

An Unlikely Hero

Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus said of heroes that some “have not been remembered even for a short time ... others have become the heroes of fables, and again others have disappeared even from fables.” While America’s legitimate heroes have a fixed place of honor in history, our culture has now almost entirely focused its reverence on the endless array of pop-media-created celebrities. The source of this celebrity is often nothing more than a meager talent generously subsidized by outrageous—and ever-increasing—flamboyance. Raunchy rock stars, pretty and plastic Hollywood low-lives masquerading as actors, and temperamental, self-important sports figures—these are the “heroes” offered to today’s young people in search of identity.

Meanwhile, the true heroes are still available, their simple, courageous lives laid out in the dusty history books waiting to be picked up and read. In the reading of their lives and struggles, we discover a rich tapestry of fortitude, dedication, and honor from which we can draw inspiration for our own lives.

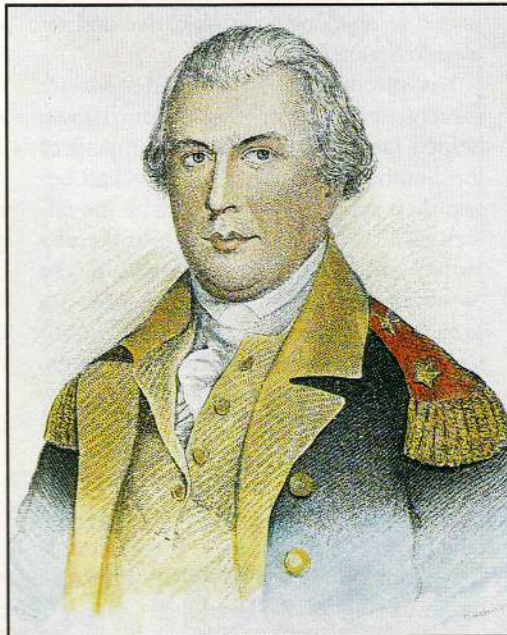
Man with a Mission

General Nathanael Greene, who gave his unselfish service to his countrymen during the American Revolution, is one such hero. When Greene, whose home was in Rhode Island, arrived at the American Army’s Southern headquarters on December 2, 1780, he found the miserable remnants of the troops which had been recently thrashed by the British army. In a letter to Thomas Jefferson he described his first impression, “I find the troops in a most wretched condition, destitute of every thing necessary either for the comfort or convenience of soldiers.”

But Greene hadn’t come just to document the condition of the troops, but was determined to use this very Army to dislodge the stronger and more professional British troops from their occupation of the south. With the present, deplorable condition of his troops, he was under no illusions as to the great sacrifice that lay ahead of him and the soldiers under his

command to prepare them for battle.

But Greene was no stranger to sacrifice. When the British illegally confiscated his sloop eight years earlier in 1772, Greene, a Quaker businessman who had studied intently the writings of John Locke, was alarmed, writing to his friend Samuel Ward Jr., “There appears such a universal declension of public and private virtue throughout the nation, that I fear the



Nathanael Greene: Quaker ideals couldn't cool passion for liberty and love of country.

[privileges] and liberties of the people will be trampled to death by the prerogatives of the crown....”

Soon after Greene’s sloop was taken from him, British regulars marched into Boston, and Greene wrote in anger to Ward: “The soldiers in Boston are insolent above measure. Soon very soon expect to hear the thirsty earth drinking in the warm blood of American sons. O how my eye flashes with indignation and my bosom burns with holy resentment.... O Boston, would to heaven that the good angel that destroyed the army of Sennacherib might now interpose and rid you of your oppressors. How is the design of government subverted.”

Such inflammatory talk was unusual from a pacifist Quaker. But Greene, steeped as he was in the philosophy of

Locke, had decided to risk his good standing among his church brethren in order to defend the ideal of government resolutely constituted on immutable natural law. He knew that his actions put him at risk of being expelled from the Quakers, who held that for Christians, war or warlike machinations were completely unlawful. Nevertheless, Greene participated in the establishment of a militia, and could not have been much surprised when he was dismissed from the Quakers. Of this, his first sacrifice in the name of liberty, Greene made no mention, but accepted the judgment of the elders of his church and made no criticism of them or their creed. He simply focused his energies on helping to outfit and train the militia.

Taking Command

After the battles of Lexington and Concord, Rhode Island’s Assembly voted to raise an army, and appointed Greene its brigadier general—an appointment that, at face value, made little sense. Greene lacked any military experience, and though he had achieved some prominence, others, like James Varnum, were more influential and abundantly more experienced. Nevertheless, while many of his contemporaries had, as Washington noted, “a dearth of public spirit, and want of virtue,” Greene was fully committed to liberty. Of his appointment he wrote to the elder Samuel Ward, “As the government has honored me with the command of their troops, I shall be guilty of ingratitude not to attempt to deserve it.” At Valley Forge, General Greene would show that his appointment was, indeed, no mistake.

After arriving at Valley Forge, Greene told his friend, General Henry Knox, “The Army has been in great distress.... The troops are getting naked, and they are seven days without meat and several days without bread.... We are still in danger of starving, the Commissary department is in a most wretched condition; the Quarter Masters, in a worse. Hundreds and hundreds of our horses have actually starved to death.”

One source of these tribulations, as hinted at by Greene, was the Quarter Mas-

ter General's department being in an advanced state of disorder at the camp. Responsible for supplies of all kinds, including munitions, clothing, water and land transportation, and tools, the department was central to the Army's well-being, and the department's impending failure was a cause of much concern to General Washington. Washington chose Greene to bring order to the chaos.

