

America: The Story of Us – Ep. 2: Revolution – Transcript (unedited)

A ragtag bunch of rebels faces the greatest military superpower of the day.

It's a war they never should have won.

This is the secret history of how they did it.

Daring.

Leadership.

New ways of fighting and true American grit.

New York City.

Gateway to North America.

Today the financial capital of the world.

8 million people.

In 1776, this is a city of just 20,000.

It will soon become the battleground for the biggest land invasion in American history.

Three miles from Wall Street, where 23rd Street crosses Lexington Avenue today the Rebels dig in to defend New York at Kips Bay.

Commander of the Rebel Army is General George Washington.

He has already driven the British out of Boston.

A surprise victory against superior forces.

But they'll be back.

The hour is fast approaching and the safety of our bleeding country depend.

Joseph Plumb Martin enlisted in the Rebel forces at 15 inspired to fight under Washington's command.

A farm boy, he joins thousands of untrained volunteers.

Our Revolutionary Army was quite something.

It was-- in a nation that wasn't really a nation yet, just starting out, and we took on the greatest superpower of the time.

Washington's ragtag troops are about to face the best-equipped and most powerful fighting force in the world.

June 29th.

45 British warships mass off Staten Island.

Bearing down on New York City, the ultimate war machine of its day, the British ship-of-the-line.

Each ship is made from over 2,000 century-old trees.

Each carries hundreds more soldiers to the fight against the colonies.

And each is armed with up to 64 heavy cannons capable of hurling a 24-pound cannonball at the speed of sound, delivering it to targets over a mile away.

One ship-of-the-line costs the equivalent of a modern aircraft carrier.

Another 350 British ships are racing across the Atlantic to join them.

The British want to terrify the Rebels into submission.

Instead, they inspire them to resist.

On July 2nd, there's a crisis meeting in Philadelphia.

50 delegates elected to the Continental Congress from the 13 colonies hold an emergency session.

They include radicals like Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams.

What they're debating is nothing less than high treason-- total independence from Britain.

The penalty is death.

We are in the midst of a revolution, the most complete in the history of the world.

It's the birth of American democracy.

We have to expect a great expanse of blood to obtain it.

Some don't believe the Rebels stand a chance.

We are about to brave the storm in a skiff made of paper.

But the doubters are outnumbered nearly five to one.

On July 4, 1776, the delegates ratify a document that will change the world, the Declaration of Independence.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, "that all men are created equal, "that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.

" Now think about that.

They're saying that your rights come not from the king, not from the government, your rights come from God and furthermore, they can't be taken away from you.

They're inalienable.

Every group: blacks, women, gays-- everybody looks to the Declaration as a way of saying we are Americans, too.

So the Declaration is the American creed.

" that among these are Life "Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

" You cannot help but be stirred when you read those words.

And you feel the excitement of being on the cusp of something so profound.

We can be free.

Now soldiers like Plumb Martin have something worth fighting for.

On July 12th, two British warships open fire on New York City.

It must have been quite a shock because New York, up to that point, was pretty quiet city.

It was a business city.

So you had significant support for the Rebels but also significant support for the people who were still loyal to the king.

A month later, Joseph Reed, secretary to George Washington, tracks the British fleet massing off New York.

Over 400 ships, the largest British Naval task force until D-day.

32,000 British troops prepare to storm Manhattan Island.

They outnumber Patriot forces two to one.

Just five of the biggest British ships carry more firepower than all the Patriot guns in the city.

Reed is awed by the sight.

When I look down and see the prodigious fleet they have collected, I cannot help being astonished that a people should come 3, 000 miles at such risk, trouble and expense to rob,

plunder and destroy another people because they will not lay their lives and fortune at their feet.

It's the biggest attack on New York City until September 11, 2001.

But the Rebels will stand and fight.

The difference for me was that the British Army was fighting for a king and the Americans were fighting for their lives.

Plumb Martin is one of 500 men standing guard at Kips Bay.

Have a look.

The first thing that saluted our eyes was all four ships at anchor within musket shot of us.

"The Phoenix.

" I could read her name as distinctly as though I was directly underneath her stern.

Pull out your gun ! The assault begins.

September 1776.

New York is under fire.

In one hour 2,500 British cannonballs smash the Rebel defenses at Kips Bay.

4,000 British troops storm Manhattan.

Tough and battle-hardened, a British redcoat has six times more combat experience than a Patriot Army recruit.

Get back in your lines ! Washington watches his army collapse.

Hold the line, men ! They retreat along an ancient Native American path that will later be known as Broadway.

September 20th.

New York, now in British hands, burns.

No one knows who starts the fire but over two days it destroys 1/4 of the city.

It gives you a sense of the people who wanted to be free, how much they were willing to endure.

