

# NWTA Courier

P U B L I C A T I O N   O F  
T H E   N O R T H W E S T   T E R R I T O R Y   A L L I A N C E

## THE PURPLE HEART: THE HISTORY OF THE REWARD OF MERIT

Frank Wicker

Commander in Chief's Guard

As our battle casualties come home from the current conflict in the Middle East, mention is frequently made of their winning the Purple Heart, the oldest "medal" in the United States Military. But, there is another which is just as old. More about that later.

The Reward of Merit was created in Gen. George Washington's General Orders issued August 7, 1782 at Newburgh, New York. In paragraph 4 of those orders it is written: "The General, ever desirous to cherish

a virtuous ambition in his soldiers, as well as to foster and encourage every species of military merit, directs that wherever any singularly meritorious action is performed, the author of it shall be permitted to wear on his facings, over his left breast, the figure of a heart of purple cloth or silk, edged with narrow lace or binding. Not only instance of unusual gallantry, but also of extraordinary fidelity, and essential service in any way, shall meet with a due reward."

On April 27, 1783, the General Orders reported a Board considered the claims of Sgt. Elijah Churchill of the Second Regiment of Light Dragoons and Sgt. William Brown of the "late Fifth Connecticut Regiment" were entitled to the Reward Of Merit. They were invested with the reward on May third of 1783.

On June 8, 1783, the General Orders recommended Sgt. Daniel Bissell of the Second Connecticut Regiment to also be issued the Reward Of Merit for "Having performed some important services within the immediate knowledge of the Commander-in-Chief, in which the fidelity, perseverance and good sense of the said Sergeant Bissell were conspicuously manifested". A board was convened on June 10 to consider claims to the honor, and Sgt. Bissell was ordered to report June 15 to receive his award.

The men receiving the Reward Of Merit were permitted to pass all sentinels and guards the same as commissioned officers.

Nowhere in the General Orders in that time period is there any mention of the specific actions of the

## A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

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Does anyone else have a closet in their home that always, no matter what time of year, smells like an event? I do—it's right behind me as I write to you, and if I opened it and inhaled I would smell the essence of a good weekend: woodsmoke, some black powder, the tang of cast iron, and even good, honest sweat (I admit, I neglected to take some things to the cleaner's after the Locust Grove Market Fair last year). I had a professor once who, while discussing the gaps in history, the things academia does not know and presumably cannot know, posed this question to prove her point: "Does anyone know what 1776 smelled like?"

I thought immediately of my clothes,

hanging in that closet after a long weekend, smelling quite a bit like 1776 must have smelled like. The average American probably would not think it was a pleasant smell, but to you and me, that closet smells not only familiar but maybe a little like home, too.

Even as we wait, eagerly, for event season to begin again, we can remind ourselves that there are a few gaps in history that we are blessed to be able to fill in—the scent of history is in our closets.

I hope everyone is wintering well,  
Rowenna Hamper

## WINTER QUARTERS: BUILDING YOUR OWN FORT PART II

*Editor's Note: Continued from the November/December issue*

David Phipps  
71st Regiment of (Highland) Foot

Determining the size of your redoubt or fort is the next factor that needs to be considered. In my own circumstance, I did a project analysis of what I wanted. Minimally, I wanted a large blockhouse with outer defensive works. The maximum size of what I thought I could afford, was a three building garrison with stockade walls that would essentially represent a French and Indian War era provincial fort. While my dream was to own a Fort Niagara, the practical goal centered on less. I wanted to house an 18<sup>th</sup> Century infantry platoon (1/2 Infantry Company or the same size as your average reenactment unit) to guard a ford across a creek. It would also double as a supply depot for reenactments, and as a possible place to hold school tours. I then prioritized the daily func-

tions of the fort that I wanted to portray, to include officer quarters, enlisted quarters, quarter master facilities, fortifications, and other activities such as a blacksmith shop, an outdoor oven, woodworking area, and a safe area to conduct live-firing demonstrations with both musket and cannon.

Taking into account the number of personnel that need to be billeted and the historical documentation of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, I then set about the task of planning the actual size of the buildings. 18<sup>th</sup> Century buildings tended to be smaller than they are now, not because people were smaller, but because building larger structures cost time and money that most people did not have. The 18<sup>th</sup> Century planning factor for space-per-soldier ranges from 10 sq ft for sleeping only, to 18 sq ft per person for combined sleeping and shared common areas. By the start of the American Civil War, engineering manuals stated the space required for a soldier was 15

square feet. Housing a minimum of 23 people requires a good deal of space, even by 18<sup>th</sup> Century standards. Using the numbers above I calculated that I needed to provide for between 230 and 414 sq ft under roof.

Once the issue of space was decided, providing adequate sleeping provisions was the next factor that mandated consideration and planning. Using documentation from the Post at Stoney Creek in 1760, (where the soldiers were dying because their only protection from the elements was "wagon cloth shelters for troops,") I realized that housing could be tents, so I planned for three tents to be included within the stockade of the fort. Another decision concerned the height of the walls. Little fort walls historically were not what we see at restored forts today. State and National Parks tend to build reproductions the way the various engineering manuals say they were to be constructed. A recent Nation Park Service review of Fort Necessity is a good example: the restored walls are twelve feet in height but the research suggests they averaged seven and half feet high.

