

WASHINGTON'S MILITIA UNIT TACTICS AT TRENTON & PRINCETON

By Jon Sinatra



PENNSYLVANIA ASSOCIATORS & MILITIA

The discipline of the Continental Army's new Pennsylvania militia units during the campaigns of 1776, was certainly not to General Washington's desired European standard. They were not drilled to strict obedience when formed into units, the Associators and militiamen favored fighting in loose formations and were led by officers elected by the men. These officers were generally elected because of their social status in the community or because of their particular war fighting skills they had demonstrated in engagements with the Indians over the years. These men were still involved in frequent fights on the frontier and were essentially professional Indian fighters. Their weapons were not developed for formation fighting. In general, they appeared for battle armed with rifles, not the smoothbore musket/bayonet combination of the Continentals and the British. These rifles were hunting weapons, developed for dropping deer and turkey at 300 yards. While very accurate and perfect for sniping, they were inadequate for volley exchanges. Slow loading and bayonet less, the rifle was no more than a club in hand-to-hand combat. Although the British feared the rifles for their accuracy at long range, they soon learned to close the distance with quick rushes and volleys and finish with a bayonet charge that would inevitably break the militia formations in panic. The Associators came from the forests where their individualism, independence, and self-reliance kept them alive on a daily basis. No amount of talk or drill was going to convince them to stand and exchange volleys with Redcoats at 50 yards. They saw Braddock defeated when he fought that way, and to them there was no honor to be gained by fighting in a fashion they all considered crazy.

CAMPAIGNS OF 1776

Being once again driven from the battlefield, in November of 1776, George Washington led his army out of New York after a demoralizing defeat at Fort Mifflin. There was no silver lining to this loss for General Washington. He had been outfought and out-generaled, and the morale of both the army and the people was at ebb and the American cause in great jeopardy of failure. Washington announced to Congress, the first of December, his contemplated retreat across the Delaware, and asked that the Pennsylvania militia be ordered toward Trenton.

DECEMBER 1776

The boats were collected on the west side of the river. About the same time, Washington sent forward Colonel Hampton to collect all the boats and other craft along the Delaware, and General Putnam was ordered to construct rafts of the lumber at Trenton landing, while another party was sent up the river to collect all the boards and scantling on or near the river banks. The arms of non-associators were collected to prevent them from being used against the Americans. The militia were ordered to reinforce Washington, and their numbers were quickly growing in force. The battle was now on the Pennsylvania border, and militia units and Associators from Pennsylvania showed up to fight. Thomas Mifflin, later the Governor of Pennsylvania, was one of the Pennsylvania commanders. He wrote to Washington that, "Pennsylvania is at length roused and coming forward to your Excellency's aid." Mifflin commanded nearly 1,500 men from numerous militia regiments and companies. At the same time Colonel John Cadwalader, commander of Pennsylvania's Philadelphia Associators, led 1,200 Associators from the Philadelphia area to join Washington, and Brigadier General James Ewing, a Pennsylvania Associator veteran of the Braddock expedition at Fort Duquesne and under the command of then Colonel George Washington, brought in a third Pennsylvania militia brigade of 800 men.

Washington, with the main body of the army reached Trenton the 3rd of December, and the heavy stores and baggage were immediately removed to the Pennsylvania side. He crossed over with the rear guard on Sunday morning the 8th, and took quarters at the home of a Mrs. Berkley, about a mile from the river, while the troops were stationed opposite the crossings. The enemy came marching down the river about eleven o'clock the same morning expecting to cross, but were much disappointed when they found the boats had been removed to the west bank. They made demonstrations to cross above and below, including

a night march to Coryell's ferry, but their attempts failed. The hostile armies now lay facing each other across the Delaware, and the cause of Independence was saved.

Washington's next care was to guard the fords and crossings of the river to prevent the passage of the enemy. On the morning of December 9th he sent four brigades of various Continental and militia up the river. Washington assigned the ferry crossing at Trenton and Yardley Ferries to Ewing and his 800 Pennsylvania militia. His instructions were clear, "Guard the river and collect intelligence. Spare no pains, nor cost to gain information of the enemy's movements, and designs." Their mission was to seize and hold the bridge across Assunpink Creek and block the only exit from the town to the southeast. Ewing and other independent militia commanders executed small operations on priority targets inside their own areas of operations, almost at will, Ewing raided Trenton each night, gaining knowledge of the Hessian garrison's defense and then faded away into the countryside. Washington ordered Colonel Cadwalader, with his 1,200 Philadelphia Associators and 600 New England regulars to cross the river 12 miles below Trenton at Bristol. His mission was to occupy the attention of the Hessians in Trenton and larger British reinforcing forces to the south. Washington ordered. "If you can do nothing real, at least create as great a diversion as possible." Each detachment was supplied with artillery. The general instructions to the troops were, if driven from their positions to retreat to the strong ground near Germantown.

