



IN THE THROES OF THE PIT:

Prisoner of War Narratives of the American Revolution.

As well as being the first book-length Revolutionary War memoir, *A Narrative of Colonel Ethan Allen's Captivity* (1779) by Ethan Allen was also one of earliest attempts to bring to public attention the plight of the war's pitifully abused and neglected prisoners of war. Though naturally Allen was expressing his concern for American soldiers, there were also British, Loyalist and German captives who suffered wretched and severe fates in enemy hands. In terms of sheer numbers, the American prisoners usually endured worse in this way owing partly to the reluctance of some of the British leadership to treat them as armed foreign combatants rather than as treasonous rebels. Yet it must be recognized too that captured Loyalists frequently incurred a similar branding and stigmatization in American hands.

Since neither side was interested in expending much of its own resources feeding and caring for the enemy, they both formally allowed the other to send food and basic supplies to their own captured soldiers and sailors. Yet this was usually harder for the Americans to do since, unlike the British who had money, they had a difficult enough time just providing for the army in the field. A further part of the trouble was that little advance planning was given by either side to subject of housing and supplying enemy prisoners. As result, many such found themselves in impromptu prison accommodations, including, for American captives, the notorious Sugar House and ship *Jersey* in New York City, and for British and Loyalists, the infamous "New Gate," that was originally a copper mine, in Simsbury, Connecticut. Though a good deal of the problem could have been ameliorated by prisoner exchanges, the Americans tended to be reluctant to engage in such trades; since, for one, it was harder for the British to replace trained and permanent recruits than for Americans to replace, as often as not, untrained and seasonal ones.

While then the hardships and sacrifices of soldiers fighting are often remembered and honored, the prisoners of war by contrast are just as likely passed over quickly or forgotten altogether. Yet it was the prisoners of war who in general were among the war's very worst victims and sufferers; and several of the descriptions of their ordeals, ironically, are such as would have found literary credit had they been penned by Boccaccio or Dante.

The experiences of prisoners are fairly well represented in the body of Revolutionary War literature. As well as American accounts like those of Allen, Israel Potter, and Christopher Hawkins, there are their Loyalist counterparts in the writings of Anthony Allaire, Uzall Johnson, and James Moody.¹ Two fairly recent books on the topic of Revolutionary War prisoners of War, as well worth mentioning here, are *Relieve Us of This Burden: American Prisoners of War in the Revolutionary South, 1780-1782* (2012) by Carl P. Borick, and the 2010 re-publications of Thomas Dring's 1829 *Life on the Prison Ship Jersey*, edited by David Swain.²

¹ My thanks to New Jersey historian Todd Braisted for bringing to my attention the last of these; as well as furnishing me with other information on the subject for purposes of this article.

² Two other Revolutionary War prison narratives Moses Coit Tyler, for his part, makes a point of specially noting are "The Old Jersey Captive, or, a Narrative of the Captivity of Thomas Andros, ...on Board the Old Jersey Prison-Ship at New York, 1781," and A "Narrative of the Capture of Henry Laurens, of His Confinement in the Tower of London, and So Forth, 1780, 1781, 1782." Philip

*Our first extract is found in Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Levi Hanford, Soldier of the Revolution by Charles I. Bushnell (1863), pp. 12-33. Hanford, born in 1759, at the time of the Revolutionary War was the young son of a Norwalk, Connecticut farmer. Sometime in 1776, he enlisted in a minute-man company led by Capt. John Carter, his uncle. While editor Bushnell himself makes plain that he acted a significant part in shaping the aged Hanford's reminiscences into written narrative form, it is no less obvious also, given the many and unusual details, that the story presented is, nevertheless, entirely Hanford's, and most of what we read sounds like a typical Revolutionary War veteran pension statement or claim; in fact, may to some extent have been based on the same.*³

On the thirteenth day of March, 1777, he [Levi Hanford] together with twelve others of the troop, was detached as a guard and stationed at South Norwalk, Connecticut, at a place then called "Old Well." The night was dark and the weather inclement, and the officers in consequence, negligent in their duties. In the course of the evening they were entirely surrounded by a party of British and Tories, from Long Island, who came over in whale-boats, and the whole guard were taken prisoners, poor Hanford among the rest, he being at that time but an ignorant boy, a little over seventeen years of age.

The prisoners were conveyed across the Sound to Huntington, from there to Flushing and thence to New-York. Upon their arrival in the city of New-York, they were incarcerated in the old Sugar House prison in Crown, now Liberty-street, near the Dutch Church, at that time used as a riding-school for the British light horse, but of late years converted to, and still used as the General City Post Office.

