The Riflemen of the Revolution

THE PENNSYLVANIA COMPANIES

By ELMO SCOTT WATSON

IT WAS the summer of 1775. On the benches outside a tavern in the little Pennsylvania town of Sunbury a group of villagers lounged in the warm sunshine and gossiped idly about the news from the north. At Concord and Lexington in Massachusetts some farmers had "fit the reg'lars" and there had been blood-letting a-plenty. Away up in New York a leader of the Green Mountain Boys, named Ethan Allen, had thundered at the gates of "Old Ti" on the shores of Lake Champlain and demanded the surrender of the fort "in the name of the Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress." The king and his ministers had sent three more generals, Burgoyne and Clinton and Howe, to Boston to help General Gage "hang as rebels and traitors all who continued to resist His Majesty's Government."

Stirring events, these! But in this sleepy little village the possibility of war still seemed far away and unlikely. Then suddenly its calm was broken. A horseman, galloping in haste and shouting: "Express, ho! Dispatches from Philadelphia!" as he rode, drew up in a swirl of dust before the inn. And this was the news he brought:

On June 14 the Second Continental congress had passed a resolution that "six companies of expert riflemen be immediately raised in the Colony of Pennsylvania, two in the Colony of Maryland and two in the Colony of Virginia, and that each company as soon as completed shall march to join the army near Boston, to be there employed as light infantry under the command of the chief officer of that army." This chief officer had just been appointed. He was a Virginian named George Washington—the same Washington who had distinguished himself at that "bloody business of Braddock" on the Monongahela twenty years before and who was even now riding north to "throw Tommy Gage out of Boston."

So it was to be war!

Farmers jogging along the country roads on their way to the grist mill, stopped to talk of it over stake-and-rivet fences with their neighbors. Packhorse men, setting out on trading expeditions to the west, carried word of it to every backwoods settlement through which they passed. And at once in many a cabin in the clearing, a lanky frontiersman reached up to the pegs above the fireplace and took down his long rifle. In his swift, sure hands it had barked defiance at Pontiac's warriors; it had brought many a squirrel tumbling down from the highest branch of a tree; and it had stopped short the bounding flight of more than one buck deer. But there was bigger game afield now, game which offered a target that no rifleman, be he "expert" or not, was likely to miss—the British Redcoats!

So from their cabins in Buffalo Valley and the other settlements along the west branch of the Susquehanna these backwoodsmen hastened to Sunbury to enroll in the company which their neighbor, John Lowdon, was forming. Lowdon had been born of Quaker parents but apparently he was apostate to the doctrines of the Society of Friends for he had fought as an ensign in the French and Indian war. He was an innkeeper at Lancaster for a time, then moved to Buffalo Valley where he was a leading member of the committee of correspondence.

On June 25 Lowdon's commission as captain of a rifle company was signed by President John Hancock and Secretary Charles Thomson of the Continental congress. Four days later he was leading his company across the river to Northumberland to be sworn into the Continental service. There they remained until one day early in July when young Dick Grosvenor, the company drummer, beat the long roll to summon

CAPT. SAM BRADY

them to take up the march to Reading and Easton and from there start on the long journey to Boston.

In the meantime congress had passed another resolution, directing the Colony of Pennsylvania to raise two more companies, which, with the six already authorized, were to be formed into a battalion and to be commanded by such officers as the colonial assembly or convention should recommend. Even before this word came out of Philadelphia the rifle companies were being filled to the overflowing. At Samuel Getty's tavern (later the historic town of Gettysburg), the York county men were rallying to the leadership of Capt. Michael Doudel. In Berks county they were swarming into Reading to enroll under Capt. George Nagel. In Northampton county recruiting for Capt. Abraham Miller's company was going forward swiftly and from Bedford county in the west came word that Capt. Robert Cluggage's men were almost ready to march. Cumberland county was providing two companies, commanded by Capt. James Chambers and Capt. William Hendricks.

