SACRIFICE FOR INDEPENDENCE

REMEMBERING REVOLUTIONARY POWS

( BY LENA ANTHONY )
On August 27, 1776, the British handed the Continental Army a decisive defeat at the Battle of Long Island, effectively forcing General George Washington and his troops out of New York City until the end of the war. Of the approximately 10,000 Americans who fought in the two-day battle, more than 1,000 were captured. It was a monumental victory for the British, but it posed one problem—where would they keep all of their prisoners?

Housing was scarce in late 18th-century New York City—the British headquarters during the Revolutionary War—where the majority of the prisoners were taken. After the British took control of the city, throngs of loyalist refugees came flooding in, explains Edwin Burrows in Forgotten Patriots (Basic Books, 2008). “The competition for housing became so intense that many residents wound up pitching tents in the burned-over blocks west of Broadway, a neighborhood promptly dubbed ‘Canvas Town,’” he writes. “There and everywhere, overflowing privies and open pools of human waste caused widespread sickness as well as an unpleasant odor that hung over the town even in winter.”

If that’s how free British citizens lived, then it should be no surprise that more Americans died in British prisons than on the battlefield. Modern historians estimate that British prisons claimed more than 18,000 American lives, compared to 6,800 Americans killed in action and another 10,000 who died in camps from illness or infection, according to Burrows.

CAPTIVES’ QUARTERS

American prisoners were held in various places during the war, including Nova Scotia, Quebec, Philadelphia and Savannah, Ga. Charleston, S.C., also served as a major detention center, holding more than 3,300 American captives in stockades and “four reeking, scandalously overcrowded prison ships,” Burrows writes.

About 3,000 prisoners, mostly seamen, were transported to Great Britain for detention in old houses and gaols in Ireland. Scotland and England, explains Sheldon S. Cohen in Yankee Sailors in British Gaols (University of Delaware, 1995). One American prisoner, Henry Laurens, who was on a mission to Holland for the Continental Congress when he was captured in 1780, was held in the Tower of London for more than a year and was eventually exchanged for Lord Cornwallis.

However, the majority of American prisoners languished in New York City—in public buildings hastily and haphazardly outfitted as prisons and, later, on infamous prison ships anchored off the shores of Brooklyn. Burrows estimates that 32,000 Americans were detained in and around the city during the Revolution.

At the beginning of the war, most prisoners were held on land. The British began using prison ships in 1776, but primarily to hold prisoners before transferring them back to shore. During 1776–1777, at least 13 separate prisons were established in New York City, according to Larry Bowman in Captive Americans: Prisoners During the American Revolution (Ohio University Press, 1976). “Most of these 13 hastily created prisons functioned only for a short time.”

One of the most notorious prisons, which operated for the duration of the war, was the provost marshal’s jail, or the Provost, for short. “Originally designed to serve as the municipal jail, it had six cells on each of its top two floors and three large vaults in the cellar, which functioned as dungeons,” Burrows writes. “An average of 10 men [were] locked up day and night in a cell that probably measured 20 feet by 30 [feet] and held little or no furniture other than the ‘necessary tubs’ in which they relieved themselves.”
Another New York building that became a British prison was the North Dutch Church, which, according to Burrows, could accommodate as many as 800 men after removing the pews and laying planks between the balconies to create a second floor.

For prisoners who languished on one of the 26 prison ships, overcrowding was even more of a problem. “Most of each 24-hour period the prisoners were confined between decks,” Bowman writes. “Each day small groups of the inmates were allowed topside for brief periods, but the escape from the desperately crowded conditions was infrequent for each man. ... In a heavily populated vessel a prisoner might wait for several days until his turn to go topside came again.”

Captain Thomas Dring, who was a prisoner aboard the Jersey, recalled his first night on the ship in his memoir, Recollections of the Jersey Prison Ship, published in 1829. An excerpt:

“The thought of sleep did not enter my mind: and at length, discovering a glimmering of light through the iron gratings of one of the air-ports, I felt that it would be indeed a luxury, if I could but obtain a situation near that place, in order to gain one breath of the exterior air,” he wrote. “Clenching my hand firmly around my bag, which I dared not leave, I began to advance towards the side of the ship; but was soon greeted with the curses and imprecations of those who were lying on the deck, and whom I had disturbed in attempting to pass over them. I however persevered, and at length arrived near the desired spot; but found it already occupied, and no persuasion could induce a single individual to relinquish his place for a moment.”

A DEATH SENTENCE

Even more dangerous than the cramped conditions was the severe hunger experienced by American prisoners. Death literally surrounded them, in large part due to the scarce, spoiled provisions they received. According to Burrows, the American prisoners should have received two-thirds of what the regular-duty British soldiers would have eaten each week, which was “seven pounds of bread and seven of beef, supplemented by what were called ‘small species’—four ounces of butter or cheese, eight ounces of oatmeal, three pints of peas, and perhaps a few ounces of rice, if available.”

The problem grew worse when the British army didn’t receive its full allotment. “Quite often stockpiles shrank to the point that the army had to go on short rations,” Burrows says. “When that happened, prisoners inevitably got less food and the poorest food—if they got food at all.”
A Connecticut soldier named Samuel Young recalled waiting two days for food from his British captors, and when he finally received it, the rations were hardly edible: “A quantity of biscuits in crumbs, mostly mouldy [sic], and some of them crawling with maggots,” he wrote. Burrows wrote about another Connecticut soldier, Thomas Stone, who “remembered that ‘old shoes were bought and eaten with as good a relish as a pig or a turkey.’” Admather Blodget, a soldier from Massachusetts who was detained in one of the New York sugar houses—former sugar refineries that were converted to prisons—admitted to surviving by eating garbage.

