



Memoir of a Revolutionary Soldier: The Narrative of Joseph Plumb Martin

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A wide-eyed teenager during much of the Revolutionary War, Martin recounts in grim detail his harrowing confrontations with gnawing hunger, bitter cold, and the fear of battle.

Memoir of a Revolutionary Soldier: The Narrative of Joseph Plumb Martin Details

Date : Published March 13th 2012 by Dover Publications (first published January 1830)

ISBN :

Author : Joseph Plumb Martin

Format : Kindle Edition 178 pages

Genre : History, Military History, American Revolution, Nonfiction, Biography, American Revolutionary War, North American Hi..., American History, Autobiography, Memoir

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The Pirate Ghost (Formerly known as the Curmudgeon) says

A Great Veteran's Day Read

I started a much longer review, but there is not enough that can be said about this, and, saying too much tends to water down the overall impact. So, I'll keep it short and to the point, as much as I am able to anyway.

The autobiographical story of Joseph Plumb Martin is a must read for any citizen of the United States. Though it is relatively unappreciated compared to stories about Jefferson, Washington, Horatio Gates and even Benedict Arnold, this is the story of an everyman, a blue collar, hard working, farm kid who joined the Continental Army for much the same reasons that many join the all volunteer service today. His casual talk of camp life is reminiscent of life aboard ship while I was in the Navy and his straight foreword style is refreshing in a "that's the truth as I remember it" sort of way that brooks no argument.

This account is shocking, humorous and sometimes deep in the way Martin expresses much broader concepts without hinting that there are deeper ideas at work. Such as stating that throughout the war, there was only one person he took aim at and shot...what about all of the engagements where he fired every bullet in his gun? This is a distinction between an act of war, under orders with greater ideals in mind, and an act of anger. Though the target is fair enough, an enemy soldier in battle, the intent is different and this is why Martin remembers this one above all others, with remorse and regret at his action and passes any other person he wounded or fired at as somehow different.

Martin and his fellow Continental soldiers suffered many hardships and kept marching and fighting that would give modern soldiers (and sailors) room to pause and think twice. He went long periods of time without pay, months, and it seemed that he was nearly starving the entire war, subsiding on the oddest things that sometimes made him sick. He comments briefly on having a nightmare that sounds much like what victims of Acute Trauma experience and, given his story, should be expected. He manages to keep a sense of honor and, even in his darkest times maintains his sense of humor.

This is why this book needs to be read. Martin is just like you and I. He could be anyone. He's not famous. He's not rich. He's no politician or general. He's the drafted youngster in Vietnam and the volunteers that fought in every war and battle the United States has needed to fight. He's the rank and file enlisted man whose blood was spilled far more often and in greater quantity than any officer, gentleman or political leader. It's his back that dragged cannon to the front and his hand that fired the musket that won the nation's freedom. And above all, it's his suffering and strength to persevere unbelievably great hardships like hunger, fatigue, lack of proper clothing and extreme elements that every citizen owes a great debt too. Without Joseph Plumb Martin, and the few thousands like him, there would be no Great Nation like the United States.

The story of Joseph Martin is the story of the American "Cincinnatus" who comes to fight and give his all when called upon, then, puts down his sword when his time was done and went back to his farm. He is still owed his 160 acres of land and countless dollars in backed pay that he never saw.

This is the story about one of those men who gets little credit for great deeds, but to whom we, as a nation, owe an incredible debt of gratitude to. The American Enlisted Fighting Man, be he Sailor or Soldier, or

Airman. It's their blood, and the blood of those they fought beside that irrigated amber fields of grain and conquered purple mountains from sea to shining sea.

Deanna Against Censorship says

Very interesting from a historical perspective. A first hand account from the time.

Kristopher Swinson says

I was profoundly affected by this common soldier's account, to the verge of tears several times. Working as I do in dispensing veterans' benefits essentially as bountiful as at any time in our history, it served as a useful reminder not to let up in gratitude. His generation literally served for nothing, and poor repayment ever after. He restored a great deal of vibrancy to the history, including warnings to historians not to censure what they don't understand, and humorous anecdotes such as exchanging retorts with the British. He doesn't pull punches on the inhumanities he witnessed.

