

THOMPSON'S RIFLE BATTALION

The Original Unit of the Army
of the United Colonies
(Now the United States Regular Army)

John A. Bonin

Historical Study
MONOGRAPH SERIES



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John A. Bonin

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Painting description: Death of General Montgomery in the attack on Quebec, December 31, 1775

Painting by: John Trumbull

Note: Colonel William Thompson is featured in the painting (right side).

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Foreword

This monograph, by Dr. John A. Bonin, explores the birth of the US Army. Although 1775 is indisputably the birth year of the US Army, two events occurred on June 14 of that year to which the Army can credit its birthday. One is the adoption by the Continental Congress of the collective militia forces from several colonies outside Boston to form a Continental Army, of which Congress appointed George Washington the commander in chief on June 15, 1775. In addition, the US Regular Army officially dates its beginning to June 14, 1775, when the Second Continental Congress directed 10 companies of expert riflemen to be raised immediately in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.

William Thompson's commission as the colonel of the Pennsylvania Rifle Battalion, dated June 25, 1775, made him the first colonel of what would eventually become, through George Washington's Continental Army, the US Regular Army. But William Thompson has not found a prominent place in the American pantheon of revolutionary heroes for a variety of reasons. In addition, Thompson's Pennsylvania Rifle Battalion later became the 1st Continental Regiment and ended the American Revolution as the 1st Pennsylvania Regiment, but its lineage has not continued in the modern US Army.

This monograph, using a variety of primary and secondary sources, will start with a discussion illuminating the colonial military context within which the rifle battalion and the Continental Army had to be formed and in which they fought. It then discusses the origins and background of William Thompson, leading to his suitability for the position of the Continental Army's first colonel. Next, this monograph will explore military events in the American Revolution leading to the necessity for and formation of the Pennsylvania Rifle Battalion and its early service under Thompson. The monograph concludes with the subsequent career of Thompson as a brigadier general, an assessment of the role of riflemen in the American Revolution, and the significance of Thompson and his rifle battalion.

Dr. C. Anthony Pfaff
Director, Strategic Studies Institute
and US Army War College Press

Introduction



Figure 1. US Army flag

As depicted on the official flag of the US Army, 1775 is indisputably the birth year of the US Army. Two events occurred on June 14, 1775, to which the Army can credit its birthday. One is the adoption by the Continental Congress of the collective militia forces from several colonies outside Boston to form a Continental Army, of which Congress appointed George Washington the commander in chief on June 15, 1775. In addition, the US Regular Army officially dates its beginning to June 14, 1775, when the Second Continental Congress “*Resolved*, That six companies of expert riflemen, be immediately raised in Pennsylvania, two in Maryland, and two in Virginia.”¹

On June 22, Congress authorized the formation of the now-eight Pennsylvania rifle companies into a battalion, with William Thompson (or Thomson) of Carlisle commissioned by the Continental Congress on June 25 as the colonel in command. William Thompson’s significance as the first colonel of what would become the US Regular Army has not been formally acknowledged. Although the foreword by Brigadier General James L. Collins Jr., chief of military history, in *The Continental Army* by Robert K. Wright Jr. specifies “the Continental Army, [as] the forerunner of today’s Regular Army,” Wright’s 1983 definitive history, published by the US Army Center of Military History, does not take the opportunity to mention Colonel Thompson’s distinction.² The factual recognition of William Thompson has been complicated by aspects of Thompson’s personal story, colonial military institutions prior to the Continental Army, and ambiguous changes in military terminology and unit lineages since 1775.

Since the National Defense Act of 1920 stated the modern US Army “shall consist of the Regular Army, the National Guard while in the service of the United States, and the Organized Reserves,” the Army National Guard is clearly the oldest component of the US military, with the National Guard dating to the Massachusetts North Regiment of 1636 (redesignated as the Middlesex Regiment in 1643), to the 3rd and 7th Massachusetts Regiments of the Continental Army, down to the 182nd Infantry Regiment of today.³ The modern National Guard continues the historic English concept of citizen soldiers responsible both to a colonial or state governor and a national executive. The US Army Reserve is a more recent creation, dating officially only to 1908, and composed of volunteer, part-time citizen soldiers directly responsible to the federal government. The adoption of the New England militia on June 14, 1775, was also the birthday of the US Army.

Thompson’s commission as the colonel of the Pennsylvania Rifle Battalion made him the first colonel of what would eventually become, through George Washington’s Continental Army, the US Regular Army. But William Thompson has not found a prominent place in the American pantheon of revolutionary heroes. First, Thompson came from the frontier wildlands of western Pennsylvania, where he fought Native Americans and held slaves. Second, Thompson’s combat record in the American Revolution ended abruptly with his defeat and capture in Canada at the Battle of Three Rivers in June 1776. Last, after capture, Thompson became an indignant parolee over the years that passed before he was exchanged for a British officer, and was found guilty of insults to the Continental Congress. Thompson died in September 1781, without reentering active service and before victory at the Siege of Yorktown.⁴

This monograph, using a variety of primary and secondary sources, will begin with a discussion illuminating the colonial military context within which the rifle battalion and the Continental Army had to be formed and in which they fought. I will then discuss the origins and background of William Thompson, leading to his suitability for appointment as the Continental Army’s first colonel. Next, I will discuss the military events in the American Revolution leading to the necessity for and formation of the Pennsylvania Rifle Battalion and its early service under Colonel Thompson, then the subsequent wartime career of William Thompson as a brigadier general. Finally, I will present several conclusions.

— 1 —

Background: The Colonial Military System

“Those Men, posted on the Frontier, are not the Militia, but what we call our *Provincial Troops*, being regularly inlisted to serve for a Term, and in the Pay of the Province; and do nothing but bear Arms like your Regulars.”

—Benjamin Franklin, 1756⁵

Militia: Common and Select

For protection during conflicts with the Native Americans, British colonial governments (except the government of Pennsylvania) could not depend upon royal troops and instead resorted to the Saxon/British tradition of the *fyrd* or militia. The *fyrd*, or a levy of the common folk, seems to have developed out of the old migration-period, Germanic custom all fit men had to be ready to serve in war when needed. This mass levy is now known by the term “general *fyrd*,” whereas a more selective subset of fewer but more capable men is known by the modern term “select *fyrd*.”

Each colony maintained a separate militia establishment, administered primarily as a local institution, whereas the great or common militia consisted of all male citizens, with few exemptions, between the ages of 16 and 60. Companies were formed locally under elected captains and subalterns, whereas regiments could be formed in districts under colonially appointed colonels. The colony expected each prosperous member of the common militia to provide their own clothing, their own weapon (usually a smoothbore musket), and their own food. As the threat receded, except on the frontier, this unpaid and relatively undisciplined military structure proved suitable only for local, short-term defense. But the structure also served

as the training and mobilization base for selecting younger and more expendable men for longer periods of service in select militias.⁶

Maurice Matloff also asserts, “in some towns and counties, however, the military tradition was kept alive by volunteers who formed units of their own, purchased distinctive uniforms, and prepared themselves to respond in case of war or emergency. These units became known as the volunteer militia and were the predecessors of the National Guard of the United States.”⁷

Provincial Volunteers

Although militia units played an important part in the colonial wars, colonial governments resorted to provincial volunteers for expeditions outside the governments’ boundaries, such as the expedition against the French fort at Louisbourg in 1745. Unlike the militia units, provincial forces were built from the top down. Colonial governors or assemblies would choose the commanding officers from the most prominent men and the soldiers were enlisted by the commanding officers. Although the militia remained the main base for recruitment, and officers were almost invariably men with previous experience in the militia, indentured servants and the poor without military obligations were also enlisted. The enlistment period was only for the duration of a campaign (normally no more than a year), not for long periods as in European armies. Colonial assemblies had to vote on money for pay and supplies, and these assemblies were conscientious about costs and unwilling to see volunteer forces achieve the status of a standing regular army. The distinction between the militia and the provincial troops was not always understood in eighteenth-century Great Britain. With short enlistments, inexperienced officers, and poor discipline by European standards, even the best colonial provincial units were, like the militia, often held in contempt by British officers.⁸

Historian Don Higginbotham, in a provocative article, argues the colonial provincial units constituted a semiprofessional force:

Left to their own devices, the colonies, because of the defects in the militia system and because of the lack of imperial direction, adopted semiprofessional forces that actually were a hybrid between the militia and a standing army. . . . We are usually speaking of fairly large numbers of men—several hundred to several thousand—who in return for a bounty enlisted for a year or more, who often reenlisted, who served if required outside the boundaries of their own colonies, who were subject to a stricter

form of military law than applied to the militia, and who served under officers not infrequently possessed of a strong tinge of military professionalism.⁹