In fact, so prompt had been the response of the Pennsylvania backwoodsmen to the call, that on July 11 congress was notified that two companies instead of one had been enlisted in Lancaster county by Capt. James Ross and Capt. Matthew Smith and that the Battalion of Riflemen, "raised for the defense of American liberty and for repelling any hostile invasion thereof" would consist of nine companies. They were to be commanded by Col. William Thompson of Carlisle with Edward Hand of Lancaster as lieutenant-colonel and Robert Magaw as major, all "men whose courage we have the highest opinion of."

A RIFLEMAN OF 1775
(From the Painting by Chappel.)

Each company consisted of one captain, three lieutenants, four sergeants, four corporals, a drummer or trumpeter, and 68 privates. The captain received $20 a month, the lieutenants $13⅓, the sergeants $8, the corporals and the drummer or trumpeter $7⅓, and the privates $6⅔.

These riflemen were a miscellaneous lot. The majority of them were Irish, German or Welsh, the second generation of some of the thousands of immigrants who, in the early years of the Eighteenth century had settled in William Penn's colony. Then, too, there were many descendants of the Scots who had been driven by religious persecution from their native highlands in the Seventeenth century. They had sought temporary refuge in the province of Ulster, Ireland, whence "between the years 1720 and 1740, thousands of them migrated to America and peopled the hills of Pennsylvania's frontier with a sturdy, rugged race that was destined to play an important part in the formation of our national character." Besides these, there were others of pure English stock and, to make the cosmopolitan nature of the battalion more complete, the rolls of Captain Lowdon's company carried the name of John Shawnee, a Shawanese Indian warrior.

On these same rolls were three other names which should have made Lowdon's company forever famous. One of them was a German, Peter Bentz. Pennsylvania would later hail him, under the name of Peter Pence, as one of her greatest Indian fighters. Another was a seventeen-year-old boy, a red-headed Irish lad named Samuel Brady. The future would see him making the name of "Capt. Sam Brady, Chief of Rangers" a household word along the Pennsylvania-Ohio border. It would know him as the hero of "Brady's Leap" across the chasm of the Cuyahoga river in northern Ohio. But this would be only one of many of his hairbreadth escapes from the red men.

The third was another Irishman, a rollicking, dark-eyed Celt named Timothy Murphy. Two years later the sharp crack of his long rifle would sound the doom of a British army as his bullet punctuated the death sentence of Gen. Simon Fraser at Saratoga. Another year would add to his fame as "the most redoubtedly notorious marksman in North America and, as the "Scout of the Schoharie," he would become the terror of his Iroquois and Tory enemies in New York.

No less notable than the eagerness of such men as these to enlist in the fight for liberty was their speed in reaching the theater of war. "Between the 28th. of July and the 2d. instant, the rifle men under the command of Captains Smith, Lowdon, Doudel, Chambers, Nagel, Miller and Hendricks passed through New Windsor (a few miles north of West Point) in the New York government on their way to Boston," said a New York item in the Philadelphia Evening Post of August 17, 1775. But it was evidently incorrect, so far as two of the companies—Nagel's and Doudel's—were concerned. A letter, dated from Cambridge July 24, 1775, says: "The Reading company of rifles got into camp last Tuesday (18th.); the rest are hourly expected and much wanted." Thus the men from Berks county had the honor of being the first Pennsylvania company to appear on the scene of action.

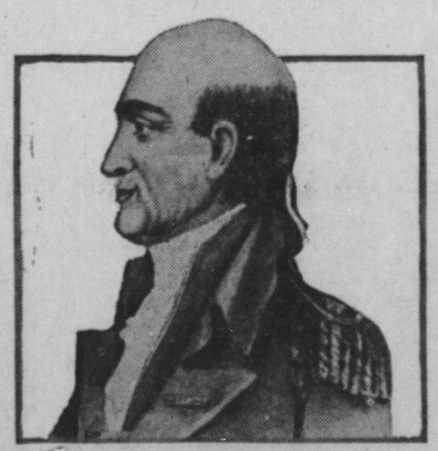
By July 25 they had been joined by their sharpshooting brethren from York county under Captain Doudel. Captain Chambers' company arrived on August 7 and Captain Hendricks' on August 8. On the same day Tim Murphy, Sam Brady, Peter Bentz and their mates in Captain Lowry's company shuffled their well-worn moccasins through the grass on the campus of Harvard college and shook the dust of the weary miles from their green-thrummed hunting shirts.

