

While researching heroes of the American Revolution, I realized one man was constantly overlooked. Learning about his life through my research, I was convinced I should write about him. Meet John Stark, born in Londonderry, New Hampshire on August 28th, 1728, of English and Irish descent.

~~Stark's first sign of bravery was in April 1752, when he and another man -- while on a fur-trapping and fishing trip on the Baker River -- were captured by Abenaki warriors and taken back to Canada. His neighbor was killed by the warriors and his brother successfully paddled away due to Stark's warning. Prisoners in the Indian camp, they were forced to "run the gauntlet." Running the gauntlet is a punishment where a man is forced to run through two lines of warriors equipped with blunt objects to hit the man. There are conflicting versions of this story, but historians agree that when John was forced to run, he grabbed the stick from a young warrior and beat him, earning the respect of the elders of the tribe, and being adopted for an entire winter by them. He was later ransomed for five hundred and fifteen livres--about \$103--in 1752.~~

John used this experience to strengthen his knowledge of hunting, fishing, geography, and general outdoorsmanship. The result was a unique and powerful military prowess when he volunteered to fight in the French and Indian War. He served under the famous Major Robert Rogers as a second lieutenant fighting in the Battle of Lake George in September 1755. Rodger's Rangers, as they were called, fought in many more engagements. By the end of the war, Stark held a wealth of military leadership knowledge and combat experience. Howard Parker Moore describes this well in his book *A Life of General John Stark*:

"Stark had learned the hard way all the complicated business of armies, in the field, in the camp, in battle, in victory and defeat. The 'Old French War' taught him how to apply discipline, and not too

much of it. He became well-grounded in military maneuvers. He saw how large bodies of soldiers should be handled, supplied with equipment and provender.”

Stark’s return to military service coincided with many other French and Indian War veterans, with the “shot heard around the world” at the battles of Lexington and Concord. The battles marked the beginning of the American Revolution. When news of the engagements reached Stark, he immediately accepted the rank of Colonel in the New Hampshire Militia and took command of 2000 men. Colonel Stark marched and ferried them to Boston, Massachusetts, where the British held the city under siege. Unbeknownst to Stark and his men, they were marching into the first major battle of the war, and this would be one of Stark’s most significant contributions to the effort.

The British Commander-in-Chief Sir Thomas Gage was under pressure to respond to the colonists’ outrageous actions at Lexington and Concord, so plans were formed to capture Dorchester and Charlestown Heights surrounding Boston, which militia men had occupied. The threat of patriots acquiring and directing artillery fire on the sitting British navy concerned Gage. Amphibious assaults were to be carried out on June 18th, 1775, attacking and fortifying Dorchester Heights first and then marching on Charlestown. Unfortunately for the British, the plans were leaked to the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, which prompted fortifications to be hastily built on Breed’s Hill in Charlestown Heights through the night of June 16th. Patriot Colonel William Prescott led 1,200 men, mostly farmers, to build the crude dirt walls. Seeing these fortifications in the morning triggered a response from Gage of artillery fire from the one-hundred and twenty-eight naval guns in the harbor, most falling short and doing little damage.

But as the sun continued to rise on July 17th, Col. Prescott noticed a serious problem — the hurried earthwork redoubt was at risk of a simple left flank by the British. Assessing the situation, Prescott ordered his men to build a crude breastwork of hay, wood, mud, and any other

material they could find. Stark did not arrive on the battlefield until after British General William Howe landed and began to lead the right wing of the attack, but he did fill the gap in the lines of Connecticut militiamen guarding the breastwork. This gap was the low tide of the Mystic River to the north exposing a further left flank for the colonists, and Stark ordered his men to quickly build a stone wall to the water's edge. Famously, Stark also placed a stake 30 meters away from the fence and ordered none to fire until British troops crossed the line. In the fierce fighting that followed, the muskets of Stark's men tore through the British lines for two advances, and on the third, the British decided to focus solely on the redoubt. Unfortunately for the patriots of the earthwork, their ammunition ran scarce by the third advancement, and they were forced into hand-to-hand combat. The British regulars were equipped with bayonets at the end of each rifle, while the patriots had only outdated hunting rifles. Therefore, the close-quarter combat turned into a hasty retreat. This situation of men fleeing the redoubt could have been far more chaotic and deadly were it not for the calm leadership of John Stark, who prevented the encirclement of the troops with a steady withdrawal from the breastwork fence. Richard Ketchum's *Decisive Day, the Battle for Bunker Hill* describes the praise of British Lieutenant Francis Rawdon and General Burgoyne, saying of the withdrawal "Lord Rawdon wrote admiringly, 'from one fence, or wall, to another.' Burgoyne, too, complimented the rebels on their retreat. It was, he said, 'no flight: it was even covered with bravery and military skill.'" While this battle is considered a defeat for the patriots, it is interesting to note they suffered less than half the casualties of the British. This was a significant morale boost for the cause and showed that the colonial men could stand and fight in a worthy manner against the most advanced military of the day – the Redcoats. Were it not for John Stark's bravery and leadership, the outcome would have been disastrously different, whether from the redoubt being flanked or the retreating troops being encircled.

After the Battle of Bunker Hill, Stark led detachments at Trenton and Princeton, always showing bravery and control under fire. He eventually was promoted to brigadier general for the New Hampshire militia and led 1,500 militiamen to Walloomsac, New York, and defeated a British force of Brunswick Dragoons, Canadians, loyalists, and Indians in what is famously known as the Battle of Bennington. Under Stark's command, the New Hampshire farmers with outdated firearms killed 207 British troops and captured roughly 700 more, while only losing 30 killed. For the British, a defeat of this magnitude caused a loss of soldiers, abandonment by Native Americans, and deprivation of essential supplies. It is considered a turning point of the war, as what followed was another British defeat at the Battle of Saratoga. This second defeat had even larger positive implications for the colonists like securing French military support, as well as the boosting of hope and morale for the patriot cause.

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