Another factor in determining the space required is a need to consider its footprint on the land you have available. The number and type of buildings you want, and the activities you are planning for your fort to demonstrate, all come together to determine the area. Fort Picalata (1720) for example was a guard post and its outside stockade measurements were only a 16-foot square. Both Fort Northkill (1760) and the Post at Bergen Point (1780) were patrol posts. They were square forts 32 and 35 feet, respectively on a side. Fort Niagara is so large that its area is measured in acres! Even though military control of the terrain is something that a trained engineer would have considered in their planning it is not an issue for the reenactor. Fort Necessity is a wonderful



David Phipps, proud owner of his own fort

example of how consideration of the terrain was not used. George Washington's fort is in a meadow surrounded by hills that allowed the French to place accurate musket fire into the interior of fort. In my case, I have one hill that would dominate the fort if fired on by rifled muskets.

Of course authenticity, the subject nearest and dearest to the hearts of most all reenactors (or should be), was of primary concern during my construction effort. While I would love to have everything 100% 18<sup>th</sup> Century correct, the reality is that my wallet was funding this project and I don't have the manpower to constantly fix or replace rotting timbers. I opted to invest in pressure treated landscape timber for the purposes of durability and an overall ease of construction. Pressure treated timber is uniform, easy to handle, relatively inexpensive and has a considerably reduced replacement time. In the case of my own fort, I should be dead by the time the timber needs replacing. As time and money permit, I will make upgrades to my fort but the ultimate goal was to get it done so I could start using it. For a long time I was losing ground until I decided on a final plan. While my reenacting unit has used what was constructed and available, my new ideas for changes, time and money have delayed completion for five years.

The final phase of my plan, blessed by a loving wife, was to have a blockhouse (8x8 ft first floor, 10x10 ft second floor), a cabin (8x12 ft with attic), an 8x8 ft bastion, and an 8x16 ft shed with room for three wedge tents. The fort's overall dimension is 28 x 32 feet. This provides room both for sleeping and common areas consisting of 420 sq ft under roof and a total of 564 sq ft including tents. The total construction cost to date is at \$5869.31.

For reenactors interested in building their own defensive fortification, a good recommended starter size would be an earthwork designed to hold up to 40 men. The interior sides

would be twelve feet long, and have an open interior space of 144 sq ft. With the ditch and reinforcing dirt walls the exterior would be 40 feet on a side for the whole works. The surrounding earth walls have to be a minimum of four and half feet high, or could be six-eight feet high with firing platforms, time and money allowing. The outside ditch will need to be about four feet in depth, giving the wall its reinforcement. This allows, in 18<sup>th</sup> Century standards, enough room to have ten tents with five men each outside the entrance and allow plenty of room for maneuvers and battle on a couple of acres. If at the beginning you expand your planning for a fort that is sixteen feet on an interior side, you can put a small 8x8 foot blockhouse similar to Fort Picalata in later if you decide you want to add more permanent quarters when funds and troops are in greater abundance.

I began work on my fort in Aug 2001 and had the blockhouse almost complete by the end of Labor Day 2001. As time, skills, and money has improved, so has the fort. The blockhouse is 8x8 foot on the first floor and 10x10 foot on the second. The first floor is paved with flagstone from the creek nearby and the roof is gray/brown architectural asphalt shingles. The cabin is 8x12 with a raised foundation, better chinking, and split cedar shingles on the roof. The 8x8 bastion mounts a brass swivel gun and the 24-foot flagpole flies the flag of the moment. There have been many construction delays over the years due to work, weddings, college students, etc.; but now I have finished the fort thanks to an understanding wife. I have made several advances with help of friends and family. My thanks to all of them for their support and their labor.

While not made of stone like Ft. Niagara that I admired as a kid, (except the blockhouse floor,) and having only a brass swivel

rather than 32lb carronades, it still serves the mission of making me the "Fort Major" and of being a source of fun and education for visitors. Besides, as my wife says to her friends, "I know where to find him. He's down the hill at the fort."

### Recommended Additional Reading

Dunnigan, Brian Leigh, Forts Within A Fort, Niagara's Redoubts, Old Fort Niagara Assoc, Inc. Youngstown NY, 1989 ISBN 0-941967-08-5

Lochee, Elements of Field Fortification (1783), reprint by King's Press For most reenactors, the easiest period manual to get for their fort building reference is Elements of Field Fortification by Lochee (1783). Lochee translated most of Vauban's works for English readers.

Stotz, Charles Morse, Outposts of the War for Empire, Univ of Pittsburg Press 1985 ISBN 0-936340-02-9

Waddell, Louis M., The French and Indian War in Pennsylvania 1753-1763, Commonwealth of PA 1996, ISBN 0-89271-069-1

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three soldiers which brought them the honors. Nor is there any mention of any other soldiers receiving the reward. Therefore, it appears that the Reward Of Merit was akin to what now is the Congressional Medal Of Honor.