While the enemy, in their comfortable quarters on the east bank of the Delaware, was waiting for the river to freeze that they might cross over, the colonials were shivering on the west bank. Some of the troops were actually in a suffering condition. Major Ennion Williams, of the First Pennsylvania Rifles, stationed at Thompson's mill in Solebury, wrote on the 13th that his men were barefooted.

General Sullivan, with Lee's division in a destitute condition, joined Washington on the 20th of December, and the same day General Gates came in with the remnant of four New England regiments, five hundred strong, which raised the strength of the army to about six thousand men, although a large portion of them was unfit for service. During the month, the Reverend John Rosbrugh of Northampton County, PA, raised a battalion, and marched at its head to join the Continental army. He requested to have a military man placed in command, as he wished to act as chaplain. A few days after the battle of Trenton he was surprised by the enemy at a house near Pennington, and cruelly murdered. The headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief and his most trusted lieutenants

were at farm houses in the vicinity of their troops, where they could be in easy communication with each other. Washington occupied the dwelling of William Keith. A two story, pointed stone house, twenty-four by twenty-eight feet, and built by Keith in 1763. The pine door, in two folds, set in a solid oaken frame, was garnished with a wooden lock fourteen by eight inches which locked out intruders when Washington occupied the house. Green occupied the first floor of Robert Merrick's twenty feet square, stone dwelling a few hundred yards away across the fields and meadows. The general caused the walls of the room he occupied to be tastefully painted, with a picture of the rising sun over the fireplace. Sullivan was at Hayhurst's and Hamilton at Dr. Chapman's, over the Jericho hill to the north. Lieutenant James Monroe of the artillery, afterward President of the United States, and Dr. Ryker were at William Neeley's in Solebury. The main body of the army was encamped in sheltered places along or near the streams, not far from the river. No doubt this position for headquarters was selected with an object: its sheltered situation, nearness to the river, and its proximity to Jericho hill, from the top of which signals could be seen a long way up and down the river when the trees were bare of leaves. Here Washington was near the upper fords of the Delaware, at which it was supposed the enemy would attempt to cross, and within a half hour's ride of the depot at Newton. At what time Washington first conceived the plan of re-crossing the river to attack the Hessians is not known. All the preparations were quietly made; the troops were selected and put in readiness, and a few days before Christmas, boats were collected at Knowles' cove. Bancroft says that Washington wrote the watchword, "Victory or death," on the 23rd, and he writes to Colonel Reed about that time, "Christmas day, at night, one hour before day, is the time fixed upon for our attack on Trenton. The troops selected were those of New England, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, and among the officers chosen to accompany him were Greene, Mercer, Stirling, Stephen, Sullivan, Knox, Hand, Monroe, and Hamilton, all trusted leaders. General Cadwalader was to co-operate below Bristol, by crossing and attacking the enemy's post at Mount Holly. The men were provided with three days' cooked rations, and forty rounds of ammunition. Six days before, the first number of Paine's "American Crisis" was read to every regiment in Washington's army, which greatly aroused the spirits of the troops.

