We Were There, Too!

by Phillip Hoose

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How are patriotism and courage related?
The smell of war began to be pretty strong.

Joseph Plumb Martin:

“And Now I Was a Soldier”

Milford, Connecticut, 1775

Joseph Plumb Martin was a tall, strong, hardworking boy who grew up on his grandparents’ farm in Connecticut. Though he never went to school, he managed to write one of the best diaries of the Revolutionary War.

Joseph Martin forced the metal plow deep down into the soil while his grandfather walked alongside, guiding the horse that pulled it. It was a fresh April morning, a perfect planting day. Suddenly the silence was broken by the sound of bells and gunshots in Milford. Joseph dropped the plow and dashed into town, his grandfather following behind as fast as he could.

A crowd was gathered in front of the tavern, where an express rider from New Haven shouted news of three days before: There had been a bloody battle in Concord, Massachusetts. Many were dead. Soldiers were needed now. A silver dollar was the reward for anyone who would enlist in the American army and march off to New York to join General Washington.
Joseph was only fourteen, a year too young to enlist. Until that day, his thoughts about soldiering had always been clear: “I felt myself to be a real coward. What—venture my carcass where bullets fly! That will never do for me. Stay at home out of harm’s way, thought I.”

But now friends his age and even younger were scrawling their names and grabbing up those dollars while adults cheered. Joseph was torn. He hated to stay home while his friends marched off to glory, and the thought of a whole silver dollar made “the seeds of courage begin to sprout,” but he needed more time to get used to the idea. Two months later, he was ready. On June 25, 1776, Joseph slipped away from his grandparents’ house and hiked into town, his mind made up to enlist for six months, the shortest term possible. When a group of boys he knew saw him coming, they began to taunt him:

“Come, if you will enlist, I will,” says one.
“You have long been talking about it,” says another.
“Come, now is the time.”

REGULARS

Unlike militiamen, who volunteered to fight when men were needed, the Continentals—or “regulars”—were professional soldiers who got paid to enlist and fight in the army. Continentals and militiamen often fought together in battle. Each Continental soldier got assigned to a company of eighty-six men. Eight companies made up a regiment, also called a battalion. The Continental army had twenty-six regiments of foot soldiers, one of riflemen, and one of artillerymen.
“Thinks I to myself, I will not be laughed into it or out of it. I will act my own pleasure after all. . . . So seating myself at the table, enlisting orders were immediately presented to me. I took up the pen, loaded it with the fatal charge, made several mimic imitations of writing my name, but took especial care not to touch the paper with the pen until an unlucky [friend] who was leaning over my shoulder gave my hand a strike which caused the pen to make a woeful scratch on the paper. ‘O, he has enlisted,’ said he. . . . Well, thought I, I may as well go through with the business now as not. So I wrote my name fairly upon the indentures. And now I was a soldier, in name at least.”

His grandparents were unhappy, but they “fit him out” with clothing, a musket, and powder. His grandmother gave him cheese and cake and stuffed it into his knapsack. He sailed to New York City to join a Connecticut company. For more than a month all they did was march in parades and practice battle drills. Joseph's biggest problem was getting used to the food—salt pork or boiled beef, hard bread, and turnips or boiled potatoes.
But even as they practiced, hundreds of British warships were arriving at nearby Staten Island, unloading 32,000 redcoated soldiers. Late in August, Joseph's company was ordered to Long Island to stop British forces from taking New York City. Just before they marched off, Joseph climbed onto the roof of a house and squinted in the direction of the battlefield: “I distinctly saw the smoke of the field artillery, but the distance and the unfavorableness of the wind prevented my hearing their report, at least but faintly. The horrors of battle then presented themselves to my mind in all their hideousness. I must come to it now, thought I.”
They took a ferry across the East River to Brooklyn and marched toward a field, the shots growing louder and louder with each step until they boomed like thunder. “We now began to meet the wounded men, another sight I was unacquainted with, some with broken arms, some with broken heads. The sight of these a little daunted me, and made me think of home.”

And then all at once he was fighting, too. “Our officers . . . pressed forward towards a creek, where a large party of Americans and British were engaged. By the time we arrived, the enemy had driven our men into the creek . . . where such as could swim got across. Those that could not swim, and could not procure anything to buoy them up, sunk.”

On the opposite bank of Gowanus Creek he could make out a long row of British soldiers—professional warriors from what was then the best army in the world. They stood straight and tall in red jackets as they fired on command at the retreating Americans. The creek was filling up with American bodies. Joseph’s company shot back furiously, trying to provide cover for those still thrashing through the water.
Then they marched on to a part of Manhattan called Kip’s Bay and readied themselves for another battle. One night they camped so close to a British warship that Joseph could overhear soldiers on board mocking the Americans. Early on a Sunday morning, Joseph slipped into an unlocked warehouse for a rare moment of privacy and peace. He was seated on a stool, reading some papers he’d discovered, when “all of a sudden there came such a peal of thunder from the British shipping that I thought my head would go with the sound. I made a frog’s leap and lay as still as I possibly could and began to consider which part of my carcass would go first.” They were soon dashing for their lives, leaping over the bodies of their friends. As Joseph put it, “fear and disorder seemed to take full possession of all and everything that day.”