Greene was not excited by Washington's decision, as he told William Greene: "[The Quarter Master General's Department] is a very disagreeable department, rendered still more so by mismanagement, by depreciation of our currency and the resources of the Country being used inadequate to our immediate wants." Greene was tempted to return to Rhode Island to command the regulars there, a post which would have allowed him to be near his wife and family, whom he missed terribly.

But General Washington insisted Greene accept the position and Greene realized that he could do more to further the cause of liberty as Quarter Master General than elsewhere. Despite his reservations, he accepted the post, saying, "I will never forsake the cause of my country."

The problem at Valley Forge, as Greene saw it, was an ineffective transportation system. He therefore set about improving it by building a warehouse at Reading, Pennsylvania from which supplies could be shipped down the Schuylkill River to the troops. He also instructed that work should be done to repair roads and bridges

on overland routes. Under Greene, conditions improved so dramatically that the change was called "miraculous."

Into the Battle

But Greene longed to command troops on the field of battle. So after stabilizing the Army's supply problems, he resigned from the office of Quarter Master General and soon after assumed command of a portion of the Army in New Jersey. Here he demonstrated a natural ability as a leader of men. With 6,000 enemy troops under Baron von Knyphausen advancing toward American supplies at Morristown, Greene, although outnumbered, put up a spirited defense and the aggressors were forced to abandon their objective and retreat to Staten Island.

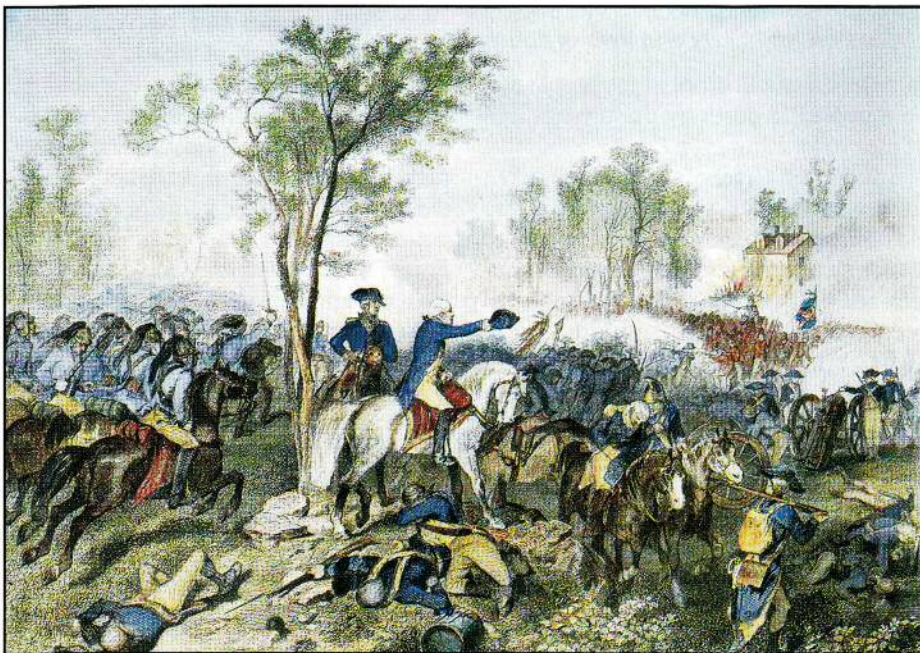
His successes both as Quarter Master General and in the defense of Morristown helped launch Greene into command of the Southern Army. The British had begun their southern campaign with the objective of subduing the South to thereby isolate any remaining resistance in the Northern theater. This strategy proved a great success, and Georgia and South Carolina were under British control by the winter of 1780. Lord Cornwallis, the British commander that winter, had 4,000 British regulars and could count on loyalist support. Further, the British had established fortified posts throughout the country to control the local population. It was from this position of strength that Cornwallis opposed Greene.

Despite the odds, in Greene's mind the path to ultimate victory seemed clear. In a daring and unorthodox strategy, Greene divided his small army in two, and encouraged the local population to rise in his support. This, he hoped, would draw Cornwallis away from his base and force him into arduous maneuvers in a hostile countryside. Cornwallis obliged and Greene, relying on his superior knowledge of the area's geography, began a series of frenzied maneuvers with Cornwallis close on his heels.

On March 15, 1781, Lord Cornwallis and his highly trained professional soldiers met the smaller American Army, led by the relatively inexperienced Greene, in battle at Guilford Courthouse in North Carolina. With Cornwallis approaching, Greene placed two lines of militia forward, behind a fence, and a line of regulars to the rear. As the British approached, American artillery fired with little effect and the first British volley caused the first line of militia to run. The second line stood its ground but its left flank was eventually turned by the overpowering British. The battle had taken an unfortunate turn for the Americans and Greene was forced to retreat into a more defensible position while pouring fire into the British ranks. Cornwallis, taking heavy casualties, could not press his advantage any longer and broke off the engagement. He had won a tactical victory over Greene, but had suffered irreparable losses in the effort.

Commenting on the closely fought battle, General Charles O'Hara, one of the British commanders, noted, "I wish it [the battle] had produced one substantial benefit to Great Britain; on the contrary, we feel at this moment, the sad and fatal effects of our loss on that day, nearly one half of our best officers and soldiers, were either killed or wounded, and what remains are so completely worn out."

Greene, meanwhile, had held his reserve of regulars back and his core force was still strong. Therefore, the strategic victory went to Greene while Cornwallis, burdened with wounded and having no wagons or supplies, retired to Wilmington and then to Yorktown. There in October, in a move that heralded the end of the war, General O'Hara surrendered for the ailing Cornwallis while the British band allegedly played "The World Turned Upside Down." Thus had Greene, leading a rag-tag army of American patriots, paved the way for a great American victory. ■



General Greene in battle: Cornwallis couldn't subdue smaller Southern Army.