

# *George Weedon: Discipline at Valley Forge*

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The winter encampment of General George Washington's Continental Army throughout late 1777 and early 1778 has lived on in the public memory of the Revolution as an example of the patriot cause in its finest hour. Perhaps no period from the Revolutionary struggle better encapsulates the underdog, hard-fought, desperate effort for independence than the Commander-in-Chief surviving a brutally cold, harsh winter with his troops. Persisting through those three months represented a triumph of American spirit in the toughest of times, a narrative appealing to anyone searching for revolutionary heroism.

While the severe lack of food, clothing, and basic comforts have come to characterize the story of Valley Forge (Jones 8), this does not account for the pivotal role played by Washington's strict army discipline. Continental Army troops were often young men enlisting for lack of other economic options (Jones 10). Instead of a united group of patriots serving for the cause of liberty and independence, soldiers under Washington's command were prone to insubordination and lacking discipline. To bring this ragtag group through the winter ready to fight, Washington needed a system of punishment to bring offenders in line. Courts-martial served not only to punish soldiers but brought a broader conception of unified military values to a group without fighting experience. Washington took great care to oversee army discipline. He appointed officers presiding at courts-martial and personally reviewed each verdict, reducing or commuting sentences as he saw fit to balance discipline and army values (Jones 11). Supply chain woes, food shortages, and insufficient clothing were external forces acting against Washington's Army, but the story of Valley Forge must also be told through Washington's responses to the threats of disorder he faced through the winter.

General George Weedon's *Valley Forge Orderly Book* provides a way to tell such a story. Weedon was a Continental Army general who previously served under Washington in the French and Indian War. Historian Harry Ward points to Weedon's time as a tavernkeeper in his native Virginia as an important developmental stage for his patriotic views. Weedon's tavern counted Washington and other Virginian founding fathers as among its patrons, adding a personal dimension to his relationship with the Commander-in-Chief. As one of four Virginians to reach the rank of general early in the war and serve through its conclusion, Weedon's papers make up one of the most detailed, complete accounts of revolutionary military life. To record his time at Valley Forge, Weedon wrote and compiled the *Valley Forge Orderly Book*, a highly detailed diary of life at Valley Forge. The *Orderly Book* is organized into daily entries spanning from August 20, 1777 to May 7, 1778. In addition to Valley Forge, Weedon discusses broader army movements through Brandywine, Germantown, and Warren Tavern.

The sometimes-mundane details of daily army life are front and center in Weedon's account. Army food, provisions, disease prevention, celebrations, and grooming standards are all included. Weedon also includes any orders issued for each date by Washington. A key thread throughout his account is the great importance placed by Washington on measures to create discipline among the troops. Many of the orders relayed by Weedon include Washington's approval or disapproval of court-martial decisions. As Weedon wrote contemporaneously with his army service, the *Valley Forge Orderly Book* provides a highly detailed account of how Washington not only persevered through the Valley Forge winter but also led undisciplined young men from all walks of life to create one of the most inspiring tales of American spirit in our nation's history.

General Weedon's orderly book entry for December 26, 1777, is dedicated to a court-martial procedure held that day and provides a detailed glimpse into how both Weedon and Washington viewed discipline in the Continental Army. Captain Jonathan Symmes was appointed the President of the Court and captains from several brigades, including the "Muhlenburgs, second Pennsylvania,

Glovers, Huntingtons, & McIntosh's Brigades" rounded out the panel (Weedon 167). Geographic diversity helped ensure soldiers received a fair hearing. However, Washington ultimately chose whether to approve each sentence. This particular court-martial was convened to prosecute crimes and robberies committed by Continental Army soldiers near the Schuylkill River, not far from the Valley Forge campsite. While Weedon claims that the offenses under prosecution would have been "unwarrantable" even in enemy territory, these crimes were committed "against our friends," making them worthy of severe punishment (Weedon 168). Weedon highlights how every soldier suffers the reputational harm that such offenses bring against the Continental Army, a key concern given the presence of loyalist sentiments across the colonies throughout the revolutionary period. Notably, Weedon does not discuss the specific harms suffered by the population because of the soldiers' actions. Courts-martial were not always oriented towards specific redress for the victim of a crime, even if the victim was a civilian, but were instead methods of enforcing military discipline and Washington's army values.

