

### **Letter from a Revolutionary War Soldier (1776)**

**From Alden T. Vaughn, ed., *Chronicles of the American Revolution* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1965). Originally compiled by Hezekiah Niles and printed in 1822.**

*By December 1776, six months after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, George Washington's army was facing disaster. They had been defeated in New York, and British and German troops (the Hessians referenced below) occupied much of New Jersey and had advanced almost to Philadelphia. But the colonists' fight against the British emboldened Washington to make a crucial move. On Christmas night, 1776, he led his troops across the Delaware River in a horrible winter storm, took the Hessian garrison at Trenton by surprise, and killed or captured more than 1000 men with only minimal losses. This was the first major American victory of the Revolution. It also was a great moral victory that was memorialized in the famous Emanuel Luetze painting that hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The letter below describes events related to this battle from a soldier's perspective.*

### ***Letter from Thomas Rodney to his brother Caesar, from Allen's Town, New Jersey, December 30, 1776.***

Allen's Town, in Jersey, 12 miles from Princeton, 20 do. from Brunswick, Dec. 30, 1776.

Sir—I wrote you a long letter on the 24th, which I had no opportunity of sending, and left it in my trunk at Mr. Coxe's, two miles from Bristol; it contains the news to that time, which I cannot repeat here. On the 25th inst. in the evening, we received orders to be at Shamony ferry as soon as possible. We were there according to orders in two hours, and met the riflemen, who were the first from Bristol; we were ordered from thence to Dunk's ferry, on the Delaware, and the whole army of about 2000 men followed, as soon as the artillery got up. The three companies of Philadelphia infantry and mine were formed into a body, under the command of captain Henry, (myself second in command) which were embarked immediately to cover the landing of the troops. We landed with great difficulty through the ice, and formed on the ferry shore, about 200 yards from the river. It was as severe a night as ever I saw, and after two battalions were landed, the storm increased so much, and the river was so full of ice, that it was impossible to get the artillery over; for we had to walk 100 yards on the ice to get on shore. Gen. Cadwallader therefore ordered the whole to retreat again, and we had to stand at least six hours under arms—first to cover the landing and till all the rest had retreated again—and, by this time, the storm of wind, hail, rain and snow, with the ice, was so bad, that some of the infantry could not get back till next day. This design was to have surprised the enemy at Black Horse and Mount Holley, at the same time that Washington surprised them at Trenton; and had we succeeded in getting over, we should have finished all our troubles. Washington took 910 prisoners, with 6 pieces of fine artillery, and all their baggage in Trenton. The next night I received orders to be in Bristol before day; we were there accordingly, and about 9 o'clock began to embark one mile above Bristol, and about 3 o'clock in the afternoon got all our troops and artillery over, consisting of about 3000 men, and began our march to Burlington—the infantry, flanked by the riflemen, making the advanced guard. We got

there about 9 o'clock and took possession of the town, but found the enemy had made precipitate retreat the day before, bad as the weather was, in a great panic. The whole infantry and rificemen were then ordered to set out that night and make a forced march to Bordentown, (which was about 11 miles), which they did, and took possession of the town about 9 o'clock, with a large quantity of the enemy's stores, which they had not time to carry off. We stayed there till the army came up; and the general finding the enemy were but a few miles ahead, ordered the infantry to proceed to a town called Crosswick's four miles from Bordentown, and they were followed by one of the Philadelphia and one of the New England battalions. We got there about 8 o'clock, and at about 10, (after we were all in quarters), were informed that the enemy's baggage was about 16 miles from us, under a guard of 300 men. Some of the militia colonels applied to the infantry to make a forced march that night and overhaul them. We had then been on duty four nights and days, making forced marches, without six hours sleep in the whole time; whereupon the infantry officers of all the companies unanimously declared it was madness to attempt, for that it would knock up all our brave men, not one of whom had yet gave out, but every one will suppose were much fatigued. They then sent off a party who were fresh, but they knocked up before they got up with them, and came back and met us at this town next morning. They surrounded a house where there was six Tories—took three of them—one got off—and one who ran and would not stop, was shot dead. They gave him warning first by calling, and at last shot two bullets over his head, but he still persisted, and the next two shot; one bullet went through his arm and one through his heart. The enemy have fled before us in the greatest panic that ever was known; we heard this moment that they have fled from Princeton, and that they were hard pressed by Washington. Never were men in higher spirits than our whole army is; none are sick, and all are determined to extirpate them from the Jersey, but I believe the enemy's fears will do it before we get up with them. The Hessians, from the general to the common soldier, curse and imprecate the war, and swear they were sent here to be slaughtered; that they never will leave New York again, till they sail for Europe. Jersey will be the most whiggish colony on the continent; the very Quakers declare for taking up arms. You cannot imagine the distress of this country. They have stripped every body almost without distinction—even of all their clothes, and have beat and abused men, women and children, in the most cruel manner ever heard of. We have taken a number of prisoners, in our route, Hessians and British, to the amount of about twenty. It seems likely through the blessing of Providence, that we shall retake Jersey again without the loss of a man, except one gen. Washington lost at Trenton. The enemy seem to be bending their way to Amboy with all speed, but I hope we shall come up with the Princeton baggage yet, and also get a share of their large stores at Brunswick. I hope if I live, to see the conquest of Jersey, and set off home again in two weeks. Some of my men have complained a little, but not to say sick; they are all now well here.

Thomas Rodney.

### **Document Analysis**

How did Rodney describe the mood of the Revolution's supporters? Can you see

evidence of the impact of Washington's victory?

How did Rodney characterize the mood of the Hessian soldiers?

What was the original intent of the campaign in which Rodney participated? Why and how did those plans change? How successful was the campaign?