During the French and Indian War, George Washington expressed his personal experience with and views on provincials in a letter to Governor Robert Dinwiddie, dated March 10, 1757:

If it should be said, the Troops of Virginia [The Virginia Regiment] are Irregulars, and cannot expect more notice than other Provincials, I must beg leave to differ, and observe in turn, that we want nothing but Commissions from His Majesty to make us as regular a Corps as any upon the Continent— Because . . . We have been regularly Regimented and trained, and have done as regular Duty for upwards of 3 Years as any regiment in His Majesty's Service—We are regularly and uniformly Cloathd; Officers & Soldiers.¹⁰

The Associators: The Pennsylvania Militia Equivalent

Because of the Quaker influence, Pennsylvania lacked an officially sanctioned militia. The War of Jenkins' Ear, which started in 1739, and was later known as King George's War in North America, changed the situation. Despite lacking a militia, Pennsylvania would still provide volunteers for imperial duty. The crown, in 1746, directed Governor George Thomas to raise and pay 400 "provincials" for the intended conquest of Canada.¹¹ Emerging non-Quaker leaders in the Pennsylvania Assembly, like Benjamin Franklin, desired to improve Pennsylvania's military defenses. After French privateers entered the Delaware River and raided plantations along the river, Franklin advocated a "uniquely American creation": a private association of volunteers that remained the militia equivalent in Pennsylvania.¹²

Background: William Thompson

“He was adventurous, daring—even rash; seemed to have a greater feel for the ‘wild West’ of his day than for safer, more sedate towns and cities.”¹³

In the early 1730s, many Scotch-Irish emigrants began to settle on the Pennsylvania frontier in the Cumberland Valley. As a result of this growth, Pennsylvania, originally a proprietary colony founded by the William Penn family, created Cumberland County (originally almost all Pennsylvania west of the Susquehanna River) out of Lancaster County in 1750. The Pennsylvania General Assembly designated Carlisle as the county seat in 1751 and had John Armstrong, a Scotch-Irish surveyor for the Penn family, lay out the plan for Carlisle’s settlement. William Thompson (or Thomson), born in Northern Ireland in 1736, emigrated to Carlisle as an educated young man by 1755.¹⁴

The influx of European settlers into western Pennsylvania resulted in conflicts with the Native American tribes, primarily the Shawnee and the Delaware, or Lenape. As a result, European colonists often suffered from attacks and atrocities.¹⁵ Carlisle, already the nexus of several trails from Harris’ Ferry on the Susquehanna River, became a supply depot and the site of a colonial protective stockade, which was later converted into Carlisle Fort in 1755.

As what would become the French and Indian War developed, especially after the defeat of General Edward Braddock in the Battle of the Monongahela in 1755, the victorious French encouraged the Lenape (Delaware) and Shawnee war parties to take up the hatchet against those who had taken their lands. The Pennsylvania frontier exploded, as Native Americans, often with French cooperation, began raiding settlements in Pennsylvania. Notable among the Indian raiders were the Lenape (Delaware) chiefs Shingas and Teweia,

better known by his English name Captain Jacobs. Both chiefs lived in the village of Kittanning, which also served as a staging area and base for the chiefs' raids and a temporary holding center for captives. But due to the lingering Quaker influence, Governor James Hamilton of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania General Assembly became deadlocked over the issue of authorizing funds for defense. The citizens on the frontier implored Philadelphia to act. William Trent, a frontier trader, demanded "how long will those in power, by their quarrels, suffer us to be massacred? Two and forty bodies have been buried on Patterson's Creek; and since they have killed more and keep on killing."¹⁶ Early in October, reports arrived stating more than 100 had been killed and war parties had crossed the Susquehanna River and threatened eastern Pennsylvania. These incidents proved instrumental to the Pennsylvania General Assembly, led by Benjamin Franklin, authorizing the raising and payment of 300 initial Pennsylvania provincials to protect Pennsylvania's citizens. Governor Robert Morris later formed the Pennsylvania Regiment, consisting of three battalions, including Lieutenant Colonel John Armstrong's 2nd Battalion from Cumberland County.¹⁷ The recently emigrated William Thompson became a lieutenant on January 16, 1756, in Captain Hance Hamilton's Carlisle company of Armstrong's battalion.¹⁸ These Pennsylvania troops were almost immediately pressed into building a chain of blockhouses and forts in Cumberland County. By early 1756, the frontier system of forts along the Blue Mountains had essentially been completed, with John Armstrong's battalion responsible for the fortifications west of the Susquehanna River.¹⁹

A July attack by Tewa (Captain Jacobs) on Fort Granville (near present-day Lewistown) captured some 31 civilians, including women and children.²⁰ Armstrong rapidly organized an expedition against Kittanning, the center of Delaware strength, in response. This raid, over a hundred miles deep into hostile territory, was the only successful expedition carried out by Pennsylvanian provincial troops during the brutal backcountry war. Leaving about half his battalion to garrison forts, probably including Lieutenant Thompson as the commander of Fort Littleton, Armstrong led a task force of 250–300 Pennsylvania provincial soldiers from Fort Shirley on August 30.²¹ Early on September 8, 1756, the soldiers launched a surprise attack on Kittanning. Captain Jacobs and others put up a defense, and when he refused to surrender, Jacobs's house was set on fire, exploding stored gunpowder. Captain Jacobs was killed escaping. Armstrong suffered 17 killed, 13 wounded, and 19 missing and withdrew after initially freeing 11 captives, returning to Fort Littleton by September 13.²² The Kittanning Expedition demonstrated Native Americans' vulnerability to determined colonist retaliations and most Native Americans moved further west of the Allegheny River.

After Kittanning, Thompson remained a provincial officer in Armstrong's battalion, defending the frontier for the next two years. By October 30, 1756, Thompson had been promoted to captain-lieutenant of Lieutenant Colonel Armstrong's company, and to full captain by December 1757 as the commander of Fort Loudoun when the previous commander died.²³

After years of allowing "French [and Indian] scalping parties to their work of havoc on the western borders," William Pitt, in early 1758, made the capture of French Fort Duquesne a priority.²⁴ Pitt gave the mission to Brigadier General John Forbes, who started to assemble his expedition at Carlisle. Anticipating the challenge of maintaining communications, Brigadier General Forbes requested the establishment of a troop of "fifty good Men, mounted upon light, Serviceable Horses."²⁵ Consequently, while retaining command of his infantry company, Thompson was commissioned on May 1, 1758, as the captain of the troop of provincial light horse in the 1st Pennsylvania Battalion. The battalion's mission consisted primarily of "conveying Intelligence thro' your Counties."²⁶ Thompson had the challenge of keeping track of his vulnerable troopers traveling along the hundreds of miles of hellish thickets back to Carlisle, described as "the Shades of Death."²⁷

By June, Forbes had assembled an army of some 6,000 based at the camp at Carlisle. These men included 1,200 from the 62nd Regiment of Foot (Montgomery's Highlanders) and Lieutenant Colonel Henry Bouquet's battalion of the Royal American Regiment. The army also included newly reenrolled provincials from North Carolina, Maryland, Virginia (under Colonels George Washington and William Byrd), and Colonel Armstrong's battalion (now the 1st Pennsylvania Battalion), which still included Captain Thompson's company.²⁸

Early in July, Bouquet established an advance guard at Raystown (now Bedford) among the eastern heights of the Allegheny Mountains. Forbes, having selected the shortest and most direct route 200 miles across Pennsylvania and the Allegheny Mountains to Fort Duquesne, planned to march in short stages, establishing forward bases as he went. Consequently, Forbes had to build a road for his wagons the entire way, through what he described as an "immense uninhabited wilderness, overgrown everywhere with trees and brushwood, so that nowhere can one see twenty yards."²⁹ Much of the heavy work of hewing, digging, blasting, and laying fascines and gabions to support the track was performed by the provincials. Armstrong's battalion, serving essentially as a labor unit, was fragmented across various locations.