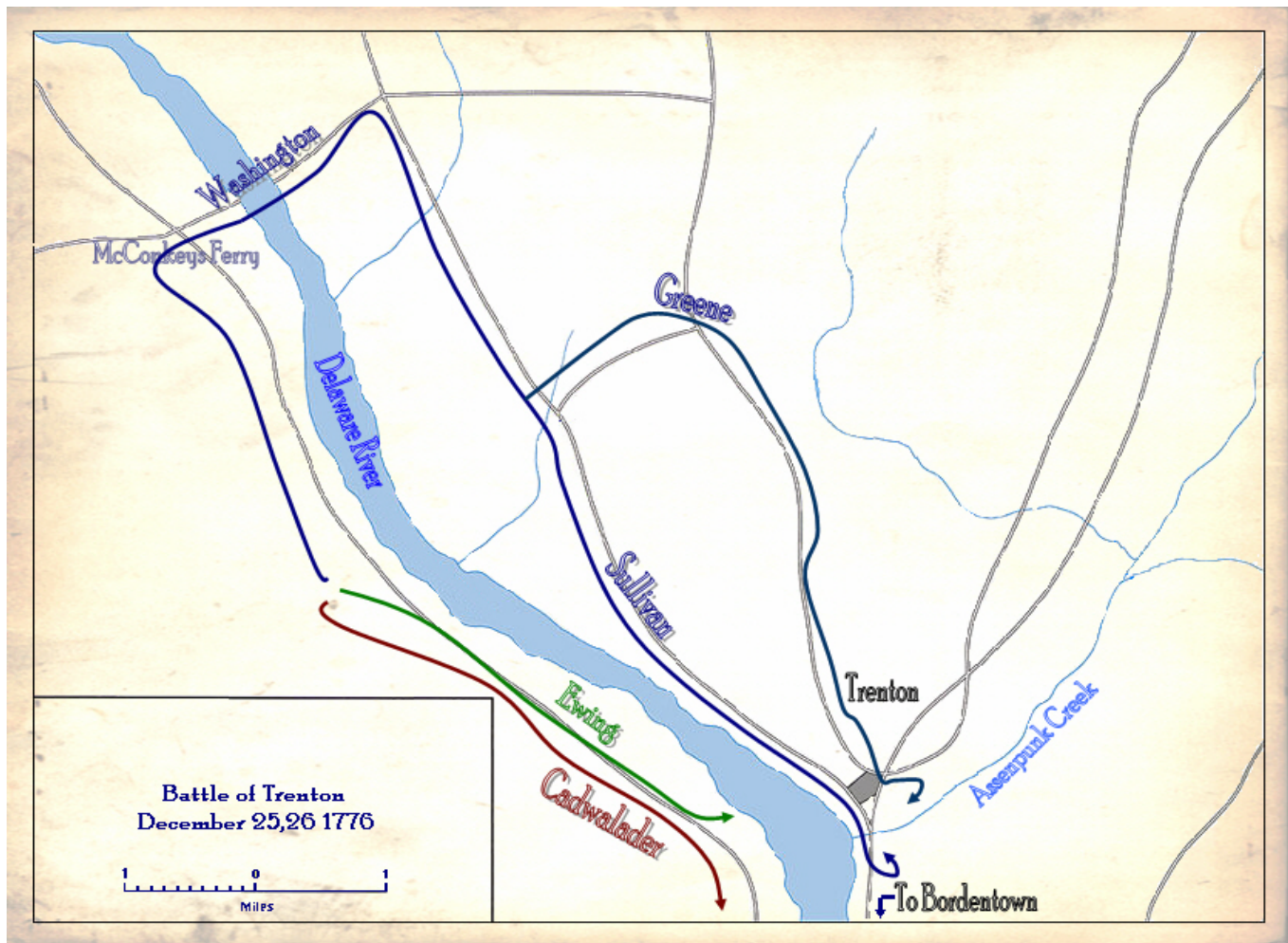
Washington rode over to Merrick's, and took supper with Greene, the evening of December 24th, and no doubt Knox, Stirling, and Sullivan were there. The Merrick family was sent across the fields to spend the night at a neighbors, so there would be no listeners to the council of war that destroyed British empire in America.

CROSSING, DECEMBER 25, 1776

Washington's mission assignments for this fight were good ones. He had by now a good understanding of the capability of the militia. If these missions were carried out properly they would be useful in diverting the focus of the Hessians in Trenton and would certainly assist in diverting any counterattack forces dispatched toward Trenton.

Very few of the Pennsylvania militia actually made it across the Delaware. At Trenton Falls, Ewing's men could not cross because of an ice jam at the falls. Washington later wrote of Ewing's attempted crossing "the quantity of ice was so great, that tho' he did everything in his power to effect it, he could not get over." For Cadwalader, the problem was ice piled on the far shore of the river that prevented unloading of the boats. From Bristol, 26 December, Cadwalader wrote to General Washington "The river was so full of ice that it was impossible to pass above Bristol, where I intended, and there fore concluded to make an attempt at Dunk's Ferry." Because the missions were not "single points of failure" they had no impact on the success of the operation. Had Ewing been successful in his crossing and blocked the bridges at Assunpink Creek the battle may possibly have had a completely different outcome. Washington's forces were slow crossing in the north and were even slower moving south to attack Trenton, and the actual attack on Trenton was initiated several hours behind schedule. The Hessians would certainly have discovered a successful crossing by Ewing and Washington's surprise attack would have been compromised. The Hessians would have been on full alert by the time Washington initiated his attack.

