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Smoke, and edom

the American Revolution

Joseph Plumb Martin was still a boy when he became an American soldier. Could he survive his first battle?

By **Lauren Tarshis**

As You Read What was it like to be a soldier in the American Revolution?

oom! Boom! Boom!

B Thundering cannon explosions shook the ground and thick smoke filled the air as 15-year-old Joseph Plumb Martin lay in the dirt, struggling to stay alive. It was August 27, 1776, in Brooklyn, New York, and America and England were fighting the first major battle of the Revolutionary War.

Only three months earlier, Joseph had begged his family to let him join the American army. Being a soldier would be a thrilling adventure, he was sure. Of course America would win! But now Joseph realized that the Americans were doomed. A terrible **cacophony** of cries and moans from wounded soldiers rose up into the summer sky; hundreds of soldiers were dead.

It seemed Joseph had two choices: Surrender—or die.



A New World

Joseph was born in 1760, when the United States was not yet a country. Much of America was wilderness. Along the east coast was a strip of land divided into 13 colonies owned by England.

Joseph's great-great-grandfather had settled in the colony of Connecticut in the mid-1600s following a 3,000-mile journey across the Atlantic Ocean on a creaking wooden ship. Such early trans-Atlantic voyages lasted for several miserable months and were marked by violent storms, rotting food, biting rats, and deadly diseases. Many passengers died before ever reaching America.

But the perils of the sea did not deter thousands of Europeans from heading to the "New World," which offered a different kind of life. In England and across Europe, strict laws and old ideas dictated nearly everything a person did—what prayers they said, whom they married or were friends with, whether they were rich or poor.

These laws and customs were like prison walls, trapping people in unhappy lives. No matter how hard a person worked, they couldn't break out. But these rules and ideas didn't reach all the way to America. By the time Joseph was born, hundreds of thousands of people of European descent lived in America.

Trouble Brewing

The colonies were not a **utopia** for everyone. As an increasing number of European settlers

arrived, hundreds of thousands of Native American people were dying. They died of diseases brought by Europeans, in fights over territory, and of starvation after being forced from their lands. At the same time, thousands of Africans were brought to America in chains and enslaved by settlers. But for people like Joseph's family—white and free—life in the colonies was better than almost anywhere in the world.

When Joseph was 7, his parents sent him from their home in Massachusetts to live with his grandparents in Connecticut. (They were wealthy and better able to care for him.) His grandparents showered him with love.

Even as a child, though, Joseph sensed that trouble was brewing. Anger and frustration with "Mother England" simmered in the hearts of many Americans, who wanted more say over how laws were made in the colonies. They fumed about England's monarch, King George III. Why should he rule over America when he had never even been there? Some said that the 13 colonies should tear away from England and become a new, independent country.

Like a storm that spins into a hurricane, anger between America and England spun into rage. Then, on April 19, 1775, fighting erupted between American and British troops around the Massachusetts towns of Lexington and Concord.

The American Revolution had begun.

"Seeds of Courage"

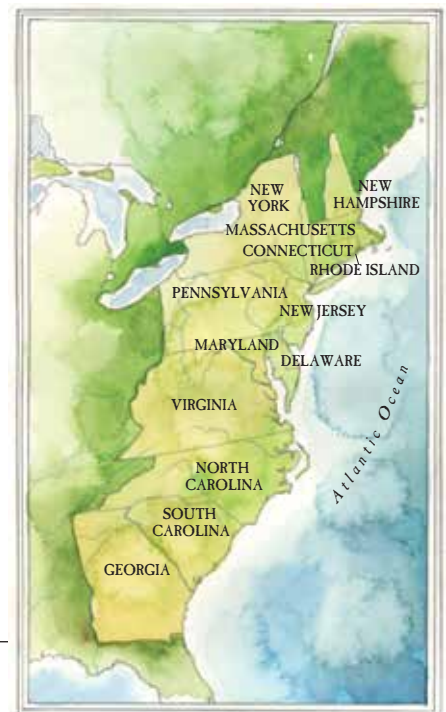
At first, the thought of fighting terrified Joseph. But soon, as he would later write, "the seeds of courage began to sprout." He pleaded with his grandparents to let him join the new American army, and in June 1776, they agreed. Carrying a musket and a Bible from his grandparents, along with a knapsack packed with clothing, cake, and cheese, Joseph sailed off to New York City, which had been turned into a massive army camp.

"I was now what I had long wished to be," he wrote. "A soldier."