I took time to share with my mother this touching scene recalling when women claimed their femininity and men chivalrously honored it, or as she said, "women's special ability is caring" (26): "We proceeded, just in the dusk of evening, to commit the poor man, then far from friends and relatives, to the bosom of his mother earth. Just as we had laid him in the grave, in as decent a posture as existing circumstances would admit, there came from the house, towards the grave, two young ladies, who appeared to be sisters;--as they approached the grave, the soldiers immediately made way for them, with those feelings of respect which beauty and modesty combined seldom fail to produce, more especially when, as in this instance, accompanied by piety. Upon arriving at the head of the grave, they stopped, and with their arms around each other's neck, stooped forward and looked into it, and with a sweet pensiveness of countenance which might have warmed the heart of a misogynist [sic], asked if we were going to put the earth upon his naked face; being answered in the affirmative, one of them took a fine white gauze handkerchief from her neck and desired that it might be spread upon his face, tears, at the same time, flowing down their cheeks. After the grave was filled up they retired to the house in the same manner they came. Although the dead soldier had no acquaintance present, (for there were none at his burial who knew him,) yet he had mourners, and females too. Worthy young ladies! You, and such as you, are deserving the regard of the greatest of men. What sisters, what wives, what mothers and what neighbours would you make!--Such a sight as those ladies afforded at that time, and on that occasion, was worthy, and doubtless received the attention of angels."

His remarks that little notice is taken of the feats performed in the absence of renowned men (54) are duly noted. Yet, "Alexander never could have conquered the world without private soldiers" (1). Their endurance, in informed retrospect, is astonishing. "Dispersion, I believe, was not thought of,--at least, I did not think of it,--we had engaged in the defence of our injured country and were willing, nay, we were determined to persevere as long as such hardships were not altogether intolerable" (58). That he could casually remark on the routineness of going between 2 and 4 days without food, hunger forming a more or less constant portion of the narrative, adds to an account of near mutiny in demanding rations from their officers. How ill used they were in expectation of performance for which they weren't provisioned echoes Alma 60:9. 103: "The men were now exasperated beyond endurance; they could not stand it any longer; they saw no other alternative but to starve to death, or break up the army, give all up and go home. This was a hard matter for

the soldiers to think upon; they were truly patriotic; they loved their country, and they had already suffered every thing short of death in its cause; and now, after such extreme hardships to give up all, was too much; but to starve to death was too much also. What was to be done?--Here was the army starved and naked, and there their country sitting still and expecting the army to do notable things while fainting from sheer starvation. All things considered, the army was not to be blamed. Reader, suffer what we did and you will say so too."

Amid his proper observations that a regular army was essential to bear the burden for which the militia was not suited (164), in recounting the various trials of 8 years' service with but one instance of pay after August 1777, this offers fit summation for my unintended review: "Almost every one has heard of the soldiers of the Revolution being tracked by the blood of their feet on the frozen ground. This is literally true; and the thousandth part of their sufferings has not, nor ever will be told" (161).

Gary Hoggatt says

First published in 1830, Joseph Plumb Martin's *Memoir of a Revolutionary Soldier* is a remarkable account of the Revolutionary War as experienced by Martin, who first enlisted as a private in 1776, was promoted to sergeant in 1780, and finally left the army after the war concluded in 1783. There are many memoirs, biographies, and histories that center on the generals and political leaders of the Revolution, but Martin provides us with the everyman's perspective, and does so with intelligence and humor.

Originally published anonymously under the title *A narrative of some of the adventures, dangers, and sufferings of a Revolutionary soldier*, interspersed with anecdotes of incidents that occurred within his own observation, Martin sets out to give the reader insight into the difficulties faced by the brave soldiers who fought under the famous generals of the war. Martin does an excellent job of it.