At least two contemporary Reward Of Merit badges may exist. One, believed to be an original, was the one issued to Sgt. Elijah Churchill. That may exist at the museum at the New Windsor/Newburgh encampment site, according an allusion by encyclopedia authors Neumann and Kravic. I have heard of a second still existing, possibly original or maybe a contemporary replacement for an original. I don't have knowledge of its location, sorry!

Back to the other reward. The same orders of August 7, 1782 paragraphs 1 and 2 state: "Honorary badges of distinction are to be conferred on the veteran non-commissioned officers and soldiers of the army who have served more than three years with bravery, fidelity and good conduct; for this purpose a narrow piece of white cloth, of an angular form, is to be fixed to the left arm on the uniform coat.

"Non-commissioned officers and soldiers who have served with equal distinction more than six years, are to be distinguished by two pieces of cloth, set on parallel to each other, in a similar form."

The color of the stripes was modified in the Orders of August 11, 1782 so they would match the facings of the uniform coat. Other distinction details were made at that time for continuous service, and loss of privileges for cases of misconduct. (An example can be seen on the coat of the Sergeant of the Commander In Chief's Guard, which is portraying the time period involved.)

Therefore, service stripes are just as old an honor as is the Purple Heart...and they might be considered older if you're a "stitch-counter" since they were mentioned in the first paragraphs of the General Orders of August 7, 1782, while the Reward Of Merit didn't show up until the fourth paragraph! The important point is both date back to the last encampment of the Continental Army at Newburgh, N.Y.

*Y<sup>r</sup> Obed<sup>t</sup> Serv<sup>t</sup>*

*Pvt. Frank Wicker*

*CNCG*

#### Notes

- 1 Boynton, p 34-35
- 2 Godfrey, p. 81-82
- 3 Boynton, p. 81-82
- 4 Boynton, p. 86-87
- 5 Neumann & Kravic, p. 98
- 6 Boynton, p. 34
- 7 Godfrey, p.81-82
- 8 Boynton p. 35-36

### Bibliography

Boynton, Maj. Edward C.; "General Orders of George Washington, Commander-in-Chief of the Army of Revolution, issued at Newburgh on the Hudson, 1782-1783; 1973, Harrison NY, Harbor Hill Books.

Godfrey, Carlos E., M.D.; "The Commander-In-Chief's Guard, Revolutionary War"; 1972

, Baltimore, Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc.; ISBN 0-8063-0518-5.

Neumann, George C. & Kravic, Frank J.; "Collector's Illustrated Encyclopedia of the American Revolution"; 1977, Secaucus New Jersey, Castle Books; ISBN 0-8117-

### Publication Schedule

You are all invited to contribute to the Courier! Articles are always welcome, but anything you would like to share, from photos to recipes to short anecdotes, helps to fill the Courier with real voices of the NWTA. Please use the publication schedule below to contribute time-sensitive pieces. I will publish other pieces on a rolling basis. Thanks to all who have and will contribute!

Issue	Deadline for Submissions
Jan/Feb	December 31
March/April	February 28
May/June	April 30
July/August	June 30
Sept/Oct	August 30
Nov/Dec	October 31

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**F I N A L   E D I T — A   N O T E   F R O M   Y O U R   C O M M A N D E R**

I hope this 2nd new issue (thanks Rowenna) of the NWTa Courier finds everyone well, having enjoyed a wonderful holiday season (of course my snowblower quit right in the middle of the first snowstorm). We are all looking forward to a new reenacting season for 2008. First event will be Klash on the Kankakee on May 3 and 4 2008. What a good place to warm up your skills for the rest of the season.

I regret to inform everyone that recently our Treasurer Rob Hanke, has turned in his resignation due to time restraints and personal reasons. We should all be grateful for the fact that Rob stepped forward to take over a rather difficult position, and thank him for his time served. I will be accepting his resignation and would like to inform you that Andrea Studz-

inski has agreed to take over the position of treasurer, pending approval of the board.

On some other news, I have recently been in contact with the Commander of the North West Division of the BAR---Robert Cairns, and we had a very pleasant conversation. His organization has extended an invitation to the NWTa to attend an event they are having at Fort St. Joseph, in Niles Michigan on July 26 and 27 of 2008, he is wanting to make this a joint event with NWD BAR and the NWTa. It is my personal recommendation that we try to attend this event, as it will only further the enrichment of our hobby within these two august units.

I have also extended an invitation to the NWD BAR to attend our Grand Encampment in 2009 in Bourbonnais. I hope to have further conversations with Mr. Cairns in the near

future, and hope to meet him in Cleveland, Ohio at a later date.

The NWTa will be having its spring board meeting on March 1st 2008 at Chela's Restaurant in Highland, Indiana. Contact your company commander if you would like to attend and come and see your board in action.

On April 5 and 6 2008 the NWTa Sewing Seminar will be at the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois.

I would like to conclude by saying that is an honor to be allowed to be the NWTa Commander for 2008/2009 and know that I and the NWTa Board will do our best for you and the organization.

See you all in May at our first formation,

Your Humble Servant,  
Bart T. Durbin NWTa Commander