

PHILLIP KEES AND THE FATHER OF AMERICA

by Dale Barnhart

George Washington has been known as the Father of our Country, but if it were not for Phillip Kees, there may have never been a United States of America. We would probably still be part of the British Empire, and instead of Dollars, we would be earning Pounds and eating Bangers and Mash.

It all started in Holland sometime after 1770. There resided a cabinet maker who had a teenage son that became a little hard to handle by his father. I don't know the exact circumstances, but one story repeated for the past 100 years has been about the teenager hunting deer where he should not have been. His father broke the gun over a stump and his fathers punishment was more than the kid could put up with, so he ran away from home. Another story claimed that the father sent him away to be a cabinet makers apprentice. In any event, our Phillip found himself in the Principality of Hesse-Kassel, Germany in the early 1770's.

Landgrave Frederick II of Hesse-Kassel, Germany married Princess Mary, daughter of King George II of Great Britain. He ruled as an enlightened despot, and raised money by renting soldiers to Great Britain to help fight the American Revolutionary War. About 30,000 of these soldiers were sold into service. They were called Hessians, because 12,992 of the total 30,067 men came from Hesse-Kassel. The troops were not mercenaries in the modern sense of military professionals who voluntarily hire out their own services for money. As in most armies of the eighteenth century, the men were mainly conscripts, debtors, or the victims of impressment; some were also petty criminals. Pay was low; some soldiers received nothing but their daily food.

It was among this motley crew of Hessians that Phillip found himself. How he got there is a mystery, but whether he was kidnapped, in debt, or just unlucky, he was a Hollander thrown in with this bunch of Germans. Impressment was a favorite means of filling the regimental ranks. Strangers as well as citizens were in danger of being arrested, imprisoned, and sent off before their friends could learn of their jeopardy and no one was safe from the grip of the recruiting officer. As every conceivable method of escape was considered by conscripts, desertions were punished harshly, though as a rule not with death. The princes found that their private soldiers had too high a monetary value in European markets to be sacrificed by killing them too early.

In many German principalities the laws required the towns and villages in which soldiers escaped to supply substitutes from among the sons of their most prominent citizens and anyone aiding a fugitive was imprisoned at hard labor, flogged, and deprived of his civil rights. In spite of the severe penalties for deserters, escape was paramount to these recruits. In 1777 when a Margrave tried to forward some recruits to America he was forced to march the detachment without their guns to the point of embarkation. In spite of these precautions many escaped and several were shot while trying to get away.

Great precautions were considered necessary to prevent escape. It was the duty of an officer to room with his men and after undressing for the night, to deliver his weapons and the clothing of the entire party to the landlord or host. In the morning the men's clothing was not to be brought in until the officer was completely dressed and he had loaded and primed his pistols. While en route should a

recruit grow restive or show signs of insubordination, the instructions were to cut the buttons and straps from his trousers forcing him to hold them up in walking thus rendering flight impossible. Our Phillip did not escape, and endured the difficult journey to America. One can only imagine the hardships on-board one of those sailing vessels.

After arriving in America, Phillip joined in several successful battles against the Revolutionists. The Battle of Long Island, fought on August 27, 1776, was the first major battle in the American Revolutionary War following the United States Declaration of Independence, and the first battle in which an army of the United States engaged, having declared itself a nation only the month before. After defeating the British in the Siege of Boston on March 17, 1776, General George Washington Commander-in-Chief, brought the Continental Army to defend New York City. There he established defenses and waited for the British to attack. In July the British, under the command of General William Howe, landed a few miles across the harbor on Staten Island, where they were slowly reinforced by ships over the next month and a half, bringing their total force to 32,000 men. With the British fleet in control of the entrance to New York Harbor, Washington knew the difficulty in holding the city. On August 22, the British landed on the western end of Long Island. After five days of waiting, the British attacked American defenses. Unknown to the Americans, however, Howe had brought his main army around their rear and attacked their flank soon after. The Americans panicked, although a stand by 250 Maryland troops prevented most of the army from being captured. The British dug in for a siege but, on the night of August 29–30, Washington evacuated the entire army to Manhattan without the loss of material or a single life. Washington and the Continental Army were driven out of New York entirely after several more defeats and forced to retreat through New Jersey and into Pennsylvania.