The old Prison, which is now torn down, was a brown stone building, six stories high, -- but the stories were very low, and the windows small and deeply set, making it very dark and confined. It was originally built for a sugar refinery, and had been previously used as such. Attached to it was a small yard, and the whole was enclosed by a high board fence, so that the general appearance of the building was extremely gloomy, and prison-like.

Upon our entrance into this miserable abode, says Hanford, we found some forty or fifty prisoners, all of whom were in a most wretched, emaciated and starving condition. The number of these poor sufferers was constantly being diminished by sickness and death, and as constantly increased by the accession of new prisoners to the number of four hundred to five hundred. Our allowance of provisions was a scanty supply of pork and sea-biscuit -- so scanty that the quantity would be far from keeping a well man in strength. The food, moreover, was anything else than of a healthy character. -- The pork was old and unsavory, and the biscuit was such as had been wet with sea-water, and being damaged, was full of worms and very mouldy. It was our common practice to put water into our camp-kettle, then break up the biscuit into it, and after skimming off the worms, to put in the pork, and then, if we had fuel, to boil the whole together. The indulgence of fuel was allowed to us only part of the time. On occasions when it was precluded, we were compelled to eat our meat raw and our biscuit dry. Starved as we were, there was nothing in the shape of food that was rejected, or that was unpalatable.

Crowded together within our narrow abode, with bad air to breathe, and such food to eat, it was not strange that disease and pestilence should prevail, and that too of the most malignant character. I had not been long confined before I was taken with the small pox, and conveyed to the small pox hospital. Fortunately, I had but a slight attack, and was soon enabled to return to the prison. -- During my confinement, however, I saw cases of the most malignant form, several of my companions dying in that building of that horrible disease. -- When I came back to the prison, I found that others of our company had been taken to the different hospitals, there to suffer and die, for few of them were ever returned. I remained in the prison for a while, until, from bad air, confinement, and unhealthy diet, I was again taken sick, and conveyed to the Quaker Meeting Hospital, so called from its having been used as a place of worship by Christians of that denomination.

Freneau himself, we might also mention, for a time was a detainee in one of the hellish prison ships moored just outside of New York harbor.

³ For an online version, with .pdf, of Levi Hanford's narrative in full, see: <http://archive.org/details/narrativeoflifea01bush>

I became insensible soon after my arrival, and the time passed by unconsciously until I began slowly and by degrees to recover my health and strength, and was then permitted to exchange once more the hospital for the prison.

Upon my return to the Sugar House, I found that during my absence, the number of my companions had become still further reduced by sickness and death, and that those who survived were in a most pitiful condition. It was really heart-rending to see those poor fellows, who but a short time before were in the bloom of health, now pale and thin, weak and emaciated, sad and desponding, and apparently very near their final end. While the poor prisoners were thus pining away by degrees, an influence was constantly exerted to induce them to enter the Tory regiments. Although our sufferings were intolerable, and although we were urged to embrace the British cause by those who had been our own townsmen and neighbors, and had themselves joined the Royal ranks, yet the instances were very rare that they could induce any one of those sufferers to hearken to their persuasions. -- So wedded were they to their principles, so dear to them was their country, so true were they to their honor, that rather than sacrifice them, they preferred the scoffs of their persecutors, the horrors of their dungeon, and in fact, even death itself.

On one occasion, I heard a great noise and uproar in the prison, accompanied by loud curses and threats of vengeance. Upon inquiry, I learned that the guard had been stoned while at his post of duty, and that the prisoners were charged with the offence. This act having been repeated on one or two subsequent occasions, the British Commander at length came into the prison yard with a body of men. He questioned the prisoners very closely, but could elicit nothing that would implicate any one. He then told the prisoners that if the act was again committed, and the aggressor not revealed, the guard should fire upon the prisoners, when the innocent would suffer with the guilty. The following day, while I was standing in the prison yard, I saw a person come to a third-story window of a neighboring house, and partially concealed behind a chimney, waited until the sentry on duty had turned his back and was marching from him, when stepping from his place of concealment so as to get the full use of his arm, he hurled a brick bat at the sentry, striking him in the back, and injuring him severely. The guard were in an instant turned out and marched to the prison yard. The gates were thrown open, and the guard stood ready to fire. There was now no time to be lost, so I at once communicated what I had seen. The gates were thereupon closed, and the guard marched to the building where the man had appeared. After a terrible uproar, with loud swearing and cursing, the guard at length retired with one or two prisoners in their custody. What became of them I never knew. Nothing concerning them was ever revealed to us. However, there were no more complaints made, after this, of the stoning of the sentry.

