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Student 354 L07

SGM(R) Taylor

NCO History

Sergeant Daniel Bissell

SGT Daniel Bissell went above the call of duty and was awarded the Badge of military Merit for his actions as a Spy for General George Washington. Daniel was born in 1754 in Windsor Connecticut the eldest son of Daniel and Elizabeth Bissell. In the summer of 1781, he was selected by Gen. Washington to obtain information of the enemy's force and plans in the city of New York and on Long Island. Under Washington's direct orders he posed as a deserter in the city of New York from August 14, 1781, to September 29, 1782, relaying valuable information to the Continental command. Daniel Bissell was present at the battles of White Plains, Trenton and Monmouth where Daniel was wounded during the fighting.

The British armies composed of around 60,000 Soldiers were split into two armies. The northern army was stationed in New York with about 22,000 Soldiers commanded by Sir Harry Clinton the Commander in Chief of the Army. The Southern army was in Yorktown and under the command of General Lord Cornwallis who had moved through the southern colonies with his army of 8,300 Soldiers capturing Savannah and Charleston. The British Fleet had shut out the French Fleet in the New York Harbor. General Benedict Arnold the former Commander of West Point and former officer in the Continental Army was in the city enlisting deserters and Americans who were sympathetic to the British cause. General Arnold was in command of about 5,000 Soldiers plus those that he recruited. The British Army was a well-trained professional army that had years of experience in battle before the American Conflict. The British Army

seemingly had enormous advantages in a war against its colonies. The British possessed a well-established government, a sizable treasury, a competent army, the most powerful navy in the world, and a large Loyalist population in the colonies. The British advantages were steadily overcome by the vastness of the country. The war was being fought over 3,000 miles from Europe making supply of men and goods extremely slow and cumbersome. The armed population spread over hundreds of miles on terrain that was very harsh and created a challenge when trying to maneuver an army in the Traditional European battle formations. The British found it very discouraging to win battle after battle while the beaten rebels always bounced back. It was equally frustrating to seize at one time or another every American urban center and yet have nothing more to show for it than the mere possession of territory, since the Americans had no single vital strategic center.

The Plan for the Continental Army was to have an army, composed of 26 regiments of infantry of 728 men each, plus one regiment of riflemen and one of artillery, 20,372 men in all. The men saw as their first obligation their families and farms at home, and they were reluctant to re-enlist for another year's service. The Army had issues keeping the Militia past their enlistment. On January 1, 1776, when the Army became "Continental in every respect," Washington found that he had only slightly more than 8,000 enlistments instead of the 20,000 planned. General George Washington Stated on Jan 14 1776 "The Reflection upon my situation and that of this army produces many an uneasy hour when all around me are wrapped in sleep. Few People know the predicament we are in" (McCullough 1). "The Continental Army had received a series of major blows: the fall of Charleston, the debacle at Camden, and the terrible shock of Benedict Arnold's treason. The economy still verged on the brink of total collapse, and the three-year enlistments of 1777 would expire during the coming winter" (Wright 156).

General Washington recommended to Congress about the possible need for a draft to overcome the militia call up problem. He argued that maintaining a strong Continental Army would cost less than constantly calling out the militia. Late in the summer of 1781 the American Army of the North was reinforced by 6,000 French Soldiers. The French landed in Rhode Island and joined the Continental Army at Dobbs Ferry outside of New York. General Nathanael Greene commanded the Southern Army of about 2,300 Soldiers. The Southern Army was nothing more than a harassing force keeping the British Army of the South occupied while the main Army of the North under General Washington did most of the fighting.