The city being burned, the city being occupied.

Gives you a sense of how much they wanted freedom.

More than 3,000 Patriot POWs are thrown into prison ships in New York Harbor.

The most notorious is the HMS Jersey, nicknamed "Hell.

" One prisoner, Robert Sheffield, escaped to tell the tale.

The air was so foul that at times a lamp could not be kept burning, by reason of which the bodies were not missed until they had been dead ten days.

Nine in ten prisoners die.

There is a memorial over in Brooklyn to those that died on British prison ships in New York Harbor.

Thousands of Americans.

Over the course of the war, 12,000 Patriot POWs will die in the prison ships, three times more than are killed in battle.

The loss of New York is Washington's first defeat as commander in chief.

The overwhelming British force crushes the Rebel Army.

Washington's only hope now rests hundreds of miles inland, with men the British know

nothing about.

A new type of soldier with new weapons and new rules of war.

Let's go kill us some redcoats.

By June, a new British Army of 8,000 men heads south from loyalist Canada.

Its objective: Kill off the American Revolution once and for all.

They're led by General John Burgoyne.

An aristocrat, politician, and art lover, he's also one of the best cavalry officers in the British military.

Burgoyne pushes south, following the Hudson River.

His army is like a mobile city.

The redcoats are accompanied by 2,000 servants, wives, and mistresses.

200 supply wagons carry 84 tons of powder and shot, as well as silver and porcelain tableware for the officers' meals.

Burgoyne's plan is simple.

He's traveling from St.

John's in Canada 170 miles south to Saratoga, deep in the interior of the New York Colony.

Then, he'll link up with the victorious British Army in New York City, cutting the colonies into two parts.

But the American frontier becomes the British Army's worst enemy.

The problem is they're in what we might call a counterinsurgency kind of campaign, where their passage through the land and the offense that they give to farmers creates enemies wherever they go.

Now Washington unleashes revolutionary new tactics and a totally new type of soldier.

Men who learned their skills on the frontier.

So this army came together-- an army of militia, an army of woodsmen, an army of sharpshooters, and we didn't play by the rules.

British redcoats are trained for open battlefields.

Now they face Rebel sharpshooters hidden in dense cover.

Leading them, Daniel Morgan.

Hard drinker, gambler, brawler.

And now the colonel of an elite corps of 500 riflemen.

He was a self-made man and he was a-- although not educated at a great school-- was a smart guy, was a tough guy, and was ready and willing to step up when the time called.

He was the perfect guy to show up at the perfect time.

Burgoyne's route takes him through dense forest over five times larger than all of England.

Trees once intended to build British ships now become Rebel roadblocks.

The British are sitting ducks.

Their advance slows to just a mile a day.

The march south becomes a six-week nightmare.

The sharpshooters know the land and have technology on their side.

Morgan's men are armed with American long rifles.

They're lightweight, with a slender barrel at least 40 inches long and fire a 50-caliber shot a half-inch wide.

Based on a German hunting weapon, the guns have a unique American innovation grooves inside the barrel that spin the shot, stabilizing it, giving it deadly accuracy.

Armed with this rifle, Patriot marksman can hit a target 250 yards away, more than three times the average distance of a modern FBI sniper shot, and twice the range of the British muskets.

The tide of the war is about to change.

Morgan's plan: First take out Burgoyne's Native American scouts.

400 have allied themselves with the British to preserve their ancestral lands.

But Morgan and his men now use traditional Native American tactics against them.

They attack using speed, stealth, and surprise.

After months of guerrilla warfare, all the scouts are dead or desert behind enemy lines.

Any knowledge the redcoats had of the terrain goes with them.

The Rebels are rewriting the rules of war, and they're about to do it again.

The American War of Independence is in its second year.

New York and many parts of the colonies are in British hands.

The Rebels have been driven into the wilderness.

But the fight back has begun.

Patriot sharpshooters target a British Army under General John Burgoyne.

They've already picked off Burgoyne's Native American guides.

Now the two armies meet near Saratoga.

Here the Rebels break the rules of 18th-century warfare and start targeting British officers.

The plan: Leave the foot soldiers leaderless.

Your officers tended to be your most educated guy.

They understood the communications line, they understood exactly what the orders were.

They were the source of trying to get something done on a battle space.

In Britain's 53rd regiment, all but one of its 11 officers are killed or wounded.

The tactic of assassinating officers appalls the British.

On the defensive, the British regroup under General Simon Fraser.

He brings fresh spirit to the beleaguered British Army.

Daniel Morgan, commander of the sharpshooters, acts fast.

Shimmy on up that tree and take out the redcoat on his high horse.

His best shooter is an illiterate frontiersman from Ireland, Tim Murphy.

This shot will turn the tide of the war.