The sentries, as a body, were not only ungenerous and uncivil, but unfeeling and tyrannical, and committed many acts of wilful, wanton cruelty. -- They considered anything short of death, to rebels, as humanity. This feeling was far more prevalent among the British than among the Hessians; and hence, when the prisoners desired any favors, they deferred asking for them until the latter had the guard, which was two days out of every five. Occasionally, a humane man was on duty, but he was restrained from obeying his natural impulses through fear of the official power above him. The orders under which they acted were absolute and imperative, and a disobedience of command or a dereliction of duty were sure to be followed by severe and immediate punishment. I shall never forget a striking instance of this which occurred during my captivity here.

In the prison yard there was a large bar of pig iron, which the prisoners, for pastime, would amuse themselves by throwing, and their contests for superiority would often be attended by considerable excitement. One day, while they were thus engaged, the sentry on duty, a stout, good natured man, after gazing for some time upon the performances of the prisoners, became at length emulous of their efforts, and, upon the impulse of the moment, ventured to enter the list and compete with them. Laying down his gun, he made one trial, and coming but little short of the best of them, was encouraged to try again. Throwing off his cartridge box and bayonet, he again grasped the bar, and though he did better than before, yet he still fell short. Stimulated by his success, and determined to gain his point, he now threw off his stock and coat. At this instant, an officer suddenly came in, and noticing the condition of the sentinel, said

to him in a stern, authoritative tone, "Walk this way, sir." They left the prison together, and we learned that for this breach of duty, the sentinel was sentenced to run the gauntlet and receive three hundred lashes.

On the following day, a company of men were drawn up in double line, facing each other, and in full view from the prison. Each man stood a little from his neighbor, and each was armed with a raw hide. When everything was ready, all the drummers of the regiment, beating the long roll, entered the lines, followed by an officer, with a drawn sword under his arm, the point turning backward. Then followed the prisoner, having nothing on but his breeches, and behind him came another officer with a drawn sword. As the prisoner passed through the lines, each man in succession gave him a severe blow with his raw hide. After he had passed, he then had to turn back again and retrace his steps, and thus walk up and down until the whole number of lashes was given. On the outside of each line an officer marched opposite the prisoner, and if any act of favor was shown, or if any man gave the prisoner a less forcible blow than he could have done, the officer would strike him so severely with the flat of his sword that he would almost bring him to the ground.

Under this dreadful trial the prisoner at first walked firmly and erect, but he soon began to quack [sic, quake?] and droop, then to writhe and convulse, until at length his lacerated body was thrown into contortions, and was literally streaming with blood. -- Sometimes he would receive a blow upon his breast, then upon his back, and then upon his head or legs, according as his body happened at the time to be placed. The scene was one of most barbarous cruelty, and ended, as might well be supposed, in the miserable death of the poor, offending sentinel.

Notwithstanding the sufferings we endured, and the rigorous treatment to which we were subjected in the prison, we were not without some friends and sympathizers. Among these, there was a lady, a Mrs. Spicer, who resided in the city, and who was a warm friend to the cause of liberty. She took a deep and lively interest in the condition of the prisoners, and visited the hospitals and prisons almost daily. She was esteemed by the prisoners as a mother, and her visits anxiously looked for, and received, always, with a warm and hearty welcome. She came, not alone, with the clear, mild sunshine. She came with the howling storm, and the whistling wind, and the pelting rain. The risk of contagion and death, even, could not deter her from her noble, saint-like mission. She came as a ministering angel, comforting the sick, sympathizing with the distressed, and performing many acts of kindness and mercy.

What became of her, or where she lived, I never could learn. I made many efforts, after the war, to ascertain, but never with success. Although she has long since passed away, and her acts were unknown to public ear, yet many a poor prisoner has poured forth his blessings upon her. The memory of that stranger's kindness will live in many a heart until life's last pulse shall cease to beat. Her deeds of mercy, though unrequited here, have not been lost. They have been recorded in a higher sphere, where she will receive a great and glorious reward.

I remained in the prison until the twenty-fourth day of October, when the names of a company of prisoners, mine among the rest, were taken down. We were informed that the time had arrived for us to return to our homes. We became, at once, elated at the prospect of a speedy release. Our feelings immediately started up from the depths of despair. We joyfully drew our weekly provision, and cheerfully divided it among our starving associates, from whom we were so soon to take our leave. But, alas! little did we dream what a cruel destiny was in store for us. How bitter, how aggravating to us was the disappointment when we found that, instead of being returned to our homes, we were to be removed only to undergo still further torments. We were put on board the prison-ship Good Intent, then lying in the North River, and reported there with one week's provisions.

