 5,000 men, the end of 2,000+ enlistments at the end of December, and the continued desertion of dozens of men everyday, George Washington had less than 4,000 men effective and ready for duty. Those that did remain, however, were as dedicated and as hard as any other army seen throughout history. They were sick, cold, lacking clothes and shelter, and hungry, yet they stayed on to fight. General Mercer would note that his entire brigade only had three rugs and three blankets which had to be shared for sleeping. Despite the men's devotion to the cause of liberty, the elements would have a severe impact upon them. Disease was becoming rampant among the revolutionaries.³⁸ Among those that were seen were "dysentery, severe rash, cloth itch, lice, jaundice, malnutrition, running sores, frostbite, cyphilis [sic], gonorrhea, bronchitis, and pneumonia."³⁹

³⁵ Ibid, pgs 160-162

³⁶ LTC Robert Powell, USA. "Victory or Death" Washington's Delaware Crossing—Christmas 1776 and the Battle of Trenton. pg 1

³⁷ Dywer, pg 97

³⁸ Powell, pgs 1-5

³⁹ Ibid, pg 4.

In addition to tactical reasons (guarding of fords across Delaware), Washington spread his army out on the western banks of the Delaware to prevent the spread of disease from one camp to another. Washington placed his army in three general areas. Brigadier General Ewing's troops were west of Trenton, Brigadier General Cadwalader's forces were to the south across from Bordentown, and the main force (under Washington) was just north of Trenton. Despite Washington's efforts, six out of every ten soldiers would become sick and only three of those would recover.⁴⁰ The situation was so bleak, Washington would write his nephew during this period and share his fears that "the game is pretty much up."⁴¹

Things were not looking to improve with time either. On the 31st of December, most of his men's one-year enlistment would be up and Washington would be left to fight the war with only 1,400 men. As an interim between the departure of the current army and the arrival and training of the new enlistments, the militia would have filled the void in the army. The militia had not proven itself too reliable, as seen in New Jersey, and Washington feared having to rely upon them. In a letter to Congress dated 20 December 1776, General Washington pleaded that they take decisive action soon regarding the state of enlistments. Addressing the letter to John Hancock, Washington wrote:

Can anything be more destructive to the recruiting service than giving ten dollars bounty for six weeks service of the militia; who come in you cannot tell how; go, you cannot tell when; and act, you cannot tell where; consume you provisions, exhaust your stores, and leave you at last in a critical moment. These Sir are the Men I am to depend upon Ten days hence – This is the basis on which your cause will and must for ever depend, till you get a large standing army, sufficient of itself to oppose the Enemy.⁴²

⁴⁰ Howard Fast. The Crossing. pg 97

⁴¹ Ward, pg 286. In other accounts this letter was said to be addressed to Washington's brother, John Augustine.

⁴² Quote taken from from Peter B. Todson II, LTCOL, USMC, The American Revolution: Strategy Success or Failure?,

This pessimistic view was not uncommon among most during the early and middle days of December 1776. As previously mentioned, Congress had fled the capital of Philadelphia in anticipation of the impending British attack. In fact, some members of the 1st Congress actually turned their back on their new country and swore allegiance to King George in order to take advantage of General Howe's Pardon Proclamation. Most of the citizens, except the loyal Tories, of Philadelphia had also fled. To most, the revolution looked nearly lost⁴³ and any chance of success would take a miracle. Ironically, the spark that gave life back to the revolution came unknowingly from General Howe on 13 December when he decided to end his pursuit of Washington and his exhausted, cold, and half-starved army of revolutionaries and took up winter quarters.

⁴³ Lefkowitz, pg 138

Chapter 3

An Opportunity for Success

The English historian Trevelyan would describe the 13th of December as a day Americans “might well have marked...with a white stone on their calendar.”⁴⁴ General Washington was in the midst of planning his continued retreat past Philadelphia, even entering Virginia, when he received the news that Howe had halted and had taken up winter quarters in a series of posts across western New Jersey. The Commander-in-Chief immediately stopped his plans for the withdrawal. George Washington saw an opportunity to achieve a strategic victory through a decisive maneuver in the midst of despair, doubt, and hopelessness. Washington saw an opportunity that if successful, might just breathe new life into his army, the American people, and the spirit of the revolution.

On the 14th, General Washington sent a flurry of dispatches out to his commanders, informing them to “Come quickly! The enemy has stopped, he is scattered, he feels secure.” and that “ a lucky blow in this quarter would be fatal to them and would most certainly raise the spirits of the people, which are quite sunk by our late misfortunes.”⁴⁵ Washington ordered his commanders to meet him at Pitts Town, some 25 miles north of Trenton. Trenton, Washington would explain, would be their objective. He made it perfectly clear that they were to prepare themselves and their men for going on the offense. The details included in the dispatches suggest that Washington’s plan for attacking the outpost at Trenton was not a “spur-of-the moment”⁴⁶ thought but one that he had been planning for sometime. To ensure his commanders fully understood the offensive nature of the campaign, Washington sent Major General William

⁴⁴ Ward, pg 288

⁴⁵ Palmer, pg 132

⁴⁶ Palmer, pg 132

Alexander out to brief them personally.⁴⁷ Washington understood the attack was born out of desperation as he wrote to Colonel Reed on the 23rd; “but necessity, dire necessity, will, nay must, justify my attack.”⁴⁸ Washington was well aware of the precarious state of the revolution and his army. He also had realized that he had to risk *everything*, his army and the revolution, in order to breathe new life into both.

“Headquarters, December 14, 1776. The Campaign having closed with the Pursuit of the Enemies Army near ninety Miles by Lieut. Gen. Cornwallis’s Corps, much to the honor of his Lordship and the Officers and Soldiers under his Command, the Approach of Winter putting a Stop to any further Progress, the Troops will immediately march into Quarters and hold themselves in readiness to assemble on the shortest notice.”⁴⁹ General Howe’s words, from his perspective, “officially closed”⁵⁰ the fighting campaign of 1776. His underestimation of his enemy would prove to be a strategic mistake.

The main elements of Howe’s army, along with Lieutenant General Cornwallis, returned to New York. The remainder of the force would be spread out along a series of posts some eighty miles in length. The outer or most western positions had a total number of some 3,000 men under the command of the Hessian Colonel von Dunop. Half of this force was garrisoned at Bordentown and the other half, six miles to the north at Trenton. The 1,500 Hessians at Trenton were under the command of Colonel Johann Rall.

Johann Rall was a hard drinking, arrogant, poker playing officer “with an undisguised contempt for the American rebels.”⁵¹ Rall had witnessed the pitiful battle performance of the revolutionaries at both Forts Lee and Washington in addition to chasing them clear across New Jersey. Rall was perturbed that General Howe had allowed Washington to escape across the

⁴⁷ Ibid, pg 133

⁴⁸ Ward, pg 292. In his footnote, Ward expresses some doubt as to the origins of Washington’s letter but states “Whether authentic or not, it well describes the situation.”

⁴⁹ William S. Stryer, The Battles of Trenton and Princeton. pg 48

⁵⁰ Ward, pg 291

⁵¹ Wood, pg 65

Delaware without further pursuit. It irked him that the Howe brothers were more concerned with the repatriation of the colonists than with destroying their army. Rall's contempt for the Continental Army blinded his better military judgment. Despite rumors and reports circulating amongst the civilians in and around Trenton that Washington was planning an attack, Rall refused to believe that they were even capable of any significant offensive actions and even if they did, he would boast, "we'll give them the bayonet!"⁵² Accordingly, Rall would not issue any orders for defensive digging or fortifications of the barracks. In fact, Rall ran the outpost as more of an administrative garrison than a combat outpost for the British Army.

Each day around 1000, Rall would have his troops, in full dress uniform, parade past his headquarters while he would review them. Often, the troops would have to wait while the good Colonel was awoken and dressed after a long night of drinking and poker. In addition to the troops, Rall also insisted that his cannon pieces be included in the parades as Hessian Lieutenant Andreas Wiederhold recorded, "instead of being out at the head of the streets where they could be of use."⁵³ Rall would rarely visit his outposts, as again, he perceived no threat from Washington and his gypsy army.

George Washington well knew the situation and disposition of the Hessians in Trenton. Soon after Rall had established his position in Trenton, Washington's pickets captured a man near their position who was acting rather strangely. Assuming he was a spy, they ran him down and brought him to General Washington. Washington acted quite pleased with their actions but surprised them when he asked that he be left alone with the prisoner. Washington emerged from behind closed doors after a half hour or so and ordered the man to be locked up and carefully guarded. A mysterious fire later in the evening, however, distracted the guards and when they returned to their post they discovered the prisoner was gone. Washington was said to be enraged with the blunder. The prisoner's name was John Honeyman. Honeyman was part of

⁵² Wood, pg 65

⁵³ Ibid, pg 65

Washington's "remarkably effective secret service"⁵⁴ that he used to gather intelligence.