The expedition arrived near Loyalhanna, some 50 miles from Fort Duquesne, by mid-September. After the French defeated Major James Grant's reconnaissance in force and inflicted almost 300 casualties on September 14, the advance stalled.³⁰

On September 17, Bouquet reported to Brigadier General Forbes about the fight near Loyalhanna, “the provincials seem to have done very well, and their good men are more suitable for this warfare than the regular [British] troops.”³¹ Unusually heavy autumnal rains now ruined the dearly built Forbes Road. Forbes is quoted as saying, “the wheels of the wagons sank in [the clay] to the hub, and to advance or retreat was alike impossible.”³²

Fortunately, by early November, due to Native American departures after the peace of Easton and Canadian militia defections, the French garrison of Fort Duquesne had been significantly reduced. Forbes organized his forces into three elements, with Colonels Bouquet, Richard Montgomery, and Washington to “act as Brigadiers.”³³ Brigadier Washington commanded the 3rd Brigade as the right wing, consisting primarily of Washington’s 1st Virginia Regiment with 595 men.³⁴

When the provincials came within a day’s march, the French made their decision to abandon the fort, and explosions could be heard on the evening of November 24, 1758. The next day, the French abandoned the fort and the British and provincials moved in.³⁵ Consequently, most of the provincials were anxious to go home, and the Pennsylvania Assembly wanted to be relieved of their expense. Jeffery Amherst, 1st Baron Amherst, the newly appointed commander in chief, wanted to retain a force of veteran provincials, including Armstrong’s unit and apparently some light horse. During the chaos, as the provincials without pay disintegrated, on December 1, Lieutenant Colonel Bouquet singled out Thompson, having “reason to complain of him, as he has not complied wth [sic] any of the Directions he had from me . . . nor delivered his horses specifically to Capt Hambright.”³⁶ Nonetheless, Thompson resigned from his provincial commission effective February 17, 1759.³⁷

After leaving provincial military service, Thompson pursued numerous entrepreneurial interests. For most of the next decade, Thompson became a merchant supplying British forts and garrisons between Carlisle and the new Fort Pitt. Thompson also established a trading station at Fort Pitt and, by 1762, went into the livestock business with the famous frontiersman and his Carlisle neighbor George Croghan. During Pontiac’s War in 1763, both Thompson and Croghan had houses near Fort Pitt burned. Thompson also speculated on various parcels of land in the region, including a house near Fort Bedford, and became part owner of a furnace near York, Pennsylvania.³⁸

During the period after leaving provincial military service, Thompson married Catherine Ross, daughter of the Reverend George Ross of York, Pennsylvania, on March 29, 1762. This marriage enhanced the social connections of the

young William Thompson, as the Ross's were a prominent family and two of Thompson's brothers-in-law, George Ross and George Read, would later be members of the Continental Congress and signers of the Declaration of Independence. The couple resided primarily in York until 1767, when Thompson purchased a large farm with a sawmill in Middleton township (now North Middleton Township) two miles west of Carlisle. Thompson later named his 1.5-story stone house "Soldiers Retreat." William and Catherine had three sons and four daughters, with Thompson's last son born in 1780.³⁹

Thompson also became heavily involved, at great personal risk, in conducting surveys for famed frontiersman George Croghan. Croghan was one of the crown's negotiators with representatives of the Iroquois Confederacy, resulting in the Treaties of Fort Stanwix in 1768. The treaties established a line of property following the Ohio River, which ceded the Kentucky portion of Virginia to the British crown, as well as most of what is now West Virginia. The treaty also settled land claims between the Iroquois and the Penn family.⁴⁰

When Thompson was appointed one of the deputy surveyors for western Pennsylvania in 1769, he defined the previously obscure boundaries of western Pennsylvania, especially Bedford County (March 9, 1771) and Westmoreland County (February 26, 1773). During this period, both Pennsylvania and Virginia were seeking land across the Ohio River for provincial veterans of the French and Indian War. At the instigation of John Armstrong, in the late summer of 1773, Thompson undertook a survey of land on behalf of the provincial officers from the French and Indian War. Thompson went down the Ohio River into western Virginia (currently Kentucky) and marked thousands of acres. But acting for Virginia, George Washington also sent Captain Thomas Bullitt to conduct surveys in an area near the mouth of the Scioto River.⁴¹ In September 1773, George Washington wrote to a friend, "I have understood that Capt. Thompson (by which authority I do not know) has been surveying a good deal of land for the Pennsylvanian officers."⁴² When the approval of his surveys by Virginia became contingent upon the claimants taking an oath to the king, Thompson refused and thereby lost the claims, including his own.⁴³

But events around Boston would draw the frontier patriot into broader action for the colonial cause. Thompson became the only member of Westmoreland County's Committee of Public Safety, and in early May became a member of Cumberland County's Committee of Observation along with John Armstrong, William Irvine, and Robert Magraw. They organized Cumberland County into four military districts, each to raise a battalion of associators. Thompson, appointed the "Second Colonel" of the upper military district, raised men who would later serve as his riflemen.⁴⁴

Consequently, by June 1775, William Thompson had established his reputation as a frontier soldier and leader, and a man of suitable character and influence to be eligible for more challenging duties. In addition, Thompson was an experienced and vigorous man of action only 39 years of age and willing to serve at personal risk in the new patriot army facing the formidable British army in Boston.

— 3 —

Thompson's Rifle Battalion

“They are indeed a very useful corps, but I need not mention this as their importance is already well known to Congress.”⁴⁵

Lexington and Concord

As the crisis between the British military and the emerging patriots in Massachusetts worsened, a Massachusetts Provincial Congress convened in Salem in early October 1774, with John Hancock as its president. The Committee of Safety began making military preparations, with moribund militia companies renewing training. Some companies formed portions of each common militia company into quick reaction units called minutemen, composed of younger, less prosperous members.⁴⁶ When the British marched on a patriot supply base at Concord on April 18, 1775, the warning was probably “the regulars are coming out.”⁴⁷ The first combat at the Battles of Lexington and Concord against the British regulars was conducted by thousands of both minutemen and ordinary members of the common militia. Many New Englanders now viewed British regulars as a menace to their safety. “From the volunteer militia companies and the mass of the common militia they came forward for military duty.”⁴⁸

On April 23, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress called for 13,600 of its own militia and appealed to Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island for an army totaling 30,000 men.⁴⁹ Soon, an army of sorts bivouacked along a 10-mile crescent opposite British-held Boston. But no sooner had this grand American militia army mustered than it began to melt away.⁵⁰

After the Battles of Lexington and Concord, at the suggestion of Massachusetts, the New England colonies moved to replace the militia gathered before Boston with volunteer forces constituting what may be called a New England army.

Each colony raised and administered its own force and appointed a commander for that force. Discipline remained lax and the forces lacked a single chain of command. Artemas Ward, the Massachusetts commander, exercised overall control by informal agreement. By mid-June, most of the men gathered consisted of volunteers and militia units continued to come and go. Although the Connecticut volunteers enlisted until December 10, 1775, those from the other New England colonies had until the end of the year. The volunteers remained dressed in personal clothes and were armed with muskets of varied types; powder and ball remained short, with few bayonets.⁵¹

Adoption of the New England Army

Because of the crisis around Boston, the Second Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia on May 10, 1775, with John Hancock as its president. The new Second Continental Congress also became informed of events in upstate New York at Fort Ticonderoga and the possibility of British forces intervening from Canada, as well as ruptures with the British-supported Native Americans across the western frontiers. In early June, Congress received a letter from the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, written before the Battle of Bunker Hill. Massachusetts appealed to the Continental Congress to adopt the New England army. Although no formal record of the action exists, Congress evidently did vote to adopt the New England army on June 14, 1775, the accepted birthday of the US Army. On the same day, Congress also voted to raise 10 companies of riflemen from Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia for one year, as was normal for provincials. These soldiers would be the first to be enlisted directly in the continental service.⁵²

Call for the Riflemen

Resolved, That six companies of expert riflemen, be immediately raised in Pennsylvania, two in Maryland, and two in Virginia; that each company consist of a captain, three lieutenants, four serjeants, four corporals, a drummer, or trumpeter, and sixty-eight privates. That each company as soon as completed, shall march and join the army near Boston, to be employed as light infantry, under the command of the chief Officer in that army. That the form of enlistment be in the following words: I _____ have, this day, voluntarily enlisted myself. As a soldier, in the American continental army, for one year, unless sooner discharged; And I do bind myself to conform, in

all instances, to such rules and regulations, as are, or shall be, established for the government of the said army.⁵³

Why were the first units of the Continental Army only from Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia; armed with rifles, not the more common muskets; and being specifically sent to Boston? Politically, raising units from Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia would lessen the exclusivity of the New England forces around Boston and include the middle and southern colonies. In addition, the selection of expert riflemen can be seen as providing the New England army a unique asymmetrical (and technological) advantage against the British. These riflemen were self-equipped with the Pennsylvania rifle, locally developed for frontier use. But despite the superior range and accuracy derived from making spiral grooves in the bore that imparted a spinning effect to the bullet, the rifle had several military disadvantages that prevented its widespread use. Each rifle had to be handmade by craftsmen, making the rifles more expensive, and each required a unique bullet mold. In addition, rifles could not be fitted with bayonets and had half the rate of fire of the more common smoothbore musket. Finally, though the United Colonies faced more irregular threats from Canada and the West (perhaps a better use of frontier riflemen), Congress viewed Boston as the center of gravity.⁵⁴