The scene of starvation and suffering that followed, it is impossible, to conceive, much less to describe. Crowded together as we were with over two hundred in the hold of the ship, the air was exceedingly foul, close, and sickening. Everything was eaten that could possibly appease hunger. -- From these and other causes, and enfeebled as we had become, and reduced as we were by famine, no wonder that pestilence in all its fury began to sweep us down. To such an extent did this prevail that in less than two months' time our number was reduced by death to scarcely one hundred. In addition to all this we were treated with the utmost severity and barbarity. Even the smallest indulgence was most rigidly denied. In the

month of December following, the river began to freeze, when, fearing some of the prisoners might escape upon the ice, the ship was moved round to the Wallabout, where lay also the Jersey, another prison-ship of horrific memory, whose rotted hulk still remained, till within a few years past, to mark the spot where thousands of brave and devoted martyrs yielded up the precious offering of their lives, a sacrifice to British cruelty.

Here again, I became sick, and my name was again taken down for the hospital. The day before New Year's, the sick were brought out, and placed in a boat to be conveyed to the city. The boat had lost a piece of plank from her bottom, but the aperture was filled up with ice; we were taken in tow and proceeded on our course. The motion of the water soon caused the ice to loosen, and our boat began to leak. We had gone but a short distance when the sailors inquired "whether we leaked." Our men, either from pride, or from an unwillingness to betray fear, replied, "but a mere trifle?" The sailors, however, soon perceived our increased weight. They pulled hard for a while, and then lay to until we came up with them. Our boat was at that time half filled with water. When the sailors perceived our condition, they vented their curses upon us, and with horrid oaths and imprecations, pulled for the nearest dock, shouting for help. When the boat reached her destination, she struck level with the water, and we were compelled to hold on to the dock and to a small boat by our side, to prevent her from sinking.

It being low water, the sailors reached down from the dock, and clenching our hands, drew us up in our turn. I well remember that I was drawn up by them with such violence that the skin was taken from my chest and stomach. One poor fellow, who was unable to sit up, we had to haul upon the gunnel of the boat to keep his head out of water. Notwithstanding this, he still got wet, and died in a few minutes after he was placed on shore.

From the boat we were taken to the Hospital in Beekman-street, known as Dr. Rogers', afterwards Dr. Spring's Brick Meeting House. While passing through the yard, I took up one end of a bunk from which some person had just been taken, dead. I carried it into the church, and threw myself upon it, perfectly exhausted and overcome. The head nurse of the hospital, passing by, saw and pitied my situation. She made me some warm tea, and pulling off the blankets from the poor, sick Irish, regardless of their curses and complaints, piled them upon me until I began to sweat profusely, and fall asleep.

The females who acted as nurses in the hospitals were many, perhaps most of them, the wives of British soldiers. Although they committed no designed acts of cruelty, yet many of them showed in their treatment of us much indifference and neglect.

When I awoke in the morning, some mulled wine and water was given to me. Wine and some other things were sent to the sick by our government. -- As for the British, they furnished nothing. After taking the wine, I became refreshed. I lay perfectly easy, and free from pain. It seemed to me that I had never been so happy before in my life, and yet I was still so weak that I could not have risen from my bunk unaided even though it had been to "*save the union.*" The doctor in attendance was an American surgeon, who had been taken prisoner. He had been taken from the prison and transferred to the hospital to attend the sick. Upon examining me, he told me that my blood was breaking down and turning to water, from the effect of the small pox, and that I needed some bitters. I gave him what money I had, and he prepared me some, and when that was gone, he was good enough to supply me some more at his own expense. Under his kind treatment and professional skill, I began slowly, and by degrees, to regain my strength, and in course of time, was once more able to walk about.

While standing, one day, in the month of May, by the side of the church, in the warm sun, my toes began to sting and pain me excessively. I showed them to the surgeon when he came in, and he laid them open. They had been frozen, and the flesh had become so wasted away that only the bone and the tough skin remained. I had, in consequence of my feet, to remain in the hospital for a long time, and of all places, that hospital was least to be coveted. Disease and death reigned there in all their terror. I have had men die by the side of me in the night, and have seen fifteen dead bodies, at one time, sewed up in their blankets and laid in the corner of the yard, the product of one twenty-four hours. Every morning, at eight o'clock, the dead cart came, and the bodies of those who had died the day previous were thrown in. The men drew

the rations of rum to which they were entitled, and the cart was driven off to the trenches of the fortifications, where they were hastily covered, I cannot say interred.

On one occasion, I was permitted to go with the guard to the place of interment, and never shall I forget the scene that I there beheld. They tumbled the bodies promiscuously into the ditch, sometimes even dumping them from the cart, then threw upon them a little dirt, and away they went. I could see a hand here, a foot there, and there again a part of a head, washed bare by the rain, and all swollen, blubbering, and falling to decay. I need not add that the stench was anything but tolerable.