Honeyman's service was secret, for in order for him to be effective, he had to be thought of as a loyal Tory. So thorough was this deception that Washington had given Honeyman a letter that stated, "the wife and children of John Honeyman, the notorious Tory, now within the British lines, and probably acting the part of a spy" were to be spared from harm.⁵⁵ Honeyman would serve his commander-in-chief in this secret fashion throughout the war, earning nothing except the hatred and contempt of his neighbors. But, in 1783 after the war's end and in front of all to see, General George Washington rode up to the front of John Honeyman's house, put forth his hand, and publicly thanked him for his service and duty to his country.⁵⁶

Washington's plan for attacking across the Delaware was far more ambitious than just defeating the Hessians at Trenton. Washington sought to establish himself in the hills of northern New Jersey in such a position that would force the British to withdraw from "most, if not all"⁵⁷ of New Jersey. The key to the expulsion of the British from New Jersey was their hub of support for the outposts at Brunswick. To Washington, Brunswick was the British operational center of gravity. Without Brunswick, the British would be unable to support the outer-most posts and they would be forced to withdraw their forces from western New Jersey. Washington knew that he either had to attack or at least threaten the British position at Brunswick in order to achieve their withdrawal. It was an aggressive plan that would require everything the army had to offer, and even some things it did not, like esprit and motivation.

A messenger arrived in mid-December bringing news that Major General Sullivan, with 2,000 men (formally under command of General Lee), were safely in Pennsylvania and only a days march away. Washington once again saw an opportunity for success. Turning to the messenger, he instructed him to tell Sullivan that every officer and soldier was to be dressed in

⁵⁴ Ketchum, pg 288

⁵⁵ Ibid, pg 288

⁵⁶ Ibid, pg 289

⁵⁷ Palmer, pg 134

uniforms that sparkled, every boot was to be black and polished, every sword shining, faces shaved, weapons cleaned with shined bayonets attached. Washington told the messenger that getting this done was Sullivan's task and that failure would result in hell to pay. General Washington wanted them to march right down the river road as "if they hadn't a care in the world,"⁵⁸ and that they better be marching to a band. Washington understood the importance of esprit de corps and wanted to ensure that need within his army was filled.

Major General Sullivan was not about to let down his Commander-in-Chief. Appropriately, on 20 December, with all 2,000 men in radiant uniforms, polished boots, sparkling swords, brilliant bayonets, and four trumpets, seven fifes, and upwards of twenty drums, Major General Sullivan proudly and smartly marched his soldiers to join the ranks of the army. Washington had his men line the street and upon seeing the magnificent sight of Sullivan's men, they erupted in cheers and shouts, displaying a bravado and excitement not seen in the army for months. General Washington was said to be the happiest he had been in quite sometime, especially when he noticed that behind Sullivan's men were 800 to 900 more men led by Major General Gates. At this sight, Washington's men broke ranks and ran to embrace, wrestle, shake hands, and weep with their brothers-in-arms. Washington had succeeded, with a relatively simple and seemingly insignificant act, to transform the spirit of his army from despair and defeatism to a spirit of motivation, esprit, and a renewed vigor for victory. Washington's next task was to provide the tactical and operational expertise necessary to present his army and the nation with the victory they so desperately needed.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Powell, pg 7

⁵⁹ Ibid, pgs 7-8

Chapter 4

Christmas Attack

On Christmas Eve, General Washington assembled his commanders together for one last coordination and planning meeting. The commanders present were General's Greene, Stirling, Roche de Fermoy, St Clair, and Sullivan. Also present was Colonel John Glover whose men from Marblehead, Massachusetts had rescued the army from Long Island and would ferry the army across the Delaware. Washington's plan called for three separate crossing sites in order to isolate and defeat the Hessian force at Trenton. The southern most crossing would be undertaken by temporarily appointed Brigadier General John Cadwalader with 1,900 men and two artillery companies. They would cross near

Bristol and conduct a diversionary attack against Colonel von Donop's garrison force at Bordentown. Donop was the focus of the diversion as he was the overall commander for the Hessians at Trenton and Bordentown. Washington wanted to ensure that Donop's attention was not on Trenton during the attack. The center crossing would be under the command of Brigadier General James Ewing. Ewing would cross the Delaware at Trenton Ferry with 700 Pennsylvania



and New Jersey militia with the mission to seize the bridge over the Assunpink Creek in order to seal off the Hessian escape and reinforcement route. The main effort, under the command of General Washington, was 2,400 men strong and would cross in the vicinity of McKonkey's Ferry nine miles north of Trenton. The force was divided into two main groups under Nathaniel Greene and John Sullivan. Six artillery batteries with eighteen pieces were kept in general support under the command of Colonel Henry Knox. The three crossings were to be made once darkness fell on Christmas Day and the attacks were to commence at first light to achieve complete surprise. Washington had conducted his time-space analysis and concluded that the crossing would be complete by midnight, giving him plenty of time for the nine-mile march to Trenton. Unfortunately Washington was to experience what Carl von Clausewitz would describe some 30 years later as "friction."

Christmas was a very busy day for the Continental Army. As the commanders completed their battle plans, the men were issued three days cooked rations, forty rounds, their bayonet, and a field blanket. The weather was bad and would continue to get worse. By 1400, the temperature had only risen to thirty degrees. The men's morale, while certainly better than it had been in months, had ebbed some after Major General Sullivan's grand entrée five days earlier. General Washington wanted to ensure the men understood the importance of the mission they were about to undertake and for the men to be determined to achieve its success. A few days earlier, General Greene's aide-de-camp Thomas Paine, had written and published a pamphlet called The Crisis. The opening words of this work have since been taught in American schools ever since. On that cold Christmas in 1776, George Washington used those words to instill a renewed vigor and esprit within his army. He ordered that all men be read the eloquent words of Paine;

These are the times that try men's souls: The summer soldier
and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from service of
his country; but he that stands it Now, deserves the love and
thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily

conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.⁶⁰

Paine's moving words were complimented by Washington's choice of a password for the operation, "Victory or Death." The words of Paine and the challenge and password coupled with the leadership of Washington and his officers instilled a sense of purpose within the soldiers. The only thing left was to get across that icy river.

By 1500 on the 25th the brigades were moving toward their assigned crossing sites. By 1630, it was dark enough for the crossings to begin. The men were being ferried over in large Durham boats that ranged in size from forty to sixty feet. They were shaped like wide canoes and were originally designed to haul extremely heavy loads of ore, grain, whisky, and produce. What made these boats particularly useful to General Washington was that even fully loaded, they drew only five inches of water. These were the perfect boats to get the men and equipment across the shallow river.

The days prior to the 25th the river had been clear of ice but on Christmas, large chunks of ice floated menacingly down the river on a swift current. Colonel John Glover's men expertly maneuvered the boats back and forth, safely delivering the shivering soldiers and the equipment to the east side. But the transverse of the river was taking much longer than expected. As the evening progressed, snow, hail, freezing rain, and a driving wind would persecute the hapless soldiers. A Captain Thomas Rodney would write in his diary "it was a severe a night as I ever saw...[a] storm of wind, hail, rain, and snow."⁶¹ The severe weather was not just having an impact on Washington's crossing site.

The ice flow downstream was so severe that Brigadier General Ewing did not even attempt a crossing. Cadwalader actually managed to land 600 men on the Jersey side but they had to walk the last 200 feet on the ice. There was no way they could get their cannons to the

⁶⁰ Thomas Paine, The Crisis

⁶¹ Ketchum, pg 300

other side. Much debate ensued among Cadwalader's officers that had many of them pushing to continue the attack even without the artillery. Considering Washington's directive to him, Cadwalader should have continued. Washington told him that if nothing else, he was to ensure that enough of a diversion was made to allow success at Trenton. Cadwalader made the decision to pull his men back to the west side of the river and return to his assembly area. Neither General was in contact with Washington and would later state they both thought that Washington would not have been able to cross either. While in fact, General Washington was in deed getting his force across and proceeding according to plan, oblivious to the plights and situation facing his subordinates.

The task of crossing 2,400 men, horses, eighteen artillery pieces, and ammunition was not complete until 0300 on the 26th...three hours behind Washington's original estimation. He was extremely worried about what consequences would face his two other forces if he did not continue and so made the decision to continue the attack. Washington continued to push, believing that both Ewing and Cadwalader would be moving into their assigned positions.

Washington and his officers got the men formed for the march and by 0400 they were moving toward Trenton. Washington knew he had no chance of arriving in Trenton prior to sunrise but was hopeful that some element of surprise could still be achieved. His hopes would be seemingly shattered before long.