The battles themselves occur very rarely, and consist more of chaos, fear, and luck than bravery or brilliance. A great deal more time is spent marching, freezing, and starving, and Martin dutifully conveys this. I had always been amazed at how the Continental Army won the war with such little material support from the populace, but hearing Martin's description of marching for days with no rations, eating only what can be scavenged from the land, really brings to life the courage and dedication possessed by the soldiers of the Revolution.

It's not all grim. Martin does a good job of putting a humorous spin on his constant hunger and fatigue, generating sympathy instead of boring the reader. Further, Martin doesn't shy away from describing the misadventures that he and his comrades in arms undertook during the war. From encounters with citizens, to pranks on officers, to foolish antics, Martin is not afraid of portraying himself as less than perfect. It's a very frank view Martin provides, and it does a lot to make him someone the reader cares about as he marches and starves. Martin never makes himself out a hero, just someone doing what he can for his country in difficult circumstances.

I've read many other histories and biographies of the Revolutionary era, and I have to say that Martin's memoir now rank among my favorites. The perspective of the common soldier is so different than most of the work focused on this period, and Martin really is a very clever and engaging writer.

I highly recommend Joseph Plumb Martin's *Memoir of a Revolutionary Soldier* to anyone interested in the Revolutionary War. Martin is an excellent writer, and his perspective is a unique and valuable one. I've

definitely developed a greater appreciation for the brave Americans who served in the Continental Army after reading this book.

Les says

An interesting narrative of Joseph Plumb Martin's service during the American Revolution. It's not filled with details of battles as much as it is with scenes from a soldier's daily life. One thing I wish he wrote more on was why he endured all those hardships. He mentioned love for the country, but wonder what that exactly means. At the end, he describes the broken promises made to the veterans. I had read about with passing interest, but this made it much more personal. A large debt of gratitude is owed to Joseph Plumb Martin and to the others who fought to create this country.

Joseph R. Howard says

One of the few books actually written by a veteran of the Revolution, and I appreciated that very much. The book can be slow at times, funny at other times, and then very sad in others. The first-hand accounts of starvation and freezing is so unfortunate, but it should make anyone appreciate what those men did back then. If you're looking for a book that has first-hand accounts of violent battles where blood and guts are flying all over the place, then this is not the book for you. There are very few battle accounts by Martin, and the ones he does speak of are vague with very little detail.

If you take into account that the book was written by a man who was in his seventies at the time, and also remember that people spoke differently back then than we do now, you should be fine. It is a very quick read. If you read a lot, then you should be able to finish this book in a weekend.

All-in-all, I think it's worth reading and would be a nice addition to any high school or middle school survey American history course.

Nick says

"Here we suffered again for eatables."

This single sentence sums up the bulk of this rather dark story. Martin was a Continental for the duration of the war, and his memoir encompasses the whole of the revolutionary soldier's experience. This book is one of the best possible resources for someone wanting to peel back the veneer of patriotic fervor attached to the period. The commentary essays point out that never once does Joseph mention "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." He takes it for granted that these are things he already has, and he has very little regard for the highfalutin rhetoric of officers and statesmen. If this were a movie, it would be the gritty, edgy retelling of the war through a morally ambiguous lens. Disney it ain't. Most of his story concerns how little the country cares for the army, and how little men in power are able to do for the soldiers. We all know the Continentals were starved and naked, but it's here that you will find it in unblinking detail, stripped of all romance. What little fighting actually makes it into the novel is desperate and unheroic. And yet, as it removes the glitter, it replaces it with a much more solid sense of just what to appreciate about the Revolution. It's all too often that the imagery of the war is co-opted by this or that political group, or it becomes just part of the hackneyed patriotism that accompanies hotdogs and fireworks. This book is good for sifting through historiographical bullshit.

Several things were especially cool for a historian. This is written decades after the war, but Martin never seems to hesitate in referring to revolutionaries as "Americans" and the British as the "British." This is important to note, again, when our images of the period are muddled by popular reinvention and over two centuries of history. Some books point out that Washington toasted King George's health, others Franklin's fervent ant-German feeling, and of course anyone who's read about the Revolution is familiar with the caveat that Paul Revere probably didn't say "the British are coming" because at the time they considered themselves British. For Martin, however, it seems that the average American was quite comfortable with a national/regional identity that separated him not only from the British and other "oldcountrymen," but even Pennsylvanians and Virginians. Even though Martin is only one perspective, it's not hard to imagine his perspective shared by many.

