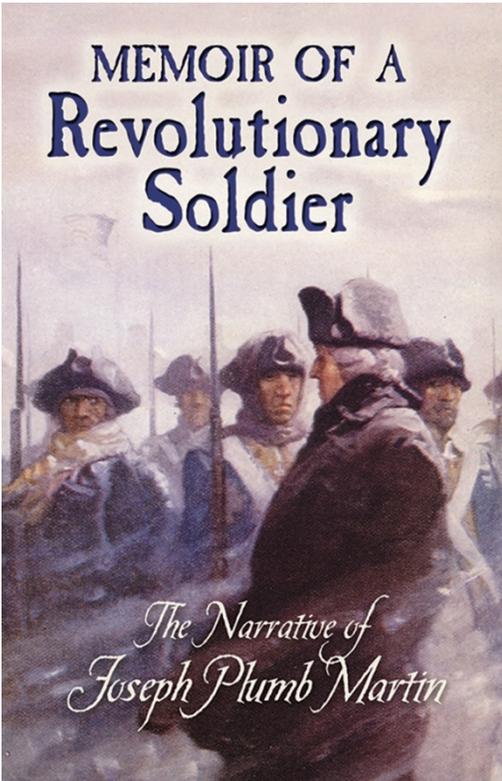


Selections from the Diary of Private Joseph Plumb Martin



Joseph Plumb Martin was born in western Massachusetts in 1760. His father was a pastor who often got in trouble for speaking his mind too freely. At the age of seven, Joseph was sent to live with his affluent grandfather. When the war started in 1775 Martin chafed to enlist but he was too young. Many of Martin's friends had enlisted and Martin was quite susceptible to their peer pressure.

In June of 1776, at the age of 15, Martin, though wary of a long enlistment, decided "to take a priming before I took upon me the whole coat of paint for a soldier." Thus, much to the chagrin of his grandparents, Martin enlisted in for six months as a private in the Connecticut state troops. After serving at the Battles of Brooklyn and White Plains on the side of the Patriots, the farm boy decided not to reenlist in December 1776. But a long winter at home proved too dull for the teenage veteran. He enlisted again in 1777, this time in Washington's Continental army, and served for the duration of the war, seeing action at a number of major battles.

At the age of 70, the venerated veteran then living in Maine published A Narrative of Some of the Adventures, Danger and Suffering of a Revolutionary Soldier, interspersed with Anecdotes of Incidents that Occurred Within His Own Observation. The book which did not sell particularly well fell into obscurity until rediscovered in the 1960s when it was republished with the title Private Yankee Doodle.

The following excerpts detail Martin's activity at Fort Mifflin.

Hardships sufficient to kill half a dozen horses

I was soon relieved from this guard, and with those who were able, of our two regiments, sent to reinforce those in the fort [Mifflin], which was then besieged by the British. Here I endured hardships sufficient to kill half a dozen horses. Let the reader only consider for a moment and he will still be satisfied if not sickened. In the cold month of November, without provisions, without clothing, not a scrap of either shoes or stockings to my feet or legs, and in this condition to endure a siege in such a place as that was appalling in the highest degree.

In confirmation of what I have here said, I will give the reader a short description of the pen that I was confined in. Confined I was, for it was next to impossible to have got away from it, if I had been so disposed. Well, the island, as it is called, is nothing more than a mud flat in the Delaware, lying upon the west side of the channel. It is diked around the fort, with sluices so constructed that the fort can be laid under water at pleasure, (at least, it was so when I was there, and I presume it has not grown much higher since. On the eastern side, next the main river, was a zigzag wall built of hewn stone, built, as I was informed, before the Revolution at the king's cost. At the southeastern part of the fortification (for fort it could not with propriety be called) was a battery of several long eighteen-pounders and one thirty-two pounder.

