

‘See some of our Grievances Redressed’: What Patterns of Mutiny Tell Us About Morale in the Continental Army

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On New Year's Day 1781, encamped in Morristown, New Jersey, officers in the Continental Army sat in their tents enjoying a grand regimental dinner. The next day, a re-organisation of the Continental Army would go into effect and the officers would be redistributed. To ring in the new year, and say goodbye to parting friends, the officers partook in festivities throughout the night. Around 8:00 p.m. they heard a rousing HUZDAH from the soldiers outside. Concerned, they sent Lieutenant Enos Reeves to assess the situation. Soldiers on the right met the cry of soldiers from the left. Reeves noted that he ‘found numbers in small groups whispering and busily running up and down the line.’¹ He would soon find out why.

The events of the next hour happened quickly. Someone fired a gun, followed quickly by a second shot and then a third. Officers rushed from their tents, abandoning festivities, only to find soldiers running from their own tents and forming lines. Around 1,500 enlisted men and non-commissioned officers gathered in revolt. Commissioned officers attempted to calm the men, but to no avail. Finally, overwhelming their officers, the soldiers successfully commandeered a cannon, forcing the remaining officers to retreat. The entirety of the Pennsylvania line, save two of its regiments, had mutinied. General Anthony Wayne and other high-ranking Continental officers attempted to squash the mutiny, but to no success. Mutineers’ demands were simple: they wanted to be discharged immediately, paid their months of back pay, and have ‘no aspersions cast against them for participating in the mutiny.’² Well organised, armed, and frustrated, the soldiers marched towards Philadelphia intent on laying their grievances against the army to Congress.

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- 1 Enos Reeves ‘Letterbook Extracts January 2–17, 1781; 2 January 1781, in John Rhodehamel (ed.), *The American Revolution: Writings from the War of Independence, 1775–1783* (New York: Library of Congress, 2001).
 - 2 Demands delivered in conjunction by the sergeants to General Wayne, 4 January 1781, ‘Diary of the Revolt – Pennsylvania in the war of the revolution battalions and line 1775–1783,’ John Blair Linn and

Mutiny was a protest that revealed soldiers' acknowledgement that they lacked the ability to endure war without a change in their present circumstances. Considering mutiny does not give a definitive measurement of morale by any means, but does expose quantifiable patterns of dissatisfaction, which contributes to our understanding of morale more generally. Soldiers' understandings of their place within the conflict and society, their value to the army, and individual rights manifested themselves in unique patterns during mutiny. Early in the war, mutinies were results of power struggles. Mutinies later in the war were typically the consequences of military authorities' failure to fulfil their contractual obligations to the soldiers. Perpetrators of mutiny used the protest to address grievances and force change within existing systems, rather than giving up on them entirely. As military authority and structures were defined throughout the war, mutinies shifted into a last resort for soldiers to protest and address their grievances. Mutiny demonstrated an acknowledgement that the problems within military life were hindering soldiers' ability to carry out their service, and was an attempt to resolve these from within existing systems. Instead of leaving the army, mutineers sought to highlight their grievances and, in doing so, attempted to fundamentally change military life.

Mutiny looms much larger than desertion in the historiography of the Continental Army, and eighteenth-century militaries more generally. The relative rareness of mutinies in European armies meant that those that did occur have been studied in detail. The inverse is true of the Continental Army, as the frequency with which mutiny occurred is unique. Peter Way conceptualised mutinies as early forms of labour strikes and the patterns of mutiny in the Continental Army arguably support that assertion.³ Fundamentally, mutinies were a radical break with military policy, over issues such as poor living and working conditions, pay and insufficient provisions. Eric Hobsbawm characterises this action as a form of riotous collective bargaining.⁴ Indeed, Joseph Plumb Martin, in his famous narrative of the war, frequently referred to his service as labour and his fellow soldiers as labourers – deserving of 'their meat'.⁵ Soldiers, after all, were employed by the military to provide a service, and their enlistment guaranteed them certain compensations. Charles Neimeyer argues that this was the 'moral economy' of soldierhood. In exchange for the temporary surrender of civil liberties in favour of military service, the army was obligated to pay wages and supply soldiers' basic needs.⁶ Mutiny, then, served as a reminder to the Continental Army of what its soldiers were owed. When the terms agreed upon were not met, soldiers rebelled.