The use of my feet having become restored to me, I was again returned to the prison in Liberty-street, and from this time forward, I enjoyed comfortable health to the close of my imprisonment, which took place in the month of May following. -- One day, while I was standing in the yard, near the high board fence which enclosed the prison, a man passed by, in the street, and coming close to the fence, without stopping or turning his head, said in a low voice, "*General Burgoyne is taken with all his army. It is a truth. You may depend upon it.*" Shut out, as we were, from all information, and all knowledge of what was going on around us, this news was grateful to us indeed, and cheered us greatly in our wretched abode. Kept in entire ignorance of everything occurring beyond the confines of our miserable prison, we had been left to the most gloomy fears and forebodings as to the result of our cause. We knew not whether it was still progressing, or whether resistance had ceased altogether. Of the probability of our government being able to exchange or release us, we knew nothing. What little information we received, and it was very little, was received only through the exaggerations of British soldiery, and could, therefore, be but very little relied upon. How grateful then to us was the news which we had just heard -- how sweet to our ears, how soothing to our hearts! It gave us the sweet consolation that our cause was still triumphant, and cheered us with the hope of a speedy liberation. It is fortunate, however, that our informant was not discovered, for if he had been, he would most probably have been compelled to have run the gauntlet, or to have lost his life for his kindness.

One day, I think it was about the first of May, two officers came into the prison. One of them was a sergeant by the name of Wally, who had, from some cause or other, and what I never knew, taken a deep dislike to me. The other was an officer by the name of Blackgrove. They told us that there was to be an exchange of those prisoners who had been the longest confined, and thereupon they began to call the roll. A great many names were called to which no answers were given. Their owners had already been exchanged by that Being who has the power to set the captive free. Here and there was one left to respond. At last my name was called. I attempted to step forward and answer, when Sergeant Wally turned, and frowning upon me with a look of demoniac fury, motioned me to fall back. I dared not answer, so all was still. Then other names were called. I felt that, live or die, now was the time to speak. I accordingly told officer Blackgrove, that there were but eleven men present who had been longer in prison than myself. He looked at me, and then asked me why I did not answer when my name was called. I told him that I did attempt to answer, but Sergeant Wally prevented me. He thereupon turned, and, looking at him with contempt, put down my name. Of the thirteen who had been taken prisoners in the month of March, 1777, only two now remained to be exchanged, myself and one other.

On the eighth day of May, 1778, we were released from our long confinement. Our persecutors, however, had not yet done with us. They, as if to trouble and torment us, took the Southern prisoners off towards Boston to be discharged, while the Eastern prisoners were conveyed to Elizabethtown, in New Jersey. There they set us free. Upon our liberation, we proceeded at once to Newark. -- Here, everything was clothed in the beauty of spring. The birds were singing merrily, and the whole face of nature smiled with gladness. We were so delighted, and in fact, so transported with pleasure, that we could not forbear rushing out and throwing ourselves upon the green grass, and rolling over it again and again. After a confinement of fourteen months in a loathsome prison, clothed in rags and filth, and with associates too numerous and offensive to mention, this was to us a luxury indeed.

From Newark, we traveled on as fast as our enfeebled powers would permit. We crossed the Hudson at Dobb's Ferry, and here we began to separate, each for his own home. The officers pressed horses and went on. My companion and myself were soon wending our way, slowly and alone. As we passed on, we saw in the distance two men riding towards us, each having with him a led horse. It did not

take me long to discover the man on a well-known horse to be my father, and the other person to be the father of my comrade. The meeting I will not here attempt to describe, but from the nature of the case, you may well imagine that it was an affecting one, and more peculiarly so, as my friends had been informed some time before that I had died in prison. They had had prayers offered up, according to the custom of the time, and the family had gone into mourning. They therefore felt as though they had received me from the dead. It seems that the officers had carried the news of our return, and our friends had ridden all night to meet us. We proceeded on our way together, and ere the shades of evening had closed around us, we were once more in the bosom of friends, and enjoying the sweets of home, and the society of those we loved. And may my heart ever rise in gratitude towards that Being whose preserving care has been over me, and who has never, never forsaken me.

Hanford did not remain long idle after his return from imprisonment. As soon as he had regained his health, he resumed his musket, and partook once more of the hardships of the tented field. -- He again took his position in Captain Seymour's company, and continued in the active performance of his duty to the termination of the war. He was present at the taking and burning of Norwalk, in Connecticut, and assisted in driving the British and Tories back to their shipping. At another time, he was one of a body of troops that was called out one cold winter night to repel a large British force that was advancing from Kingsbridge, foraging, marauding, and burning everything in their way...

