

A Journal of  
The Saratoga Campaign  
as Kept by  
John F. Denis  
of the  
Company of Captain Oliver Hanchett

Friday, 7 October 1977

I wasted as little time as possible in getting out of school and cashing my paycheck, and so I arrived at home by 2:40 PM. Judy had already packed, of course, and was now napping. I refreshed myself with some 7-Up and crackers and then set about finding a suitcase. The next task involved collecting my clothing, the amount of which was so small that little time was spent. We took a minute or so for a tuna sandwich and then packed the car. After a stop to top off the tank we set out for Saratoga at 3:45 PM.

The air was clean and about 70°, and a few troops of heavy gray clouds marched from the north now and again. Traffic was moderate along the turnpike, although there had been quite a jam of folks trying to get off at Springfield. Through the Berkshires it appeared that the foliage was not peaking at once, but rather spreading its display over a longer period.

The time passed very quickly, and we left Rte 87 at Exit 13N. Just three miles farther up the road we found the Holiday Inn of Saratoga Springs, and at 6:10 PM we had parked the car.

Room 443 is at the rear of the building, and we were able to park just below our window. Some of our neighbors were a bit surprised to see me enter the hotel with my wrapped musket and powderhorn. Two trips and the car was empty.

After checking the quality of the TV — the color was awful — we thought to look into supper. Having been advised against our hotel's food by Charlie Byron, we set out to search the town for a likely restaurant. We had tried to call Denny and Patty Lou Moran down in Colonie, figuring we might visit them after supper, but there had been no answer. At the desk I checked my camera and lens and then left a message for Bob and Audrey Childs, who were expected later.

Judy wished to see more of the town, so despite the sun's having set, we drove around a few of the main streets of the town. We quickly spied a Friendly's and were inclined to return there, but shortly decided on a Pizza Hut near the hotel. (In fact the Holiday Inn is surrounded by fast food shops.) The quality of Pizza Hut food has improved impressively over the past few years, and we enjoyed an excellent medium-size pizza with the works.

We returned to the hotel around 8:15 and checked out the lounge, which has one of those new giant TV screens. Reception for the Yankees-Royals playoff game was rather poor, so we went back to our room. With the game going in the background, I began to keep my diary. I've never before had such luxury during a campaign.

By 10:10 the ballgame was going so badly as to be worthless entertainment. I had tried to call Bob and Audrey for the second

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time, again without success, so I left a call at the desk for 7:00 AM. I then concluded this entry and turned in.

P.S. A local paper, The Saratogian, has produced the finest commemorative issue I have ever seen, including full color pictures. The whole paper is worth saving.

P.P.S. 200 years ago this minute Burgoyne was planning to withdraw from his position of deepest penetration into the United States, his right flank having been all but destroyed by our old friends, Arnold and Morgan.

P.P.P.S. At about 10:30 Bob called in. We'll get together for breakfast.

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The phone rang a few minutes after 7:00 and I decided I had better get up. A look out the window showed a generally overcast sky with touches of orange light on the eastern horizon. By 8 we had finally organized to the point of leaving. Down at room 211 we found Bob and Audrey waiting and facing the prospect of eviction — their reservation was guaranteed for just one night and they would have to check back to see if they could stay the weekend.

We now headed down the block to McDonald's for a breakfast of egg McMuffins, orange juice, and tea. Again the food was surprisingly good. The Childses then went back to the hotel, and Judy and I set out for Stillwater.

We drove down Rte 87 to Exit 12 and then headed east on Rte 67. Signs for Stillwater did not exist, so we bravely kept going east on a back road numbered 9P. Despite the overcast the foliage was quite impressive, and much of this country is untouched regrown woodland. We drove past Saratoga Lake, and shortly spied "sentry-boxes" and a big marquee on a hillside. We discovered that this was a gathering of boy scouts who knew little about the coming battle. We continued along the road and shortly came out to the highway leading south to Stillwater.