On the whole, individual mutinous actions demonstrated a soldier's rejection of their subordination – an unwillingness to accept and respect the hierarchy of military life.

William H. Egle (eds), *Pennsylvania archives* (Harrisburg: Clarence M. Busch, 1896), 2d ser. vol.11, pp.633–634, and *Papers of the Continental Congress 1774–1789*, reel 170, vol.9, p.481, Washington, D.C., National Archives & Records Administration, 1962; National Archives microfilm publications; M0332.; Charles Patrick Neimeyer, *America Goes to War: A Social History of the Continental Army* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p.149.

3 Peter Way, 'Rebellion of the Regulars: Working Soldiers and the Mutiny of 1763–1764', *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol.57, no.4 (October, 2000), p.763.

4 E.J. Hobsbawm, 'The Machine Breakers', *Past & Present*, vol.1, no.1 (February 1952), p. 59.

5 Joseph Plumb Martin, James Kirby Martin (ed.), *Ordinary Courage: The Revolutionary War Adventures of Joseph Plumb Martin* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell Publishing, 2013), p.99.

6 Neimeyer, *America Goes to War*, p.157

Although these actions happened and were punished accordingly, the mutiny with which this chapter is chiefly concerned involved collective actions. There was a key distinction within Continental Army policy between acting in a mutinous way, and participating or inciting a mutiny. Mutiny as an adjective was punished and treated differently to mutiny as a verb. Thomas Simes's dictionary defined perpetrators of mutiny as any actors who began, excited, caused or joined mutiny – similarly, anyone who knew about or was present for a mutiny and did not actively participate, but also did nothing to stop it or report it, was guilty.⁷ This chapter uses mutiny to refer only to a group action, rather than an individual act of insubordination. Such subordination was commonplace within military life and highlighted dissatisfaction in its own way. Indeed, smaller individual instances of mutiny highlighted the dissatisfaction amongst soldiers that culminated in larger actions.⁸ However, it functioned differently to collective mutiny. Individual soldiers who felt personally let down by the army, or the leadership within it, could desert or act out in an individual form of mutiny.⁹ Mutiny as a protest against an army that was not fulfilling their end of the contract was most effective as a collective action.

Mutiny charges accounted for 5.8 percent of all court martials in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War.¹⁰ Fundamentally, mutiny was a defiance of the military system from within – a plea for change and recrimination for grievances. It is important to highlight that the line between mutiny and mere disobedience was relatively fluid. Many soldiers were charged with mutiny and found guilty only of disobedience.¹¹ For the purposes of this chapter, groups found guilty of disobedience will not be considered as mutinous. However, this does not negate the importance of their actions. Many of the issues these groups protested paralleled issues highlighted in larger subsequent mutinies. Mutinies rarely existed as singular incidents, unlike desertion, where an individual soldier's decision to leave cannot easily be attributed to any particular event because of the lack of documentary evidence that exists. Large mutinies were normally foreshadowed by smaller acts of disobedience and followed by other mutinies where soldiers complained about the same issues. Mutinies were often culminations of complaints the army failed to rectify – final desperate attempts for soldiers to have their concerns heard.

The threat of mutiny was consequently ever present in the Continental Army. Mere months after his appointment as Commander in Chief, George Washington began advising

7 Thomas Simes, *The Military Medley Containing the Most Necessary Rules and Directions for Attaining a Competent Knowledge of the Art: To Which is Added an Explanation of Military Terms, Alphabetically Digested* (London: n.p., 1768), p.B4.

8 It should also be addressed that a number of mutinies were committed by militiamen exclusively, or militiamen participated within the ranks of the larger mutinies alongside enlisted soldiers. Although these men are not considered throughout the rest of this thesis, their participation and incitement of mutinies are significant. Unlike in cases of desertion, when the army punished militiamen differently because of the nature of their service, the army doled out punishments for mutiny without prejudice – militiamen were treated as if they were enlisted men.