After Congress approved the companies of riflemen, couriers on relays of swift horses carried the news to the various county committees on the frontier. These committees were empowered to pick company officers and forwarded the officers' names to Congress. The men selected to command these rifle companies were also responsible for recruiting the companies' soldiers. Volunteers poured into the county recruiting stations. The men of the frontier were ready for a call to arms.⁵⁵

"Over every cabin door hung a well made rifle, correctly sighted and maintained in perfect condition for immediate use. Beside it were a tomahawk and a hunting knife . . . and a pouch, or bag containing bullets, patches, spare flints, steel, tinder, a whet stone, oil and tow for cleaning the rifle. A hunting shirt, moccasins, and a blanket were near at hand."⁵⁶ The need for pioneer boys to learn to shoot squirrels with accuracy and the constant danger from Native Americans bred men of iron. "It was the pick of these which Congress asked."⁵⁷

Due to an excess of volunteers, on June 22, Congress expanded the original requirement for six companies from Pennsylvania to eight, to be constituted as a battalion under field grade officers recommended by the Pennsylvania Assembly. "*Resolved*, That the colony of Pennsylvania raise two more companies of riflemen, and that these, with the six before ordered to be raised by them, making eight

companies, be formed into a battalion, to be commanded by such field officers, captains, and lieut, as shall be recommended by the Assembly or convention of the above colony.”⁵⁸

On June 25, 1775, William Thompson (or Thomson) of Carlisle accepted a commission directly from Congress. He was the first colonel commissioned in the Continental Army, the lineal ancestor of the US Regular Army (see also Appendix A).

In Congress The Delegates of the United Colonies . . .
To William Thomson, Esquire, WE reposing especial trust,
and confidence in your patriotism, valour, conduct, and fidelity
DO by these presents constitute and appoint you to be
COLONEL of the Battalion of Riflemen raised in the Province
of Pennsylvania in the army of the United Colonies raised for
defense of American Liberty. Philadelphia 25 June 1775.⁵⁹

On July 11, Congress approved a second company from Lancaster, making a total of nine companies for the battalion. The riflemen of the battalion were enlisted as follows: two companies from Cumberland County, two from Lancaster, and one each from York, Northumberland, Bedford, Berks, and Northampton (see Appendix B).⁶⁰ “Before leaving their home state, the six [now nine] rifle companies from Pennsylvania were combined to form William Thompson’s Pennsylvania Rifle Battalion.”⁶¹ Within three weeks after enlistment, some of the companies took up their march to Massachusetts. The first of the companies arrived on July 25 with Colonel Thompson, and the last company arrived by August 18.⁶²

Higher Commands of the Army of the United Colonies

On June 15, 1775, the day after authorizing the rifle companies, Congress appointed George Washington commander in chief of the army of the United Colonies. The choice of Washington had been made for geographic and political as much as military reasons. New Englanders believed a southerner would be needed to garner the support of the southern colonies. In addition, Washington had previous military experience as a colonel of provincials and as a de facto brigadier in the French and Indian War—greater than any other southerner—and had appeared while serving in the Continental Congress in his blue Virginia provincial uniform.⁶³

Between June 17 and June 22, Congress took on what would be “one of [its] most important responsibilities” by deciding to commission four major generals and eight brigadier generals as senior officers to help Washington command the new army.⁶⁴ Notably, none of the initial brigadier generals came from colonies south of New York, including Pennsylvania and Virginia. On June 25, 1775, General George Washington established the northern theater when he ordered Major General Philip John Schuyler to take “command of all Forces destined for the New York Department.”⁶⁵ On June 30, 1775, while George Washington continued to Boston, Congress approved articles of war for the new army.⁶⁶ Washington formally took command of the Continental Army around Boston at Cambridge on July 3, 1775. Initially, “except for the rifle companies, the men technically remained enlisted in the service of the various colonial governments which had turned the units over to Congress.”⁶⁷ To start the process of providing continental commissions to officers below generals, Washington and Schuyler were given blank commissions from Congress to distribute to the militia regimental officers. The commissions confirmed local selections while retaining a nominal national level of appointment. Washington also reshaped his army by imposing greater rationality and control, introducing divisions and brigades as echelons between his headquarters and the regiments. Washington used his available generals already commissioned by Congress by assigning them to command the three divisions and six brigades Washington formed out of the available militia regiments. Each brigade, normally six regiments, defended its own sector, while Thompson's Rifle Battalion and Henry Knox's artillery remained directly under Washington's headquarters. Washington retained this arrangement throughout the Siege of Boston.⁶⁸

The Riflemen in Action around Boston

After arrival, the riflemen began to pose a longer-range threat than those to which the British were accustomed. In August 1775, Dr. James Thatcher, a young doctor from Barnstable, provided the following description:

Several companies of riflemen . . . have arrived here from Pennsylvania and Maryland . . . They are remarkably stout and hardy men; many of them exceeding six feet in height. They are dressed in white frocks, or rifle-shirts, and round hats. These men are remarkable for the accuracy of their aim; striking a mark with great certainty at two hundred yards distance. At a review, a company of them, while on a quick advance, fired their balls into objects of seven inches diameter, at the distance of two hundred and fifty yards. They are now stationed on our lines, and their shot have frequently proved fatal to British

officers and soldiers who expose themselves to view, even at more than double the distance of common musket-shot.⁶⁹

According to Rick Atkinson, an aide to Washington reported rifle fire so unnerved the British “that nothing is to be seen over the breastworks but a hat” and a Yankee newspaper warned, “General Gage, take care of your nose.”⁷⁰ The riflemen, as a separate non-brigaded unit, would also receive special missions. On August 16, 1775, General Washington directed a detachment of riflemen to proceed to Cape Ann to “protect the Inhabitants” and “distress and annoy” the ministerial army.⁷¹

But the frontier riflemen, if underemployed, also proved they could be poorly disciplined and insubordinate. On September 11, 33 riflemen of Thompson’s command were tried by court-martial for “disobedient and mutinous behavior” and sentenced to pay 20 shillings and serve six days of imprisonment.⁷² On the same day, the general orders directed “Col. Thompson’s Battalion of Rifle-men posted upon Prospect-hill to take their share of duty of Guard and Fatigue with the brigade they encamp with.”⁷³

The appointment of necessary general officers by Congress remained extremely important to General Washington. In a letter to the president of Congress on August 31, 1775, Washington recommended Colonel John Armstrong be the first brigadier general from Pennsylvania as “one I can speak from my own Knowledge.”⁷⁴ Washington acknowledged Armstrong’s experience during the French and Indian War in command of Pennsylvanian forces and especially where “his character was distinguished by an Enterprise against the Indians [at Kittanning], which he planned with great judgment and executed with equal courage and success.”⁷⁵

The most famous action of Thompson’s Rifle Battalion occurred on November 9, 1775. The British had landed a detachment at Lechmere Point under covering artillery and naval fire. At high tide, as Lechmere Point was an island, Colonel Thompson rapidly assembled his men, and they waded up to their armpits for a quarter mile to shore. Notwithstanding British fire from behind cover, the riflemen drove the British back to their boats. The rifle battalion lost one killed and three wounded while inflicting 17 killed and one known wounded.⁷⁶ In a general order dated November 10, 1775, General Washington publicly thanked “Colonel Thompson & the other Gallant Officers & Soldiers (as well as other Regiments as the Riflers) for their Alacrity Yesterday, in pushing through the Water, to get to the Enemy on Lechmore’s Point.”⁷⁷

Reorganization of the Continental Army for 1776

After approval by a congressional committee in late October, Washington began the reorganization of the Continental Army for 1776. Washington commissioned his officers and reenlisted his men directly in the Continental Army for a year, ending on December 31, 1776. As each infantry regiment (a term used interchangeably with battalion) received a numerical designation based on its colonel's relative seniority, and in recognition of the fact the riflemen were the first continentals, the Pennsylvania Rifle Regiment (which the regiment was now named) was given primacy as the 1st Continental Regiment. Because they had enlisted as the first continentals for a year from July 1, 1775, Thompson's Pennsylvania Rifle Regiment and the associated Virginia and Maryland rifle companies were not initially internally reorganized or reenlisted.⁷⁸

After positioning Henry Knox's Continental Artillery in Dorchester Heights in early March, Washington anticipated forcing the British out of Boston. He became concerned about the security of New York City and other locations. Still using Thompson's regiment as a general-headquarters unit on March 3, Washington directed "two Companies of Col Thompson Rifle regiment, are to march tomorrow-evening, to Roxbury," with the commanding officer receiving Washington's orders from the adjutant general.⁷⁹ On March 9, general orders directed, "the Regiment and Companies of Riflemen, are to hold themselves in readiness to march at an hours warning."⁸⁰ A subsequent general order on March 13 directed the rifle regiment now under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Edward Hand, with the three remaining Virginia and Maryland rifle companies under Captain Hugh Stephenson, to lead the army on its march to Norwich, Connecticut the next day.⁸¹