Hostile actions taken by Continental Army soldiers against the civilian population had become a serious issue for army leadership. Wayne Bodle's account of the broader Valley Forge period describes how soldiers who had become "unattached" from a unit had taken the liberty of patrolling the countryside (Bodle 105). Such operations sometimes degenerated into harassing, stopping, and looting civilians. General Anthony Wayne, a resident of nearby Chester County, heard many civilian complaints about the impact of such behavior. Crimes committed against the civilian population harmed not only local support of the Army, but also militia units, since members felt compelled to return home and defend their property from such incursions (Bodle 105). Major John Clark described the soldiers involved as "no better than as many highway robbers" (Bodle 105). Putting an immediate stop to such behavior became a top priority for Washington.

Weedon relays several specific orders given by Washington on December 26 in response to the offenses committed. First, only officers holding a rank high enough to be in command of a regiment were authorized to give passes to leave camp. Second, soldiers and non-commissioned officers were not to be in possession of their arms unless on duty. Third, any non-commissioned officer or soldier caught beyond the boundaries of the camp with a weapon or without a pass was subject to confinement. Fourth, roll must be called at varying times throughout the evening with those absent subject to strict punishment. Fifth, all wagons and horses must be inspected every morning and evening and those responsible for them must remain nearby to watch for any soldier attempting to take them for unauthorized purposes. These measures were quite simple in nature. However, they were effective at instilling formal discipline among a fighting force in which some were accustomed only to the demands of one master in civilian life. Restrictions on soldiers' behavior both instilled discipline valuable for broader military goals and helped prevent reputational damage arising from nefarious behavior towards civilians. Continental Army units were also replaced with local militia for patrol duty when possible, helping to ease tension with the local population and prevent frustration with Army supply challenges from impairing military readiness (Bodle 106).

Washington did not always rubber stamp the decisions of court-martial panels. Weedon's January 3, 1778, entry discusses the court-martial of Captain Courtly, charged with leaving a Hoitz, a piece of artillery, in the field during the Battle of Brandywine. The panel, after hearing evidence against him, concluded that Captain Courtly was guilty of behaving in a "cowardly unsoldierly like manner" (Weedon 177). His punishment, given his previous record as a sufficiently brave officer, was to be reprimanded by General Knox in front of his fellow artillery officers. Washington, having reviewed the proceedings, opted to release Captain Courtly without public censure. Weedon does not state a reason for Washington's decision, but this entry highlights Washington's personal involvement with army discipline. While he appointed trusted officers to court-martial panels, Washington still believed

that his direct involvement was necessary to ensure punishment reflected his conception of military values.

The beginning of 1778 marked a turning point for Valley Forge discipline. Historian Keith Marshall Jones' account of Valley Forge disciplinary trends describes how courts-martial per thousand troops increased fivefold, from 3.1 trials per thousand to 14.9 (Jones 16). Conviction rates also spiked from 57.8% in the last quarter of 1777 to 75.4% in the first quarter of 1778. Washington needed to crack down on what he described as an army "captivated by their own folly and carelessness" (Jones 19). Enlisted soldiers were not the only targets of Washington's new year crackdown. Nearly one in twenty officers were prosecuted in the initial months of 1778. Such prosecutions were more common than those against soldiers. Only 33 soldiers were prosecuted compared to 51 officers during the first quarter of 1778 (Jones 20). This represented a dramatic shift from the prior three years, which saw soldiers face 75.1% of court-martial actions (Jones 20). This distribution shows Washington's concern over the moral character and example shown by his officer corps. Theft, cowardice, and ungentlemanly behavior were among the offenses for which officers faced prosecution. Washington believed that discipline and proper behavior could flow through the officer corps to their soldiers. Officers were not only to be feared but also respected as examples of military virtue. At Valley Forge, bringing the soldiers in line meant bringing their officers in line with them.

Weedon's orderly book entry dated February 6, 1778, describes a prosecution consistent with Washington's crackdown on the officer corps. The officer on trial was Lieutenant William Williams of the 13<sup>th</sup> Virginia Regiment. Lieutenant Williams' alleged offense was "repeatedly behaving Unbecoming the character of an Officer and a Gentleman" (Weedon 223). Weedon identifies three elements of Williams' offense: purchasing a pair of shoes from a soldier, sleeping nearby and eating with soldiers, and stealing some bread. After the court-martial procedure, Williams was acquitted of taking a soldier's bread but convicted on the other two counts. The punishment for these offenses:

discharge from service in the Continental Army. Washington approved the sentence to be carried out immediately.