Stillwater is a small town with the Central School — containing all grades — right on the main drag. Over the road was stretched a banner proclaiming: "Burgoyne — We Gotcha." Our drive had taken 21 miles. At the rear of the school we found Peter Murray, who directed us to a parking place near to Hanchett Company's tents. It was now 9:20.

Judy and I quickly fell in with a number of old friends including Joe and Winnie Rose. After the exchange of greetings we set out around the building to get a look at the battlefield. There was a section of low-lying field which had filled with water, but this could be passed at either end. On the ground sloping down from the school building the 4th Middlesex Militia was trooping up and down in two ranks.

The battlefield was actually a long — perhaps 250 yards — playing field, including a baseball diamond and a soccer field. The southern half of the field was about 75 yds. deep and completely flat, ending in thick woods. Along the woods had been constructed a twelve-yard long redoubt of bark-covered planks. The northern end of the field was a 100 yards deep, ending in a slight rise of about eight feet. Atop this rise another redoubt about twenty yards long had been placed. Just below this barricade the slope had been cut away to form a muddy cliff, so that the redoubt could be attacked only from the flanks. At this time a number of officers were being directed about the field in preparation for the afternoon's battle.

After we had strolled around a bit we were told to report to Hanchett Co. campsite for a briefing. Capt. Ron Davis took us through the days activities and the specifics of battle action, but the item of greatest interest was the new Hanchett Co. medal which Bob Appleyard had prepared. Paul Hansell had a bag full of these items and sold them to the AEQ-75 veterans for five dollars each.

With our business now concluded, Bob Childs and I now entered

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the school building to find Judy and Audrey. A little searching brought us to the cafeteria where the girls were already enjoying hot chocolate and doughnuts. The I.D. cards which we had been handed earlier seemed unnecessary. The tables in this room were gradually filling with men and women from various units. In other rooms men rolled cartridges while in the gym kids shot baskets around the cots and sleeping bags.

During the wait for lunch, I once again took up my journal. Bob and Audrey showed some interesting photos of this past Patriots' Day and Bennington. In a little bit Jack and Colin Chisholm arrived, but we learned that Art Rawlings would be kept away by a conflicting engagement and that Bruce Kidder would be delayed by a Bar Mitzvah.

About 11:00 the lines began to form in the cafeteria behind tables carrying trays of cold cuts and bread. There were NFL team stickers falling from the bread wrappers and overlooked by the kitchen aides, so Bob and I scooped up a few Patriots tags as being quite appropriate.

Once we had finished our sandwiches it appeared that some troops were heading for the busses. Bob took some extra time to show Audrey how to operate their new Pentax. I slung all of my gear over my shoulders and moved out to the front door, where I found Hanchett Co. boarding the first schoolbus. The driver was rather impatient to get underway, as she would have to make several trips, so Bob Cunningham got the bus filled and we were off. By 12:10 we had passed through downtown Stillwater and were forming up on a short side street just off U.S. Rte 4. As the rest of our division — the 4th Middlesex and the 1st New Hampshire — arrived we adjusted our positions and waited.

As usual our wait was lengthy. By now it was certain that the sky would not clear, and we began to worry about the predicted rain. The air was cool but without a noticeable breeze. In fact it was generally agreed that such was a perfect day for a parade. About a quarter hour before the scheduled step-off we moved out to form on Rte 4, which is the main street through Stillwater. From this position we could see the Hudson River, a swirling current with rapids and white water which belies the name of the town.

Seventeen minutes past the 1 PM step-off time, the parade stepped off. On this day Hanchett Co. numbered three officers, one flag-bearer, twelve muskets, and two fifers. We were at an initial disadvantage due to our lack of a drum. Compounding this problem was the fact that each of our two fifers — Bill Dempster and Ben Soule — has a different repertoire. They could agree on but a few tunes. Their music was rivaled by the fine sounds of music from the 4th Middlesex some twenty yards ahead of us. Furthermore, our fifers often began their tunes on the wrong foot. As a result of all this, Hanchett's marching was not the most polished.