A group of forty men soon came upon Washington's column from the direction of Trenton. Captain Richard Anderson led them. Apparently they had been sent over on the 25th for reconnaissance, with mission approval coming from their brigade commander, Brigadier General Stephen. General Washington had not been informed and grew increasingly irate as the young Captain told his tale. Anderson and his men had ventured dangerously close to Trenton and had a chance encounter with a Hessian outpost. They exchanged fire with the Hessians and then countermarched back to the crossing site where they ran into the front of Washington's column.

General Washington was furious that such a mission was conducted without his approval.⁶² He scorned General Stephen and said, “You, Sir, may have ruined all my plans by having them put on their guard.”⁶³ Some luck, however, would be on the side of Washington that evening.

Colonel Rall was engaged in a card game on the night of the 25th. He had given orders to his servants to not disturb him. So when a local loyal Tory farmer came to tell Rall that the American Army had just crossed the Delaware and was moving toward Trenton, he was not allowed in the house where Rall played. Instead, he wrote a note on a piece of paper, folded it, and handed it to the servant to give to the Hessian Commander. One of a few chances that Rall had the ability to change the course of history, to spare himself the fate of defeat was lost at this moment as he took the note, still folded, and put it in his pocket without so much as even looking at it⁶⁴. Another chance came as a result of Captain Anderson’s shooting incident with the outpost.

The report of a shooting with some rebel element bothered Rall more than serve as an alert to an impending attack despite the rumors that such an attack was being planned. Rall rode out to the outpost and after listening to his soldiers report and surveying the severe weather, concluded it must have been some rogue farmers or militia. Despite the pleading of one of his officers, Major von Dechow, Rall refused to send patrols out in the weather to the crossing sites and post outside pickets. Colonel Rall ordered his troops to stand down for the evening and he returned to drinking and playing cards. It is not known how Rall fared playing cards that evening, but if he won, it would be the last thing he would win in his life.

At Birmingham, a few miles from Trenton, the road split (see diagram #3) and the forces with General Washington would do the same. The 1st Division or right wing as Washington described it under Major General Sullivan with his three brigades continued toward Trenton along the River Road. The 2nd Division, or left wing under Major General Greene would turn left

⁶² Dwyer, pg 250

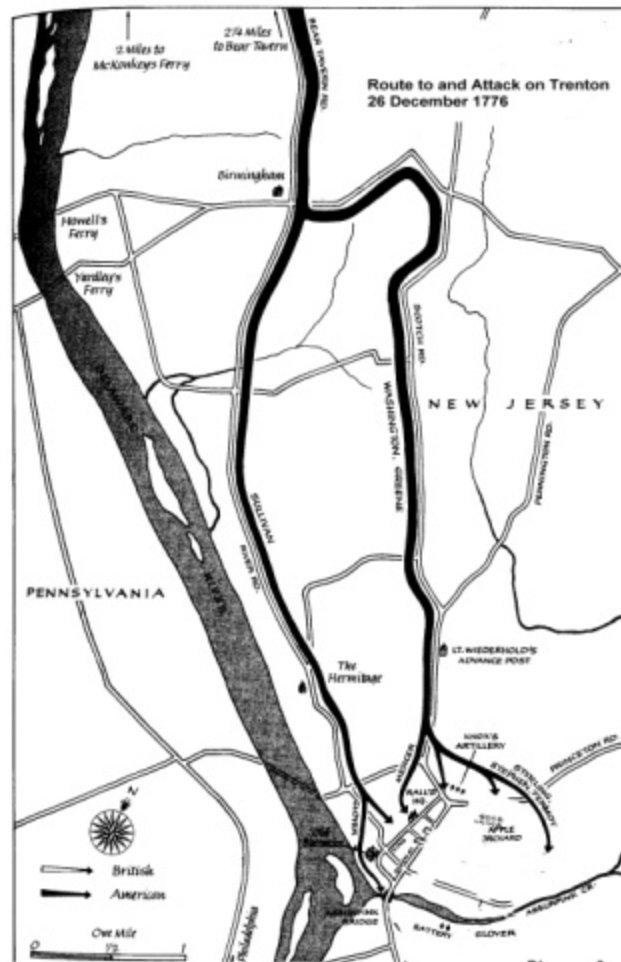
⁶³ Ibid, pg 250

⁶⁴ Other accounts have Rall looking at the note but seeing it was in English, put it in his pocket to be translated later.

on Scotch Road and attack the town from the north. With General Greene traveled Colonel Knox with his artillery regiment and the Commander-in-Chief, George Washington.

The two columns were making slow progress along the snow and ice covered roads. Many of the men only had rags on their feet as they plodded their way along. The temperature hovered around freezing, with a harsh downfall of snow and freezing rain.

The only comfort they did have was the stiff wind was at their back. The rain, however, would affect more than just the men. A young captain from a New Jersey regiment, John Mott, discovered that even with his flint box covered, he could not keep it dry. He quickly checked his men and soon discovered that they were all in the same situation.⁶⁵ Captain Mott informed General Sullivan that in his opinion, not one rifle in the division would be capable of firing. General Sullivan



stopped the column and had the commanders check all the weapons. Within a few minutes, it was determined that while the firing of any muskets would be doubtful, the artillery pieces should still be able to fire. Sullivan was very wary of attacking the strong Hessians without rifles. He sent Captain Mott to inform Washington of the situation and asks for orders.

While General Washington was normally a composed and calm gentleman, he was known for the occasional burst of rage and profanity. Captain Mott would be the unfortunate

recipient of one of those bursts. Washington roared at Mott, “Sullivan has his damned orders.”⁶⁶ He then added, “Tell General Sullivan to bayonet the ____ Hessians!”⁶⁷

Captain Mott rejoined General Sullivan and the other rain soaked, half-frozen officers and repeated Washington’s words verbatim. The men reacted with a “burst of laughter, and then the language of Washington, the word bayonet, and laughter ran up and down the line, once again bringing the men to life.”⁶⁸

As the two columns converged on Trenton in those early morning hours, the thoughts of George Washington can only be imagined. He knew there was no chance of attacking before sunrise and he had to assume the Hessians were at a heightened state of alert due to Captain Anderson’s actions. It can also be assumed that many of Washington’s thoughts were on the men under Generals Cadwalader and Ewing. With no means of communicating with them, Washington had no idea where they were, what condition they were in, or even if they had been in contact. It was probably better for Washington’s mental health that he did not know that neither force had crossed the Delaware and would not be in position to support his attack.

Slightly before 0800, (See diagram # 4) the lead troops of General Greene’s column had reached the northern outposts of Trenton. General Greene’s men attacked the first outpost, quickly running the Hessians from the building toward the town. Approximately three minutes later, General Washington heard shots from General Sullivan’s division. Washington could not have asked for a better-coordinated attack. Since the Hessians were almost all in quarters because of the weather and Colonel Rall’s orders, surprise was complete and decisive. “Half-dressed Hessians”⁶⁹ spilled from their buildings in an attempt to form a battle line. They quickly faltered under the pressure from the swarming Americans.

⁶⁵ Powell, pg 33

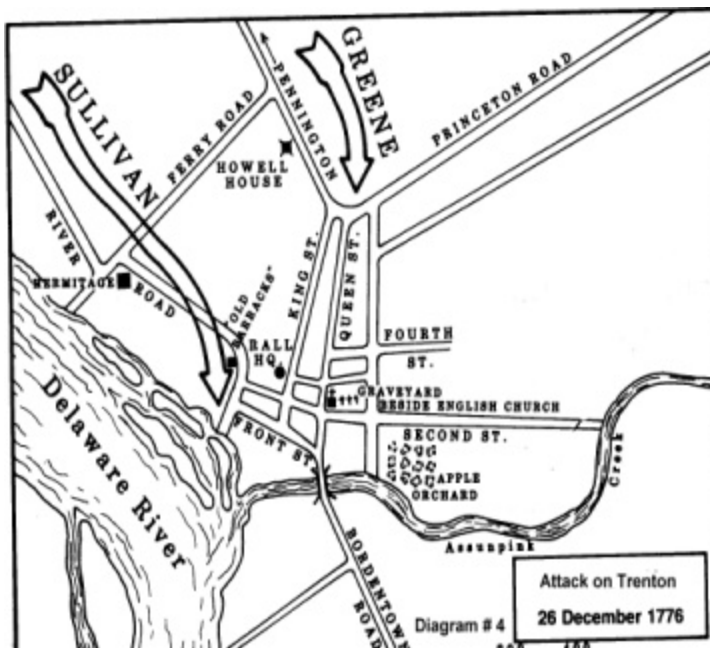
⁶⁶ Ibid, pg 34

⁶⁷ Ibid, pg 34. Other accounts of this conversation attribute less colorful words to Washington. Richard Ketchum recorded Washington as saying, “Use the bayonet. I am resolved to take Trenton.”