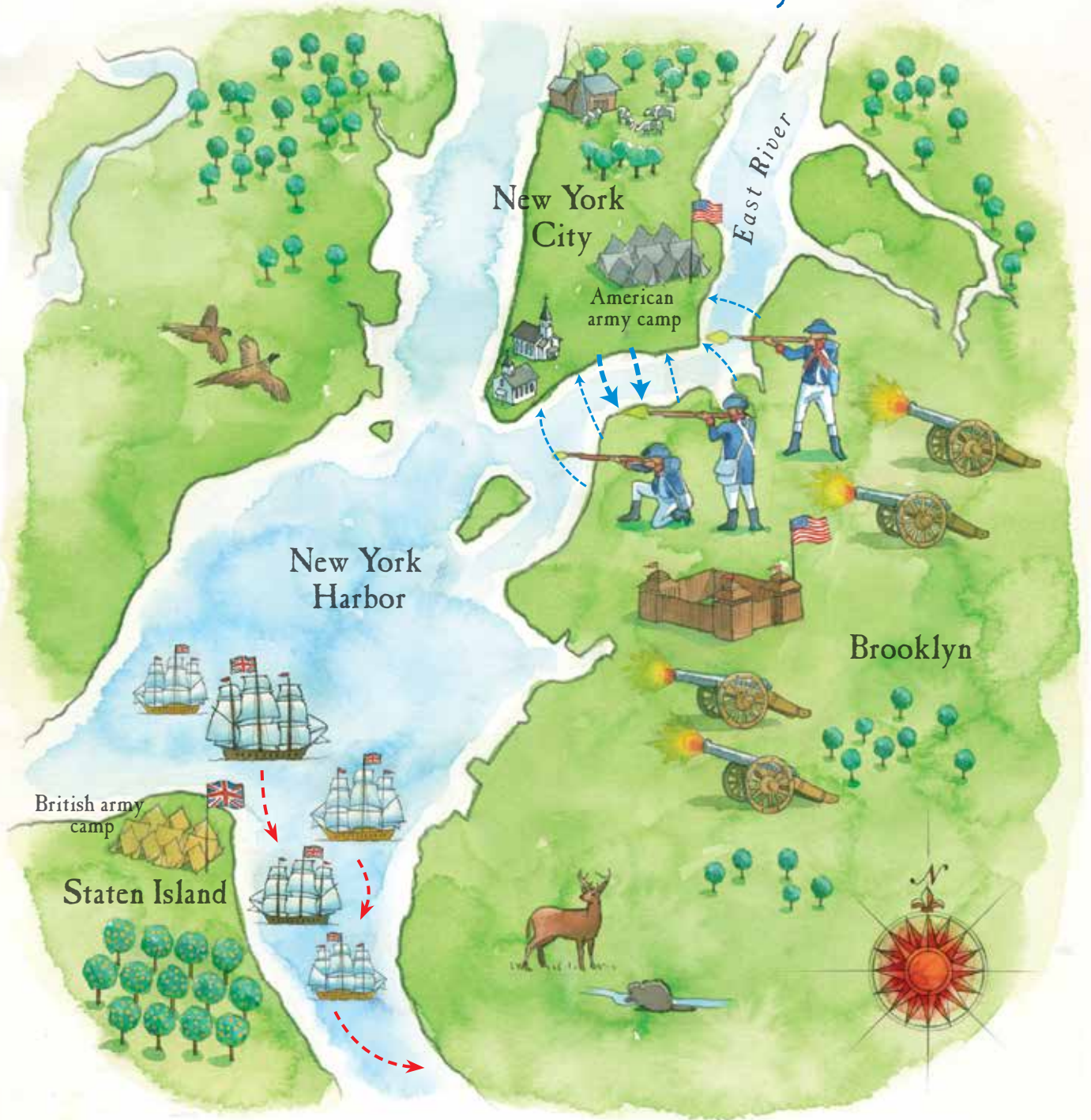
Except Joseph wasn't really a soldier—at least not yet. Neither were most of the other nearly 20,000 men and teenage boys who had joined the American army.

The 13 Colonies

During the American Revolution, what would become the United States was only a group of colonies along the East Coast.



The Battle of Brooklyn



Back home they were farmers, butchers, tailors, shop owners. Few had ever fought in a war; some barely knew how to fire a gun. What's more, the leader of

this **motley** crew, General George Washington, had never led an army. All summer, he struggled to turn his ragtag group into a trained fighting force.

Joseph did not complain about the ceaseless marching and shooting practice. He choked down army meals of corn mush, bland meat, and



If you lived in 1776

Life was different

Here are just a few of the ways:

Kids loved eel pie.

Pies filled with these long slimy fish were an American favorite.



Schools were just one room.

One teacher taught kids of all ages—together.



New shoes hurt.

There were no left or right shoes. It took months to break in a new pair.



wormy biscuits. And he coped with the sweltering summer heat and the stench of human waste that perpetually hung over camp.