Such a severe punishment reflects Washington's commitment to building an officer corps that conducted itself honorably. Purchasing a pair of shoes from an enlisted soldier deprived the soldier of equipment necessary for his own duties, a fact mentioned in Weedon's account, and showed that Lieutenant Williams placed his own comfort in the harsh Valley Forge conditions over his soldier's readiness for duty. It is possible that such offenses, minor as they may seem, would have been ignored or deemed unworthy of such a dramatic punishment in a different context. However, Washington required a higher standard from his army to survive the brutal conditions at Valley Forge. Officers must conduct themselves honorably in all areas of camp life, not simply on the battlefield.

Valley Forge courts-martial were not limited to Continental Army soldier and officers. Civilians were also tried and convicted for supporting British forces in Philadelphia. Weedon's February 8, 1778, entry describes how ten civilians were tried for violating a "resolve of Congress" prohibiting the offering of supplies or intelligence to British troops (Weedon 226). Carrying flour, mutton, beef, cattle, sheep, and general communications into Philadelphia were all deemed to be offenses subject to military jurisdiction, even when committed by civilians. Two civilians were acquitted and the remainder were sentenced to a variety of fines, imprisonment, and whippings. The fines assessed were to be put towards the horsemen responsible for apprehending the civilians and the care of the sick in the camp. However, Washington did not entirely agree with this expansive view of military jurisdiction. Only the whippings and imprisonment assessed by the panel were approved. Washington saw the taking of property via fines to be beyond the reach of martial law. Such proceedings were "irregular" in the broader context of the war and provided an outlet to vent frustration while giving Washington the opportunity to approve only punishments falling within military authority (Bodle 174). The army did show some compassion in its punishment of loyalists; a

surgeon was to attend the whippings and ensure that those convicted did not “receive more stripes than their strength will bear” (Weedon 228).

Formal disciplinary processes and orders were not the only means by which Washington could improve the state of his army. Bodle explains how Washington saw many of the hostilities displayed by his troops as reactions to “acute” hunger and other supply challenges faced by the army throughout the winter (Bodle 106). However, Washington also amplified the extent of these challenges to support the army’s interests, particularly during the February 1778 crisis (Bodle). By making the situation seem more dire than it truly was in letters to civilian leaders, Washington could more effectively marshal political and financial support. Instilling discipline required not only targeting soldiers directly but also working with political leaders and other outside forces to improve conditions for his troops. Army supplies were not only a material factor contributing towards broader military success. Washington’s magnification of his army’s sufferings represent how political support from afar could impact discipline at the lowest level of army life.

Continental Army discipline at Valley Forge shows that Washington was keenly aware of the need to turn a group of unfocused, energetic, and desperate young men into a coherent fighting force. Instead of passively guiding his men through the winter, Washington took control of his army, particularly the officer corps, and created a disciplinary system designed to impart military values to men lacking previous military experience. Courts-martial were led by men hand-picked by Washington. He personally approved or modified all sentences. By cracking down on officer misconduct at the start of 1778, the court-martial system kept army leaders accountable and prioritized honorable leadership over cowardice. While the court-martial system was never designed as a truly impartial system of justice, Washington was sure to impose limits on its use, particularly against civilians, to best maintain the public standing of the army.

The discipline shown by the army throughout the challenges of Valley Forge life was noted at the time. One officer claimed that Continental Army privates were “the best in the world Else they would Mutiny and Desert in Bodys” (Bodle 130). Another officer wrote to his father during the campaign that his troops “possess a Docility, and patience which astonish foreigners,” implying that the British would have failed at Valley Forge where Washington’s army succeeded (Bodle 131). While troops lacked the formality found in European fighting forces, they avoided any tendency towards large-scale mutiny (Bodle 130). Resentments were taken out against civilians but never boiled over into an organized attempt at challenging Washington’s leadership.

For many, Valley Forge occupies a prominent place in the story of the Revolutionary War. A tale of turning desperate winter conditions into military success is understandably captivating. But material factors cannot account for the entirety of the Valley Forge story. Washington’s decisive action to bring discipline to his army throughout the winter must be remembered as an important step in the war effort. Hungry soldiers surviving dire circumstances are vital to the Valley Forge narrative, but they cannot complete it. Punishment and discipline are as much a part of the Valley Forge story as starvation and snow. We can thank George Weedon for telling it.

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