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*John Robert Shaw, originally from Yorkshire, was a soldier in the 33<sup>rd</sup> Regiment; one of the leading units of Cornwallis' Army when the British invaded South and North Carolina in 1780 and 1781. The following comes from his A Narrative of the Life & Travels of John Robert Shaw, The Well-Digger, Now Resident in Lexington, Kentucky, Written by Himself (1807), pp. 61-75, and our excerpt begins with Shaw at a time just before the battle of Guilford Court House (15 March 1781). After being made captive by the Americans prior to that engagement, he served some time in their prisoner of war jails, and, following a series of unusual events, finally ended up enlisting in the Continental army; serving in the Pennsylvania line. Upon the war's conclusion, he settled in the United States where he made a living as a well digger. As with Hanford, the time Shaw spent as a prisoner, though it takes up considerable space in his account, is only a portion of his overall narrative, and which is notably lively and replete with numerous adventures and facetious anecdotes; as well as containing much rare information and details of value to the historian.<sup>4</sup>*

...At this time the scarcity of provisions [for the British soldiers] was so great that we had but one pound of flour for six men per day with very little beef, and no salt the half of the time...

On one occasion, the officers having by some means neglected to put out centinels on guard for three hours together, impelled by hunger we took the blessed opportunity of going out in search of something to satisfy our craving appetite. A soldier of the [British] 23d regiment, by the name of Tattedell, and myself made a push for the country...

Scarcely had we gone half way up the lane, when seven of Lee's light horse made their appearance: my companion swore there was Tarleton's light horse coming, and, says he, "we shall be taken up on suspicion of plundering, and get 500 lashes a piece." "No;" said I, upon observing their brown coats, and white cockades, "no, friend, you are deceived; these must be the rebels." Having therefore discovered his mistake, he began to cry; but for my part, I thought it very good fortune. As they were advancing towards us, we "concluded to go and meet them; which we accordingly did, and falling on our knees begged for quarter; which they granted us and said, "come on, we will give you good quarters;" and so on we went past the house that had betrayed us it was fine fun for the old lady [i.e., whom they'd visited and fed them just previous to this] to see how handsomely she had tricked us. They brought us on a short distance beyond major Bell's, and there were Washington's and Lee's light horse, and Morgan's riflemen. These officers examined us as to the strength of Cornwallis's army, and sent us under guard to general Green[e]'s encampment; and while the guard were conducting us thither, they suffered one of Morgan's subaltern officers to strip us; against which conduct we remonstrated, by observing that no British officer

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<sup>4</sup> For Shaw's narrative online, see: <http://archive.org/details/narrativeoftheli009228mbp>

would permit a continental soldier to be stripped while a prisoner of war. But we were obliged to submit; for the officer drew his sword and swore, if we did not comply, he would run us through. So they took our clothes, not leaving us even our leggings or shoes; and God knows, they wanted them badly; for such ragged mortals I never saw in my life before, to pass under the character of soldiers. We were then brought to the camp, on the 11th day of March 1781, and after being re-examined by general Green[e], we were sent to the provost, where we found about thirty fellow-prisoners who had been taken on straggling parties. From thence we were sent to Halifax [Halifax, VA.] court house, where we remained until after the battle of Guildford [or Guilford]; which took place the 15th day of March...