Washington crossed the river with his main force about 10 miles upstream from Trenton. Elisha Bostwick, a Continental soldier crossing with Washington's troops recounts the crossing in his diary, "Our whole army was then set in motion and toward evening began to cross the Delaware but by obstructions of ice in the river did not all get across till quite late in the evening, and all the time a constant fall of snow with some rain, and finally our march began with the torches of our field pieces stuck in the, exalters. [They] sparkled and blazed in the storm all night and about daylight a halt was made at which time his Excellency (General Washington) and aids came near to the front on the side of the path where soldiers stood. I heard his Excellency as he was coming on speaking to and encouraging the soldiers. The words he spoke as he passed by where I stood and in my hearing were these: "soldiers, keep by your officers, for God's sake, keep by your officers!" Spoke in a deep solemn voice.



Trenton was a significant loss for the British Army. Two thousand four hundred colonials fought 1,500 Hessians in a two hour battle that had lasting effects and an impact far beyond the scale of the battle. The surprise engagement cost the Hessians 918 men - 22 killed, 83 wounded and 896 captured. Colonial casualties were almost nonexistent. Two soldiers froze to death along the line of march and four were wounded in the engagement. This relatively small event had incredible importance on the world stage and pumped new vigor into the men who fought for Washington and the leaders who led them.

TRENTON, JANUARY 2, 1777

On January 2, 1777, there was a second battle of Trenton. This fight would require Washington's militia to hold a defensive line against a deliberate British attack. Washington's understanding of the militiaman's inability to stand toe-to-toe with the British regular is apparent in his task assignment and positioning of militia units to repel the assault.

Following the defeat of the Hessians, General Cornwallis joined Howe at Princeton and from here was ordered by Howe to find the rebel army and destroy

it. Cornwallis quickly led 8,000 men out of Princeton. Small units of colonial riflemen delayed and harassed the British forces moving on a single route toward Trenton. Simultaneously, Washington spent his time positioning his fighting elements in Trenton expecting a full scale British assault. As the British and Hessians moved into Trenton from the north, the colonial regulars fought a delaying action through the streets of Trenton and finally crossed over Assunpink Creek and occupied the high ground south of the creek facing Cornwallis's advancing force.

Washington's plan for positioning of forces as they crossed the bridge demonstrated a unique method of handling the unpredictable militia forces while still getting the benefit of the combat power they offered. He used the Continental line regulars to guard the bridge and the two key fords. Washington then interspersed militia units between the regulars. The Virginia regulars, reinforced with numerous artillery pieces, were assigned the bridge crossing. To their left Washington posted Ewing's Pennsylvania militia, on the right he posted the New Jersey militia under Newcomb. Cadwalader's Philadelphia Associators were on the right of the line posted on the main road to prevent a flank attack from surprising the line of battle. As the British used repeated frontal attacks on the crossing points, Washington ordered Cadwalader's Associators, who were as yet unengaged, to reinforce the main line of battle near the bridge. In making this reallocation of forces, Washington expected that the Associators would stand against the British if they were paired with a strong Continental unit. He still realized they could not be assigned this type of task alone as they lacked the discipline to hold in the face of a British assault.

While this second battle of Trenton was less spectacular, it was no less revealing in looking at Washington's understanding of his militia. Interspersing the militia units amongst the regulars was certainly not doctrine of the time. Washington broke up the Pennsylvania militia into smaller elements, and by doing so he allowed the steadiness of the regulars in the face of a determined attack to help "prop" up the spirits of the militia and keep them from breaking and running.

This second battle of Trenton also ended on favorable terms for the colonials. The British lost an estimated 365 men. The colonial losses were to be around 50. Cornwallis led this British attack personally, which also increased the political and morale impact of the loss.