⁶⁸ Ibid, pg 34

⁶⁹ Powell, pg 36

Washington continually exposed himself daringly throughout, wheeling his horse from position to position, shouting encouragement to his men as well as maneuvering Fermoy's



brigade to cut off the road leading to Princeton.

On the southern end of town, Sullivan's men were enjoying equal success and advancing rapidly. Seeing Ewing's force was not in position, General Sullivan quickly pushed forces toward the Assunpink Creek to prevent any more Hessians from escaping.

By the time Colonel Rall was awoken and dressed, his advance posts were already running through town. He tried desperately to form his lines for a counterattack but Colonel Henry Knox's artillery was expertly located on the high ground on the northern end of the town and were skillfully pouring canister and solid shot upon the Hessian soldiers as they tried to form.

The Hessian soldiers tried to fight back but were quickly overcome by confusion, chaos, and fear. Colonel Rall received two wounds to his hip but stayed on his saddle as long as he could, desperately trying to rally his men. When too weak to hold himself in the saddle, his men assisted him inside a nearby church. Colonel Johann Rall would die of his wounds within 24 hours but not before discovering the note in his pocket from the Tory farmer. Had he read that note, Rall might not have been laying in the church dying.

Within an hour of the battle starting, most of the Hessians had been forced from the town and into the fields and orchards to the east. One group after another surrendered until the last group finally turned over its colors. The entire battle lasted only an hour and a half. Washington had finally achieved a victory.

The victory had been decisive and complete. Washington had planned and executed a masterful attack that utilized surprise, deception, and speed to overcome his enemy. The speed, shock and surprise employed by Washington soundly defeated the Hessians with not only minimal loss to the Americans, but with very few musket shots even being fired! Washington's forces suffered only four wounded men, two officers, and two enlisted.

The Hessian losses were significant. Over 900 men were captured, "including 23 officers, 6 three pounder cannons, 3 ammunition wagons, over 1,000 muskets, 12 drums, and four sets of colors."⁷⁰ The Hessians also had 22 killed and over 80 wounded. The victory for Washington and the Hessian defeat was sound.

The time afforded Washington and his officers to bask in the warmth of their first victory of the war were brief at best. The decision had to be made whether or not the army should continue its attack as originally planned⁷¹. This plan included attacking Princeton and Brunswick in an attempt to expel the British from New Jersey. General Greene and Colonel Knox wanted to continue. They argued that not one soldier had been killed⁷², only four wounded and with the current momentum they enjoyed, they could achieve their goals. Greene and Knox were alone in their beliefs. The other officers offered Washington a more realistic viewpoint. The men were exhausted, cold, and hungry. Colonel Donop still had his troops to the south and both they and the troops at Princeton were fresh. The army was not complete as the forces of Ewing and Cadwalader were still in Pennsylvania. They had over 900 prisoners to guard, and perhaps most importantly; they felt it too risky to possibly jeopardize the victory they had just gained.⁷³ After careful consideration, Washington would also agree that the men were in no shape to continue and the victory they had just achieved too fragile to risk. They rounded up what supplies they could and began the cold march back to the crossing site.

⁷⁰ Powell, pg 46

⁷¹ Ward, Christopher. The War of the Revolution, pg 302

⁷² After-action reports show two men did die. However, their death was a result of freezing to death during the nine-mile march from the crossing to Trenton.

The first battle of the campaign was impressive from its inception through its completion. The very conception of the attack was a result of Washington sensing an opportunity to regain the initiative from the British in what had been previously a one sided war. The opportunity was a result of Howe's decision to end the campaign for the winter, stopping his pursuit of Washington, and establishing a series of outposts in New Jersey. The speed in which Washington transitioned from a near rout to the offense resulted in an American operational tempo that the British would not be able to recover from until later in 1777. Washington would create this superior operational tempo by planning an attack that used speed, surprise, and deception as its principle tenets.

During the planning phase, Washington identified Brunswick as the British operational level center of gravity (COG). He assessed Brunswick as the source of power for the British as it was the main resupply point for all the posts in Western New Jersey and it also contained vast stores of money and supplies. Washington believed that if he could attack or seize Brunswick, the British would be forced to give up their claim on the Jerseys. A British withdrawal from New Jersey, Washington's ultimate goal for the campaign, would bolster the morale of his army, the American people, and breath a new life into the stalled revolution.

The plan itself, while simple, was incredibly bold and daring for its time. Overall the British forces in New Jersey outnumbered him but the dispersion of the forces made them vulnerable. Washington sought to exploit this vulnerability on the post that offered him his greatest chance of success, not only in the attack but also in moving on to Brunswick. That post was Trenton. Trenton was isolated from the other posts and the state of preparedness and level of alertness prescribed by the over confident Hessian, Colonel Rall, made it particularly attractive to George

⁷³ Ketchum, pg 315

Washington. Washington sought to further his advantage over the isolated outpost by an exciting deception plan.

The focus of the deception plan was the commander of the three most western outposts, Colonel von Donop. The deception was supposed to be carried out by Brigadier General Cadwalader. General Washington had given Cadwalader a clear, mission type order on the 24th, outlining his purpose and the desired endstate. Washington wanted Donop kept occupied and unable to concentrate his thoughts on any reports he may receive from Trenton. Cadwalader's deception would also serve to confuse the Hessian commander as to which attack was the American main effort. This would allow Washington to maintain control of both the initiative and tempo. In Washington's plans, the deception was critical. Why Cadwalader did not continue with the 600 men he did manage to get across the river remains unanswered. Luckily, for both Cadwalader and Washington, the success of the attack precluded any need for an investigation into Cadwalader's failure to accomplish his mission.

Surprise was also a critical element of Washington's plans. He knew (from his spy John Honeyman) that Rall did not expect any sort of attack from the seemingly defeated American army. Washington would also benefit from the severe weather, as it would further convince Rall that no army would or *could* conduct an attack under such horrific conditions, especially at night. The element of surprise would greatly benefit Washington in evening the odds in attacking a force which although numerically inferior was superior in training, skill, and discipline.

Besides Cadwalader and Ewing being unable to cross the Delaware River and the four hour delay in getting Washington's forces across, the plan of attacking and securing Trenton went very close to the original plan. This can be attributed to the simplicity of Washington's tasking as well as the effective leadership of Generals Greene and Sullivan. To achieve the success of two

separate maneuver forces attacking near simultaneously after a nine-mile night march with no means of communication approaches near miracle status. General Sullivan deserves particular recognition for his quick actions in pushing a unit to seal off the Hessian escape route over the Assunpink Creek Bridge once he realized that General Ewing's forces were not there.

The effectiveness and totality of the surprise achieved by Washington was evident by the lack of injuries sustained by the American army and the short amount of time it took to achieve complete victory over the Hessians. The physical tempo generated by Washington with his two maneuver elements quickly overcame the Hessian officers and Rall. Unable to cope with the rapidly maneuvering forces of Washington, the Hessians could not organize any determined resistance and quickly lost their will and ability to fight.

Washington's use of surprise, deception, and his ability to maintain a superior operational tempo in relation to his British and Hessian counterparts was critical to his success at the first Battle of Trenton. His ability to quickly transition to the offense and conduct a major attack caught the British completely off guard and ill prepared to deal with his actions. It was something that the British, particularly General Cornwallis, did not want to repeat.

Washington, his men, their equipment, the newly acquired Hessian equipment, and 900+ Hessian prisoners of war crossed back over to the western side of the Delaware. Unfortunately, three more soldiers froze to death in the transit. The mood in the camps was one of excitement and celebration. Once again, however, General Washington would not have much time to celebrate.

The psychological effect that Washington's surprise attack on Trenton had on the British was very real. General Howe would dismiss the defeat in a letter to Germain as an embarrassment but overall a minor incident. Additionally, in this same letter, Howe would place

the blame for the loss squarely on the shoulders of the late Colonel Rall, telling Germain, “Rall’s defeat has put us much out of our way. His misconduct is amazing.”⁷⁴ But while he was downplaying the effects of the battle to Germain, he was preparing to issue orders to Cornwallis to march into Jersey with 1,000 extra men and attack Washington. To the British already in New Jersey, including Colonel Donop, a sense of near panic was among them. Numerous reports of American movements, reconnaissance efforts, the Jersey militia, and Cadwalader’s crossing on the 27th enforced the effects of Washington’s victory at Trenton and served to unnerve the British troops.