A big problem within the Continental Army was the lack of Discipline. The majority of the commanders in the Continental Army used the traditional European method of commanding discipline by the use of fear. There was a problem with this aspect of control since it had little effect if any in the early days of the war because the soldiers were mostly fighting for their own ideologies. To the soldiers, the commanders were of little importance. The soldiers were going to fight their own fight, and leave the battle when they felt it necessary. The soldier saw himself as a volunteer, a citizen fighting in a group of citizens, and as a result did not respond well to the traditional forms of discipline. The soldier knew it wasn't necessary for him to serve. The Soldier had the freedom to choose how he wished to serve the revolution, and military service was not an obligation. Baron von Steuben brought a sense of belonging to the Soldiers of the Army by creating an atmosphere of equality. Baron von Steuben set a standard that became universal in the Army and all soldiers and officers were to follow it. Through constant repetition of these rather simplified drills and training methods, coupled with the newly evident compassion and caring being shown by the officers, soldiers soon began to show a level of pride and professionalism in doing their duties in the Continental Army. Steuben catered to the needs and

ideologies of the men in the Continental Army. The Baron knew that Soldiers, who felt that military service was not a necessity, would often question authority. The new discipline helped create a new the beginning of a new attitude in the Continental Army.

“At the breakout of the American Revolution he enlisted on July 7, 1775, as a fifer in the 8th Connecticut Regiment, and on April 1, 1775, signed on for the duration as a corporal in the 5th Connecticut. He became a sergeant on September 1, 1777, and ended the war with the 2d Connecticut” (Wikipedia). The date was August 1781; this was a critical period in the American Revolution with the intended reinforcements from the French. General George Washington desperately needed to keep the divided British forces in place; Sir Harry Clinton was in New York and General Lord Cornwallis in Virginia. The need for information about the forces inside New York City brought a request from General Washington to Sergeant Daniel Bissell. Sergeant Bissell was asked by George Washington to go behind the British lines in New York and gather valuable information. “ Bissell was put down in the records as a deserter. He soon realized that to get the information Washington needed he would have to join the British Army” (G3). Sergeant Bissell’s mission was to pass misleading information about Washington’s intentions and collect intelligence on British preparations and defense locations. There was nothing easy about this plan once Daniel arrived at the British lines there had been a change in the treatment of deserters. The British were no longer giving free passage to deserters but would have them pressed into service in the British Navy. Sergeant Bissell enrolled in a corps newly raised by Gen. Benedict Arnold. Needing medical attention SGT Bissell spent nearly ten months in a British military hospital. Daniel learned from his attending physician that he had been talking during his periods of delirium. Not sure if he had revealed his secret mission, he determined to escape.

Daniel Bissell tells his story in Daniel Bissell IV and we see the escape was a harrowing one during which they were pursued by a detachment of British light horse, commandeering a farmer's boat to take them across a river, and threw off the bloodhounds they were able to make their escape and return to the American lines and make his report to General Washington.

D. Heroes: The escape from the British lines was not easy. Sergeant Bissell had to make up a story allowing him to go to the country in search of food for the General. The British forces learned that of his escape and a detachment of British light horse pursued him. Daniel had a farmer take them across a river that threw off the bloodhounds and allowed for the successful escape. Sergeant Bissell was arrested when he got to the American lines; it took the verification of General Washington to get his freedom. According to Doug Gilbert, the Army was in a bad way and there was nothing of monetary value to give to the Soldiers so General Washington had to have additional ways to reward his men. While the final terms of the surrender were being worked out there was the need to keep the moral and desertion rate under control. The Army had no money to pay its Soldiers and this caused problems. General Washington created the Badge of Honor to recognize soldiers for valor. General George Washington recognized the action of Sergeant Daniel Bissell. Sergeant Bissell was awarded the Badge of Military Merit. This award was the U.S. Army's first military medal for conspicuous gallantry and one that has been called the early equivalent of the Medal of Honor. The story of Daniel Bissell was not correctly told in the Connecticut area until his records were found and verified almost 100 years after his death. On Daniels grave the inscription reads "Daniel Bissell, Died August 5, 1824, Aged 79 Years, He had the confidence of Washington and served under him" (G3).

In summary SGT Daniel Bissell performed his duties as a Soldier and spy for the Continental Army against the British forces occupying the city of New York. The desertion and

discipline problem created a cover for SGT Bissell and labeled him a deserter for almost a century even though he had been awarded for his service.

In conclusion SGT Bissell believed in a cause and his duty to America. As a Soldier and NCO SGT Bissell put the mission above his personal reputation. The sacrifice of SGT Bissell is an example for us all.

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