Ten days later Captain Ross and his company swung into camp, to be met with much good-natured banter at his tardy arrival, because his "Lancaster county Dutchmen were so slow." Although there is no record of the date of arrival of the companies commanded by Captains Smith, Cluggage and Miller, it was evidently prior to August 18. An army return from Washington's headquarters of that date shows that the Pennsylvania riflemen had three field officers, nine captains, 27 lieutenants, the adjutant, quartermaster, surgeon and mate, 29 sergeants, 13 drummers and fifers and 713 privates present and fit for duty.

Besides these regularly enlisted men there were several "gentlemen volunteers" who had accompanied the riflemen on their march. Among them were Edward Burd, Jesse Lukens, Matthew Duncan, and John Joseph Henry, who later rose to prominence in the history of their state. But more important than these was a young doctor named James Wilkinson.

A native of Tidewater, Md., he had studied medicine in Philadelphia and there made the acquaintance of officers of a British regiment, the Royal Irish. His association with them, as he later wrote, "inspired in me that love of things military ever after the guiding star of my life." So he accompanied Colonel Thompson's riflemen to Cambridge where began that amazing career which carried him eventually to the high position of commander in chief of the Army of the United States despite the fact that he was, in the words of one historian, "venal, cowardous, treacherous, a bribe-taker from Spain, a traitor to the United States, and faithless in all relations, public and private."

Soon after the arrival of the Pennsylvania companies at Cambridge, the battalion became the "Second Regiment of the Army of the United Colonies," thus losing their identity as "riflemen"



GEN. EDWARD HAND

in the "light infantry" authorized by congress. But they lost none of their characteristic fighting qualities, for, as one of their captains wrote home, "the riflemen go where they please and keep the regulars in continual hot water."

Early in September Captain Hendricks' and Captain Smith's companies accompanied Arnold and Montgomery on their ill-fated expedition against Quebec where Hendricks was killed and most of the riflemen taken prisoners. In the meantime the other companies were giving their officers and the commander-in-chief plenty of trouble by rebelling against attempts to enforce discipline. But their "disobedient and mutinous behavior" was somewhat forgiven by their conduct in a skirmish at Lechmere's Point in November which won for Colonel Thompson and his regiment the public thanks of Washington.

On January 1, 1776, the army was reorganized and these riflemen became members of the First Regiment of the Continental Army. In March Thompson became a brigadier-general and Hand succeeded him as colonel. Under his leadership the regiment distinguished itself at the Battles of Long Island, Brandywine, Germantown, Paoli and Monmouth and its members, frequently referred to in terms of their commander, made the name "a Hand Rifleman" a badge of special distinction for a "first-class fighting man" in the struggle for American liberty.

TRIBAL TERMS TWISTED

Careful revision of translations of American Indian texts in the Mohawk, the Cayuga and the Onondaga languages by J. N. B. Hewitt ethnologist, has revealed, says the annual report of the bureau of American ethnology, that many historical deductions previously made from these writings are incorrect.

In writings of many historians of the tribes of the Iroquois there is a constant occurrence of the terms "elder" brothers, tribes, and nations; These phrases, Hewitt points out, have often been employed to show the tribal or racial descent of one Iroquois tribe or people from another. But Hewitt was able to demonstrate that the eldership or juniorship of tribes or nations or political brothers among the Iroquois peoples has quite a different signification, these terms being courteous forms of address of an institutional nature, which bars completely the historical inferences or deductions so frequently made from them.