It's not an easy read. Martin wasn't exactly a litterateur; his inconsistent spelling and strange structure are preserved. Even so, while the stories about starving and freezing get repetitive, he is actually quite funny. He sends up wry commentary and depicts tragically hilarious scenes. Like the part with the cat and the bench made of two barrels. Just read it. Most of the book is composed of such writing, such as an especially funny scene where in 1777, they are ordered to observe a thanksgiving, and attend the sermons. The feast they are given to celebrate, Martin records, is a half cup of rice and a tablespoon of vinegar.

This is a more-than-worthwhile read for a history buff of either the American Revolution or the 18th century in general; and for anyone else, Martin's story about young men in terrible situations will always be fresh.

Bob says

One of few personal accounts of the Revolutionary War written by the common soldier in the ranks of Continental Army. What makes this book the best is that it covers almost the entire war and is well written, with humor and keen observations. I read this book over 30 years ago, and the two things that stand out in my mind are Martin's descriptions of always being hungry and the time he saw a white woman living with a black man, as he described, in a husband and wife situation, in Virginia. It surely surprised and amazed him.

It is no wonder that this book is oft quoted for sources regarding the foot soldier of the American Revolution. I have a hardbound edition published by N. W. Ayers still in my library. I will always keep it because it is that good of a book.

James Spurgeon says

I actually wanted to give this book 3 1/2 stars instead of just 3. It is a definite read for anyone studying the American Revolution. Joseph Plumb Martin was an enlisted soldier during the length of the war. Though he doesn't give a personal hand-by-hand account of the major battles he was involved in (though there are some details), he is able to give us a glimpse into the world of what the ordinary enlisted soldier had to endure while serving our new nation. Most of us have heard the infamous stories before of our soldiers starving and having no clothes, but Joseph Plumb Martin gives us the details and let's us know how bad it really was. He does address the reader in several places throughout his memoir. JPM wrote his personal story from memory long after the war was over when he was at an older age so some details are sketchy even for him. :)

Grampus says

I've always enjoyed reading diaries and/or narratives they always make me wish I could have been there to live the events with them but not in this case!

This narrative is the unique perspective of a young man as a private in the Revolutionary War. I've read many books on this war from the perspective of Washington or other leaders in the war but this is the first I've come across it through a simple foot soldier's eyes—and what a difference there is between those perspectives. While he had many “adventures”, the hardships he endured were remarkable.

How he was able to stay committed to the cause for all those years with infrequent pay, clothing, or food is a testament to our early patriots and their dedication to fighting for the cause of American liberty.

Jerri says

My son recommended that I read this. He is a history buff and was captivated by this narrative written by a revolutionary war soldier--not during the war but years later. I approached it with some trepidation, but I also found myself amazed to be reading such an honest work some 200 years after it was written--finding opinions and situations that might be similar to those of a soldier or veteran today. The introduction and afterward give depth and understanding along with a credibility afforded by scholars. Martin admits that he is not writing a history but merely writes of the adventures and struggles he experienced during the campaigns in which he served. He writes of George Washington and Lafayette as he met them--not as the historical icons we see them to be.

Brian Mumford says

What a treasure of a book. Joe Martin was a teenager when he joined the Continental Army in 1775 and spent the next eight years suffering as most of the soldiers did until they won our independence. We're lucky this soldier took the time to pen his memoirs about his experience in the war of independence. It's one of the best descriptions we have about the war--maybe the best--and it's a great reminder about what our veterans of the American Revolution went through both before and after the war. Martin's book should be mandatory reading for everyone before they graduate high school.