I have seen the enemy's shells

At the northwestern corner was another small battery with three twelve-pounders. There were also three blockhouses in different parts of the enclosure, but no cannon mounted upon them, or were they of any use whatever to us while I was there. On the western side, between the batteries, was a high embankment, within which was a tier of palisadoes. In front of the stone wall, for about half its length, was another embankment, with palisadoes on the inside of it, and a narrow ditch between them and the stone wall. On the western side of the fortification was a row barracks, extending from the northern part of the works to about half the length of the fort. On the northern end was another block of barracks which reached nearly across the fort from east to west. In front of these was a large square two story house, for the accommodation of the officers of the garrison. Neither this house nor the barracks were of much use at this time, for it was as much as a man's life was worth to enter them, the enemy often directing their shot at them in particular. In front of that barracks and other necessary places were parades and walks; the rest of the ground was soft mud. I have seen the enemy's shells fall upon it and sink so low that their report could not be heard when they burst, and I could only feel a tremulous motion of the

earth at the time. At other time, when they burst near the surface of the proud, they would throw the mud fifty feet in the air.

The British had erected five batteries with six heavy guns in each and a bomb battery with three long mortars in it on the opposite side of the water, which separated the island from the main on the west, and which was but a short distance across. [Martin is referring to Carpenter's Island where the British employed six 24-pounders, an 8 in. Howitzer, and an 8 inch mortar included in the battery.] They had also a battery of six guns a little higher up the river, at a place called the Hospital Point. [usually referred to as Webb Point, it was near the confluence of the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers.] This is a short description of the place which I was destined, with a few others, to defend against whatever force, land or marine, the enemy might see fit to bring against it.

The first attempt the British made against the place after I entered it was by the *Augusta* a sixty-four-gun ship. While maneuvering one dark night she got on the *cheaveau-de-frise* which had been sunk in the channel of the river. As soon as she was discovered in the morning we plied her so well with hot shot, that she was soon in flames. Boats were sent from the shipping below to her assistance, but our shot proving too hot for them, they were obliged to leave her to her fate. In an hour or two she blew up with an explosion which seemed to shake the earth to its center, leaving a volume of smoke like a thundercloud, which, as the air was calm, remained an hour or two. A twenty-gun ship [the *Merlin*] which had come to the assistance of the *Augusta* here distress shared her fate soon after.

[By this place, perhaps Martin is referring to all the American-held forts. The *Augusta* and *Merlin* were part of a land-sea assault on Fort Mercer on October 22, not on Fort Mifflin. Further, the *Augusta* did not become entangled on the *cheveau-de-frise*. Rather, following a night attack by the American galleys on the *Augusta* and *Merlin* the two ships became stranded on shoals after attempting to fall down the river. On the 23rd, the *Augusta* came under a heavy bombardment not only from Ft. Mifflin but from galleys, fire ships, and land batteries. Repeated British attempts to refloat the *Augusta* were hampered by persistent American naval harassment. At about 10:30 a.m., a fire was seen on the deck of the *Augusta*. [At noon the *Augusta* blew up with such force that the explosion was heard 18 miles away.]

Like a beaver

Our batteries were nothing more than old spars and timber laid up in parallel lines and filled between with mud and dirt. The British batteries in the course of the day would nearly level our works, and we were, like the beaver, obliged to repair our dams in the night. During the whole night, at intervals of a quarter or half an hour, the enemy would let off all their pieces, and although we had sentinels to watch them and at every flash of their guns to cry, "a shot," upon hearing which everyone endeavored to take care of himself, yet they would ever and anon, in spite of all our precaution, cut up some of us.

The engineer in the fort was a French officer by the name of Fleury, the same who struck the British flag at the storming of Stony Point. He was a very austere man and kept us constantly employed day and night; there was no chance of escaping from his vigilance.

Between the stone wall and the palisadoes was a kind of yard or pen, at the southern end of which was a narrow entrance not more than eight or ten feet wide, with a ditch about four feet wide in the middle, extending the whole length of the pen. Here, on the eastern side of the wall, was the only place in the fort than anyone could be in any degree of safety. Into this place we used to gather the splinters broken off the palisadoes by the enemy's shot and make a little fire, just enough to keep from suffering. We would watch an opportunity to escape from the vigilance of Colonel Fleury and run into this place for a minute or two's respite from fatigue and cold. When the engineer found that the workmen began to grow scarce, he would come to the entrance and call us out. He had always his cane in his hand, and woe betided him he could get a stroke at. At his approach I always jumped over the ditch and ran down on the other side, so that he could not reach me, but he often threatened me, but threatening was all, he could never get a stroke at me, and I cared but little for his threats.