Stillwater is not unlike many of the small towns along the upper Hudson. The edges of town have mostly small ranch houses. There are several small factories, most no longer in business. In the center of town many of the older buildings are in little better than slum condition. It is rather depressing to see. Nevertheless, this town of 1400 was making a great effort for this one big day.

The parade route was quite easy, there being only two moderate hills in a course of about three miles. At 2:10 PM we entered the driveway of the Central School where Judy and Audrey were waiting with the cameras.

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Once we had been dismissed, the girls, Bob, and I walked out to the battlefield to view the preparations. The large redoubt — Breymann's — had a few tents nearby, and we decided to scout the enemy while we might. For the first time we got a good look at the construction. The Newport, R.I., Artillery had two brass 6-pounders behind embrasures and all its equipment leaning against the wall. Bob and I had our pictures taken behind enemy lines. As the artillery company was now returning from the parade, we decided that it was time to leave.

Walking across to the school, I was pleased to find that the battlefield was dry. Back in the cafeteria I again took up my journal, and I later had more doughnuts and chocolate.

Around 3:15 Bob and I gathered our gear and set out to find Hanchett's staging area, which appeared to be right behind the school. As we stood there observing the preparations of other units, I noticed that Bob still carried his ramrod. That morning Ron had appointed me safety officer, the only one authorized to carry a ramrod into battle. Since few of our new men had arrived there seemed to be plenty of time for Bob to stash the rod back in his car, and so he headed off. Shortly after his departure, I observed a gathering of men far off to our right in "Bedrock Stadium," the school football field. I thought I recognized Peter Murray and a few others, and in a minute one of our Lincoln recruits came up to tell us that indeed our whole division was assembling on that field.

As we moved to the assembly area, I lagged behind the others until Bob Childs could see me, which he soon did. On our football field many men were testing their muskets by firing them into the branches of nearby trees. My ramrod was in great demand. Some fellows discovered faulty flints. Others just kept blasting away, round upon round. There was little concern for conservation, as we had not yet emptied our cartouche boxes in three years of battles. Nevertheless, I fired just one of my twenty-seven rounds.

Our division was under the command of Brigadier General Ebenezer Learned (Palmer True). The 4th Middlesex formed the head of our column, and we marched behind their new, blue flag. When we formed our column before the battle, off to our right was another column of Rhode Islanders who would be first to reach their objective. Wandering about our lines was the green-coated figure of General Horatio Gates (Tony Walker). The sky was now growing darker, and whatever the exact temperature it was cold enough now to make my toes quite uncomfortable.

Eventually a line of redcoats appeared along the end of the football field between us and the school. The line of chatter among our crowd ran like football commentary, with references to "the long bomb" and the "march downfield." Indeed the long drumroll by the 4th sounded like the prelude to a kick off. At this point I produced that New England Patriots sticker from my pouch. Peter Murray quickly tucked it under a button on his tri-corn to show it to Ron. He inadvertantly left it there for the rest of the battle, but it was somewhat appropriate.

At 3:58 the British muskets flashed first fire against us. In the background their fifes and drums played "The British Grenadiers." Our light infantry and skirmishers now advanced to form a line and

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exchange fire. To the left of the enemy line was a pipe band.

In three successive marches of a dozen or so yards each our column advanced to a line of playground equipment. We had to give the enemy time to fall back on their redoubts. In fact our column was now standing broadside to Balcarres's redoubt. Since we had loaded muskets before marching, some thought we should face right and give fire, but Palmer was intent on getting us to the far left of the field where we belonged. The Rhode Island men were already engaged on the right, when we moved on.

There was one further halt at which point I could see Judy. I was concerned that the increasing darkness would require a new setting for our camera, but Judy couldn't hear me. Momentarily we were off again.