Bob Schmitz says

This short book is apparently the most complete of the few first person accounts of an ordinary American soldier during the Revolutionary war. You will not get the sweep of battles or strategy but only the recollections of what happened to the Joseph Martin. I did use Wikipedia to look up some of the incidents and battles and they are as he describes. The information is eye-opening and the story is told with amusing and fanciful language that it is a pleasure to read. An example:

“We've this forenoon passed through a pretty village, called Maidenhead; (don't stare, dear reader, I did not

name it.) An hour or two before we came to this place, I saw a pretty lady standing in the door of the house, just by the side of the road. I very innocently inquired of her how far it was to Maidenhead; she answered, "5 miles." One of my men, who, though young, did not stand a very eminent danger of being hanged for his beauty, observed to the young lady, "that he thought the commodity scarce in the market, since he had to go so far to seek it." "Don't trouble yourself," she said, "about that there is no danger of it's being more scarce on your account." The fellow heard and I believe wished he had held his tongue."

He enlisted at 15 to get away from hard farm work in Connecticut. Much of the narrative describes long marches and hunger which he says were worse than any labor or battles. Often he and the other men often did not eat for days. They march all across the Mid-Atlantic States once walking 90 miles in 24 hours. One Thanksgiving the troops are given vinegar and rice as their meal. He describes mutinous situations at winter camp when the soldiers assemble with their rifles on the parade ground without being ordered to. This was understood by all to be a threat to the officers about conditions. One lucky winter he ate better as he was on a foraging party which begged, requisitioned or simply stole food and from surrounding farms. At some point they receive Indian corn meal but have no idea of how to prepare it into something palatable. He does say that the deprivations of food lessened in the last four years of the war after Holland and France lent the U.S. money. The troops were often ragged and shoeless. You could follow the troops by the bloody footprints left by shoeless soldiers in the snow including his.

He talks a lot about moving about following the British and retreating from them but rarely engaging them in battle. He mentions pursuing and fighting against Hessians and fighting beside French soldiers at Yorktown. At one point his group is talking across a ravine to British soldiers where there seem to be a tacit agreement not to harm each other. He describes one skirmish early in the war where all of the American soldiers simply drop their guns and knapsacks and flee when attacked. In another skirmish his small group of soldiers is chased by British soldiers and he is wounded by a saber wielded by his childhood friend who has enlisted in the British army. He ponders as he runs away whether that friend told the other Brits not to shoot or whether they had simply not had time to reload.

He does see a number of notables including Lafayette, Benedict Arnold and even Washington and of learning the drills of Baron von Steuben at Valley Forge.

The world was clearly different then. He talks of flocks of birds blackening the sky, of an 8 foot sturgeon leaping into their boat on the Hudson, of seeing magnificent aurora borealis at night. He uses the term jack-o'-lantern to refer to the glowing of swamp gases, the latest idea being that they are a species of glow-worm in their butterfly state.

Great devastation was wreaked by the British in their passage through patriot areas burning houses, destroying tools and furniture, killing livestock, cutting down orchards. He mentions groups of roving Tories called Cowboys or refugees that attack small groups of soldiers and destroy US warehouses etc.

He clearly considers himself from Connecticut and mentions the different dress speech and strange behavior of people from Pennsylvania, Virginia or New Jersey.. He describes the pranks that soldiers play on the officers and on each other. He describes hungry half-fed, half-clothed soldiers marching off against orders to get into the fight.

On a number of missions by himself or in small groups and he describes the fear and uncertainty and not knowing which farm houses contained Tories or Americans. He is invited in and given food and a place to sleep at some houses but refused a drink of water and others.

If Yorktown he is in the miner and sapper brigade and describes digging trenches and making bulwarks undercover darkness very close to British lines while a small group of American soldiers elsewhere built numerous campfires and marched around to distract the British. It was here that Gen. Washington came right up to the trenches to inspect them. Interestingly the password at Yorktown was Rochambeau, a French nobleman fighting on the American side. His is now used in ultimate Frisbee for the rock-paper-scissors way of settling arguments.

After Yorktown a great number of slaves who had gone over to the British side are let go and sent by the Americans back to their masters. He has no compunction about this. Another time he meets a white woman married to a black man and is aghast and disturbed and leaves as soon as possible.