It was utterly impossible to lie down to get any rest or sleep on account of the mud, if the enemy's shot would have suffered us to do so. Sometime some of the men, when overcome with fatigue and want of sleep, would slip away into the barracks to catch a nap of sleep, but it seldom happened that they all came out again alive. I was in this place a fortnight and can say in sincerity that I never lay down to sleep a minute in all that time.

A shower of grapeshot

The British knew the situation of the place as well as we did. And as their point-blank shot would not reach us behind the wall, they would throw elevated grapeshot from their mortar, and when the sentries had cried, "a shot," and the soldiers, seeing no shot arrive, had become careless, the grapeshot would come down like a shower of hail about our ears.

I will here just mention one thing which will show the apathy of our people at this time. We had, as I mentioned before, a thirty-two pound cannon in the fort, but had not a single shot for it. The British also had one in their battery upon the Hospital Point, which, as I said before, raked the fort, or rather it was so fixed as to rake the parade in front of the barracks, the only place we could pass up and down the fort. The artillery officers offered a gill of rum for each shot fired from that piece, which the soldiers would procure. I have seen from twenty to fifty men standing on the parade waiting with impatience the coming of the shot, which would often be seized before its motion had fully ceased and conveyed off to our gun to be sent back again to its former owners. When the lucky fellow had caught it had swallowed his rum he would return to wait for another, exulting that he had been more lucky or more dexterous than his fellows.

What little provisions we had was cooked by the invalids in our camp and brought to the island in old flour barrels; it was mostly corned beef and hard bread, but it was not much trouble to cook or fetch what we had.

There was music indeed

We continued here, suffering cold, hunger and other miseries, till the fourteenth day of November. On that day, at the dawn, we discovered six ships of the line, all sixty-fours, a frigate of thirty-six guns and a galley in a line just below the *cheveau-de-frise*; a twenty-four gun ship (being an old ship cut down,) her guns said to be all brass twenty-four pounders, and a sloop of six guns in company with her, both within pistol shot of the fort, on the western side. We immediately opened our batteries upon them, but they appeared to take very little notice of us. We heated some shot, but by mistake twenty-four-pound shot were heated instead of eighteen, which was the caliber of the guns in that part of the fort. The enemy soon began their firing upon us and there was music indeed. The soldiers were all ordered to take their posts at the palisadoes, which they were ordered to defend to the last extremity, as it was expected the British would land under the fire of their cannon and attempt to storm the fort. The cannonade was severe, as well it might be, six sixty-four-gun-ships, a thirty-six-gun frigate, a twenty-four-gun ship, a galley and a sloop of six guns, together with six batteries of six guns each and a bomb battery of three mortars, all playing at once upon our poor little fort, if fort it might be called.

Split like fish to be broiled

Some of our officers endeavored to ascertain how many guns were fired in a minute by the enemy, but it was impossible, the fire was incessant. In the height of the cannonade it was desirable to hoist a signal flag for some of our galleys that were lying above us to come down to our assistance. The officers inquired who would undertake it. As none appeared willing for some time, I was about to offer my services. I considered it no more exposure of my life than it was to remain where I was. The flagstaff was of easy ascent, being an old ship's mast, having shrouds to the ground, and the round top still remaining. While I was still hesitating, a sergeant of the artillery offered himself. He accordingly ascended to the round top, pulled down the flag to affix the signal flag to the halyard, upon which the enemy, thinking we had struck, [surrendered] ceased firing in every direction and cheered. "Up with the flag!" was the cry of our officers in every part of the fort. The flags were accordingly hoisted, and the firing was immediately renewed. The sergeant then came down and had not gone half a rod from the foot of the staff when he was cut in two by a cannon shot. This caused me some serious reflection at the time. He was killed! Had I been at the same business I might have been killed, but it might have been otherwise ordered by Divine Providence, we might have both lived. I am not a predestinarian enough to determine it. The enemy's shot cut us up. I saw five artillerists belonging to one gun cut down by a single shot, and I saw men who were stooping to be protected by the works; but not stooping low enough, split like fish to be broiled.

