

The accounts of individual soldiers during wartime have worked to not only inform historians but to allow for insight into incidents, events and campaigns. These accounts may come in the form of audio, video, blogs, and social networking sites today. However, in the past journals, diaries, and memoirs probably serve as the best evidence of first hand accounts of the difficulties of war. Soldiers' accounts give a face and name to the sometimes nameless massive body at arms that we call our military. Details of mundane banalities, extraordinary circumstances, and the drudgery of everyday life at times provide a vivid picture of what it means to be a soldier. Sometimes conditions, mindset, and morale contribute to the overall success of a campaign or can dictate what happens next; by knowing these things one can more accurately describe and know what took place. The accounts of Revolutionary War soldier Joseph Plumb Martin through his memoirs help to provide this insight rarely seen from this era.

The record of J.P. Martin entitled, "Ordinary Courage", was edited by a descendent, James Kirby Martin. The book itself is interesting to me because I have never really seen an account like this for the Revolutionary War. There is quite a bit in the form of diaries and personal correspondence from the world wars and from Vietnam for example, but not from this time period. I also like the fact that J.K. Martin talks at length about J.P. as a common man and soldier. In the book J.K. states that he never commanded many men, never acquired much wealth, didn't invent anything notable, and was never a prominent political figure.

J.P. was an ordinary soldier born in 1760 in western Massachusetts. He was only 15 years old when he joined the army and saw his first combat. He died seemingly without much fanfare in Maine after living a long life. "Ordinary Courage" is a glimpse

at some of those years in between. More specifically, the text focuses on the campaign years of 1776-1783 from the recollections of J.P. It should be pointed out that the material represents the recollections of J.P. much later in life after, according to the text; he was convinced by others that he should write down his war stories. J.P. gives insight into weather and physical conditions, accommodations, injuries, battles, rations, and other anecdotes that illuminate the experience.

In his early period of enlistment J.P. actually enlisted for just 6 months. He indicated that if this were not an option he may not have enlisted at all. Martin also indicated that he was not well versed in the reasons for war prior to enlistment. He was able to gather ideas from other men in his regiment to create what he thought to be an informed opinion on the conflict. Martin also discusses the romantic notion of war that he himself succumbed to prior to enlistment, but certainly no longer felt afterwards. It's interesting that his account goes against the grain of more romantic presentations of the war even today. The book serves as a good contrary companion to some of the rose colored recollections from other writers and historians. There is a passage in the book that criticizes Bancroft's more favorable view of war, in favor of the biting account given by Martin.

Throughout the book Martin discusses battles at Monmouth, Philadelphia, and the Delaware River. One anecdote that stood out was when a member of Martin's regiment died in one of the first battles Martin participated in. The men solemnly dug the grave back at the camp and laid the man to rest as best they could (without any casket or covering). Two ladies from a nearby house came down to the grave site crying. They asked if the man's naked face would be covered in dirt. When they received an answer in

the affirmative, one of the women laid a white cloth over the man's face. Martin was amazed that even amongst men he hardly knew, the slain soldier had a proper burial with mourners and women (Martin was particularly excited that women could be there).

During battles and downtime alike the weather conditions were brutal. Often times shelter was unavailable and the nights were cold. To make matters worse men had to march extensively in the elements with little for supplies, and sometimes through rivers. Martin gives one account where the regiment crossed back and forth over the Schuylkill River near Philadelphia several times in a matter of days. The crossing took place during a period of extreme cold affecting the men's health, sleep, and fatigue. At camp men tried in vain to start fires by using flash powder on leaves. A great line from Martin concerning this is that when fire didn't work men would have to "lay with their three constant companions, fatigue, hunger, and, cold".

Other than the weather, rations were probably the biggest problem. Men were constantly hungry and sometimes didn't eat for days on end. Martin wrote about an incident where men came back to camp with no food rations and full whiskey rations. Needless to say they had a rough night by his account. During the 1777 campaign Martin mentioned an additional ration funded by the government for Thanksgiving. Men were to be provided with a feast. Unfortunately this meant that for the days leading up to Thanksgiving food was scarce or non-existent. Martin revealed the feast with such great sarcasm that to say the men were disappointed would be to engage in gross understatement. For their feast men received a "half a gill" (or a half pint) of rice and a tablespoon of vinegar. It helps to shed some light on the fact that Martin's regiment engaged in line mutiny over shortages of food and supplies during the 1780 campaign.

Martin's account is useful in that it provides details overlooked at times in this particular war. His attention to detail, ability to convey emotion, sarcasm, and humor all make "Ordinary Courage" a wonderful read. I think that Martin achieves his objective of making the war seem less romantic and harsher. It also helps to show that not everyone enlisted right away and that things like money and social status mattered as to whether a person stayed enlisted or not. For example, Martin indicates that if he had other prospects for work and money he would not have re-enlisted as a duration soldier when his six months were up.

From a teaching or pedagogical standpoint, this book could be used in a number of different ways. One way it might be used is to help students make real world connections. There are connections to be made with the current wars in the U.S. and this one. Things such as morale, conditions, or the knowledge of soldiers prior to enlistment could be examined. A discussion could be held on people's knowledge of the Middle East today versus people's knowledge of problems with Britain in the past. Martin talked about applying for a 15 day furlough to visit friends and family whom he missed dearly. We hear this message all the time from current troops. The assignment could also serve as a springboard to discuss civic duty. Perhaps students would like to write to soldiers currently overseas.

Another way that the book could be used is in a cooperative learning method. Students could be set up in a jigsaw classroom format with different accounts from different time periods. This could be run in two different ways. Students could be put into groups of five where each student has a different section. Students would then report back to the small group on what they read about. In another setup the small groups of

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students could discuss one section together first. Students then would report back in a large group setting what they learned from that particular section.

Obviously there are countless ways that material like this can be used. Drawing comparisons to other wars could be something. Comparing Martin's account with accounts from other wars specifically could be something else. Having students write their own letters based on what they know could be another way. The point is that it is something valid and helpful in the classroom.

This was an interesting read for me because I didn't know there was material out there like this. It reads pretty easily and would be appropriate for students. I think the most useful part of having a resource like this is to humanize and to bring reality to the conditions of war in general.

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