Colonel von Donop heard news of the attack and defeat of his forces at Trenton by noon on the 26th. Fearing a large force would soon attack his position, he withdrew his forces to what is now Chesterfield, New Jersey. He withdrew so quickly that much of his supplies were abandoned to the delight of Cadwalader and his men. Arriving, Donop found 400 or so of Rall’s soldiers who had managed to escape Trenton before Sullivan’s men had completed the encirclement. On the 27th, Donop would continue to withdraw back to Allentown where General Grant, the British Commander for New Jersey, told him to wait for further orders. Donop would eventually be ordered to Princeton.

⁷⁴ Alfred Hoyt Bill, The Campaign of Princeton 1776-1777, pg 84

Chapter 5

Trying to “Bag the Fox”

Word spread quickly concerning the victory at Trenton. By the evening of the 26th, it had reached General Cadwalader. Thinking that Washington would continue to Princeton and Brunswick as originally planned, Cadwalader and his forces crossed, successfully this time, the Delaware. He had sent a dispatch to General Washington telling him his intentions. With most of his forces across, Cadwalader received a return dispatch from Washington informing him that he had crossed back to Pennsylvania and that he (Cadwalader) should stay in Pennsylvania to await further orders. Cadwalader would decide to stay in New Jersey after receiving word from Colonel Reed that the British had deserted Burlington and Bordentown. Cadwalader sent his current intentions back to Washington.

Washington received word from Cadwalader that he was staying in New Jersey and moving to Bordentown on the evening of the 27th. Washington also discovered that his Adjutant General, Colonel Reed, was in Trenton. George Washington now faced perhaps the most difficult dilemma he had faced to date. If Washington ordered Cadwalader back, the men might perceive his actions as based on fear of the British regulars and it might serve to negate any gains made at Trenton. If Washington left Cadwalader there, he was isolated and vulnerable to attack from the 1,000+ Redcoats that Cornwallis would soon be marching with toward Princeton. The defeat and capture of Cadwalader and his men would certainly crush any gains achieved to date. His third option, and perhaps possessing the most risk and the largest penalty for failure, was to re-cross his already exhausted force and move back to Trenton, consolidate his forces, and engage the Redcoats in battle, something that prior to the 26th had been unable to produce a victory. Additionally, the third option also included trying to convince most of his soldiers to stay past

their enlistments that were up on the 31st of December. Washington's chose the option that inherently had the biggest risk; but also offered the biggest gains.

Washington's desire to further expand on his success after the first battle of Trenton was relayed to his immediate staff on the 27th prior to discovering Cadwalader's situation.

Washington had told them that once the troops were well rested, he wanted to re-cross and "beat up the rest of their Quarters bordering on and near the River...I think a fair opportunity is offered of driving the Enemy entirely from, or at least to, the extremity of the province of Jersey."⁷⁵

While these words clearly suggest that Washington was planning on resuming actions against the British, they also suggest more raid type actions against small outposts. By his unordered crossing, Brigadier General Cadwalader pushed Washington into crossing earlier than planned and with the risk of the whole British army bearing down upon them.

Washington committed to re-crossing and sent a dispatch to Cadwalader telling him that he would cross with the Army on the 29th. Washington also sent orders to General Ewing who was still stationed opposite Trenton, to send a small advance force to Trenton immediately to secure the town and meet there with Colonel Reed. Washington also sent orders to Philadelphia, directing Brigadier General Thomas Milfin, with whatever troops he could muster, to cross into Jersey and join Cadwalader. Once Washington got his army across, he would turn his attention to trying to convince his army to stay past their enlistment.

When all were across (their third crossing in four days), Washington moved his men into Trenton and established a strong position on the south side of the Assunpink Creek. Then, one regiment at a time, Washington had the men form up in order to try and convince them to stay past the 31st. This was no easy task. For the past year, these ragged, tired, cold, sick, and half starved men had fought and had been beaten repeatedly. They had seen many of their friends and comrades killed, wounded, and taken prisoner. They were weary of fighting and enduring its hardships. They were ready and anxious to go home.

Once the men were formed, Washington came in front of them upon his horse. He told them how well they had done in fighting the Hessians, what it meant for the nation, and why they were still needed. He told them they were the men that Thomas Paine had written about in *The Crisis*. He asked if they could stay just a few weeks longer, the good it would do for the army, the nation, and the cause would be invaluable. He also offered them a ten-dollar bounty⁷⁶ if they agreed to stay for six more weeks. When he was done, Washington pulled his horse off to the side to watch as the troop commanders told the formation that any many willing to stay should take one step forward. It was a disturbing silence as not one man moved.

If the soldiers refused to stay, Washington knew everything would be lost. Having come too far to let it all end like that, the General again directed his horse in front of the formation. A sergeant in the formation remembered Washington saying:

You have done all I asked you to do, and more than could be reasonably expected; but your country is at stake, your wives, your houses, and all that you hold dear. You have worn yourselves out with fatigues and hardships, but we know not how to spare you. If you will consent to stay only one month longer, you will render that service to your country which you probably never can do under any other circumstances the present is emphatically the crisis which is to decide our destiny.⁷⁷

Again, Washington directed his horse to the side of the formation to await the effect, if any, his words had had upon the men. A few stepped forward and then looked back upon the rest. The shameful look of the few was enough that almost all able-bodied men stepped forward and agreed to stay on with Washington. This process was repeated throughout the Army until Washington had 1,200 to 1,400 men extend their enlistments for six weeks. These regulars plus the estimated 3,500 volunteer militia would be all the General would have to face the 8,000 soldiers under Lieutenant General Cornwallis.

⁷⁵ Samual Steel Smith, *The Battle of Princeton*, pg 7

⁷⁶ Washington was not authorized to offer this money and if Congress did not approve of it, he was prepared to sell off his own assets in order to pay the men.

⁷⁷ Dwyer, pgs 293-294

Cornwallis was about to board a ship in New York bound for England to spend the winter with his family when the news of Washington's raid on Trenton reached him. Needless to say, General Howe canceled Cornwallis's leave but took five days to order Cornwallis to Princeton with a 1,000 soldiers. Cornwallis would depart from Perth Amboy on the 1st of January 1777. Following a fast paced 50-mile march from Perth Amboy to Princeton, Cornwallis reinforced the troops under Grant and Donop. He assumed command of the 8,000 men and began issuing orders to move out the next day, 2 January, to Trenton. Cornwallis's goal was no less than the complete destruction of Washington's army.

Washington's decision to re-cross the Delaware was one of enormous courage, audacity, and possessing significant risk. He well knew that he would be going against everything Howe and Cornwallis could throw at him and his chances for success against the Redcoats in open battle was slim. If Washington received any sort of defeat, he risked the loss of public support (again) and his ability to raise an army to continue fighting. By re-crossing and challenging Lord Cornwallis, George Washington was in fact risking *everything*. The possible gain, however, was worth the risk in Washington's view. Here again, Washington's ability to see an opportunity for victory where perhaps most others would only see a crisis is noteworthy. Although Washington had not planned on re-crossing the Delaware so soon, the situation had developed that would allow him to exploit his previous success. The operational tempo generated by Washington by quickly making the decision to re-cross was faster than Howe's reaction to the first attack. Howe would wait nearly five days before ordering Cornwallis to march into Jersey with the reinforcements. Howe's inability to make a decision in a timely manner forfeited the initiative and control of the tempo to George Washington. Cadwalader's crossing accelerated Washington's timeline for re-crossing and elevated the goals he hoped to achieve. Washington took the opportunity given to him by Cadwalader and quickly began to formulate a plan that

would once again, provide him a prospect to attack or threaten the British center of gravity at Brunswick.