**RECRUITING FOR THE CONTINENTAL ARMY**

After the wave of enthusiasm that gripped Joseph Plumb Martin and his friends in 1775, recruiting for the army got harder each year. Part of the problem was that the Continental soldiers faced the well-equipped British forces in ragged uniforms that they had to provide for themselves. Often they fought with muskets that lacked bayonets. Food was scarce and soldiers were not always paid on time, if at all. Not that it mattered much—privates got only about seven dollars a month. Some soldiers deserted, but many more remained out of a desire for independence and a respect for General George Washington.
Joseph was still alive when October came and cool weather set in, and life got even more uncomfortable: “To have to lie, as I did almost every night on the cold and often wet ground without a blanket and with nothing but thin summer clothing was tedious . . . In the morning, the ground [often was] as white as snow with hoar frost. Or perhaps it would rain all night like a flood. All that could be done in that case was to lie down, take our musket in our arms and packe the lock between our thighs and ‘weather it out’.”

When Joseph was discharged from the Continental army on Christmas Day, 1776, he felt older than fifteen. A battle-tested patriot, he was proud that he had stood his ground against the British. He set off for home, fifty-two miles away, with four shillings of discharge pay in his pocket and enough stories to get him through the winter and more. He farmed for a year, got bored, and reenlisted. When the war ended six years later, he was still a soldier. And he was also a free citizen of a new nation.

WHAT HAPPENED TO JOSEPH PLUMB MARTIN?

He moved to Maine in 1794 and began to farm. He married and became the father of five children. He loved to write, tell stories, and draw pictures of birds. When he was seventy, his Revolutionary War account was published. He died in Maine at the age of ninety.
Just after dark on the rainy evening of April 26, 1777, Colonel Henry Ludington, commander of a regiment of militiamen near the New York–Connecticut border, heard a rap at his door. Outside stood a saluting messenger, rain streaming from his cape. His words came fast. British soldiers had just torched the warehouse in Danbury, Connecticut. Food and guns belonging to the Continental army were being destroyed. Soldiers were burning homes, too. Could Colonel Ludington round up his men right away?

The British are burning Danbury! Muster at Ludington’s!

Sybil Ludington:
Outdistancing Paul Revere

Fredericksburg, New York, April 26, 1777

Nearly everyone has heard of the midnight ride of Paul Revere. That’s mainly because Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a poem about it soon after it happened. But far fewer people know that two years later a sixteen-year-old girl rode much farther over rougher roads. Alone and unarmed, Sybil Ludington raced through the night for freedom.

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SYBIL RODE FARTHER

On April 18, 1775, Paul Revere raced from Boston to Lexington to warn American rebel leaders, “The British are coming!” He rode fourteen miles on good roads for some two hours, while Sybil Ludington rode all night—nearly forty miles over cart tracks and rutted fields in the blackness of rural farm country.
It was easier said than done. Colonel Ludington’s militiamen were farmers and woodsmen whose homes were scattered throughout the countryside. Someone would have to go get them while the colonel stayed behind to organize them once they arrived. But who? Who besides he himself knew where they all lived and could cover so many miles on horseback in the dead of night? Deep in thought, he heard his daughter Sybil’s voice. She was saying that she wanted to go.

For Sybil Ludington it was an unexpected chance to help the war effort. As the oldest of eight children, her days were filled with chores and responsibilities. Still, each week when her father’s men drilled in their pasture, she paused from her work to watch them. She wished she could fight. People kept saying she was doing her part for liberty at home, but she wanted to do more. Suddenly, with this emergency on a rainy night, she had a chance.
Her father looked at her. How could he let her take such a risk? The whole countryside was full of armed men. There were skinners and cowboys who stole cattle for the British, soldiers from both sides, and deserters trying to get back home under cover of darkness. But Sybil was right: She knew every soldier in her father’s unit and she was a fine rider. Rebecca, her next oldest sister, could mind the children. Most of them were already asleep anyway.

Colonel Ludington walked with Sybil out to the barn and held a lantern while she threw a saddle over her yearling colt, Star. Together father and daughter went over the names of his men and where they lived. Then the colonel watched Sybil disappear into the darkness.

It was raining hard. Sybil put away thoughts of who might appear in the roadway and concentrated on the road map in her head. With no time to lose, she had to reach all the men, taking the most efficient route possible. She picked up a long stick to bang on doors. That way she wouldn’t have to waste time dismounting and getting back on Star. One by one, hearing the rap of the stick, the sleepy farmers cracked their doors open, some poking muskets out into the darkness. Sybil said the same thing to all: “The British are burning Danbury! Muster at Ludington’s!” Once she knew they understood, she galloped off, refusing all offers of rest and refreshment.

This bronze statue of Sybil Ludington riding Star is in Carmel, New York.
It took her till dawn to get back home. She was soaked and sore, but as she rode up to her farm she could hear the sounds of drums and bugles. Many of her father’s men were already there, getting ready to march. Soon her father’s militia set off to join five hundred other Colonial soldiers. They missed the British at Danbury but finally fought and defeated them at Ridgefield, Connecticut, a few weeks later.
WHAT HAPPENED TO SYBIL LUDINGTON?

Word of Sybil’s ride got around. George Washington thanked her personally, and Alexander Hamilton wrote her a letter of appreciation. When she was twenty-three, Sybil married her childhood sweetheart, Edmond Ogden, and became the mother of four sons and two daughters. Sybil died in New York at the age of seventy-seven. There is a bronze statue of Sybil Ludington atop Star at Lake Gleneida in Carmel, New York. In 1975, an eight-cent U.S. postage stamp was issued in her honor.

ANALYZE THE TEXT

**Compare and Contrast** What similarities and differences do you see between Joseph's and Sybil's actions during the Revolution? Use text evidence to support your answer.