

Patriot's Day: We Remember

What really happened on April 19, 1775

By Rachel Malone

Sixteen-year-old Jonathan Harrington put in a good day's work on his family farm. He was sleeping soundly when his mother ran into his room at 1 or 2 AM: "Jonathan! Wake up! The Regulars are out, and something must be done!"

Jonathan woke up, grabbed his fife and went out to the Lexington Green. Within hours he could see the approaching lines of soldiers in startling red uniforms -- 800 of them, like a huge machine.

If he'd looked around him, he could have counted 30-40 men standing on the green.

A few minutes later their numbers would grow to maybe 70-80, no more.

One of them addressed their captain, John Parker: "There are so few of us, it is folly to stand here!"

And yet they stood.

Within minutes, nearly 20 would be dead or wounded. Several of Jonathan's cousins and relatives were killed.

Was it folly? Was it stupidity for them to stand?

Who were they, and why were they there? What happened to cause them to stand up against their own King's troops -- perhaps in folly -- so few -- and yet to stand?

You see, they were facing the same soldiers they had fought alongside in the French & Indian War.

That was an expensive war. The King of England needed money to refill the Crown's treasury. So he began taxing the colonists -- insufferably. Without representation.

There was the taxation without representation.

There were the Intolerable Acts, meant to punish colonists for their Tea Party defiance.

And then the King's troops started the powder raids. Oh, they weren't taking the guns -- they were just taking the ammunition (gunpowder).

It might as well have been a gun ban. Guns are clubs without ammo. This was unacceptable.

The colonists formed patriot groups. There were many groups, with overlapping membership. Seven were in the Boston area alone; Paul Revere was a member of five groups.

They gathered intel and formed plans.

That fateful night, April 18, 1775, after the two lanterns shone in the North Church, a rider set out to warn the colonists.

His name was NOT Paul Revere. His name was William Dawes.

Unfortunately for William, he didn't finish first that night. The other guy did. And that's why history remembers "the midnight ride of Paul Revere."

Because Paul set off too -- across the river and down the road, 18 miles, through Lexington and Concord.

Did you know he was captured?

The British patrols found him. But just then, there was a volley of gunshots and good ol' Paul convinced those redcoats that it was the colonists coming to slaughter them. They panicked and let Paul go.

Turns out, it was the colonists unloading their guns (by shooting them in a volley) so they could go to the tavern and have a drink while they waited for some tyrant action. But still, it saved Paul.

The First Strike of the Match

And so it was, at dawn on April 19, 1775, that Jonathan Harrington and his family and friends stood on Lexington Green. They watched 800 gleaming bayonets march down the road with the sunlight glistening on the British soldiers' bright red uniforms -- 800 bayonets coming straight toward them.

The redcoats had marched 13 miles overnight from Boston. They had 5 miles to go to Concord. Lexington was in the middle of their path, and the few dozen colonists stood between the Redcoats and their mission: the gunpowder at Concord.

The colonists looked to Captain Parker for leadership.

Captain Parker was dying of tuberculosis. Instead of sitting back to live his last days in comfort, he decided to spend his last days leading the fight for liberty, for the sake of his posterity.

The British yelled, "Disperse, ye damned rebels! Lay down your arms and disperse!"

Captain Parker ordered the men to keep their arms and "Don't fire unless fired upon."

Somewhere, a shot rang out. Scholars still don't know for sure who it was. Neither side accused the other of firing first. But someone fired. Then the British opened fire. Some colonists managed to return fire.

The smoke cleared.

Out of the 800 redcoats, 1 was slightly wounded.

Out of the 70-80 colonists, about one-fourth were hit by the British (nine were dead and 17 wounded).

Out of eight father/son pairs, five were split by death with either the father or son dying.

What a price to pay.

Was it worth it? Was it folly to stand when the odds were against them and they had no way of knowing the outcome?

That was the first strike of the match. There was a skirmish, people died, but the war was not yet in full force.

The Second Strike of the Match

Captain Isaac Davis was head of the Acton Minutemen. He built a gun range behind his blacksmith shop, he made them guns and ammo, and he trained them twice a week. He knew their abilities.

So when the hundreds of groups of colonists arrived at Concord to defend the town's supply of gunpowder, they looked to Captain Davis as a leader.

That morning, 30-year-old Captain Davis had said goodbye to his family. His four children were very ill with canker rash -- a dangerous and deadly form of scarlet fever. But his 29-year-old wife Hannah told him to go, for the sake of liberty.

As he left, he merely said, "Take good care of the children." Those would be his last words to her.

At Concord, the militia groups gathered on Punkatasset Hill, across the North Bridge from Concord. But when they saw the town burning, they knew they needed to take action.