Washington's position in Trenton, while one of reasonable strength, certainly was not impregnable. The American lines were anchored on the left to the Delaware River and extended for some three miles. The majority of the lines were on the south side of the Assunpink Creek, whose waist deep water and steep banks provided a natural barrier and were reinforced with extensive earth works, but the right flank was not anchored into anything and was relatively open. Colonel Reed had practiced law in Trenton and knew the surrounding area well. He warned Washington of the fording sites further north on the Assunpink that Cornwallis could use to cross his army and roll the right flank of their army. Washington's staff realized the situation they were facing. Most agreed "ruin faced them if they stayed to fight it out."⁷⁸ The men of Washington's army knew the danger of their situation as well. Stephen Olney, a soldier in the army wrote, "It appeared to me then that our army was in the most desperate situation I had ever known it, we had no boats to carry us across the Delaware, and if we had, so powerful an enemy would certainly destroy the better half before we could embark."⁷⁹

Washington's plan, while simple in design, was one of pure brilliance and courage. He planned on delaying Cornwallis's force from attacking the main defensive lines in Trenton until nightfall on the 2nd of January. Washington had assumed that Cornwallis would not press an attack against a fortified position at night when he could easily and more safely wait until first light to finish the effort. But Washington did not plan on cooperating for the Lord General. He developed a master deception plan to convince Cornwallis that the American army was also bedded down for the evening on the south side of the creek, awaiting the battle the next morning. But in reality, only a skeleton force would be manning the bridge, fording sites, and numerous

⁷⁸ Theodore Thayer, Nathaniel Greene; Strategist of the American Revolution, pg 148

⁷⁹ Ketchum, pg 338

cooking fires while the majority of the army would be silently slipping around Cornwallis's left flank under the cover of darkness along a little known road to attack the British rear guard at Princeton. The success of the plan was dependant upon the ability of Washington to delay Cornwallis from getting to Trenton while it was still light out. If Cornwallis and his army reached Trenton with daylight remaining, they would be able to press the attack and with their numerically superior force, and crush the American army against the Delaware. Washington must have known the danger he, his army, and perhaps even the Revolution itself faced those early days of January 1777. Some historians disagree on the timing of Washington developing the plan for the deception and subsequent attack on Princeton. While it is believed that Washington had developed the plan for the operation prior to the events on the 2nd of January, others suggest that Washington and his staff envisioned the flanking movement and attack after the 2nd Battle of Trenton had finished.⁸⁰ Regardless of when the plan was developed, Washington had to first stop General Cornwallis and his army from reaching Trenton. The upcoming battle and its success "might be the issue of life or death for the American cause."⁸¹ So it was in a very real sense that the success or failure of the delaying action equated to the success or failure of the entire revolution. Even if Washington had managed to save most of his army from a British attack, the psychological impact a loss would have had would have been no less decisive then the destruction of the entire rebel army. The awesome responsibility for the delaying action and in reality, for the future of the revolution would luckily fall on the able shoulders of Colonel Edward Hand.

⁸⁰ Thayer, pgs 148-149

⁸¹ Freeman, pg 344

Colonel Edward Hand “was the stuff of which the hard core of the Continental Army was made.”⁸² Born in Ireland in 1744, by the age of 23

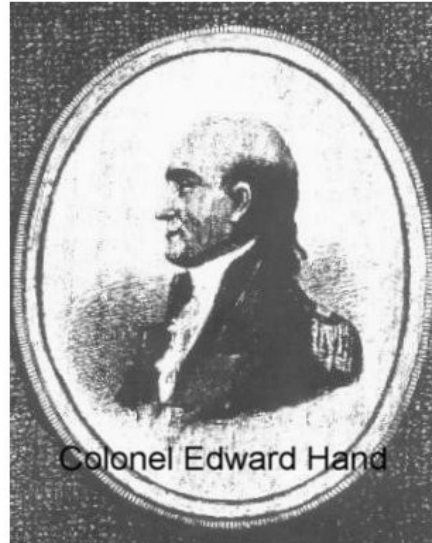
he was serving in the British army and was qualified as a physician and surgeon’s assistant.

He was deployed to America in 1767 and soon grew to love the new land. He settled in

Pennsylvania with numerous other Irish

immigrants where he practiced medicine. When

trouble began with the British crown concerning taxes and representation, Hand joined a battalion



and was appointed a Lieutenant Colonel. Hand would participate at Bunker Hill and every other major engagement up to and including Cornwallis’s surrender at Yorktown. He would achieve the rank of Major General and after the war he would continue his public service, serving as an elected official in the Continental Congress and various other local offices. But it would be his actions as a colonel on 2 January 1777 that would provide his greatest contributions to the American Revolution.

General Washington had positioned Fermoy’s brigade five miles outside of Trenton along the south west bank of a creek called Five Mile Run. The location was approximately half way between Trenton and Princeton and would be the starting point for the critical delaying action of Washington’s plan. The first British skirmishers appeared just before 1000 on the 2nd and were quickly downed from the accurate long rifles of the American army. Unexplainably, General Fermoy, at the sound of the first rifle shots, turned his horse and galloped quickly toward

⁸² Ketchum, pg 341

Trenton. It would be later reported that Fermoy was drunk and unable to handle the pressures of command.⁸³ Fermoy's sudden departure left the brigade under the command of Colonel Hand.

Hand had the men wait, in ambush, for the approaching British column. Only when the British advance guard were literally right in front of his position did he give the order to shoot. The volume of fire was so intense the British advance guard was forced to pull back and into the main body. Hand's men would actually pursue the advance guard for some distance. The confusion created by this gave the illusion that they had run into the entire American Army and they were about to attack.⁸⁴

Under the masterful control of Hand, the brigade used the available terrain and cover to continually engage the forward British columns, causing them to stop, deploy their lines for battle, and pull up their artillery pieces for support. But, by the time the British were formed and ready to attack, the American rebels had disappeared into the wilderness without a trace. This scene would be repeated numerous times throughout the day. The demoralizing affect on the British troops was evident as the day progressed. Their friends and comrades were being shot and killed by an enemy they could not catch nor see. The pace of the British movement slowed as the forward commanders became more and more cautious in their movement to avoid getting their men shot. It was just what Hand needed to do. The British advance was further slowed by the unusually warm weather that turned the roads into knee deep muddy quagmires. By 1500, Colonel Hand and his men were still a half-mile outside Trenton at a ravine called Stockton Hollow.

Stockton Hollow was Hand's final fighting position and he was determined to hold it as long as possible. General Washington, along with Nathaniel Greene and Henry Knox, rode out to the position to encourage the men and remind the Colonel from Pennsylvania how important it

⁸³ Ketchum, pg 341. Fermoy would later disgrace himself again during the abandonment of Fort Ticonderoga by falling into a drunken stupor and failing to give the withdrawal order for his troops on Mount Independence. He "resigned" early in 1778 when Congress refused to promote him.

⁸⁴ Dwyer, pg 316

was to hold the enemy off till nightfall. Hand and his men were stubborn in their defense and only gave up ground after the British had managed to get their artillery in place and appeared ready to attack with the entire army. At 1600, Hand and his men entered Trenton and began their retreat through it in order to reach the safety of the Assunpink Creek Bridge. By this time, the American artillery had begun firing on the British attackers, and rifle fire from both sides of the creek was filling the town with noise and a hazy smoke. As Hand and the last of his men crossed the bridge, their Commander-in-Chief, George Washington, sat stoically on his horse at the very end of the bridge, waiting for the last man of Hand's brigade to safely cross. Colonel Hand and his men were successful in their mission as it was dark before Cornwallis and the main body of his army entered Trenton. "Washington had achieved his vitally important purpose of delaying a coordinated attack on his main positions during daylight, an attack that could hardly have failed to destroy him."⁸⁵

Even some at that time realized the importance and strategic meaning of Hand's actions. A Major Wilkerson would write, "Thirty minutes would have sufficed to bring the two armies into contact, and thirty more would have decided the combat; and covered with woe, Columbia might have wept the loss of her beloved Chief and most valorous sons."⁸⁶ The officers were not the only ones to grasp the significance of the battle. John Howland, a young trooper from Rhode Island, would write, "On one hour, yes, on forty minutes, commencing at the moment when the British troops first saw the bridge and creek before them, depended the all-important question whether we should be independent states or conquered rebels!"⁸⁷ George Washington would be in debt to Colonel Hand and the brave men in his brigade. Hand had given Washington "...the time he so badly needed to organize his incoming reinforcements and deploy them in their defensive positions behind Assunpink Creek."⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Mark M. Boatner III, Encyclopedia of the American Revolution, pg 786

⁸⁶ Dwyer, 319

⁸⁷ Ibid, 319

⁸⁸ Wood, 78

Cornwallis gathered his officers together to discuss their options for the evening. Sir William Erskine, his quartermaster general, recommended pressing the attack that evening, believing that Washington and his army would be gone by morning if they were not attacked. General Grant disagreed. He argued that the rebel army had no escape routes, the men (British) were tired from the ten mile force march through muddy roads from Princeton, and “we’ve got the old fox safe now,” he told Cornwallis, “We’ll go over and bag him in the morning.”⁸⁹ Cornwallis’s other option was a frontal attack, in the dark, across the heavily guarded bridge and across a waist deep creek with steep banks. The chance for success under those conditions was not promising for the tired British army. Cornwallis agreed with General Grant, they would bag their fox in the morning. The next morning, however, found Lord General Cornwallis and his officers looking through their field glasses at empty and abandoned positions across the Assunpink Creek. Cornwallis had no idea where his enemy had gone until around 0800 when he heard the sound of cannon fire coming from the direction of Princeton. The Fox had proved more elusive and cunning than Cornwallis had thought.