In this battle a few prisoners were taken by the Americans, and sent forward to join us at Halifax court-house: and in a short time we were all marched on to Winchester in Virginia, where we joined the Cowpen[s]-prisoners, and were put into the barracks a few miles from the town, under a strong guard, Here we suffered much: our houses had no covering to shelter us from the inclemency of the weather; and we were exposed to cold, hunger and want of clothing; and all manner of ill-treatment insult and abuse. Having thus for a considerable time (I cannot say with the patience of Job) endured many hardships, we formed a project for our escape, by means of one of the guard, who agreed for 3 half Joes, to conduct us to New-York. The time and mode of elopement being fixed upon, we parted with our uniform and put ourselves in disguise ready for the journey. But when the appointed hour arrived, we found ourselves deceived by the fellow's "wilful neglect, in fulfilling his promise, but what better could we expect from a tory and traitor: He that would turn tory is worse than the Devil; for, be the Devil as bad as he may he is still said to be true to his party. So we had to continue in our confinement, and were now worse treated than ever; for we had parted with our uniform, and were considered as refugees. But some time in the summer, we were ordered to be ready to march at a moment's warning; and soon after a new guard was appointed to conduct us to Lancaster in Pennsylvania. The cruelty of this new guard exceeded any thing we had yet seen; their conduct was indeed shameful, and altogether incompatible with the profession of either soldiers or christians: they drove us like so many bullocks to the slaughter. Scarcely had we advanced three miles, before the captain broke his broad sword by cutting and slashing the prisoners, who were too much weakened by hunger, and former ill-treatment to keep up in the march. The lieutenant, a snotty-nosed stripling, just from the chimney corner, came up, raging like a madman, with his small sword in his hand, and pushed it with such violence into the back of one of my fellow-prisoners, that he broke it in the wound, where it remained till one of his comrades pulled it out Now such dastardly conduct towards poor prisoners of war, who had no weapon to defend themselves, was a disgrace even to chimney-corner officers. However, we marched along as well as we could, consoling ourselves with the hopes of being delivered one day or other from such cruel bondage. We came to a place where there was a mill turned by a stream, the source of which was not more than 100 yards above the mill: here we expected to draw some provisions, but were sadly disappointed, as we had been three days without any, and through perfect weakness, I trembled like a patient in a severe fit of the ague. All we drew was but one ear of corn per man, and this was a sweet morsel to us: -- we softened it in water, and grated it on the lid of our camp-kettle, and made bread of it. This we did until we came to Fredericktown barracks, where we drew provisions, and found the people more hospitable and kind; many of them having experienced the hardships and calamities of war: and at the same time they had several of their friends and relations, then prisoners with the English, and suffering much greater hardships than I ever experienced while prisoner with the Americans. -- But it is natural for every man to think his own case the hardest; and though of ill usage I had my share, yet I enjoyed the fresh air, while thousands of soldiers lay languishing and dying in loathsome prison-ships, stinking jails, and dark dungeons, deprived of the privilege of the fresh air, necessary to preserve health; and even excluded from the cheerful light of heaven, and having nothing for subsistence, but damaged provisions, such as even a wretch starving on the gibbet and ready to eat the flesh off his own body with hunger, might turn from with disgust. Such was the unhappy situation of those who were taken at Long-Island, Fort-Washington, Brandy-wine, Germantown, Monmouth, Camden, and several other places. Indeed the treatment of prisoners in general during the American war, was harsh, severe and in many instances, inhuman: except only with regard to those who were taken under a capitulation; for such were always, treated well: -- Burgoyne's and Cornwallis's men were treated like gentlemen, to my own certain knowledge, and why not the soldier who is taken prisoner in the field of action, or in any other way discharging his duty to his king or country?

We next arrived at Lancaster, where we had reason to expect good treatment, the inhabitants being in general remarkable for hospitality, and for contributing to the relief of objects of distress; yet such of us



as had no trade or mechanical profession fared but indifferently. -- While we were in Lancaster I became acquainted with a man in the army, belonging to the 44th regiment, whom I think proper to mention in this place on account of his piety. I had frequently observed him retiring into a secret place, which at length awakened my curiosity to see what he was about; -- I watched him, and found he went there to *pray*: he was remarkably reserved in all his conduct and conversation; was often alone, and seldom spoke, except when spoken to; and from his general deportment, I firmly believe, he was, what is truly a phenomenon in the army, a *conscientious christian*. But this pious example had little influence on my conduct. One day, I very well remember, I got a quarter of a dollar from a Mr. John Hoover, by dint of hard begging: I now fancied myself as rich as a king, and immediately sent for a loaf of bread and a pint of whiskey; with which I and my comrade regaled ourselves, and sung some merry songs: being for the time as happy as princes.

Not long after, before we left Lancaster, we concerted another scheme for our release, by undermining, from one of the cellars under the barrack-yard and stockades, about 100 yards, and coming out in the grave-yard, -- conveying the dirt in our pockets, and depositing it in the necessary house, and other private places. The next thing was to seize the magazine which contained a large quantity of ammunition and fire-locks, with which we intended to arm ourselves, and being joined by a strong party of tories, set fire to the town, and so proceed to form a junction with the English army. But our evil designs were entirely frustrated, by one of our own men belonging to the 71st regiment, of the name of *Burk*, who first made our plot known to the officer of the guard; and being conducted to General Wayne, who was then in Lancaster, gave in all the names of the non-commissioned officers. The consequence of this was, that about 11 o'clock at night, general Wayne came to the barracks with a guard of militia, and called out those unhappy men, and marched them down to the jail, and put them in close confinement. And the commissary of prisoners, whose name was *Hobley*, ordered a ditch to be dug at the foot of the stockades, 7 or 8 feet deep, and filled with large stones, to prevent us from undermining; and had pieces of scantling spiked along the top and bottom of the stockades. The prisoners were employed to do the work, and they very cunningly cut the spikes in two, so as to go through the scantling and but slightly penetrated the stockades. These short spikes were put in at the bottom, in order that the stockade might swing when cut off under ground.

A day or two after this, when Mr. H. the commissary of prisoners came to call the roll, a man of Lord Rawdon's corps, whose name has slipped my memory, took the commissary aside, and offered to shew him all the private ways by which the prisoners went out and in. Accordingly he went round the stockades with the commissary, and made all the discovery he could. When all was done, and the fellow wanted to be discharged, Mr. H. called the prisoners together, and represented to them the bad policy of one prisoner turning traitor against the rest, and concluded with telling the fellow he ought to be hanged for acting so much like a scoundrel. We accordingly held a court-martial, and the fellow pleaded guilty, and was sentenced to receive 500 lashes, on his bare posteriors, well laid on with a broad leathern strap.