As the main army arrived in New York, General Washington established his headquarters there on April 14. Washington then assumed command of the Middle Department, consisting of New York below Newburgh, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware. Schuyler retained command of the new Northern Department of New York (which included Vermont). New England reverted to the Eastern Department under Major General Artemas Ward. As Washington reorganized for the defense of New York, he placed riflemen in the two brigades manning the most advanced positions.⁸² A general order dated April 24, 1776, assigned Hand's 1st Continental Regiment to Brigadier General John Sullivan's brigade and assigned the remaining three companies of Virginia and Maryland riflemen, in an ad hoc battalion under Captain Stephenson, to Brigadier General William Alexander, Lord Stirling's brigade.⁸³

The Challenge of Canada and the Revolutionary Service of William Thompson

“But justice requires me to mention that William Thompson Esquire of the Rifle Regiment is the first Colonel of this department, and as far as I have had an Opportunity of Judging, is a good Officer and a man of Courage.”⁸⁴

The Initial Invasion of Canada

Congress formalized Major General Schuyler’s territorial command on July 20 as the New York Department of the Continental Army for the protection and defense of New York from Canada. Congress also ordered Schuyler to invade Canada from Fort Ticonderoga, and he launched the invasion on August 31, 1775, under Brigadier General Richard Montgomery.⁸⁵

By August 20, General Washington approved a second invasion of Canada directly from Boston, as proposed by Benedict Arnold, and appointed Arnold a colonel in the Continental Army.⁸⁶ On September 11, Arnold’s small task force of some 1,000 men included “three rifle companies (Daniel Morgan’s from Virginia and Matthew Smith’s and William Hendricks’ from the Pennsylvania Rifle Regiment).”⁸⁷ Initially, Arnold appointed Captain Morgan as the de facto commander of the three companies. When Arnold proposed sending one company as part of an advanced force under Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Greene, a militia officer, Morgan refused because “since Morgan and Arnold held commissions in the Continental Army, they alone could head the riflemen.”⁸⁸

In the failed assault on Quebec of December 31, 1775, General Montgomery was killed and Colonel Arnold wounded. Among the other casualties were most of the members of the three rifle companies. Captain Hendricks from Carlisle was

killed, and Captain Morgan captured. But Congress remained intent on bringing Canada under its control.

Creation of Additional Departments

After the disaster of the initial invasion of Canada in 1775, on January 17, 1776, Congress separated the invasion force from Schuyler's New York Department and transformed the department into the Canadian Department. The addition of continental regiments from the southern and middle colonies and the potential for the conflict to expand necessitated more changes to the territorial departments. On February 27, 1776, Congress created the Southern Department, consisting of Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia under Major General Charles Lee. Major General Philip Schuyler's New York Department gained Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland and became the Middle Department.⁸⁹

On March 6, Congress promoted Brigadier General John Thomas to major general and commander of the Canadian Department. Thomas assumed command outside Quebec on May 2, 1776.⁹⁰ He found his command in shambles. Thomas had only 1,000 men fit for duty, with 300 of those refusing to fight. Shortly after Thomas arrived, British reinforcements started to arrive in Quebec, breaking the siege on May 7. Thomas withdrew his troops back toward Montreal, stopping at Sorel-Tracy.

Because of Thomas's promotion to major general on March 6, General Washington notified Congress the resulting brigadier-general vacancy would require "the appointment of some other gentlemen that shall be agreeable to Congress."⁹¹ Washington endorsed Thompson as follows: "But justice requires me to mention that William Thompson Esquire of the Rifle Regiment is the first Colonel of this department, and as far as I have had an opportunity of Judging, is a good officer and a man of courage."⁹² The same day, in responding to a recommendation from Joseph Reed—Washington's former aide and military secretary and now president of the Pennsylvania Assembly—Colonel Thompson be promoted to brigadier general and sent to the new Southern Department, Washington offered an alternative and somewhat mixed assessment of Thompson in a lengthy missive.

I am of the opinion, that Colonel Armstrong, if he retains his health, spirits and vigor, would be as fit a person as any they could send to Virginia, as he is senior officer to any now there but to place Colonel Thompson there, in the first command, would throw everything into the utmost confusion; for it was

by mere chance that he became a colonel upon this expedition, and by greater chance he became first colonel in this army . . . surely Colonel Thompson would have more sense, and a greater regard for the cause he is engaged in, than to accept of it He must know, that nothing more than being a captain of horse in the year 1759 (I think it was) did very extraordinarily give him the start he now has . . . He stands first colonel here, and may, I presume, put in a very good and proper claim to the first brigade that falls vacant . . . If Thomas supplies the place of Lee [in the Canadian Department], there will be a vacancy for either Armstrong or Thompson.⁹³

But unknown to Washington on March 7, Congress had already acted on March 1, 1776. Congress selected six new brigadier generals, including John Armstrong and William Thompson, both of Pennsylvania. Armstrong would go to the Southern Department for about a year before resigning and Congress directed the younger Thompson to the priority theater of New York.⁹⁴ As Thompson had been promoted out of command of the Pennsylvania Rifle Regiment, or 1st Continental Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Edward Hand replaced Thompson as colonel.⁹⁵

Brigadier General Thompson in Canada

On April 15, 1776, Brigadier General William Thompson took command in New York of a brigade-sized relief expedition intended as a reinforcement for Canada.⁹⁶ Thompson arrived at Sorel-Tracy, Canada near Montreal in mid-May. On May 19, Thompson reported to Major General Schuyler about the confusion and lack of provisions and reported many of his newly arrived troops immediately became disabled by an outbreak of smallpox.⁹⁷

Patriot morale in Canada remained poor, as indicated on May 16, 1776, at the Battle of the Cedars, 30 miles west of Montreal. An advanced outpost of 400 New England continentals surrendered to a mixed force of British and Native Americans almost without fighting.⁹⁸ In a dispatch to the Continental Congress from Montreal, Charles Carroll, one of the commissioners from Congress, reported on the “miserable situation” with the army “broken and disheartened . . . soldiers without pay, without discipline.”⁹⁹

Major General Thomas, stricken with smallpox at Sorel-Tracy on May 21, relinquished temporary command of the department to Brigadier General Thompson on May 24.¹⁰⁰ Thompson apparently began organizing the chaos,

eliciting a description of Thompson by Commissioner Samuel Chase as having “the sense to conceive and the spirit to execute.”¹⁰¹ When Thomas died on June 2, Thompson reported to Washington from Sorel-Tracy, “the prospect is rather unfortunate for our side but I hope will clear up.”¹⁰² Thompson also reported to Washington, “I have sent off the sick and heavy Baggage from hence that if I am reduced to the necessity of retreating I can do it with little Loss.”¹⁰³

Upon learning several hundred British and Canadians under Colonel Allan Maclean had arrived at the strategic port of Trois-Rivières 35 miles down the St. Lawrence River from Sorel-Tracy, Thompson sent Colonel Arthur St. Clair’s small 2nd Pennsylvania Battalion to Nicolet with “between six & seven hundred Men to attack his Camp if it can be done with the least probability of success.”¹⁰⁴ But Thompson’s time in department command ended on June 4.¹⁰⁵ Brigadier General John Sullivan had arrived at Sorel-Tracy with additional Pennsylvania regiments, and being senior to Thompson, Sullivan subsequently took command of the department.¹⁰⁶ When spies informed Sullivan only 300 British troops occupied Trois-Rivières, he informed General Washington he had decided to regain the initiative by attacking. Consequently, he ordered Brigadier General Thompson:

You are to March as soon as possible with Col Irvine & Col Waine’s [sic] Regiments together with those of Col St Clair . . . and take command of the whole party & unless you find the number of the enemy at *Tres Riviere* to be such as could render an attack upon them hazardous, you are to cross the river . . . and attack them.¹⁰⁷

Thompson arrived in Nicolet on June 7, where he took command of 2,000 of the healthiest continentals in the newly arrived 2nd, 4th, and 6th Pennsylvania Battalions, and the 2nd New Jersey Regiment. Thompson ordered:

the Whole Detachment to be in Readiness to Embarque at nine o/clock this evening, & Shall pass the [St Lawrence River] . . . and after Leaving a Guard of Two Hundred and fifty with the Boats will proceed by Land to the three Rivers, & if Possible begin the Attack at daylight . . . No Certain Accounts of the Number of the Enemy . . . the Intelligence is from fifty to fifteen hundred. If I Should find that they are Numerous, & that they are Strongly Intrenched, I shall not risqué a Battle, as a Defeat at this time wd greatly distress us.¹⁰⁸