Captain Isaac Davis declared, "I have not a man who is afraid to go," and led his few dozen men down the hill.

As they charged down the hill and across the bridge, a redcoat raised his musket and fired at random.

The musketball hit Isaac Davis.

After seeing Captain Davis killed, his compatriot Major Buttrick yelled to the colonists: "Fire, fellow soldiers! For God's sake -- fire! Fire as fast as you can!"

That was the first order to fire, and the first time the British troops were killed.

Unlike the British soldiers who didn't actually aim, the colonists knew how to use their weapons. They hunted for food. They knew how to hit their target.

They aimed at the leaders of the redcoats. The resulting casualties told the story: 7% of the British ranks were killed, and 44% of the British officers.

The British army broke ranks and fled.

But still, the war was not on in full force.

The Third Strike of the Match

The British Regulars were running. This was unheard of.

At this point, they just wanted to make it back to Boston. Eighteen miles stood between them and the safety of their warships. But would they make it?

Militia groups had been converging all morning, in small bands, from miles away.

That 18-mile march from Concord through Lexington and back to Boston was filled with horror raining down on the Regulars and with extraordinary moments of courage and ingenuity on the part of the "untrained backwoodsmen" of the militia.

The roads converged at Meriam's Corner, and the flankers protecting the British marchers had to narrow in to cross the bridge.

One shot range out -- likely a militia shot, at very long range. It missed. The Regulars volleyed back but they were high and didn't hit. The colonists fired back in return -- and they hit their targets.

That was the third strike of the match. The fire kept burning, and the war was on.

Constant fighting ensued the entire way back to Boston.

Many stories should be remembered, but here are a few notable vignettes:

Parker's Revenge

Once again, the redcoats needed to march through Lexington.

Once again, Captain Parker was ready. And this time, he wasn't on Lexington Green.

He'd gotten the memo that the war was on and this time didn't feel the need to wait until they were fired upon.

He gathered his men behind the granite boulders at a bend in the road just before Lexington. He ordered them, "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes!"

The plan worked. They ambushed the redcoats. Col. Smith, the British leader for that mission, was hit in the thigh.

The Ring of Fire

In Lexington, the redcoats finally got some help: reinforcements and relief troops from Lord Percy and General Gage.

But also in Lexington, the colonists came up with a new strategy: the Circle of Fire. They set themselves up so they surrounded the British units as they marched on the road, moving through the woods, leapfrogging past one another so they always had a unit ready to go.

In other words, they rained hell on those who had come to take away their guns, their ability to defend themselves.

Bloody Menotomy

The road went directly past the houses in the town of Menotomy. The colonists refused to leave their houses, saying, "An Englishman's home is his castle."

It was one of the bloodiest places of the march.

In that one small town, the death toll was 25 dead and 9 wounded for the colonists and 40 dead, 80 wounded for the redcoats.

That Dangerous Old Man

Samuel Whittamore was 78 years old and crippled. He wasn't about to go down without a fight, though. He made 5 shots from 150 yards.

The guns of those days could shoot maybe 4 rounds a minute -- if you were really fast. So getting off 5 shots, and hitting the targets as he did, was quite remarkable.

The British sent a whole detachment to root out Whittamore. He managed to shoot 3 of them before they got to him.

They shot him in the face, bayoneted him 14 times, and left him for dead.

He did die . . . 18 years later. That's right. The badass dude recovered and lived to be 96 years old. That's ridiculously amazing longevity for those times.

Cambridge and the Harbor

Eight miles away from Boston, the British troops hit Cambridge and lucked out. They asked a townspeople for directions and he pointed them to an obscure road. They were able to break the

ring of fire and made it back to the safety of the Boston Harbor, crossing Charleston Neck around 7pm.

Why We Remember

That day, the British escaped complete demolition by the colonists.

But the militia groups -- those "untrained backwoodsmen" -- proved their mettle.

No one knew at the time how the day would end.

Certainly, no one knew how the war would end.

It would be a year before the colonists actually declared independence, because originally they weren't even fighting to be their own nation. They were simply fighting against tyranny, fighting to keep their gunpowder.

It would be eight years before they gained victory and the war finally ended.

The Constitution wasn't written for another 13 years, and the Bill of Rights another 2 years after that.

But they still remembered. And they enshrined in that precious document the right to defend ourselves and the right to defend liberty:

"A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed."

And today, we remember. We remember the well-trained militia of Isaac Davis. We remember the young patriotism of Jonathan Harrison. We remember the heroic stands for liberty by Captain Parker, Hannah Davis, Samuel Whittamore, and so many others.

And we remember the liberty that is so dear to us.

Let us never forget.

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