

interpreter

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The Siege of Yorktown

As the 200th anniversary of the victory at Yorktown nears, it is appropriate to review the events of that historic autumn. The siege began on September 28, 1781. Early in the morning, the allied army, some 16,000 French and American soldiers and militiamen, left Williamsburg on the fifteen-mile march to Yorktown where Lord Cornwallis's 9,000 soldiers and sailors waited. By 1781 siege warfare had long been a science and each side knew well what was about to happen. Allied engineers had already planned the course of the siege even as the troops pitched camp that evening. The first order of business the next day, and for several days thereafter, was the construction of gabions (large wicker baskets) and fascines (bundles of saplings) needed to establish the first siege line.

As the allied soldiers moved into their initial positions, it was obvious to the British that they were in an untenable situation. Although the ravines of Yorktown creek offered some protection to the British right flank, and while three redoubts they placed well to the south and east were strongly held, Yorktown could not withstand a long land siege. Until the defeat of the British navy in the Battle of the Capes on September 5, Cornwallis never expected that he would have to defend Yorktown. Perhaps the realization that this was not possible explains why, under the cover of darkness on the night of September 29, Cornwallis abandoned his strong outer defenses and pulled all his troops back into Yorktown. This move mystified the allies. On the morning of the 30th, Washington moved into these positions without what all agreed should have been a protracted and costly fight.

The allies busied themselves getting ready throughout the early days of October. They expected the British to conduct several sorties aimed at disrupting their preparations, but, although the British occasionally fired at them, Cornwallis declined to take such action. By October 6, after all the heavy cannon had been dragged into the allied camp, it was

time to begin the actual digging. On the night of October 6, under the protective cover of rain, 1,500 soldiers opened a trench 2,000 yards long some 600 yards in front of the British position. By October 9 the French and American artillery batteries were completed and that afternoon began shelling Yorktown. The preparations over, the siege of Yorktown moved into its second phase.

Siege warfare is an orderly business, guided by a simple principle. The siege lines, with their destructive cannon fire, were to be moved ever closer to the enemy until their works could be breached and their camp taken by storm. Following this rule, the allies opened a second line within 300 yards of the British on October 11. When two British redoubts protecting their left flank were overrun on the night of October 14, the line was completed. It took only a day for the allies to advance their cannon.

Each day more allied cannon were added to the bombardment until at the end over 80 siege cannon and 50 field pieces were firing an average 1,500 shells a day on the British. Throughout the siege, Cornwallis was reluctant to play his part. A besieged force was expected to defend itself with frequent sorties against the attacker's guns. However, the British hid behind their works. The completion of the second siege line finally moved Cornwallis to act. On the morning of October 16 a sortie was launched at the middle of the allied line, but despite spiking eleven guns it had little lasting effect. That night Cornwallis's desperate attempt to break out across the York River was ended by a sudden storm. He was left with no alternative but surrender.

Negotiations on the terms of capitulation, begun on the morning of October 17, dragged on until the morning of the 19th. In the end the terms accepted were essentially those Washington had first proposed. At 11:00 A.M. on October 19, Cornwallis duly signed the Articles of Capitulation. At 2:00 P.M. the

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Siege, continued

British army, led by General O'Hara in place of an indisposed Cornwallis, marched out of Yorktown with colors and flags cased and their bands playing melancholy airs, one of which may have been the tune of "The World Turned Upside Down." Because O'Hara was Cornwallis's second in command, Washington had his second in command, General Benjamin Lincoln, deal with him. The rest of the British troops grounded their arms in a field two miles from town. The siege was over.

Many little things helped contribute to the allied victory. The rivalry between Cornwallis and his commander, Sir Henry Clinton, explains why Cornwallis marched into Virginia in the first place, and it also accounts for Clinton's indecisiveness about what to do with Cornwallis once he was there. That the English admiral Rodney was unable to intercept Admiral de Grasse as he left the Caribbean allowed the French to blockade the Chesapeake Bay. The first British relief fleet failed to dislodge de Grasse in the Battle of the Capes because of misunderstood signal flags. When Clinton finally decided to launch a second desperate relief effort, it arrived five days after Cornwallis had surrendered. That Cornwallis patiently waited for the entire allied army to assemble around him rather than attempting an escape up the York River baffled his own officers as well as later historians. Yet when all is said and done, it is not surprising that the allies won. Once begun, the siege could end only one way. What is remarkable is that the siege occurred at all.