The span of six hours had decided whether or not Washington and his army would continue to exist. Colonel Hand and his men, through exceptional use of terrain, marksmanship, and massed-surprised fires, had given Washington, the army, and the Revolution an opportunity for new life. Hand, with his experience in the British army, knew the British Center of Gravity (COG) at the tactical level lay in their discipline and well rehearsed drill. Going directly against this surface would not have been possible for the British would have broken the American lines and destroyed Hand’s brigade. Instead, Hand had his men, with their long and accurate rifles, attack the critical vulnerability of the British COG. He had them concentrate their fires on the British officers. Attacking the officers slowed down the British machine, created confusion, and forced the

⁸⁹ Ketchum, pg 344

surviving officers to not be as aggressive in fear of becoming the next victim to the American sharpshooters. Coupled with a little help from mother nature in the form of warm weather and muddy roads, Hand was successful in his mission of keeping the British out of Trenton before nightfall and thus preventing a British attack that evening.

Hand's actions and success had given Washington the time he so desperately needed to gather the remaining forces coming into Trenton and organize them into the defensive positions along the Assunpink Creek. Hand's success made Washington's decision to re-cross the Delaware with the knowledge of Cornwallis's impending attack a calculated risk vice a reckless gamble.

Chapter 6

Attack on Princeton

Once Washington was sure that Cornwallis had indeed stopped for the night, he began to implement his deception plan. He continued to let his men dig and improve their positions and large fires were built to ward away the cold night air. Then, while Cornwallis and his men slept, Washington and his men silently moved into formation and began their march to a little known road that would take them around the British lines and to Princeton.

Without the use of audible signals such as drums and bugles, it took some time to quietly move the army from its defensive positions to a road march formation. By 0100, Washington and his officers had them moving. The temperature, which had been unseasonably warm the previous few days, had dropped some 18 degrees to 21 degrees. While the men certainly did not think so at the time, the cold weather helped them by freezing the muddy roads that had slowed the British advance from Princeton just the day prior. The frozen roads, while easier to walk on than mud, had negative effects as well. The frozen ground quickly wore through the leather moccasins that many of the men were wearing. The effect on the men was brutal. Many walked bare footed on the icy, jagged roads. One soldier would later write in a diary, “The ground was literally marked with blood of soldier’s feet.”⁹⁰

At Princeton, approximately 850 men were under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Charles Mawhood. They made up the 4th Brigade and were composed of the 17th, 40th, and 55th regiments. Mawhood had hastily assumed command of the garrison during the evening of the 2nd, replacing General Leslie who had left the town earlier that afternoon with General Cornwallis.

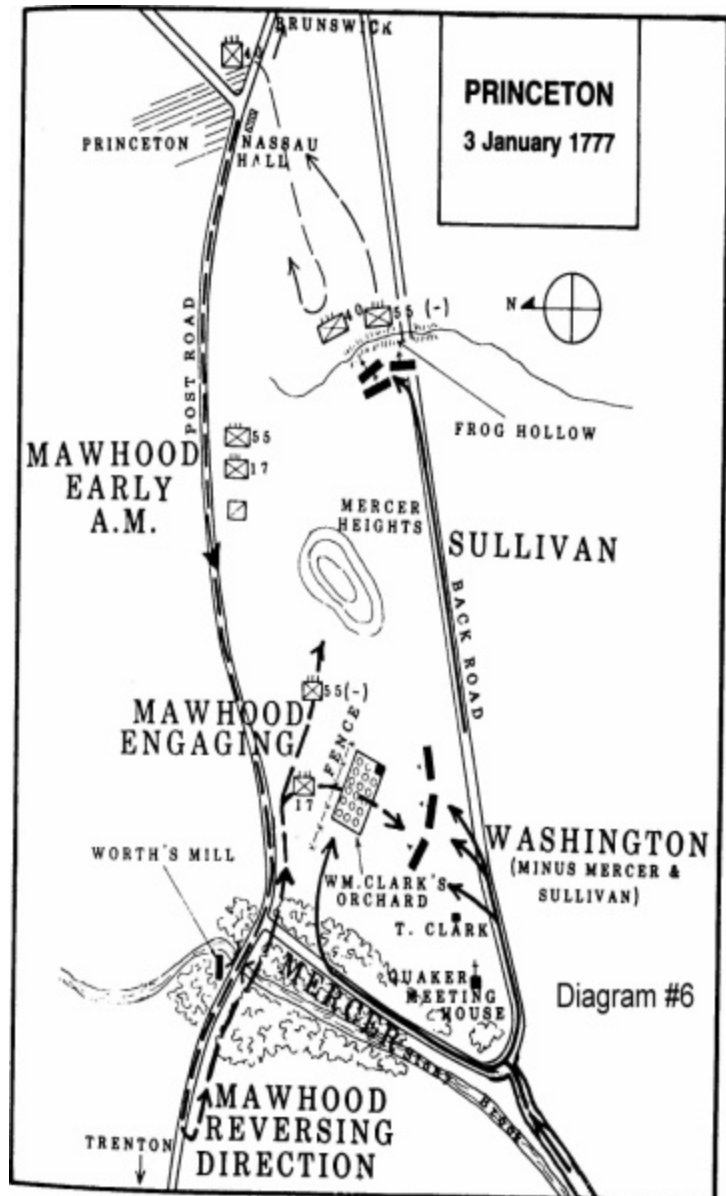
⁹⁰ Samual Stelle Smith, The Battle of Princeton, pg 19

The apparent lack of an adequate turnover between the two commanders would prove to have dire consequences.

On the 30th of December, Colonel Reed and some scouts had conducted a reconnaissance of the old Quaker Road and had managed to capture a British foraging party. Subsequent to that action, Leslie had 100 soldiers guarding the road around the clock. But when Leslie pulled out to accompany Cornwallis on the attack on Trenton, the importance of the pickets along the Quaker Road was never relayed to Mawhood. As a result, there were no outposts posted on the road that Washington advanced on with 6,000 men toward Princeton. Only the request for additional supplies for Trenton prevented Mawhood and his entire force from being caught in their bunks.

Mawhood had received the request for supplies from Trenton sometime during the evening of the 2nd. At 0500 on the 3rd, Mawhood formed 362 men from the 17th and 55th regiments with 30 mounted dragoons to escort the needed supplies. Getting the column moving was slow at best and so it was not until 0800 when the first elements of the 17th Regiment were crossing the Stoney Brook Bridge. Washington was less than a mile south at that same moment.

General Washington had his force once again organized in two columns. One was under the command



of Major General Greene and the other under Major General Sullivan. After crossing Stoney Brook, Greene's column moved north west toward the main Princeton/Trenton pike while Sullivan continued north to attack the town from the east. Brigadier General Hugh Mercer led Greene's column. As Mercer led his men toward a farmhouse on top a slight hill, the British horsemen were spotted. The British had spotted the Americans as well and Mawhood immediately began to prepare for an attack. He sent the 55th Regiment back to Princeton to reinforce the 40th. He would personally lead the 17th in an attack on the rebel force.

Washington could only make out the British horsemen and assumed that it was a patrol sent out from the town. Hoping to still achieve the attack on the town with the element of surprise on his side, Washington sent word to Mercer to attack the enemy while directing Sullivan to continue the movement toward the town. Mercer was already in motion before the order from Washington had arrived. He took a forward detachment (120 men) of his force and was personally leading them up the hill (Diagram # 6) toward the farm in an attempt to cut, what he thought to be a small enemy force, off from the town. Mercer's aggressiveness blinded his better judgment as he led his men through a wooden gate instead of taking the fence down and then right into a thick orchard but he did not know what lay on the other side. Emerging from the far side of the orchard, Mercer found himself looking at a line of well-formed infantry supported by two cannons.

Luckily for the Americans, although the British were in a prone position, they had to rise on one knee to fire and the rounds went above their heads. Mercer's men immediately sought cover and returned fire. The two sides exchanged volleys with little effect upon the other. Unexpectedly, the entire 17th British Regiment rose with bayonets fixed and charged! As most of the Americans were using rifles, they did not have bayonets with which to fight back. They were soon overwhelmed by the violence and fierceness of the attack and forced to pull back. The British, adrenaline charged with the sight of the fleeing rebels, unmercifully bayoneted the Americans. General Mercer was not to be an exception. His horse was shot out from under him

and as he tried to rally his men he was surrounded by British soldiers, was knocked down, and then repeatedly stabbed him with their bayonets. Brigadier General Hugh Mercer would die from his wounds nine days later.