When the column next halted we were opposite Breymann's redoubt with some space between our units. At the command we faced right and began to advance. The captain had to take care to coordinate with other units so as to form a single front line.

The enemy artillery now opened fire. There was a bright flash of priming and then a greater flash and boom from the muzzle of a cannon, repeated by the second. The concussion was quite noticeable against my cocked hat.

On our line the front rank knelt, the rear stood. Orders were simple: aim; fire; prime and load. The firing was going quite well. I thought I felt a spit of rain, but I could not be certain.

After four or so rounds we advanced several yards and reformed. Again the firing procedure. I began to have trouble with some cartridges. Some had been badly rolled so that powder was held tightly within folds of paper. Some such cartridges I had to bite off well beyond the twisted end. Once I fired a second prematurely and drew a rebuke from Paul Hansell. My first misfire resulted from my forgetting to remove the hammer stall after another advance.

Our farthest advance was to a point about thirty yards from the redoubt, where a yellow ribbon had been placed across the field. On our way to this point the division had had to give way to the left in order not to be crossed by other units to our right. Already Ron had called for casualties, and a few Hanchett men unarmed or with failing muskets had gone down. Muskets from the rear rank now filled gaps in the front line, and so the rear was thinned considerably.

Now Tony Walker came along to order a short withdrawal. Our execution was not parade ground pretty — in fact our lines wavered greatly — but we probably looked authentic. We turned and once again on command gave fire. Again we advanced. At least twice we repeated this manoeuvre.

On the redoubt the artillery belched flame from time to time, accompanied by some musket fire. The wadding from one shot set a small bright fire on the field before the redoubt. In firing I aimed at either the blue Hessian flag or at one of the cannons. By now the number of cartridges in my box was beginning to dwindle seriously.

The firing continued by volleys and casualties continued to go down. Dan McLaughlin fell on his face. Suddenly an "angel of mercy" from the Weymouth Militia appeared beside him. Ron Davis quickly warned her against attempting mouth to mouth resuscitation. Then

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at one volley Colin Chisholm suddenly rolled onto his side and lay staring skyward. I thought it certain that something had hit him. Called to withdraw, we left him still lying there unmoving. One of our number now advanced to help Colin off — and we learned that it had all been an act. The best "die" I've seen yet. Colin later reported some discomfort at being fired over.

Now Tony Walker came along to order a cease fire so that we would not endanger Benedict Arnold in his mad dash across our front. Momentarily, while the enemy continued its musketry, Arnold came running across from the right, sword drawn, to the huzzas and hollers of our division. From among the 4th Middlesex he found three "volunteers" to follow him in a mad assault against the left of the redoubt. A volley of Hessian musketfire brought all four men down in wild tumbles, and then the enemy advanced at the bayonet to finish the job.

Immediately the 4th burst forward upon firing a magnificent volley, and they surged up to the left of the redoubt thus saving Arnold. Firing my last cartridge at this time I joined Hanchett Co. in sweeping around to the slope leading around the redoubt. There was great shouting as the last of the mobile enemy fled into the woods.

The redoubt being crowded, I made my way along the front of the barricade. The wounded and dead were propped against the walls and cannon, and I doubt that they cared to hear our demands for rum and schnapps. A light infantry officer was quite upset to learn that one field piece still had an unfirable round inside it.

Now we were ordered out of the redoubt to form on the battlefield for final ceremonies. In the same order of units as in the battle and in double lines we drew up facing the single line of redcoats. Huzzas were exchanged by the opposing sides, and another three huzzas were offered for Benedict Arnold — the last he will receive from us for another hundred years. After hearing Tony Walker's thanks, we were dismissed from the assembly. It was now rather dark and spits of rain could be felt once again. It was 5:05 PM.

Back in the cafeteria Judy, Audrey, Bob, and I sat together once again. I was quite pleased to be able to take off all of those slings. Judy decided to place my coat over her knees.