Men were cut up like cornstalks

About the middle of the day some of our galleys and floating batteries, with a frigate, fell down and engaged the British with their long guns, which in some measure took off the enemy's fire from the fort. The cannonade continued without interruption on the side of the British throughout the day. Nearly every gun in the fort was silenced by midday. Our men were cut up like cornstalks. I do not know the exact number of the killed and wounded but can say it was not small, considering the numbers in the fort, which were only the able part of the Fourth and Eighth Connecticut regiments, with a company or two of artillery, perhaps less than five hundred in all.

If ever destruction was complete, it was here

The cannonade continued, directed mostly at the fort, till the dusk of the evening. As soon as it was dark we began to make preparations for evacuating the fort and endeavoring to escape to the Jersey shore. When the firing had in some measure subsided and I could look about me, I found the fort exhibited a picture of desolation. The whole area of the fort was completely ploughed as a field. The buildings of ever kind hanging in broken fragments, and the guns all dismantled, and how many of the garrison were sent to the world of spirits, I knew not. If ever destruction was complete, it was here. The surviving part of the garrison were now drawn off and such of the stores as could conveniently be taken away were carried to the Jersey shore.

The D---d rebels will show you a trick

I happened to be left with a party of seventy or eighty men to destroy and burn all that was left in the place. I was in the northwest battery just after dark when the enemy were hauling their shipping on that side higher up to a more commanding position. They were so nigh that I could hear distinctly what they said on board the sloop. One expression of theirs I well remember. "We will give it to the d---d rebels in the morning." The thought that then occupied my mind I as well remember, "The d---d rebels will show you a trick which the devil never will; they will go off and leave you." After the troops had left the fort and were embarking at the wharf, I went to the water side to find one of my messmates to whom I had lent my canteen in the morning, as there were three or four hogsheads of rum in the fort, the heads of which we were about to knock in, and I was desirous to save a trifle of their contents. There being nothing to eat I thought I might have something to drink. I found him indeed, but lying in a long line of dead men who had been brought out of the fort to be conveyed to the main, to have the last honors conferred upon them which it was in our power to give. Poor young man! He was the most intimate associate I had in the army, but he was gone, with many more as deserving of regard as himself.

I returned directly back into the fort to my party and proceeded to set fire to everything that would burn, and then repaired immediately to the wharf where three batteaux were waiting to convey us across the river. And now came on another trial. Before we could embark the buildings in the fort were completely in flames, and they threw such a light upon the water that we were as plainly seen by the British as though it had been broad day. Almost their whole fire was directed at us. Sometime our boat seemed to be almost thrown out of the water, and at length a shot took the stern post out of the rear boat. We had then to stop and take the men from the crippled boat into the other two, and now the shot and water flew merrily, but by the assistance of a kind Providence we escaped without any further injury and landed, a little after midnight, on the Jersey shore.

Crazy as a goose shot through the head

We marched a little back into some pitch-pine woods, where we found the rest of the troops that had arrived before us. They had made up some comfortable fires and were enjoying the warmth, and that was all the comfort they had to partake of, except rest, for victuals was out of the question. I wrapped myself up in my blanket and lay down upon the leaves and soon fell asleep and continued so till past noon, when I awoke from the first sound sleep I had for a fortnight. Indeed, I had not laid down in all that time. The little sleep I had obtained was in cat naps, sitting up and leaning against the wall, and I thought myself fortunate if I could do that much. When I awoke I was as crazy as a goose shot through the head.

We left our flag flying when we left the island, and the enemy did not take possession of the fort till late in the morning after we left it. We left one man in the fort who had taken too large a dose of "the good creature." He was a deserter from the German forces in the British service. The British took him to Philadelphia, where, not being known by them, he engaged in their service, received two or three guineas bounty, drew a British uniform, and came back to us again at the Valley Forge. So they did not make themselves independent fortunes by the capture of him.

Here ends the account of as hard and fatiguing a job, for the time it lasted, as occurred during the Revolutionary War.

-Joseph Plumb Martin