



Victory at Yorktown 1781

It was a strange sight to behold. Thousands of soldiers lined the road leading from Yorktown, Virginia. On one side, the handsomely uniformed French troops formed what looked very much like a mile-long blue and white wall crowned with evenly spaced musket barrels. In stark contrast, the line on the other side of the road was composed of men clad in dirty, tattered uniforms of various descriptions. Some had no uniforms and were still dressed in the same clothing they were wearing when they left their homes to fight for independence.

On this afternoon of October 19, 1781, as the French and American troops stood waiting, the British army commanded by Lieutenant General Earl Cornwallis marched along the road from Yorktown to surrender. As the redcoated British regulars marched, their band played "The World Turned Upside Down." For the king's men, no tune could have been more appropriate. But for

the American soldiers, the world was beginning to right itself, for their victory in the battle of Yorktown sealed the fate of the British in America.

Since 1775 open warfare had raged between the Americans and the British. For the most part, the outcome had favored England. For the British Army, considered the world's finest when the colonies declared independence, was far superior to the poorly organized colonists hurriedly banded together to defend the cause of freedom. In the early months of the war, the British had occupied Boston and New York, and had pursued the Continental Army across New Jersey to Pennsylvania. "The rebels fled like scared rabbits," wrote one British officer.

Then the glow of victory helped brighten the gloom which had fallen over the colonies. On Christmas night 1776, General George Washington led a daring attack on

the British garrison at Trenton, New Jersey. By crossing the dangerous, ice-laden Delaware River, the Americans surprised the British-paid Hessian soldiers at Trenton. Nearly 1,000 of the enemy were captured, while the Americans suffered very few losses. This first major victory renewed the dwindling spirit of independence. Successive victories at Princeton, Saratoga and Bennington showed that the Continental Army had the spirit and determination to win despite the strength of the British.

But it takes more than spirit to win a war. Soldiers must be supplied with food and equipment. And unlike England, which seemed to have an endless supply of vital commodities, the newly established United States government was often unable to provide its army with these essentials. As a result, many patriots died of starvation and exposure. During the bitter winter at Valley Forge nearly 3,000 men died because food and supplies were lacking.

Help arrived in 1778. France began sending men, money and equipment to aid the American cause. With this support, the odds against the Americans were reduced. Even so, the British pressed the Americans on two main fronts — around New York and in the Carolinas and Virginia. Following a series of battles throughout the South, the

allied American-French forces cornered Cornwallis' army at Yorktown.

Realizing the opportunity to end the war in the South was at hand, Washington quickly moved his troops from New York to reinforce those laying siege to the British at Yorktown. After several days of heavy shelling by Washington's artillery, the British defenses began to crumble. Finally, on October 17, Cornwallis sent word that he was ready to surrender, and the fighting came to an end.

Two days later, the official surrender ceremony took place. Before the assembled armies, the British second-in-command, Brigadier General Charles O'Hara (Cornwallis claimed to be too sick to participate) offered his sword to Washington. In keeping with proper military courtesy, Washington sent O'Hara to his second-in-command Major General Benjamin Lincoln, who accepted the sword and then, in a gracious gesture, returned it to the defeated British general.

Thus, ended the battle of Yorktown, the last major battle of the Revolution. And two years later, due to this great victory, the Treaty of Paris was signed and the war officially ended. Peace, liberty and independence for the United States of America had been won.