

On the Warpath

The great victory at Saratoga in October 1777 bore its first fruit (beyond the capture of the Convention Army) in February 1778. On February 6, Conrad Alexander Gerard, representing France's King Louis XVI, signed a Treaty of Amity and Commerce in Paris with three American envoys - Benjamin Franklin, Silas Deane, and Arthur Lee. Not only did this document recognize the independence from Great Britain of the "United States of North America," it also pledged that the French would be America's principal ally should war develop between her and the British, "their common Enemy." Great Britain found itself isolated as it pursued what would become a world war. The Continental Congress ratified the agreement on May 4, 1778, and war effectively commenced between France and England on June 17, when British ships fired on two French frigates off Portsmouth, England. A French fleet first appeared off New York on July 11. Congress' approval of the Treaty of Alliance will be remembered at Valley

Forge, Pennsylvania, on May 3-4 with a "French Alliance Celebration"; for more information, visit www.valleyforge.org/VF-PatCalendar-03.asp.

Back in New York, Maj. Gen. Israel Putnam, commander of troops in the Hudson Highlands, reported to Gen. Washington on February 13 that progress was being made at West Point. A barracks and huts for 300 men had been completed, and the "batteries near the water and the fort [Fort Clinton] to cover them, are laid out." While no fortifications had yet been erected, Putnam had ordered the most critical component of Fortress West Point: the chain that would block the Hudson River.

Putnam's work at West Point ended on February 14, when he turned command over to Brig. Gen. Samuel Holden Parsons. Parsons wrote to Gov. George Clinton on February 15 that "I came to this command in most disagreeable circumstances, nothing done, everything expected and wished for, and everything in confusion." The weather turned so bad that during Parson's first 21 days in command his troops were confined to their

shelters a third of the time. One of his regiments did not have a single blanket for its men, and "Very few have either a shoe or a shirt." Parsons clearly had his work cut out for him.

The construction of Fortress West Point and the military successes of the Continental Army depended on individual soldiers. Gen. Washington designed a Badge of Military Merit in 1782, presenting it to three soldiers at his headquarters in Newburgh. The modern Purple Heart as a combat award evolved from this badge. U.S. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, Rep. Maurice Hinchey, and State Senator William Larkin joined forces last October 22 at Washington's Headquarters to announce that August 7 would be Purple Heart Day. The date will honor the contributions in battle of America's soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines; a Purple Heart stamp should be available this year. - JIM JOHNSON

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