

Terrible winter conditions, which were only beginning to abate in March 1780, epitomized the plight of soldiers serving in the Continental Army. The war was about to enter its fifth year, with no end in sight. The shortage of rations, inflated value of pay and allowances, and the lack of support for the war effort by the citizenry was taking a toll on morale.

In the Hudson Highlands, Brig. Gen. John Paterson, commander of Fortress West Point, watched the regiments of his garrison disintegrate. On March 31 he summarized the state of the Massachusetts Line to Maj. Gen. William Heath, commander of the Highlands Department. He missed the earlier times when “we once had a respectable soldiering, the men in high spirits, they then had confidence in the Justice and generosity of their Country, in which Confidence they fought...they endured hardships, cold hunger and every other inconvenience with pleasure.” Now he found that officers were resigning “by the dozens,” and the soldiers “are now counting days, months, hours and minutes they have to tarry in the service.” The result was that the four brigades on both sides of the Hudson numbered just 1,400 men, with a third to complete their service in three weeks. Paterson feared he could not make an adequate defense should the British threaten his command. Still, he was “making every exertion in our power to put the works in a State of defense against an attack.”

The Fifth New York Regiment, stationed with the Main Army in Morristown, New Jersey, was experiencing similar problems. Congress had authorized the regiment, made up of men from Orange and Ulster counties, in November 1776. It garrisoned Fort Montgomery (in the Highlands) in 1777 and lost 98 out of 312 men when the British stormed the fort that October. In 1779, the Fifth New York took part in the Sullivan-Clinton campaign against the Iroquois. By 1780, only 94 officers and men were fit for duty. Capt. John Francis Hamtramck, a company commander in the regiment, joined 65 other officers on February 1 in tendering his resignation to Washington, arguing that “the alarming Depreciation of the Currency in Which we are paid, renders us, not only incapable of supporting ourselves with any Decency, but makes it altogether impossible for those of us who have Families, to afford them the smallest Assistance.” While the officers would not carry out their threat to resign, their petition got the attention of Washington and New York Governor George Clinton. On March 10, Clinton promised the commander in chief that the legislature would address the problem; he also observed that “I am sensible their meritorious Services have not been hitherto properly noticed & their present distressed situation apologizes in some measure for their hasty Determination to quit the Service.”

Unfortunately, affairs were going to get worse before they got better: the fall of Charleston and the treachery of Maj. Gen. Benedict Arnold lay in the not-too-distant future.

To learn more about the Revolution in the Hudson River Valley, log onto <http://www.hudsonrivervalley.net> and <http://www.hudsonrivervalley.com>.

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