Unfortunately, Thompson's crossing of the St. Lawrence River would not be a success. Besides this event being Thompson's first combat in command of a formation exceeding the size of a company, his overly complicated plan called for a night crossing of the St. Lawrence River, followed by a lengthy night approach marching through swampy ground, and then an attack at first light with all four of Thompson's inexperienced regiments (termed divisions for the assault). Colonel Anthony Wayne's small 4th Pennsylvania Regiment served as the American vanguard. Colonel William Irvine, 6th Pennsylvania Regiment, with Brigadier General Thompson accompanying his regiment, commented in his journal they "crossed the river to Point de Lac; the pilot deceived us, for his orders were to steer within four miles of Trois Riviere. Point de Lac is nine miles. Notwithstanding . . . we marched with all possible expedition for Trois Riviere but . . . Our guide led us quite out of the way into a swamp."¹⁰⁹

Irvine continued, after exiting the swamp, they:

strove to draw the men up in some order, which we found impracticable. The General then got up with me, and ordered as many as we could be collected, to move forward . . . A brisk firing then began, which we took to be Maxwell's party [2d New Jersey]. General Thompson then ran to the front, the firing increased, and seemed very hot. The General sent word to me to send forward the riflemen of my regiment, but they being chiefly in the rear could not get up as soon as he or I wished . . . I then advanced to the front and joined the General, but by this time Maxwell's Division was entirely broken and retreating in such disorder as there was no possibility of rallying them . . . [Gen Thompson] and I used every argument. . . to collect and engage the men to make a stand, but our utmost efforts were in vain; not more than forty men could be got together.¹¹⁰

Thompson's attack had not surprised the British, who were in prepared positions, supported from the river by the Royal Navy. General Thompson, caught up in the rout, spent the rest of the day and night in the swamp before surrendering on June 9, 1776, with some seven men and Colonel Irvine. Colonel Anthony Wayne gathered about 700 fugitives, avoiding the British, and, having lost his boats, straggled back to Sorel-Tracy. In the attack, Thompson's men suffered about 400 total casualties compared to only 17 for the British. The British reported capturing 244 Americans and 18 officers.¹¹¹ This action ended Thompson's military career and ended any American hope of maintaining a hold on the Saint Lawrence Valley or Canada. Although William Thompson

was captured, he had been following General Washington's command guidance. In a letter to the president of Congress on August 7, 1776, Washington stated, "for it is to be observed that a Brigadier General at the head of his brigade is no more than a Colonel at the Head of a Regiment, except that he acts upon a larger scale."¹¹²

After holding a war council on June 13, Brigadier General Sullivan approved withdrawing his army of some 9,000 men remaining out of 12,000 (but with thousands sick) from his vulnerable position at Sorel-Tracy, while Brigadier General Arnold began the withdrawal of American forces from Montreal.¹¹³ Leaving many wounded behind, American forces were completely out of Canada by June 30, 1776. Probably 2,000 had died of disease or combat, several thousand more were temporarily unfit because of wounds or sickness, hundreds had deserted, and at least 1,374 prisoners had been captured, including Brigadier General William Thompson.¹¹⁴ General George Washington, after being informed of the defeat at the Battle of Three Rivers, wrote to Major General Schuyler, "I regret much the captivity of General Thompson."¹¹⁵

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Conclusions

“*Resolved*, That six companies of expert riflemen, be immediately raised in Pennsylvania, two in Maryland, and two in Virginia.”¹¹⁶

Riflemen during the Remainder of the War

In a letter to the president of Congress dated April 22, 1776, General Washington expressed concern about losing the Pennsylvania Rifle Battalion.

As the Time for which the Rifle Men inlisted, will expire on the first of July next, and as the loss of such a valuable and brave body of Men will be of great injury to the Service; I would submit it to the Consideration of Congress whether it would not be best to adopt some method to induce them to continue. They are indeed a very useful Corps, but I need not mention this as their importance is already well known to Congress. It is necessary they should pay an early attention to this matter. As we know from past Men are very slow in re inlisting.¹¹⁷

According to an endnote on the same page in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, Congress authorized the reenlistment of the men from the Pennsylvania Rifle Battalion, with a month's pay as a bonus in advance for two more years' service. Another first for the Pennsylvania riflemen.

The 1st Continental Regiment (previously Thompson's Rifle Battalion) under Colonel Edward Hand, after arriving in New York, was detached from serving directly under Washington's headquarters and initially assigned on April 24, 1776, to Sullivan's brigade of the main army.¹¹⁸ On August 22, 1776, as General William Howe's army landed on Long Island at Gravesend Bay, Colonel Hand's posted riflemen fired a few shots before pulling back.¹¹⁹ Later, on October 12, 1776, at Throgs Neck, 30 of Hand's riflemen stymied the British landing.¹²⁰ During the critical Battle of Trenton in late December 1776, Hand's veteran regiment, as part of Brigadier General Matthias Alexis Roche de Fermoy's brigade, attacked Hessian outguards and blocked the road out of Princeton.¹²¹ Hand's 1st Continental Regiment was reorganized into eight companies and officially redesignated on January 1, 1777, as the 1st Pennsylvania Regiment.¹²² On January 2, 1777, during the Second Battle of Trenton, when Brigadier General Roche de Fermoy abandoned his brigade, Colonel Hand took charge. Later, Hand's riflemen bought Washington a delay of almost an entire day while skirmishing with Hessian Jägers and British light infantry at Assunpink Creek.¹²³ According to Lynn Montross, this event was "the first real test of American Riflemen against *Jaegers*, and the results left little doubt as to comparative merits. Hand's frontiersmen . . . not only outshot the Germans, but showed more adaptability at skirmishing and taking cover in the woods."¹²⁴ The next morning, at least a hundred of Hand's riflemen accompanied Brigadier General Hugh Mercer's brigade attacking Princeton. In the ensuing fight, Hand's riflemen faltered as the British charged with bayonets at close range, resulting in General Mercer being mortally wounded by bayonets.¹²⁵ Remaining part of the main army, the 1st Pennsylvania Regiment was assigned on May 22, 1777, to the 1st Pennsylvania Brigade (later Brigadier General Anthony Wayne's brigade). The regiment gradually lost most of its riflemen, as it fought primarily as a musket-equipped line unit during the remainder of the war in the defense of Philadelphia in 1777 and in the Philadelphia-Monmouth campaign in 1777-78.¹²⁶

Congress authorized an additional rifle regiment as the Maryland and Virginia Rifle Regiment. Modeled on the original Pennsylvania Rifle Regiment, the unit consisted of the three companies of Captain Hugh Stephenson's ad hoc battalion as cadre, with additional companies to be raised in Virginia and Maryland. The regiment was still incomplete when most of the regiment was captured at Fort Washington, New York on November 16, 1776, with the remaining Virginia elements assigned in February 1777 to the 11th Virginia Regiment then forming under Colonel Daniel Morgan.¹²⁷

Morgan had difficulty raising his regiment, as he only wanted skilled riflemen and had only 180 men when he reported to Washington's main army at Morristown, New Jersey at the end of March 1777. But the unit never achieved adequate numbers. Consequently, in June, Washington gave Colonel Morgan command of an ad hoc corps of some 500 riflemen picked from across the army. This unit served as an independent unit partially equipped with rifles and provided Washington with great service against Howe in June and July.¹²⁸

Because of the threat from General John Burgoyne's army, with his Native American allies from Canada to the Northern Department, on August 16, 1777, Washington ordered Morgan's corps to Major General Horatio Gates. Washington wrote Morgan, "I know of no Corps so likely to check their progress in proportion to its number as that under your command."¹²⁹ Washington provided as another specific reason Morgan's corps was "well acquainted with the use of rifles, and with the mode of fighting, which is necessary to make them a good counterpoise to the Indians."¹³⁰ Gates reinforced Morgan with 300 select continentals under Lieutenant Colonel Henry Dearborn to form, according to historian Kevin Weddle, Gates's "most elite unit" and a "combat multiplier" of the Northern army for the Battles of Saratoga.¹³¹ In the Battle of Bemis Heights, Colonel Morgan and his command contributed significantly to the victory. Morgan allegedly personally directed one of his Pennsylvania riflemen, Timothy Murphy, to shoot and mortally wound British Brigadier General Simon Fraser.¹³²