Burrows also introduces readers to Levi Hanford, a Connecticut soldier detained in a sugar house who wrote how he and his fellow inmates prepared their stale biscuits and raw pork: “The biscuit was such as had been wet with sea water and damaged, was full of worms and mouldy. It was common practice to put water in our camp kettle, then break up the biscuit into it, skim off the worms, put in the pork, and boil it, if we had the fuel ... when we could get no fuel, we ate our meat raw and our biscuit dry. Starved as we were, there was nothing in the shape of food that was rejected or was unpalatable.”

Reports from Philadelphia included stories of American prisoners attempting to eat bark, clay and stones to survive, and one surgeon, Albignance Waldo, even reported that an American held captive in Philadelphia ate his own finger, “up to the first joint from the hand, before he died,” according to Burrows. Malnutrition combined with cramped, unsanitary conditions translated into rampant disease among the prisoners. “Because malnutrition impairs the body’s immune function, they became easy prey to typhus, dysentery and other infectious diseases of the skin, lungs and gastrointestinal tract,” Burrows says. “The lack of fresh fruit and vegetables in their diet led to a chronic vitamin C deficiency, guaranteeing that many would also experience the bleeding gums, open sores, tooth loss and listlessness that were the symptoms of scurvy.”

Illness, however, did not give prisoners reprieve from their abusive captors, who, Burrows says, were known to beat those who were too weak to even stand up.

AN OFFICER IS A GENTLEMAN

Not all prisoners were subjected to severe mistreatment. The British officers, considering themselves gentlemen, treated some American officers with a measure of respect. For lower-ranked officers, that might have meant imprisonment in Liberty House, the pre-war headquarters of the New York Sons of Liberty. Although it was cramped inside, prisoners housed there “could walk around the tiny outside yard,” Burrows writes. They were also allowed to purchase additional provisions some days of the week and could accept donated food and clothing from city residents.

Word quickly got back to leaders like General George Washington that their men were suffering deplorable conditions in British prisons. The Americans implored the British to exchange the prisoners or at least allow them to bring in proper food, clothing and medical care. Their angry protests fell on deaf ears. The more colonists heard about the prisoners’ abuse, the more fervent they felt about winning the war. “If the enemy’s cruelty thus legitimated the Revolution,” Burrows writes, “it also served as a warning that should they fail, all Americans would be treated like the prisoners in New York.”

CONGRESS APPROVED THE RELOCATION

Congress approved the relocation, and the prisoners marched from Boston to Virginia in “bitter winter conditions, with scarce rations and thin clothing,” Kranish writes. “As the prisoners reached the barracks in January 1779, they beheld an appalling site: half-constructed log cabins, few provisions and a landscape swirling in snow.”

Conditions eventually improved, and the “barracks became a lively center, with its own store, coffeehouse, large church and taverns,” Kranish writes. Jefferson, an avid musician, befriended some of the officers, and even invited Friedrich Wilhelm von Geismar, a Hessian officer and violinist, to accompany him on the violin at Monticello.
residents who felt pity for them. Other officers were held and worked in the homes and on the farms of loyalists around New York City. They were on parole, but unable to leave the city.

For General Charles Lee, who was one of the highest-ranking American officers to be captured by the British, prison meant something else entirely. While he awaited parole, Lee received his own private room in City Hall, and “got all the firewood and candles he needed, without charge, and enjoyed lavish dinners with whatever wine and liquor he desired, all at His Majesty’s expense,” Burrows writes. “In time, [Commander General William] Howe even let Lee bring in his Italian manservant and one of his beloved dogs. Other than the fact that he could not go outside … Lee had nothing to complain about.”

UPON RELEASE

While death was a reality facing American prisoners, it wasn’t the only outcome. Many captives were either released or escaped. Some prisoners were part of partial exchanges, in which the Continental Army negotiated for a certain number of their prisoners to be released in exchange for the release of British prisoners. In other cases, being extremely sick was grounds for release, although, as Burrows notes, many of those prisoners died on their way home or immediately upon returning home.

For others, there were two ways out: escaping or defecting to join their British captors.

However they got out, a former’s captive’s troubles were far from over once free. According to Burrows, from reading the journals and letters of prisoners, many likely experienced what today is known as post-traumatic stress disorder.

ANOTHER REASON FOR INDEPENDENCE

Experts point to several possible reasons as the cause for such inhumane treatment. Some say the British weren’t prepared for a war that lasted as long as it did, so were ill-equipped to house and feed prisoners for an extended period of time. Others argue that because Britain did not recognize America’s independence, viewing the colonists as rebels, it would not recognize the captives as proper prisoners of war, which would have afforded them much better treatment.

Whatever the cause, the fact remained that American prisoners suffered greatly at the hands of their captors. “The apparently systematic mistreatment of American prisoners [was] a kind of moral or psychological Rubicon,” Burrows writes. “Once crossed, there could be no compromise, no turning back, no restoration of the old connection between the Colonies and the mother country.”

Lena Anthony shared tips for finding female ancestors for a story in the January/February issue.

Consider membership in the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution (NSDAR), a volunteer women’s service organization that honors and preserves the legacy of our Patriot ancestors. More than 200 years ago, American Patriots fought and sacrificed for the freedoms we enjoy today. As a member of the DAR, you can continue this legacy by actively promoting patriotism, preserving American history and securing America’s future through better education for children.

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