Soon after this, two of my fellow prisoners and myself laid a plan for our escape, which we effected in the following manner: -- the night being appointed for the purpose, we procured a large knife, with which about two o'clock in the morning we had dug about two feet under ground, where, to our great joy, we found the stockade rotten, or at least considerably decayed: we cut away by turns, till the stockade swung by the upper spike; so the boldest fellow went for[e]most, and the centry fired at the hindmost; but we all escaped to a rye field where we lay hidden for a while., and then made the best of our way to a friend's house, two miles from town, and found there 30 or 40 more lying in a barn. -- Next morning each man taking his own road, I directed my course for the Moravian town (as it is called) 8 miles from Lancaster, and there I met with a friendly reception from a certain Joseph Willey, one of the Moravian society, a wool weaver by occupation, and a native of the town of Putsey in Yorkshire, old England. This man though a friend to individuals, particularly those from Yorkshire, was notwithstanding a true republican in principle, and as warm an advocate for the rights and liberties of America, as any man could be. He recommended me to the brethren of his society as a prisoner of war belonging to a christian nation, and an object of compassion, and prayed for their assistance; which they granted and furnished me with what I stood in need of: but not until they had exacted a promise from me that I would return to my captivity, and wait with patience for the exchange of prisoners. -- This promise I fulfilled, and accordingly returned to Lancaster barracks. And in a few days after my return, an officer of an additional company of the 33d regiment taken with general Burgoyne's troops, came to Lancaster, and an application was made

for some money, and each man received five guineas: there were 16 of us in a room together making ourselves as happy as possible; and we were determined to have a general feast or frolic. Accordingly having laid in provisions of different sorts and procured a barrel of whiskey in the morning, I leave you to guess, my courteous reader, what an appearance we made by the middle of the day, when a pot-pie was proposed for dinner, and the preparation of it undertaken by a drunken old soldier, who, in making up the crust of the pie, used whiskey instead of water: the dough being made and rolled out, and put in the pot; the ingredients of the pie were added consisting of old rancid bacon, dried apples, onions and old chews of tobacco; and when sufficiently baked at the fire, the whole compound was next stewed in good old whiskey: and when ready, a general invitation was given to the neighbours to partake of this *delicate* repast; and we concluded the entertainment with a good bucket of whiskey, dancing with our shirts off while we were able to stand, and then we lay down promiscuously, and slept till morning. -- Our frolic so much resembled the Irish feast, as described by Dean [Jonathan] Swift, that I cannot forbear transcribing a few lines from that poet:

“We danced in a round,  
Cutting capers and ramping;  
A mercy the ground  
Did not burst with our stamping.  
The floor was all wet  
With leaps and with jumps,  
While the water and sweat  
Splish splash in our pumps.  
Bless you late and early  
*Laughlin O’ Enagin,*  
By my hand, you dance rarely  
*Margery Grinagin.*  
Bring straw for our bed  
Shake it down to the feet,  
Then over us spread  
The winnowing sheet.  
To show I don’t flinch  
Fill the bowl up again,  
Then give us a pinch  
of your sneezing, *a yean.* –[”]

Next morning myself and a certain M’Gowan, after taking a little more of the *usquebaugh*, determined to try our fortune; and accordingly made application for a pass for a few hours, and a sentry to go as a safe-guard to bring us back at the expiration of the limited time. Previously to this, we had made ourselves acquainted with a certain militia-man by the name of Everman, a tobacco spinner, who lived in Lancaster, and a notorious drunkard. We called on him, and he readily attended- us to a certain Tom M’Honey’s, who kept the sign of the white-horse in Donnegal street, near the barracks. -- So now, Mr. Everman, what will you please to drink? What you please, gentlemen, said Mr. Everman. So a lusty bowl of punch was called for, and we all drank heartily together, until our sentry got drunk, and fell asleep on his guard. -- We seized the favourable opportunity, and set out to push our fortune; and in order to avoid suspicion, we soon parted, and took different roads. I came to a farmer’s house, and inquired for work: the farmer very readily agreed to give me employment; but “what,” says he, “can you do?” I told him I was brought up a stuff-weaver. Can you weave worsted? says he. Yes, sir, said I. “Well then,” said he, “if you will weave a piece of worsted I have on hands, and continue with me five weeks, I will teach you to be a linen-weaver.” I consented, and fulfilled the contract, and he made me an indifferent linen-weaver. After that I parted with my new master, and went to live with one John Bostler, a Dutchman...

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