PRINCETON, JANUARY 3, 1777

The battle of Princeton, was the final engagement of the short colonial

offensive that closed the 1776 campaign. After the British attempts to force a crossing at Assunpink Creek on the evening of 2 January, General Washington held a council of war. His scouts determined that Cornwallis was moving some of his forces to the east and concentrating them in a wooded area with the intent of flanking the colonial right the following morning. A mounted reconnaissance had also determined that the road network was clear to Princeton and Brunswick, the British rear. The council agreed on a plan for a nighttime withdrawal from current positions and a night march to Princeton with the intent of striking the British forces remaining there.

As the force neared Princeton, Washington stopped the column and reorganized his forces for the attack. After crossing Stony Brook Bridge, Washington split his force into two columns for the final advance on Princeton. Each of the columns had Continental troops in the lead and rear with militia units in the center. This deliberate re-positioning of militia units again illustrates Washington's realization that propping up militia units by surrounding them with Regulars was a good technique.

Nathaniel Greene commanded the left column and was intended to be the supporting attack. His force included Cadwalader's 1200 Philadelphia Associator's. One of Greene's primary missions was to destroy the bridge at Worth's Mill, to the west of Princeton. Destruction of the bridge would prevent British reinforcements from returning to Princeton from Trenton and, at the same time, seal the remaining British forces in Princeton and prevent any attempts they might make to link-up with Cornwallis' forces in Trenton. The remaining elements of Greene's force were to attack Princeton from the southwest using Princeton road as their approach route.

General John Sullivan commanded the other column of the force with General Washington in accompaniment. This force was the main effort for the attack and included Pennsylvania militia units integrated with the Pennsylvania Brigade of Continentals commanded by Thomas Mifflin.

While Washington closed his force on Princeton, the British there were already moving out to join Cornwallis in Trenton. Cornwallis had previously ordered Colonel Mahood, the British commander at Princeton, to move his brigade to reinforce Trenton. As Greene's column moved northwest along the creek towards Worth's Mill, it encountered British forces already forming in line of battle. The British had seen them first and had already begun forming in line. Greene ordered his lead element of regulars to attack the British, and the British broke their attack. As the Associators moved forward, the lead regiment of Continentals was fleeing. The sight of the Continental Regulars in flight caused

the Associators to break and run as well.

Several of the leaders of the Associators rallied their men and began reforming the fleeing militiamen. As Washington watched the initial engagement from Sullivan's position he immediately diverted elements from Sullivan's force to reinforce Greene. Washington arrived at the fight with elements of Sullivan's column, joined the Associators, and personally led them in assault, driving the British back to Princeton where they were defeated.

As word of the American's victories spread through Europe, even Frederick the Great commented that the Christmas campaign was "the most brilliant of any recorded in the annals of military achievement."

POST BATTLE

All combat units are not equal, and Washington, during this campaign, knew it. As a strategic leader his mission was to capitalize on the strengths of each available unit by assigning it appropriate missions, while at the same time minimizing the risk to the unit.

By looking at Washington's deployment of the militia at Trenton and Princeton, we see that Washington was developing techniques that maximized the effectiveness of the Pennsylvania militia. These techniques used by George Washington in this short campaign to handle the militia served him well throughout the rest of the American Revolutionary War.

Excerpts taken throughout from:

USAWC Strategy Research Project, 2005

History of Bucks County, PA

Elisha Bostwick Diary

George Washington's Letters, John Cadwalader's Letters

On August 21st, 1775, My 8th generation grandfather, Casper Metzger, signed his articles of association in Springfield Twp., Bucks County, Pennsylvania. In December of 1776, he answered General Washington's order for all Pennsylvania Associator's and militia to meet at the Delaware River. Casper Metzger, a member of the 2nd Company of Springfield Associators, joined up with Colonel John Cadwalader's Philadelphia Associators, in their march towards the Delaware River. Casper Metzger fought in the second battle of Trenton and participated in the battle of Princeton as well as the destruction of Worth's Mill. Below, Casper Metzger's name, along with my grandfather Henry Hauser, and uncle's Casper Hauser, and Christopher Keller, resides in the Hamilton Church Cemetery in Northampton County, PA.

Sons of the American Revolution
Pennsylvania Archives - Vol. VIII

REVOLUTIONARY WAR
SOLDIERS

HERE BURIED

MELCHOIR BOSSARD

J. PETER CONRAD

J. PHILIP FETTERMAN

CASPER HAUSER

HENRY HAUSER

CHRISTOPHER KELLER

ANTHONY KINTZ

CASPER METZGAR