At the far end of our row of tables a pair of vendors had now set up shop, offering items for the philatelists. There were two choices in first day covers offered on about a half dozen different cachets. I chose a cachet with first day issues of both the Herkimer stamp and the Saratoga stamp. I also bought a print of the Trumbull surrender painting with the Saratoga stamp. There was much interest all around.

Once again seated I began to work on my diary. Around 5:30 a line began to form leading into the kitchen. Judy and Audrey remained to keep an eye on our gear, while Bob and I got into the chow line. We got to talking with a fellow from the 1st New Hampshire. The line moved very slowly despite its being short. And then we noticed a line three or four times as long coming down the farther hallway and feeding into the same doorway as ours. Patiently we moved along and picked up meals for our wives as well as

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ourselves. Very spicy spaghetti, salad, and bread, with Kool-Aid was the menu. It wasn't bad. There were ice cream cups for dessert.

As soon as we had finished supper, we headed out to the cars. It was now quite dark, and there was a steady drizzle. Rather than attempt to retrace our overland route of this morning, I led the way straight up Rte 4 to Schuylerville and then west on Rte 29 to Saratoga Springs.

Back at the Holiday Inn, it was planned that we should all get together shortly in the lounge. I changed out of uniform and Judy began a short nap, which she delayed long enough to catch the Bob Newhart Show. By 9:00 I was ready to go, but Judy had already decided to call it a night.

I enjoyed a piece of home-made mince pie which Audrey had brought along, and then she, Bob, and I went down to the lounge. Here the one feature was a giant "Advent" television screen on which we watched the Dodgers-Phillies play-off. A steady rain was falling on Philadelphia, and we knew it would fall on us tomorrow. By the time of our arrival all of the scoring was over and the teams were simply struggling to keep from drowning. If I ever wondered why baseball is not played in the rain, I found out this evening.

I taught the bartender how to make a "burnished nail" and then enjoyed that warming concoction. As we talked I learned about Bob's work at MIT on the development of nuclear fusion. Returning to the battle we noted the fate of Bobby McLean's bayonet. Bobby had bravely followed Arnold this afternoon. Upon being shot he tumbled forward, planting his bayonet into the ground and throwing his weight against the musket. This we theorized to explain the 90° angle in his bayonet at the end of the day.

Audrey retired early, leaving Bob and me to the TV, but we didn't last much longer. By 10:30 I was crawling beneath the covers.



Sunday, 9 October 1977

The phone rang at 8 AM as requested, but I took my time in rising. A look outside almost sent me back to bed, for the rain had not really ceased. We packed without difficulty and I took the baggage down to our car. With the last trip finished, Judy and I moved the car around to the front lot and I went into the lobby to sign out. Here I ran into Bob Childs once again. As I was leaving the lobby, I was stopped for a photo for the first time this weekend.

By 9:15 I had finished my business with the Holiday Inn, and Judy and I headed for breakfast once again at McDonald's. We had been working on our McMuffins for a while when Bob and Audrey arrived. They had managed to find a place farther down the Hudson for this night and so were leaving Saratoga Springs, too.

As Judy and I went to the car at 10:05 the rain continued to drizzle down. We followed Rte 29 east to Schuylerville and then headed south along Rte 4, keeping an eye out for any sign of the troops. Just beyond the Schuyler House, south of town, we noticed some activity in a park area, and a short way up the road sat a camper with militia gathered around it. I turned in at a drive which led down toward a certain gravel pit, and here I sought information. Things did not appear to be particularly well organized at this point. The parade through town had now been cancelled because of the weather, and the only planned activity was a ceremony up by the Saratoga monument.

Transportation seemed a chancy thing — but one school bus had appeared as yet. When Bob and Audrey arrived we conferred and decided to take both cars up to the monument, where the girls would wait with one car while Bob and I returned to the mustering place with the other. Following this plan we shortly found ourselves atop a steep hill, where a police officer directed us to a parking place handy to the great gray obelisk. After a brief bit of scouting about and a few last words about the cameras, Bob and I took my car back downhill to park it by the gravel pit.

