

Revolutionary Citizen-Soldier

BY MEMBER ROBERT A. MAYERS



American soldiers capture a British redoubt during the Battle of Yorktown, 1781.

In 1775, the first year of the American Revolution, John Allison—an eager, patriotic 21-year-old New York farmer—joined the Continental Army. What is amazing is that his service spanned the entire eight years of the war. He was present at many of the most critical and pivotal events of the conflict, and often in the presence of Gen. George Washington. Allison marched in the ranks with Marquis de Lafayette, was drilled by Baron Von Steuben and Benedict Arnold, and fought Alexander Hamilton in the

Battle of Yorktown.

Using letters, muster rolls, orderly books, service records, and oral family history, I was able to reconstruct the remarkable wartime experiences and campaign life of this average soldier of the American Revolution.

Despite the lack of training, equipment, and clothing, John Allison and his company of new recruits found themselves marching towards Quebec in the winter of 1775-76 as part of the unsuccessful American invasion of Canada.

At the tragic American defeat in the fall of 1777 at Fort Montgomery, N.Y. Allison was part of a company of 30 men who were sent on a reconnaissance patrol to determine the movements of the British invasion as it moved up the Hudson River. The patriots met up with a column of 2,000 British soldiers. Despite being vastly outnumbered, they opened fire on the British and held fast against a barrage of return musket fire, ruining the surprise attack.

Allison was on the Sullivan-Clinton campaign to fight the Iroquois Nations who were devastating the American frontier in 1779; the campaign was the largest expedition ever before mounted against Indians of North America. He spent the next winter at Jockey Hollow in Morristown, N.J. It was the harshest of the Revolution, 23 snowstorms and high mortality rates among the soldiers. While there he took the unique step of writing Gen. Washington directly about the terms of his enlistment. (I discovered the original copy of this appeal letter in the archives of the New York Public Library.)

Allison was a mere 100 yards away from redoubt No. 10 at the Battle of Yorktown on the night of Oct. 14, 1781; the fall of the British defense was the turning point of the siege. The next day he witnessed the surrender of Cornwallis and the defeat of the most powerful army of the age.

During his eight-year military career, Allison survived numerous skirmishes and battles across the colonies, was promoted to the rank of corporal, and in 1783 returned home a local hero. I am honored to be his descendant.

Member ROBERT A. MAYERS is from Watchung, N.J.