

AFEHRI File 19-10

**Research Materials/Source Documents
ENLISTED FIRSTS**

**FILE TITLE: Sgt Elijah Churchill
- First to American to receive the Badge of Military Merit/Purple Heart**

Reviewed by:

AFEHRI Representative *G.R. Akin* date 15 Dec 97

EPC Representative *J. C. C.* date 18 Dec 97

Scanner Operator *Suzanne* date 13 Dec 97

APPROVED BY:

Gary R. Akin

GARY R. AKIN, CMSgt, USAF

Director

Air Force Enlisted Heritage Research Institute

File
1910WOOD BEE ALSO SEE AWARDS & DECORATIONS
(Mc Dowell)**IJAH CHURCHILL**

The first Badge of Military Merit went to Sergeant Elijah Churchill of the Fourth Troop, 2nd Regiment of Light Dragoons. Based on intelligence gathered from well-placed spies, it was learned in November of 1780 that the British had stored a large quantity of hay for winter forage near Coram (Long Island), New York. The forage was protected by a small fortification consisting of three blockhouses connected by a stockade of heavy twelve-foot long stakes sharpened on the end. The fortification was also protected by a ditch, a high wall, and a series of bent trees which were sharpened on the end and pointed in the direction of any would-be attackers. This fortification was named Fort St. George.

Washington approved plans for an assault on Fort St. George and assigned the task to Major Benjamin Tallmadge of the Second Regiment of Light Dragoons. Tallmadge formed a raiding party of fifty men, including Sergeant Churchill. The group marched to Fairfield, Connecticut, which was opposite the point on Long Island where they wished to land. Because of a violent gale, the raiding party was forced to wait eight days before making its crossing. At four o'clock in the afternoon of November 21, 1780, they crossed the Long Island Sound in whale boats. Once on Long Island they were in danger of being discovered by a large force of British regulars quartered on the island - or by numerous loyalist troops scattered about the area.

On November 23, 1780, the raiding party was within two miles of Fort St. George. The party was divided into three groups and each was assigned to attack a specific blockhouse. Sergeant Churchill was placed in charge of sixteen men and ordered to attack the main (and largest) blockhouse. The assault began at four o'clock in the morning, and the raiders got to within fifty feet of the fort before they were discovered by British sentinels. Churchill's party stormed the central blockhouse before its defenders could organize their resistance. However, a British schooner at anchor near the fort began to fire on the raiders, so a group was detached to capture the ship, which they did in short order. The fort, the schooner, and the center forage - over three hundred tons of hay - were set on fire, and at four o'clock in the afternoon the raiders and their prisoners reached their boats. By eleven o'clock in the evening of November 23, 1780, the raiders and their fifty English prisoners were back in Fairfield, Connecticut.

Purple Heart Medal

The second incident upon which Churchill's Purple Heart was based also involved a raid on Long Island. Washington had become annoyed by a fort the British had built on the north shore of Long Island, about forty-eight miles northeast of Brooklyn, which they called Fort Slongo. Major Tallmadge was again charged with leading an attack on the fort. For this operation, he formed a force of about one hundred men, including the intrepid Sergeant Churchill; however, this particular raid was to be led by Major Lemuel Trescott of the Ninth Massachusetts Regiment, who had volunteered for the task. The raiding party started across Long Island Sound at eight o'clock in the evening of October 2, 1781, and quickly launched a direct attack on the fort. By three in the morning the fort was captured with no losses and with the capture of twenty-one prisoners. For his participation in these two raids, Sgt. Churchill was awarded the Badge of Military Merit. At the time of his second exploit he was twenty-six years old. He served in the Continental Army until the end of the war and then moved to Chester, Massachusetts, where he died on April 11, 1841, at the age of eighty-eight.

WILLIAM BROWN

The second person to receive the Purple Heart was Sergeant William Brown of the Fifth Regiment, Connecticut Line. Brown, who was born at Stamford, Connecticut on February 12, 1761, earned his Purple Heart at Yorktown on October 14, 1781. A siege by the Americans and French had become stalled by two strong British "redoubts" (fortifications). The Americans attacked the outer redoubt, led by Sergeant Brown, in what was then referred to as a "forlorn hope" because by leading the attacking party, he had virtually no hope of coming out alive. The assault was made under the command of Lt. Col. Alexander Hamilton and Brown led by charging over formidable obstacles and into the fortification in the face of a murderous fire. In less than fifteen minutes the redoubt was captured and Brown miraculously escaped death or injury. Washington was so impressed with his courage that he subsequently awarded Brown the Purple Heart on April 24, 1783. After the war Brown moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where he died in 1808 at the age of forty-seven.

DANIEL BISSELL

The third Purple Heart was awarded to Sergeant Daniel Bissell, who was born at Windsor, Connecticut on December 30, 1754. It was awarded for a saga which started in August of 1781 when Washington decided that he needed detailed and accurate infor-



William Brown (left) and Elijah Churchill receiving the first Badges of Military Merit. ("Newburgh, New York, 3 May 1783," watercolor on board by H. Charles McBarron, 1975. *Soldiers of the Revolution*, Army Art Collection.)