Massive Attack

As Joseph and the other fledgling soldiers struggled through training, the British were busy making their own preparations. All summer long, British ships carrying soldiers and munitions streamed toward New York. Fearsome British soldiers—known as “redcoats” for the color of their uniforms—were highly trained and famous for their skill in battle.

By August, more than 32,000 redcoats were camped on Staten Island, just five miles south of New York City. Some 400 British ships were anchored nearby; 73 of those were warships **laden** with powerful cannons that could blast apart

a city block in minutes.

Joseph could plainly see those warships, waiting like ravenous predators for the right moment to strike. Yet he assumed America would be victorious in any battle.

He was wrong.

At the end of August, the British **commenced** their assault. Even before the first gunshot rang out, the Americans were doomed.

In the predawn darkness, more than 15,000 British soldiers began to creep toward Brooklyn, which at that time was a sparsely populated village barely a mile across the river from New York City. Only a few thousand American troops were stationed there. Most were hunkered down in six American forts—roughly constructed buildings protected by high walls and cannons. Other troops were on patrol across the area. All would be caught by surprise.

Over the next few days, Washington scrambled to send reinforcements to Brooklyn. Among those reinforcements was Joseph, his pockets stuffed with hard biscuits and his heart filled

Diary

“Learn to Be a Soldier”

An excerpt from the diary of Joseph Plumb Martin
Fall 1776

We remained on the battleground till nearly sunset, expecting the enemy to attack us again, but they showed no such inclination that day. The men were very much fatigued and faint, having had nothing to eat for forty-eight hours—at least the greater part were in this condition, and I among the rest. While standing on the field, after the action had ceased, one of the men near the Lieut. Colonel, complained of being hungry; the Colonel, putting his hand into his coat pocket, took out a piece of an ear of Indian corn, burnt as black as a coal, “Here,” said he to the man complaining, “eat this and learn to be a soldier.”

in Joseph's day.

There was no toilet paper.

People used corncobs to clean themselves.



with fear. He was rowed across the river, a trip that took about an hour.

When he stepped ashore in Brooklyn, a grisly scene greeted him: Men lay in the grass with gruesome injuries—broken arms, missing legs, gushing head wounds.

Joseph's regiment was ordered to a nearby creek, where they fought bravely. But the British forces outmatched them in size and might. Blast by fiery cannon blast, shot by crackling musket shot, the British mowed down the Americans. Hundreds were killed, injured, or taken prisoner. Those captured were doomed to almost certain death on the prison ships docked around New York City—filthy, rat-infested floating jails where thousands died of starvation and disease throughout the war.

Many Americans threw down their weapons and attempted to flee. Joseph watched in horror

as dozens of American soldiers drowned trying to escape across a deep pond. He helped drag bodies out of the water.

For three days, Joseph and his regiment fought the British troops. On the third day of fighting, the British closed in on the American forts, where thousands of soldiers—and Washington himself—were trapped. The situation was dire: If the British captured the soldiers in these forts, the war would certainly be lost and America's fight for freedom would end on the blood-soaked fields of Brooklyn.

Yet amid the blood and smoke and terror, Washington did not give up. Instead, he devised an **audacious** plan.

Cover of Darkness

As the battle in Brooklyn continued, an aide to General Washington managed to sneak out and get to New York City. He **dispatched** an urgent message: The Americans need boats in Brooklyn—now.

Within hours, dozens of boats, large and small, arrived on the shores of Brooklyn. Under the cover of darkness and fog, thousands of American soldiers—including Joseph—were stealthily ferried back to New York City.

After dawn, the British—unaware of what had transpired during the night—launched their attack on the six Brooklyn forts. But when they stormed inside, they discovered to their astonishment that every fort had been abandoned.

Somehow, the entire American army had slipped away.

Eight Long Years

The Americans lost the Battle of Brooklyn, but the American army survived. And they kept fighting.

The war lasted for eight long years. Fear and suffering gripped the colonies. Towns were burned, families were torn apart, and thousands perished in battle or from diseases that spread swiftly through crowded and dirty army camps. Many others died when soldiers spread illness to their families.

The war finally ended in September 1783. The British surrendered. America had won.

As for Joseph?

He fought throughout the entire war. He later married, moved to Maine, and raised five children. He lived to the age of 89. Throughout his long and full life, he never forgot what he had endured as a soldier, nor did he ever lose his pride in helping America win its freedom. ●

Writing Contest

Imagine you are Joseph Plumb Martin. Your cousin is thinking of joining the American army and wants your advice. Write him a letter about what he can expect if he joins and why you think he should or should not join. Draw on details from the article and diary entry. Send your letter to **American Revolution Contest**. Five winners will get *Scar: A Revolutionary War Tale* by J. Albert Mann.

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