In early July 1781 Comte de Rochambeau, the French commander, notified de Grasse that the summer campaign would either be a siege of New York City or a move against Cornwallis in Virginia. De Grasse correctly read Rochambeau's reluctance to attack New York, the operation Washington favored, and decided to sail his fleet to the Chesapeake. Although de Grasse's orders called for support of an allied land effort, he boldly went beyond mere compliance when he left the French West Indies completely unprotected and sailed his entire fleet north. Word reached Washington on August 14 of de Grasse's objective. Washington quickly abandoned his attack on New York and five days later put the combined allied army in motion southward. Moving slowly at first to deceive Clinton, he quickened the pace after August 25. To abandon one theater of operation to take up a new one 400 miles distant was not an easy feat

for an eighteenth-century army. Coordinating that movement with the actions of a navy only increased the chances of failure. When Washington, racing ahead of the army, arrived in Williamsburg on September 14 and heard that the French fleet still held the Bay, he knew failure had been avoided. The siege of Yorktown and its victorious outcome was the result of international and interservice cooperation rare for the eighteenth century.

—Kevin Kelly

Occurrences

Colonial Williamsburg will play a major role in the celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Yorktown this October. As John Moon indicates elsewhere, Williamsburg served as headquarters and base of operations for the French and American armies on the eve of the climactic siege. Some of the activities associated with those occurrences will be demonstrated prior to the major celebration, which will take place at Yorktown October 19.

On Columbus Day, October 12, there will be a program depicting the establishment of the headquarters of Generals Rochambeau and Washington in the Historic Area. Wednesday, October 14, will see the arrival and encampment of several colonial military units and the various drills and ceremonies that would accompany an eighteenth-century encampment at a number of locations in the town. The following day, October 15, the military units will break camp and, led by the Colonial Williamsburg Fife and Drum Corps and including members of the State Garrison Regiment, will march down the Colonial Parkway to Yorktown. After that the spotlight focuses on the happenings at Yorktown, but the events at Williamsburg will doubtless prove a rousing curtain raiser for the celebration of the bicentennial of victory at Yorktown.

You will want to mark the first weekend in November on your calendars, too. That's when "Publick Times and Fair" will take place. It's November 6-8 for the busy buying and selling, boisterous competitions, and lively entertainments of a colonial fair. Several evening programs will enliven the nighttime hours of this weekend.

Military Encampments

John Moon, Director of the Company of Colonial Performers, tells us something of military camp life in the eighteenth century.

To quote from *An Universal Military Dictionary* by Captain George Smith, which was published in 1779:

"Camp, in military affairs, is the whole extent of ground, in general, occupied by an army pitching its tents when in the field, and upon which all its baggage and apparatus are lodged. The extent of the front of a regiment of infantry is 200 yards, including the two battalion guns, and depth 320 [yards] when the regiment contains 9 companies.

"The nature of the ground must also be consulted, both for defence against the enemy, and supplies for the army. It should have a communication with their own garrisons, and have plenty of water, forage and fuel.

"An army always encamps fronting the enemy, and generally in two parallel lines, besides a corps de reserve, about 500 yards distant from each other, the horse and dragoons on the wings, and the foot in the centre."

The linear tactics of the eighteenth century dictated the strict requirements for *castramentation*, the laying out of a military encampment. Its importance can be better appreciated when considering the hazards of arriving in a newly established camp under cover of darkness, and of being required to find one's way without benefit of lanterns. Each military encampment was laid out in exactly the same way in order to facilitate uniformity and familiarity.

Soldiers' tents were arranged in company lines, and officers' quarters were removed from the troops' tents. Fire pits and latrines were placed at acceptable distances from sleeping areas and executive officers' quarters and *bells of arms* (cone-shaped tents in which company weapons were lodged) were strategically sited to serve better any emergency situation that might arise.

Life in camp was neither romantic nor necessarily healthful. One quickly learned not to touch the tent canvas during a rainfall, otherwise the porous material would establish a leak that might produce disaster. Six infantrymen to one tent gave little privacy or camaraderie. Rude awakenings were common (the definitive term being rude). Whether in camp or garrison, the regulatory sounds of the field musick were all-pervasive and ever-present.

The role of the military drummer in the eighteenth century was three-fold: to beat the various duty calls and signals that regulated the functions of the army, to ensure that troops maintained the proper cadence and length of step whilst on the march, and to provide informal dance and folk music to enhance esprit-de-corps. These three vital responsibilities can be readily translated into modern terminology as communications, time and motion, and entertainment.