General Greene ordered Cadwalader and his brigade to advance and meet the rushing British 17th Regiment. Cadwalader would bravely lead his men forward but he too would advance them too close to the enemy and they immediately were placed under fire. The 17th Regiment would again charge and for the second time that day, route an American brigade. The brutality of the British would also continue to be vicious as they killed and stabbed wounded Americans found along their path. The killing of one officer was particularly atrocious. Lieutenant Bartholomew Yeates, an 18 year old from Virginia, received a wound to his side and fell, unable to retreat. A British soldier came upon him and despite pleas for mercy from the young officer, loaded his musket and shot him in the chest. Seeing Yeates was still alive, the Redcoat bayoneted him thirteen times. When Yeates still refused to die, he was hit in the head with the butt of a rifle. Yeates would miraculously survive for another week, giving the details of his attack to his doctor.⁹¹

General Washington, riding with General Sullivan's column, saw the chaotic situation facing Greene. Washington wheeled his horse around and with the First Troop Philadelphia Light Horse, hurried to the battle. Upon arrival Washington saw the men of Cadwalader and Mercer's brigades in an all out run to the rear. Washington knew something had to be done, and done quickly or he risked losing his ability to capture Princeton. Washington, being an expert horseman, put himself between the British and his army, rearing the horse up in the air, and yelling support to his men. One of Washington's aides would later recall seeing the Commander-in-Chief disappearing in a blanket of smoke and bullets from the British guns. The aide shut his eyes in fear for what he thought had just happened only to see Washington emerge from the smoke, unscathed, and continuing to rally the troops. At the same time, other American units led

by the able Colonel Edward Hand appeared on the British flank and began delivering fires into them. Seeing this and their Commanding General defying the British shooters, Greene's men stopped their retreat, rallied, and fiercely charged the British lines.

Mawhood and his regiment were forced to retreat from the overwhelming pressure. Because of the valor and aggressiveness the 17th Regiment displayed that day, they would be later crowned "The Heroes of Prince Town," and would become legends in their regiments history. But they paid dearly for their title. Out of 224 men, 110 would be killed, wounded, or captured. Once the 17th broke, Mawhood rode to Princeton in an attempt to prepare the other two regiments for the defense of the town. Coming under fire from Sullivan's forces, Mawhood was unable to reach Princeton and he was forced to retreat south to Maidenhead where most of the 17th Regiment had fled as well.

The 40th and 55th Regiments were prepared to defend the town but when the realization hit they were facing the entire American army and after two shots from American artillery, the British forces surrendered to Major General Sullivan. The surrender of the two British regiments, almost without firing a single shot, is a testament to the powerful and synergistic effect that the tenants of maneuver warfare can produce. The combined effects of surprise, speed, and maneuvering forces so completely overwhelmed the British defenders that their will and ability to defend and fight was lost. The battle for Princeton was over but as had been the norm for Washington and his men, the time to celebrate the victory would be short lived. Once again, General Washington would have to decide whether or not the attack should be continued.

Washington had wanted, as he had wanted to on his first attack on Trenton, to attack the British store supply at Brunswick. But once again, the men were exhausted. After having been awake for nearly 40 hours, completing the grueling night march, and after fighting a determined foe in Lieutenant Colonel Mawhood, the men were not able to march another 18 miles and conduct an additional attack. But Washington did not lose focus on what gave the enemy

⁹¹ Dwyer, pg 344

strength in New Jersey, Brunswick. While he could not attack it directly, he knew he could indirectly threaten it and have the same effect.

Washington would turn his men north vice east as they left Princeton. They had not stayed long in Princeton, as Washington knew that Cornwallis would soon be approaching with his army to attack and protect Brunswick. In fact Cornwallis's forward troops would reach the destroyed bridge at Stoney Creek just as Washington's rear guard was departing on the other side of town. Washington would take his men to Morristown. For Washington and his tired army, the Winter Campaign of 1776 was over, they had achieved what less than a month earlier would have been thought impossible – a series of victories against the British army. They had saved themselves, the revolution, and their young nation from certain destruction. The war was far from over, and more hard times were in front of them but never would they be that close to destruction as they were in December 1776.

Washington's planning and actions during this final phase of his Winter Campaign embodies the traits of what most consider to be maneuver warfare. A masterful deception plan, a large flanking movement, and the attack of a superior force against a weaker force in rear area. While this is obviously true, Washington's plans and actions were so much more than the physical movement of his forces.

Washington had once again dominated the operational tempo of the battle and his ability to maintain control of the initiative had "out-generaled" Lord Cornwallis. Washington not only avoided the strength of the British army but as a result of maneuvering, he placed himself in a position that threatened the British operational level COG in New Jersey, Brunswick.

Washington had originally planned, in both crossings of the Delaware, to attack and secure the British supply depot and war chest at Brunswick. Washington had assessed that this action would

cause the withdrawal of British forces from New Jersey. Unable to directly attack this COG, Washington proved instead that a COG does not have to be directly attacked, that if a critical vulnerability of that COG is attacked or even threatened, the overall result would be just as decisive. In this case, Washington maneuvered his army to the safety of the Watchung Mountains. His position threatened the lines of communication and supply to Brunswick from New York City. The mere threat of Washington being able to cut off and isolate Brunswick was enough to cause the withdrawal of British troops from most of New Jersey. The British withdrawal made Washington's victory complete and gave him, his army, and the revolution enough momentum to continue the fight in 1777.

Conclusion

The English historian George Trevelyan would write the following about George Washington's Winter Campaign of 1776, "It may be doubted whether so small a number of men ever employed so short a space of time with greater or more lasting results upon the history of the world."⁹² These few but eloquent words truly capture the magnitude of the accomplishments of Washington and his army during that now infamous ten-day period. Even at his surrender at Yorktown some years later, General Cornwallis would admit the strategic importance of the campaign by saying, "Fame will gather your brightest laurels from the banks of the Delaware rather than the Chesapeake."⁹³ Washington's strike at Trenton was a tremendous blow to the British air of invincibility and to their cause. With that single act, George Washington had proven his worth as a commander and the prowess of his American army. Once again the English historian George Trevelyan captures the meaning of the campaign with the following thoughts, "From Trenton onward, Washington was recognized as a farsighted and able general all Europe over – by the great nobles in the Empress Catherine's court, by the French marshals and ministers, in the King's cabinet at Potsdam, at Madrid, at Vienna, and in London. He has shown himself both a Fabius and a Camillus."⁹⁴

The campaign had reinvigorated the patriotism and faith of a nation when all within it assumed their battle of independence was doomed to failure. It overcame a series of seemingly insurmountable obstacles through a series of engagements that combined boldness, audacity, courage, skill, and maneuver. While the campaign did not end the war, it certainly set the conditions for its ultimate success. The failure of the campaign, however, almost would have certainly ended the war...in favor of the British. The army was never closer to destruction then

⁹² Colonels R. Ernest and Trevor Dupuy, An Outline History of the American Revolution, pg 73

⁹³ Ibid, pg 76

⁹⁴ Palmer, pg 135

when Washington choose to risk everything by re-crossing the Delaware and join Cadwalader's forces in Trenton. Washington had placed himself and his army in a position of assured destruction if the mission of delaying the British from Princeton to Trenton was not successful. Luckily for George Washington, his army, and the young country, the mission was assigned to Colonel Hand.

Hand's strategically critical actions, in a very real sense, saved the Revolution from a premature extinction. Washington's 5,000+ men were made up of mostly untried militia, with only 1,600 regulars. The militia would have broken under a full frontal attack by the highly trained and disciplined soldiers under the able General Cornwallis. Hand's actions are often overlooked or minimized in most historical accounts of the campaign. Sandwiched between the battles of Trenton and Princeton, the six-hour delaying action is usually given minimal ink. Yet it was this action that set the conditions for Washington's overall success in the campaign and the withdrawal of the British from New Jersey. Had Hand failed, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Cornwallis and his army could have destroyed Washington and his army, and perhaps the revolution as well against the banks of the Delaware.

Through the prism of maneuver warfare, few campaigns provide a better example of how the employment of its principles can empower a numerically inferior force to defeat a superior force. In each of the three engagements, Washington utilized superior tempo, deception, and physical maneuver to defeat the British forces, physically and psychologically. At the operational level, Washington's focus on the British COG at Brunswick gave purpose and direction to his campaign. The final endstate for the three engagements, both individually and combined, was the attacking of Brunswick in order to force the British withdrawal from New Jersey. Washington's correct assessment of the British operational COG enabled him to focus his efforts not on the direct attack of the British army but on that which gave it strength. By threatening the lines of communication and supply to Brunswick, Washington achieved his goal of driving the British from New Jersey

Washington's Winter Campaign of 1776 frequently results in images of the dramatic crossing of the Delaware, with the large ice chunks floating menacingly by or of Washington gallantly riding into Princeton to lead his troops in battle. While these images are part of our nation's historical culture, it is hoped that this paper has shown just how much more there is to this brilliant campaign. It was a campaign that although executed some 200 years earlier epitomizes the tenets of maneuver warfare. It was also a campaign whose success can be attributed to a young Irish immigrant and his actions during the often-overlooked Second Battle of Trenton.

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