The first shot misses.

This left.

The second skims his horse.

Too high ! Reload ! Come on, take him out ! The third hits home.

You could argue that whoever fired the bullet that took out Simon Fraser did as much as any Founding Father to establish American independence.

Without leadership, the British lose 1,000 men.

Twice as many as the Patriots.

On October 17, 1777, General Burgoyne surrenders.

It's a turning point.

The victory persuades Britain's greatest rival, France, to join the war on America's side.

Now the French Navy will force the British to fight a war on two fronts, land and sea.

But first, Washington must face his greatest challenge as leader.

He makes his winter camp in Pennsylvania at a place called Valley Forge.

In freezing temperatures, the Rebels build 900 huts in just 40 days.

Each houses a dozen men.

He has an army of 14,000 men and no houses, and the Continental Congress has failed to provide him with resources, and by willpower, by courage, by leadership, by cajoling, he has to hold the army together in the middle of a terrible winter.

Joseph Plumb Martin, veteran of The Battle of New York, is at Valley Forge.

It's a desolate place.

We are now in a truly forlorn condition.

No clothing, no provisions and as disheartened as can be.

Our prospect is indeed dreary.

All right, soldier.

This is gonna hurt a bit, all right ? You just grit your teeth.

Surgeon Albion Waldo watches Washington's army head toward crisis.

The army, which has been surprisingly healthy, now begins to grow sickly from the fatigues they have suffered from this campaign.

If we don't keep this clean, you're gonna be right back in here.

1/5 of the soldiers have no shoes.

With little clean water, dysentery spreads through the camp.

Within weeks, 2,000 men are sick and they run out of meat.

Down to their last 25 barrels of flour, the men survive on "fire cake," a mixture of flour and water.

The Rebel Army is a melting pot.

As many as 60% of recruits are convicts, freed slaves and immigrants.

But Washington's leadership inspires unruly men to stay in line.

What he had was a confidence that if you want freedom, this is what it's gonna take.

It's gonna take sacrifice, it's gonna take blood.

It's gonna take cold winters at Valley Forge.

It's gonna take losses.

General Washington, he was a great general, to be able to uplift his army during Valley Forge during that winter and still be able to fight.

I wish I would have been there, I wish I could have fought for him, because I damn sure would have.

But Washington's army soon faces an enemy far more lethal than the British.

Smallpox.

The revolution breaks out during the worst smallpox epidemic in US history.

The deadly airborne virus spreads through the British prison ships.
Isolated from the disease for generations, the American colonists have little resistance to it-- and there's no cure.
Victims break out in blisters and sores.
The virus spreads through the blood, invading healthy cells, which it kills, producing more of the virus in the process.
Four in ten victims die.
Once smallpox arrives at Valley Forge, it spreads through the cramped huts like wildfire.
Washington survived smallpox as a child.
Now he decides to take a gamble with one of the most daring experiments in US military history.
Surgeons have learned about inoculation from African slaves.
They harvest pus from a smallpox victim and smear the live virus into cuts on the skin of a healthy patient.
The inoculation spreads the infection, but at a slower rate.
A week after exposure, the victim's white blood cells create antibodies.
These attack and kill the virus that causes smallpox before the disease can spread.
But it's a dangerous race against time.
To survive, the patient's immune system has to work faster than the virus, or it will run out of control.
One in 50 of those inoculated will die.
But Washington's gamble pays off.
New cases of smallpox fall from several thousand to just a few dozen.
But to win the war against the British, Washington turns to an unlikely hero who will transform his ragtag militia into a formidable fighting machine.
George Washington's Patriot Army survives a hard winter and an outbreak of smallpox at Valley Forge.
Now Washington introduces a new recruit who will change the course of the war.
Baron von Steuben is an ex-Prussian Army officer, an elite soldier whose career is said to have been ruined by his homosexuality.
But Washington makes him one of the most powerful men in his command.
Washington was a genius in taking people in who didn't seem like they could achieve great things, but under him, they rose to the challenge, they rose to the occasion.
And that's what great leaders do.
Von Steuben's task: Reinvent the demoralized Patriot Army so they can take on the British in a close fight.
Our arms are in horrible condition, covered with rust.
Our men are literally naked, some to the fullest extent of the word.
Von Steuben starts by drilling discipline into Washington's ragtag recruits.
The men are unlike any he has ever trained before.
The genius of this nation is not in the least to be compared with that of the Prussians or Austrians or French.

You say to your soldier, "Do this," and he does it.

But here, I am obliged to say, "This is the reason why you ought to do that," and then he does it.

Von Steuben brings order, discipline and hygiene to Valley Forge.

He moves latrines away from living quarters, rebuilds the kitchens on the opposite side of the camp, and organizes housing according to regiments and companies.