At least four times daily, all the company field musicians would be massed together to form a corps in order to "beat" various ceremonies. They beat *Reveille* at sunup to wake all troops and to begin the working day. *Assembly* was sounded at midmorning so that all troops would assemble to be read the orders of the day. *Retreat*, usually at sundown, denoted the end of the working day, and *Tattoo* was beaten at night to call all troops to camp or garrison.

The responsibilities for laying out encampments rested with the regimental quartermasters, along with a work party of "pioneers," who staked out boundaries, measured areas of responsibility, and dug out fire and trash pits and latrines. The Quartermaster also found food and forage, water, firewood, and other day-to-day supplies. When these commodities were to be issued to troops, the duty fife and drummer would be detailed to sound the appropriate call.

As we approach the prelude to Yorktown and the bicentennial of the siege, it is prudent to remember that Williamsburg became a marshaling area of camps and garrisons, and these activities had great impact upon a town of this size. Commissary agents were contracted by regimental quartermasters for the acquisition of rations, ammunition, and clothing, and the agents in town scoured the countryside to gather all the supplies necessary to maintain an army on the move.

Period documents indicate that during the build-up to the march to Yorktown there were intensive military activities on Market Square, at the Magazine, at the Palace, on Capitol Exchange, behind Christiana Campbell's Tavern, and on the grounds of the college. Many of the Foundation's employees will become involved in emulating these activities this coming October, which will culminate in a march from Market Square to the Yorktown battlefield. The Senior Corps has

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Museums in Motion

by Edward P. Alexander

A book review by Edmund R. Smith II

Dr. Edward Alexander's *Museums in Motion* is commendable reading for a very important reason: it puts emphasis on professionalism in our jobs as interpreters. Interpreters have a great responsibility that they confront daily. The visitor's personal interpretation of history, technology, the arts, and other aspects of a complex museum hinge on the *interpretation* of the community, the time period, and the people and artifacts that once filled it.

Museums in Motion, with a thorough examination of museum types, functions (collection, preservation, interpretation, etc.), and an assay of the various definitions of museums serves as a professional handbook and textbook. The book suffers periodically from the great amount of factual information presented creating a rather dry texture, but like many good textbooks, it can be used as a reference for information on selected topics.

In format, content, and writing style, the book may further serve as an example of effective communication. This is an additional skill to be learned and used by an effective interpreter.

Another important aspect of Dr. Alexander's work is his treatment of various types of museums such as art, science and technology, natural history, and botanical museums. A careful reading of his chapters on these representative museums can give interpreters in a large, complex museum, such as Colonial Williamsburg, a clearer picture of the opportunities its facilities create.

The book also deals with the functions of museum support facilities such as research, conservation, and, to a lesser extent, museum administration. These pages create a greater empathy for a museum's departmental divisions.

Sprinkled throughout the book is a system of museum ethics, a loose-knit fabric of principles with which to fulfill professional responsibilities, and the last pages are devoted to descriptions of professional museum organizations.

A thoughtful reading of Dr. Alexander's *Museums in Motion* can only serve to improve the quality of our museum.

Encampments, *continued*

accepted the challenge to lead the marchers the entire 15.2 miles playing every step of the way, and training is now underway to improve feet and lungs.

The King's English

The following words related to John Moon's and Kevin Kelly's articles have specific military definitions:

Carbine—a type of fire-arm, shorter than the musket, used by mounted soldiers.

Commissary—an officer or official who has charge of the supply of food, stores, and transport.

Foot—foot-soldiers; infantry.

Horse—a horse and its rider, a cavalry soldier.

There were three weights of cavalry:

Dragoon—a mounted infantryman armed with a carbine. The horses were large and carried more equipment; the riders were larger men. Dragoons had a long-range tactical capability.

Hussar—a lighter weight rider on a medium horse. The horses carried less equipment and were faster. Hussars were often used as messengers.

Lancer—a lightweight cavalryman armed with a lance, on a lighter, faster horse. Lancer's mobility was used to break up lines of infantry in battle.

Fascines—long cylindrical bundles of brush-wood firmly bound together for use in filling up ditches and in constructing artillery batteries and other earthworks.

Gabions—large wicker baskets of cylindrical form, usually open at both ends, to be filled with earth and incorporated in earthen fortifications.

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