The war was going badly for the Continental Army. Morale was extremely low for the soldiers. They missed their families, they were outnumbered, hungry, cold, and thought this idea of independence was perhaps a crackpot idea. Like most wars the US has been involved in, there were many local citizens who disagreed with the military. What was so wrong about being ruled by King George? Why send your best young workers off to war when they were needed at home to care for the livestock and the fields? Washington was seriously worried that after losing 3000 soldiers who had been captured on his retreat from New York, many of his remaining 2500 troops would just walk away and go home. There might not be enough soldiers to attack when the weather cleared in the Spring. If a lot of guys went home and told of the lack of hope, then recruiting would become impossible to rebuild the forces. Things looked pretty grim.

Meanwhile, with Washington and his men hunkered down for the winter on the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware River, and General Rahl encamped on the New Jersey side, nothing much was happening as cold weather set in. When Washington retreated across the river, he had instructed his men to commandeer every boat within 70 miles and take them to the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware. The Hessians under General Rahl had no boats to go after Washington, so Rahl began an emergency boat building campaign on the New Jersey side. He found among his Hessian soldiers a young cabinet maker by the name of Phillip Kees, and put him on the boat building crew.

Phillip wasn't very happy being the lone Hollander among the Hessian troops. He was particularly offended by the brutal treatment he witnessed against some of the local farming women and children. When General Rahl called all of his sentries in for a Christmas Day celebration, Phillip saw his chance. He waited a little longer as the troops got drunker and drunker, then headed to his boat works and quietly slipped one of his new boats into the river. He rowed to the other side where he was captured by the Continental Army sentries. He managed to convince them that he had important news for General Washington and was escorted to the Generals tent. He informed Washington that there

was a huge party going on across the river, and that even General Rahl was involved. He explained that all the sentries had joined the party, everybody was getting drunk, and nobody was guarding the camp.

General Washington had been looking for a way to turn things around, and this was just the opportunity he had been hoping for. So, on Christmas day, Washington ordered his army to prepare three days' food, and issued orders that every soldier be outfitted with fresh flints for their muskets. He was also somewhat worried by intelligence reports that the British were planning their own crossing once the Delaware was freezing over. At 4 pm Washington's army turned out for its evening parade, where the troops were issued ammunition, and even the officers and musicians were ordered to carry muskets. They were told that they were departing on a secret mission. Marching eight abreast in close formations, and ordered to be as quiet as possible, they left the camp for McKonkey's Ferry. Washington's plan required the crossing to begin as soon as it was dark enough to conceal their movements on the river, but most of the troops did not reach the crossing point until about 6 pm, about ninety minutes after sunset. The weather got progressively worse, and turned from drizzle to rain to sleet and snow. "It blew a hurricane" recalled one soldier.

Washington was among the first of the troops to cross, going with Virginia troops led by General Adam Stephen. These troops formed a sentry line around the landing area in New Jersey, with strict instructions that no one was to pass through. The password was "Victory or Death". The rest of the army crossed without significant incident, although a few men, including Delaware's Colonel John Haslet fell into the water. In the short battle that ensued, only three Americans were killed and six wounded, while 22 Hessians were killed with 98 wounded. The Americans captured 1000 prisoners and seized muskets, powder, and artillery. The impossible had been accomplished. Victory had come to the Americans at last, hope lived anew in the hearts of the Colonists who had all but given up hope.

Phillip Kees had saved the Army. With the decisive victory at the Battle of Trenton, Washington was able to win a couple more quick victories and the tide had turned. Recruitment was up, morale had improved, and the Tory's discovered that this was not going to be over as quickly as they thought.

Phillip Kees stayed with General Washington. He was assigned to the 3rd Pennsylvania Regiment and fought the battles now for the American side. The following winter was spent at Valley Forge, and he suffered along with the rest of the Continental Army. He survived however, and got married in 1797 and raised a family in Pennsylvania. His son, David Kees, married and stayed in Pennsylvania where Phillips grandson, William, was born. William married and moved his family to Agency, Iowa where they had a daughter, Ethyl. When a fire destroyed the farmhouse in Agency, William moved his family to Iola, Kansas where young Ethyl met and fell in love with a neighbor, Eddie Barnhart. From this new union, my father, Max was born.

I am proud of my heritage, but especially proud that my Great Great Grandfather, Phillip Kees, made it possible for me to be an American.

Marjorie Barnhart was the daughter of Eddie and Ethyl Barnhart. Here, she is standing beside a picture of her parents.