His biggest contribution, he writes a manual on military training, with methods that are still in use today.

Faster ! Von Steuben's drills European battle tactics into an elite corps of 100 men.

Up, soldier ! Move ! Each will train 100 more.

He also teaches them a new and deadly weapon the bayonet.

Bayonet fighting will prove pivotal in the battles ahead.

Bayonets allow rifles to double as spears, making close hand-to-hand combat possible without reloading.

But it's not just new weapons and skills Von Steuben gives the Patriots, it's a new attitude.

You know, we can talk about weapons and how certain weapons change the face of warfare, which is absolutely true, but the greatest weapon that you can ever have is right up here.

Men like Plumb Martin leave Valley Forge highly skilled killers.

While they retrain, another secret war has been raging in British-occupied New York.

Here, a network of spies has been busy passing information to the Rebels.

Their leader is George Washington himself.

A man who's come down to us in history as someone who is incapable of telling a lie, succeeds as a commander in no small measure because of his capacity for deception.

A British general will later claim that Washington did not outfight his enemies, but out-spy them.

Now his French allies come under deadly threat, and only his secret army of spies can save them from disaster.

In New York, an estimated 20% of the population is still loyal to the British.

Food costs are up 800%.

One young woman in five is a prostitute.

To the British, New York merchant Robert Townsend is a loyalist.

A member of the loyalist militia, he writes for the loyalist press.

But to Washington's spy network, his code name is "Culper Jr.

," a fact that was only discovered in 1939.

Culper's gang will change the course of the war.

By July 1781, New York is buzzing with rumor.

A French fleet has been sighted off Rhode Island.

News leaks out that the British plan to send warships from New York for a surprise attack.

Culper must get word to Washington to somehow stop the British fleet.

The spies use invisible ink.

An advanced formula unknown to the British, the ink is made from gallic acid.

It can only be revealed by brushing the paper in liquid iron sulfate.
The next link in the chain is Austin Roe, a tavern owner from Long Island.
His contact, Abraham Woodhull, picks up the message and buries it at a secret drop.
Another agent, Ann Smith Strong, then uses her laundry as a secret code.
It signals a sailor who picks up the message and takes it to Washington.
Washington moves troops towards New York, threatening the city, forcing the British fleet to stay put in New York Harbor.
The French fleet sails out of danger.
It will play a critical role in the next stage of the war.
Now, with a spy network and a modern army backed by French naval power, Washington is ready for a final showdown.
Come on ! October 1781.
Six years into a war the British thought would last six months, the American Revolution comes to a head at Yorktown, Virginia.
In trenches around the fortified city, Plumb Martin, now a sergeant, waits with 8,000 other Patriot soldiers for the signal to attack.
Washington's army has reinvented itself with sharpshooters Left ! with training, discipline and new weapons and with a spy network that has saved the French fleet, giving the Rebels dominance at sea.
What remains of the British Army is under siege in Yorktown.
Trapped in the city, the redcoats wait for reinforcements, but back in Britain, the war is unpopular and costing far too much money.
This is a case of hanging on in the face of the- the British actions long enough to where the British literally would grow weary of this and realize that it was endless.
This is Washington's chance to end the war with one decisive blow.
He committed to this idea of being able to stand on your own.
See, America is a dream, and the only way to go get that dream is to show up and bring your very best to that moment and not stop until you bring that dream into existence.
Plumb Martin will be one of the first over the top.
Godspeed.
How are you doing, my friend ? Good, how are you ? I better check it out.
Behind Yorktown's defenses, 9,000 battle-hardened British troops are waiting.
They're protected by a series of outlying cannon forts called redoubts.
By October 14th, just two remain.
If they're captured and their guns turned on Yorktown, the British will be forced to surrender.
How's it look up there ? It's time.
All the batteries in our line lay silent.
We lay anxiously waiting for the signal.
Patriots race 100 yards to the British lines under fire and a hail of hand grenades.
Come on ! Come on ! A force of 400 break through and storm the British fort.
Fighting in close combat with bayonets, they beat the redcoats back.

Immediately after the fighting had ceased, I went out to see what had become of my wounded friend.

He was dead.

34 of Martin's comrades lie dead or wounded but they've breached Yorktown's defenses.

Two days later, the British surrender and begin negotiations for peace.

For the past six years, leadership training, weapons and intelligence have been vital.

The Rebels have achieved the impossible.

The United States is the only country to win independence from the British in war.

On April 30, 1789, Washington is inaugurated first president of the United States of America under the new constitution.

But liberty comes at a price.

Over 25,000 men have lost their lives in the battle for independence but a new nation is born.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Read more: https://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/view_episode_scripts.php?tv-show=america-the-story-of-us-2010&episode=s01e01