Rifle-equipped units, though providing a noticeable asymmetrical advantage in accuracy and range, needed support for musket-armed units and proved difficult to recruit, equip, and maintain. During the rest of the war, with the improvements in the equipment and training of the Continental Army, especially after 1777, few exclusively rifle-equipped units existed. According to historian Dr. James Scudieri, "the rifle was not suited to the tactics of linear warfare."¹³³ This unsuitability occurred primarily because of the rifle's slow rate of fire and incompatibility with a bayonet, and because of the logistical limitations of the Pennsylvania rifle. But during Major General John Sullivan's irregular-warfare campaign against the Iroquois from June to September 1779, Washington ensured Brigadier General Edward Hand's brigade included the 11th Pennsylvania Regiment, augmented with three rifle companies under Major James Parr.¹³⁴

In the war in the South from 1780 to 1781, the legend of the riflemen—as exhibited at the Battle of Kings Mountain and at the Battle of Cowpens on January 17, 1781, under Brigadier General Daniel Morgan—depended primarily on rifle-armed militiamen, not continentals.¹³⁵ Specifically for the Siege of Yorktown,

Pennsylvania raised 300 militia riflemen who apparently served with distinction and then went home.¹³⁶

Thompson's Epilogue

After being detained for almost two months in Quebec, the British transported Brigadier General Thompson to Long Island by ship in early August. The British paroled Thompson on August 6, 1776. Congress directed Major General Schuyler to try to obtain the exchange of General Thompson for a British general. But Thompson went to Philadelphia, where he stayed almost continuously for four years throughout British occupation and the Americans' return, awaiting his eventual exchange.¹³⁷

Thompson's exchange proved complicated due to his being a brigadier general and his actions while in Philadelphia. Thompson became upset over his exchange being repeatedly blocked and in 1778 blamed the Pennsylvania Chief Justice Thomas McKean. After a meeting in November 1778, the two had an altercation resulting in Congress finding Thompson guilty of insulting Congress. Thompson challenged McKean to an unfulfilled duel and McKean later successfully sued Thompson for libel. Thompson also became involved in the so-called battle of Fort Wilson on October 4, 1779, when Thompson helped defend his lawyer and friend James Wilson from a mob of militiamen.¹³⁸

On October 22, 1780, Washington wrote to Abraham Skinner to accede to the British proposal to exchange Major Generals William Phillips and Friedrich Adolf Riedesel "provided Brigadier Generals Thompson and Du Portail, together with Major General Lincoln . . . be set in opposition to them."¹³⁹ Thompson was officially exchanged on October 25, 1780, for the Hessian Major General Baron Riedesel. Thompson, as the senior brigadier general in the Army, may have demanded a promotion to major general to return to service. But the promotion was not to be. Never resuming active service, Thompson returned to Soldier's Retreat outside Carlisle and died in ill health on September 3, 1781. He is buried in the Old Public Graveyard on East South Street in Carlisle. Unfortunately, due to debts incurred during the war, Thompson died insolvent. Soldier's Retreat was sold at sheriff's auction in 1788.¹⁴⁰

Significance of Colonel William Thompson and His Rifle Battalion

Thompson's Rifle Battalion, successively the 1st Continental Regiment and then the 1st Pennsylvania Regiment, after eight years of action, was furloughed in June 1783 and then disbanded on November 15, 1783, in Philadelphia and its lineage discontinued. The rest of the Continental Army also mustered out by November 1783, with only Colonel Henry Jackson's newly raised continental regiment and John Doughty's New York artillery battery (raised by Alexander Hamilton as the New York Provincial Company of Artillery) remaining at West Point. By June 3, 1784, Congress paid off Jackson's regiment, and what was left of the veteran Continental Army consisted of only a few artillerymen (now the 1st Battalion, 5th Field Artillery Regiment) at Fort Pitt and West Point.¹⁴¹

After the Battles of Lexington and Concord, the Continental Congress assumed responsibility for the virtuous colonial military forces in opposition to the "regular ministerial army" in Boston. Although colonial militias appeared to be the obvious and available instrument, Congress, perhaps particularly its members Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, initially believed semiprofessional forces, like colonial provincials, might also be needed. According to Robert K. Wright Jr., in the official Army history, *The Continental Army*, "Congress recognized the militia's limitations from the beginning of the war and turned to full-time regular troops, the Continentals."¹⁴² The Pennsylvania rifle companies, authorized on June 14, 1775, and commanded as a battalion by Colonel William Thompson after June 25, served as the first full-time regular troops in the army of the United Colonies. This unit served directly under and in the pay of Congress, but initially only for a year, as was typical of provincials. But the Continental Army, as commanded by George Washington beginning in 1775, and shaped by Washington in 1776 and 1777, ultimately employed well-trained units with longer periods of service by 1781, which proved essential to American success. As Dr. James Scudieri determined, "Washington's army after 1777 possessed the attributes of any regular army of the period."¹⁴³

Some may argue the Continental Army, essentially disbanded by 1784, could not be the forerunner of the current US Regular Army. Washington, in his "Sentiments on a Peace Establishment" on May 2, 1783, before his Continental Army disbanded, wanted to keep a modest "regular and standing force."¹⁴⁴ But Congress rejected Washington's advice about a standing army. Congress, perhaps overly enamored of the ultimate success of a semiprofessional force, raised and officered Josiah Harmar's First American Regiment on

June 3, 1784, from veterans and militia volunteers from several states, for a one-year term of enlistment. Led by continental veterans such as Generals Arthur St. Clair and Anthony Wayne, the United States's small, peacetime Regular Army gradually expanded over the next several decades as a bridge to later conflicts. Consequently, the lineage of the oldest infantry regiment in the Regular Army, now the 3rd US Infantry Regiment (The Old Guard), dates from Harmar's First American Regiment and not from Thompson's Pennsylvania Rifle Battalion.¹⁴⁵ But as the Army's 250th birthday approaches, this unit and its commander William Thompson, the first colonel of the Continental Army and thereby the US Regular Army, should receive deserved recognition. Appropriately, Colonel Thompson and part of his rifle battalion hailed from Carlisle, which now serves as the home of the US Army War College, which educates today's colonels.

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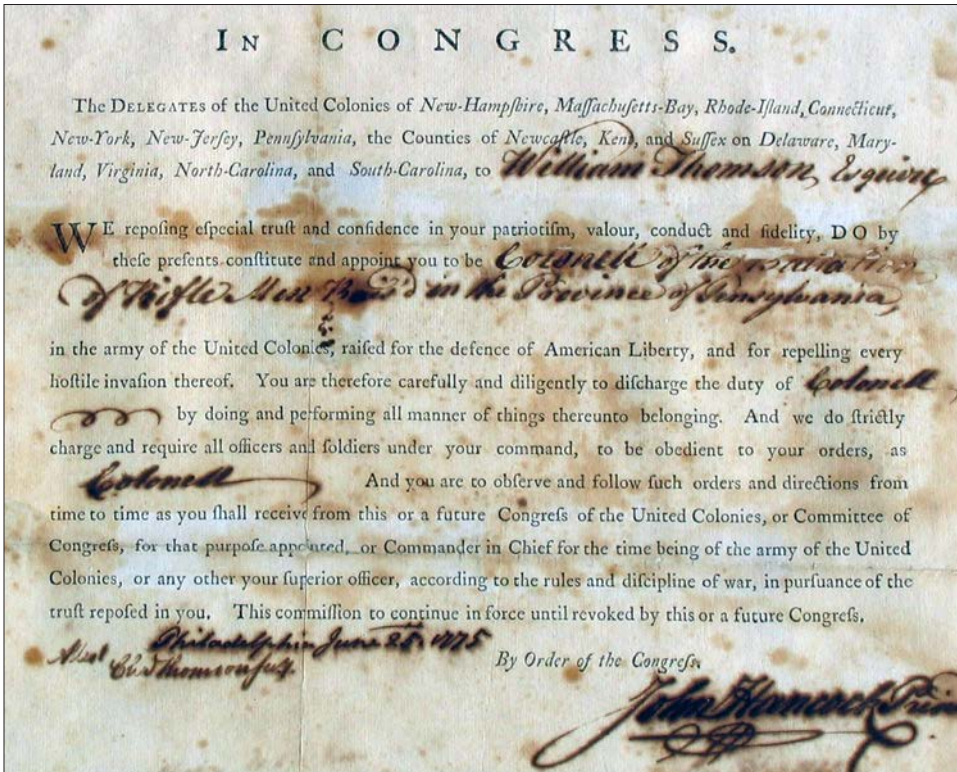
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70. Atkinson, *British Are Coming*, 133.
71. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, 3:426.
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74. John Armstrong and George Washington had been personal friends since the Forbes Expedition of 1758. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, 461.
75. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, 4:461.
76. Stroh, *Thompson's Battalion*, 28.
77. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, 4:79.
78. Wright, *Continental Army*, 46, 51, 54, 259.
79. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, 4:363.
80. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, 4:385.
81. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, 4:389.
82. Wright, *Continental Army*, 84.
83. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, 4:536.
84. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, 4:374.
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86. William Sterne Randall, *Benedict Arnold: Patriot and Traitor* (William Morrow and Co., 1990), 137.
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88. Don Higginbotham, *Daniel Morgan: Revolutionary Rifleman* (University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 28.
89. Wright, *Continental Army*, 60; and Ford, *Journals*, 4:174.
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92. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, 4:374.
93. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, 4:374.
94. Ford, *Journals*, 4:181.
95. Wright, *Continental Army*, 82.
96. The units were the 8th (New Hampshire); the 15th, 24th, and 25th (all Massachusetts); and Captain John Nelson's independent company of Pennsylvania riflemen. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, 4:478, 500; and Wright, *Continental Army*, 60, 263.
97. Justin H. Smith, *Our Struggle for the Fourteenth Colony: Canada and the American Revolution* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1907), 2:352.

