

“And Now I Was a Soldier”
Joseph Plumb Martin

Joseph Plumb Martin was a tall, strong, hardworking boy who grew up on his grandparents’ farm in Connecticut. Though he never went to school, he managed to write one of the best diaries of the Revolutionary War.

Milford, Connecticut, 1775

Joseph Martin forced the metal plow deep down into the stony soil while his grandfather walked alongside, guiding the horse that pulled it. It was a fresh April morning, a perfect planting day. Suddenly the silence was broken by the sound of bells and gunshots in Milford. Joseph dropped the plow and dashed into town, his grandfather following behind as fast as he could.

A crowd was gathered in front of the tavern, where an express rider from New Haven shouted news of three days before: There had been a bloody battle in Concord, Massachusetts. Many were dead. Soldiers were needed now. A silver dollar was the reward for anyone who would enlist in the American army and march off to New York to join General Washington.

Joseph was only fourteen, a year too young to enlist. Until that day, his thoughts about soldiering had always been clear: “I felt myself to be a real coward. What - venture my carcass where bullets fly! That will never do for me. Stay at home out of harm’s way, thought I.”

But now friends his age and even younger were scrawling their names and grabbing up those dollars while adults cheered. Joseph was torn. He hated to stay home while his friends marched off to glory, and the thought of a whole silver dollar made “the seeds of courage begin to sprout,” but he needed more time to get used to the idea. Two months later, he was ready. On June 25, 1776, Joseph slipped away from his grandparents’ house and hiked into town, his mind made up to enlist for six months, the shortest term possible. When a group of boys he knew saw him coming toward the tavern, they began to taunt him:

“Come, if you enlist, I will,” says one.

“You have long been talking about it,” says another. ‘Come, now is the time.’

“Thinks I to myself, I will not be laughed into it or out of it. I will act my own pleasure after all...So seating myself at the table, enlisting orders were immediately presented to me. I took up the pen, loaded it with the fatal charge, made several mimic imitations of writing my name, but took especial care not to touch the paper with the pen until an unlucky [friend] who was leaning over my shoulder gave my hand a strike which caused the pen to make a woeful scratch on the paper. ‘O, he has enlisted,” said he... Well, thought I, I may as well go through with the business now as not. So I wrote my name fairly upon the indentures. And now I was a soldier, in name at least.”

His grandparents were unhappy, but they “fit him out” with clothing, a musket, and powder. His grandmother gave him cheese and cake and stuffed his Bible into his knapsack. He sailed to New York City to join a Connecticut company. For more than a month all they did was march in parades and practice battle drills. Joseph’s biggest problem was getting used to the food - salt pork or boiled beef, hard bread, turnips or boiled potatoes.

But even as they practiced, hundreds of British warships were arriving at nearby Staten Island, unloading 32,000 redcoated soldiers. Late in August, Joseph’s company was ordered to Long Island to stop British forces from taking New York City. Just before they marched off, Joseph climbed onto the roof of a house and squinted in the direction of the battlefield: “I distinctly saw the smoke of the field artillery, but the distance and the unfavorableness of the wind prevented my hearing their report, at least but faintly. The horrors of battle then presented themselves to my mind in all their hideousness. I must come to it now, thought I.”

They took a ferry across the East River to Brooklyn and marched toward a field, the shots growing louder and louder with each step until they boomed like thunder. “We began to meet the wounded men, another sight I was unacquainted with, some with broken arms, some with broken legs, and some with broken heads. The sight of these a little daunted me, and made me think of home.”

And then all at once he was fighting, too. “our officers...pressed forward towards a creek, where a large party of Americans and British were engaged. By the time we arrived, the enemy had driven our men into the creek...where such as could swim got across. Those that could not swim, and could not procure anything to buoy them up, sunk.”

On the opposite bank of Gowanus Creek he could make out a long row of British soldiers - professional warriors from what was then the best army in the world. They stood straight and tall in red jackets as they fired on command at the retreating Americans. The creek was filling up with American bodies. Joseph’s company shot back furiously, trying to provide cover for those still thrashing through the water.

Then they marched on to a part of Manhattan called Kip’s Bay and readied themselves for another battle. One night they camped so close to a British warship that Joseph could overhear soldiers on board mocking the Americans. Early on a Sunday morning, Joseph slipped into an unlocked warehouse for a rare moment of privacy and peace. He was seated on a stool, reading some papers he’s discovered, when “all of a sudden there came such a peal of thunder from the British shipping that I thought my head would go with the sound. I made a frog’s leap for the ditch and lay as still as I possibly could and began to consider which part of my carcass would go first.” They were soon dashing for their lives, leaping over the bodies of their friends. As Joseph put it, “The demons of fear and disorder seemed to take full possession of all and everything that day.”

Joseph was still alive when October came and cool weather set in, and life got even more uncomfortable. “To have to lie, as I did almost every night on the cold and often wet ground without a blanket and with nothing but thin summer clothing was tedious...In the morning, the

ground [often was] as white as snow with hoar frost. Or perhaps it would rain all night like a flood. All that could be done in that case was to lie down, take our musket in our arms and packe the lock between our thighs and ‘weather it out.’”

When Joseph was discharged from the Continental army on Christmas Day, 1776, he felt older than fifteen. A battle-tested patriot, he was proud that he had stood his ground against the British. He set off for home, fifty-two miles away, with four shillings of discharge pay in his pocket and enough stories to get him through the winter and more. He farmed for a year, got bored, and reenlisted. When the war ended six years later, he was still a soldier. And he was also a free citizen of a new nation.