A number of men, particularly those of the Fourth Middlesex, were waiting now, but none of Hanchett Co.'s officers had arrived. Palmer True, concerned at the lack of transport, discussed matters with several officers, and it was agreed that the one school bus should be left for the dependents. This being the case it was important that the army start marching soon. And so by 11:15 Palmer began the parade along the highway. All Hanchett men present brigaded with the Fourth by their invitation.\*

The rain was steady and the temperature was about 50°, but these factors made the march easier, especially the steep uphill climb on Burgoyne Avenue. Our music awakened some late risers, and it most likely did not please those inside the two churches which we passed. A British outfit had to make a mad dash to get ahead of us at the foot of the hill and had to put up with some choice cat-calls. A short ways up they took their revenge by firing a volley into our front rank. Those lobsters never will learn to elevate their muskets.

So up we climbed until at the top we turned left into a field before the monument. We marched on and through the British lines, where some nasty comments were exchanged. Beyond a line of high

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grass lay a long mown field in which we were to form up. Above this meadow to our right was a ridge with a cemetery, and since there were trees as well, we fell out and took shelter up there. Perhaps fifty or sixty spectators also stood along the ridge.

By now the Hanchett officers had arrived and so our company formed on its own. Up to this point it had been said that the battle would be cancelled due to the weather, but since it was merely a question of convenience and not safety, the commanders changed their minds. All men who wished to try firing were to form in the front two ranks of the battle lines. Immediately a number of men began firing practice rounds. All day I had taken care to keep my musket muzzle downward and the rain out. I also kept the frizzen closed to keep the pan dry. I should have been set.

In time we fell to in columns and marched once again toward the British. The enemy line was formed along the clump of undergrowth that divided the mown field from the monument park. As we formed line of battle the first redcoat volleys came at precisely one minute past noon. Our skirmishers advanced and returned a few volleys.

As we advanced Hanchett Co. was slightly left of center with the 2nd New Hampshire on our right and the Fourth Middlesex on our left. Eight of us were formed in two ranks for firing. My first shot was a flash in the pan, while others had better success. I blamed my difficulty on a delay between our loading and firing which was caused by our waiting for British reinforcements to arrive. There was no way to keep rain out of the barrel and the powder in. Actually moisture may already have collected earlier in the barrel which had not been cleaned after the last battle. In all I suffered two flashes and four complete misfires, and all throughout the rain fell.

Gradually we pushed the redcoats back, and upon reaching the line of tall grass we charged through at a run. It totally soaked our breeches and stockings. Perhaps ten yards into the monument park, we were halted to form up for the surrender ceremony.

The surrender was overly long and not well coordinated, or at least our discomfort made it seem so. After the exchange between Generals Gates and Burgoyne the national anthems were played. The British effort was laughable as the troops sang "God Save the King" — a lieutenant loudly out of tune with his men — and their fifes played "British Grenadiers." A further delay occurred when heads had to be counted for distribution of medals. By 12:25 it was all over and we began the march back to our parking area. Palmer has to be the only divisional commander ever to lead his troops while playing a fife.

At the parking lot we soon found Judy and Audrey. Good-byes were said quickly, as the weather discouraged any hanging around. Judy and I set out at 1:15 PM and, following the same route as on the way up, had an uneventful trip to Springfield, arriving at 3:45. Ahead of me was the prospect of scrubbing orange rust from all of my steel weapons.

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Note

- \*: As we were gathering before the march, Palmer spoke to the Hanchett men about plans for the Fourth Middlesex and invited us to consider joining the Fourth. The absence of our officers made an especially cogent argument in favor of such a move. I judge that the Oliver Hanchett Company ceased to exist at this moment.