98. Coakley and Conn, *American Revolution*, 99; and Atkinson, *British Are Coming*, 284.
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100. Crist, *William Thompson*, 28; and Atkinson, *British Are Coming*, 285.
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102. "To George Washington from Brigadier General William Thompson, 2 June 1776," Founders Online, n.d., accessed on June 11, 2024, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-04-02-0339>.
103. "Thompson, 2 June 1776."
104. "Thompson, 2 June 1776."
105. Crist, *William Thompson*, 29.
106. Sullivan's regiments included the 2nd and 5th Continental Regiments (New Hampshire), the 2nd New Jersey Regiment; Colonel Arthur St. Clair's 2nd Pennsylvania Battalion; three companies of Colonel Anthony Wayne's 4th Pennsylvania Battalion, and Colonel William Irvine's 6th Pennsylvania Battalion (raised in Cumberland County). These Pennsylvania battalions each had one company armed with rifles. Washington confirmed Sullivan's command in a letter dated June 13, 1775. Wright, *Continental Army*, 60–61, 78–79; and Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, 5:132–33.
107. Instructions for General Thompson from Brigadier General Sullivan at Sorel-Tracy on June 6, 1776, as printed in Smith, *Fourteenth Colony*, 2:401.
108. Brigadier General Thompson to Brigadier General Sullivan on June 7 from Nicolet, as enclosed in "To George Washington from Brigadier General John Sullivan, 8–12 June 1776," Founders Online, n.d., accessed on June 11, 2024, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-04-02-0368>.
109. "Col William Irvine's Journal," in *Pennsylvania Archives*, ed. Thomas Lynch Montgomery, 5th ser., vol. 2 (Harrisburg Publishing Company, 1906), 195–98.
110. "Irvine's Journal."
111. Atkinson, *British Are Coming*, 286–87.
112. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, 5:380.
113. Atkinson, *British Are Coming*, 289, 294; and Coakley and Conn, *American Revolution*, 99.
114. Atkinson, *British Are Coming*, 294.
115. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, 5:189.
116. Ford, *Journals*, 2:89.
117. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, 4:502.
118. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, 4:536; and Wright, *Continental Army*, 259.
119. Atkinson, *British Are Coming*, 357, 362.
120. David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 109.
121. Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, 237.
122. Wright, *Continental Army*, 259; and Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, 295–97.
123. Colonel Hand's 1st Pennsylvania Regiment, with some 200 members, was one of Washington's largest remaining units. Atkinson, *British Are Coming*, 537; and Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*, 295–97, 409.
124. Lynn Montross, *Rag, Tag, and Bobtail: The Story of the Continental Army* (Harper and Brothers, 1952), 172.
125. Atkinson, *British Are Coming*, 544–45.
126. Wright, *Continental Army*, 259; and Fred Anderson Berg, *Encyclopedia of the Continental Army Units: Battalions, Regiments and Independent Corps* (Stackpole Books, 1972), 99, 147.
127. Wright, *Continental Army*, 82, 319; and Berg, *Continental Army Units*, 120, 128.
128. Higginbotham, *Daniel Morgan*, 56–57.
129. "From George Washington to Colonel Daniel Morgan, 16 August 1777," Founders Online, n.d., accessed on June 29, 2024, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-10-02-0624>.

130. George Washington, "From George Washington to George Clinton, 16 August 1777," in *The Writings of George Washington*, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford, vol. 6 of 14 (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1890).
131. Kevin J. Weddle, *The Compleat Victory: Saratoga and the American Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 260–61.
132. Timothy Murphy served as an original member of Captain Lowdon's rifle company of Thompson's Rifle Battalion. Higginbotham, *Daniel Morgan*, 61–74; and Stroh, *Thompson's Battalion*, 38.
133. James D. Scudieri, "The Continentals: A Comparative Analysis of a Late Eighteenth Century Standing Army, 1775-83" (PhD diss., The City University of New York, 1993), 348.
134. Joseph R. Fischer, *A Well-Executed Failure: The Sullivan Campaign against the Iroquois, July–September 1779* (University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 27–33, 69–90.
135. Higginbotham, *Daniel Morgan*, 133–42.
136. Berg, *Continental Army Units*, 100.
137. Crist, *William Thompson*, 37–38.
138. Crist, *William Thompson*, 40–41; and Ford, *Journals*, 12:1150–52.
139. Major General Benjamin Lincoln and Brigadier General Louis Duportail, a French engineer, were captured in May 1780 in Charleston, South Carolina. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of George Washington*, 20:243.
140. Crist, *William Thompson*, 44–45; Dolson, *Cumberland County*, 242; and Jake Austin, "William Thompson House Was Once Home of First Commissioned Army Colonel," *Sentinel*, April 16, 2016, https://cumberlandlink.com/news/local/history/building_blocks/william-thompson-house-was-once-home-of-first-commissioned-army-colonel/article_c459146d-b7d2-5f5e-8706-56bfe0df1dd1.html. This house still stands in North Middleton Township, Pennsylvania and is being renovated.
141. Wright, *Continental Army*, 216, 259, 430.
142. Wright, *Continental Army*, 183.
143. Scudieri, "Continentals: A Comparative Analysis," 380.
144. George Washington, "Calls for a Standing Army, 1783," in *Major Problems in American Military History*, ed. John Whiteclay Chambers II and G. Kurt Piehler (Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 99.
145. Mahon and Danysh, *Infantry, Part I*, 11–12, 159–61.

Appendix A

Colonel William Thompson's (or Thomson's) Commission



Note: The original document of William Thompson's (or Thomson's) appointment as a colonel in the army of the United Colonies, dated June 25, 1775, is located at the Cumberland County Historical Society and the Hamilton Library in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

Appendix B

Initial Roster of Senior Officers in Thompson's Rifle Battalion	
Battalion Headquarters	
Name	Location
Colonel William Thompson (or Thomson)	
Lieutenant Colonel Edward Hand	
Major Robert Magraw	
Third Lieutenant David Ziegler, adjutant	
Second Lieutenant Frederick Hubley, quartermaster	
Captain James Chambers's company	Cumberland (now Franklin) County
Captain Robert Cluggage's company	Bedford
Captain Michael Doudel's company	Gettys' Tavern, York County
Captain William Hendricks's company	Carlisle, Cumberland County
Captain John Lowdon's company	Northumberland
Captain Abraham Miller's company	Northampton
Captain George Nagel's company	Reading
Captain James Ross's company	Lancaster
Captain Matthew Smith's company	Harris's Ferry
The Virginia and Maryland Rifle Companies (also authorized on June 14)	
Name	Location
Captain Daniel Morgan's company	Frederick County, Virginia
Captain Hugh Stephenson's company	Beckley, Virginia
Captain Michael Cresap's company	Frederick County, Maryland
Captain Thomas Price's company	Frederick County, Maryland
<p>Note: As listed in Oscar H. Stroh, <i>Thompson's Battalion and/or the First Continental Regiment</i> (Graphics Services, 1976), 31–43. See also Patrick H. Hannum, "America's First Company Commanders," <i>Infantry</i> (October–December 2013): 16–18.</p>	

About the Author

Dr. John A. Bonin is a distinguished fellow at the US Army War College and has written extensively on US Army topics. Bonin is a United States Military Academy graduate, and he possesses 30 years of experience serving in a variety of field and academic positions as an infantry officer. Bonin's experience also includes serving at the US Army War College as a doctrine advisor, full professor, the Elihu Root chair of military studies, and a special government employee focusing on theater armies. He holds a master's degree from Duke University and a doctorate from Temple University in American military history.

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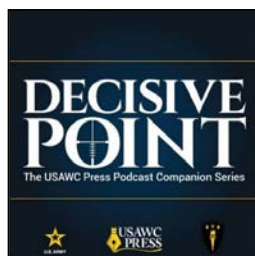
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