He describes being vaccinated for smallpox which in fact gave the soldiers a mild case of smallpox that sometimes killed them. He also had yellow fever that nearly took his life. He describes in detail the manner in which winter cabins were made, interesting detail for a historian.

At the announcement of the end of the war there was no great cheer from the enlisted men. He felt a degree of sadness knowing that he would be parting from this family of brothers. Upon enlisting the soldiers had been promised clothing and food of specific amounts during the war which was never delivered. He was only paid a few times. Upon enlistment men were also promised after the war clothing, food, land and money to establish a homestead in the state or an adjoining state from which they came. None of this came to pass. In fact they were shunned by much of the populace after the war for they were a ragged dirty poor and often invalid group of men. Presidents Washington and Monroe were the only presidents to mention anything about providing pensions or care for veterans.

Wayne Walker says

In 1775, Joseph Plumb Martin (November 21, 1760 – May 2, 1850) was a wide-eyed fifteen-year-old boy who decided to leave his grandfather's Connecticut farm and join the Continental Army, first as a private then a sergeant, to fight the English during the American War for Independence. During the next eight years, he participated in some early battles, such as White Plains, Kipp's Bay, and Redbank; spent the famous winter of 1777-1778 near Valley Forge, though not in the camp itself but at Milltown between Philadelphia and Lancaster; and was at Cornwallis's 1781 surrender in Yorktown. His term of duty actually lasted a couple of years past the end of hostilities, and he retired from service in 1783 at the ripe old age of 23.

However, this narrative, written from memory when Martin was seventy, is basically an account of gnawing hunger, bitter cold, and the fear of battle that accompanied Martin and his fellows as they criss-crossed the mid-Atlantic states, went south to Virginia, and then returned north after the British surrender at Yorktown. He records in grim detail his harrowing experiences with staggering losses of human life and the agony of long marches, balancing them with humorous stories about excursions for hunting, fishing, and other diversions. He also mentions his connections to "the Commander-in-chief," the infamous General Charles Lee, the traitor Benedict Arnold, and even the spy Major Andre. Being the fullest existing description of the Revolutionary War by an enlisted man, the book is an excellent first-hand source material for the American Revolution and will help students understand what it must have been like to have fought in that war. The St. Louis (MO) Post-Dispatch said that it is "one of the best firsthand accounts of war as seen by a private soldier."

There are several references to drinking alcohol—wine, whiskey, brandy, ale, and especially rum. Forms of

the “d” word are found a few times, but they are written “d---d” or “d---n,” though I don’t know whether this was done by Martin or by an editor. In one such instance “the Commander-in-chief” said it with reference to General Lee, who undoubtedly deserved it, but Martin wrote that “it was certainly very unlike him.” Also the “h” word and the term “son of a b---h” (written that way) are each used once. Some of the descriptions of battle are blunt but not overly graphic. Martin must have been well-versed in the Scriptures because there are numerous Bible quotations and references throughout. I picked this book up in the gift shop while visiting Valley Forge National Historical Park. Though there is really nothing in the book that is inappropriate for anyone, the style of writing would make it more suitable and of interest to older teens and adults. A version for children and younger readers down to age nine entitled *Yankee Doodle Boy: A Young Soldier's Adventures in the American Revolution* has been adapted and published in 1995 by Holiday House.

Hotavio says

Joseph Plumb Martin reflects towards the end of his life on his days as a soldier during the Revolutionary War. His thoughts cover his intense sufferings, particularly the struggle with starvation, but also with a few fierce battles, close-calls, and the general mischief that a young adult is wont to get into.

Martin has a wonderful sense of humor and, provided that the reader can discern what he is talking about, is apt make one laugh on some of his hijinks or playful introspections, even when acknowledging his multiple brushes with death. The ultimate realization in this book is that while the Revolutionary War is often recognized as a "clean" and "noble" occurrence, it was often anything but. There was mass dissention amongst patriots and a surprisingly low level of support for the cause of independence, as well as lackluster support of American troops on behalf of the fledgling country.