9 Ilya Berkovich, *Motivation in War: The Experience of Common Soldiers in Old-Regime Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p.96.

10 John A. Nagy, *Rebellion in the Ranks: Mutinies of the American Revolution* (Westholme Publishing, 2016), p.xv.

11 See James C. Neagles, *Summer Soldiers: A Survey & Index of Revolutionary War Courts-Martial* (Salt Lake City: Ancestry Incorporated, 1986).

Congress that mutiny was imminent if the troops were not adequately supplied.¹² Concerns regarding mutiny even affected the civilian population. In July 1775, Abigail Adams wrote to her husband informing him that the townspeople had been ordered not to use white handkerchiefs because ‘tis a signal of mutiny.’¹³ Despite the consistent and looming potential for mutiny from the very beginning of the war, the nature and severity of mutinies grew annually. Soldiers’ reliance on mutinies to redress their grievances directly relates to their cultural wariness of standing armies. Mutiny within the Continental Army acted as an unofficial system of checks and balances that the soldiers used to safeguard their rights as afforded to them by their contractual agreements.

This chapter is not intended to be an exhaustive study of mutiny perpetrated by the rank and file in the Continental Army, but rather to highlight the patterns in mutiny and evaluate what they reveal about morale. Mutiny was typically a last resort as a form of protest. Soldiers utilised petitions liberally throughout the war as a way to raise their grievances to officers and members of state governments.¹⁴ Mutinies occurred within the Continental Army as early as 1775. Although there were no significant mutinies during the 1777–1778 campaign, there were at least four major mutinies in 1779. From 1779 onwards, mutinies occurred annually and with increasing severity. Three Continental Army lines revolted in 1780, which led to the famed Pennsylvania line mutiny of 1781, the largest mutiny of the Revolution. Each period of mutiny had distinct characteristics. As such, this chapter will view mutinies in three stages: early in the war, 1775 and 1776; the middle of the war, 1777–1779; and the end of the war, 1780–1781. Concerns raised during earlier mutinies never fully evaporated, and each grouping of mutinies built upon previous concerns. The events of 1781, unlike previous mutinies, were therefore a culmination of grievances, not merely an outbreak of them. The progression of mutinies demonstrates the growing consciousness within common soldiers in the Continental Army, that their service was valuable and could be leveraged.

Evaluating mutiny by year, rather than individual incident, does remove some of the characteristics unique to each circumstance. However, considering them chronologically highlights the growth and nuance mutinies gained throughout the eight years of war. The mutinies in 1781 were the culmination of a consistent pattern of rebellion. Mutinies early on in the war were primarily power struggles between the militia turned army and Continental Army leadership. Those in the middle focused more on grievances, but that is not to say that both issues were not at play throughout the entire war, or that the two issues functioned independently of one another. Mutiny is inherently a power struggle – a revolt against the status quo to effect a major change. In the early years, mutiny highlighted the limits and gaps in military authority, whereas later years highlighted limits within army structures to provide for soldiers. Just as the Continental Army developed alongside the progression of the war, so did soldiers’ grievances and how they approached them.

The Continental Army was not the only army that suffered from soldiers mutinying. However, the extent to which it happened in the Continental Army was greater than in its

12 Philander D. Chase (ed.), *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series*, vol.2, 16 September 1775–31 December 1775 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987), pp.24–30.

13 Nagy, *Rebellion in the Ranks*, p.2

14 Ricardo Herrera, ‘Self-Governance and the American Citizen as Soldier, 1775–1861,’ *The Journal of Military History*, vol.63, no.1 (January 2001), p.48.

European counterparts. Ironically, notions of service as a contract were particularly important to the Continental Army's soldiers' understanding of their own citizenship. Due to the persistent difficulties the Continental Congress had supplying and paying soldiers, the Continental Army could not uphold its end of the contract significantly more often than the established and better organised armies of Europe. This, combined with soldiers understanding of their position in the war, 'conscious of their rights ... liberties,' created an environment where mutinies flourished.¹⁵ When mutinies occurred in European armies, they were almost always over backpay issues. Professional soldiers were significantly less likely to endure contract breaks than the Continental Army citizen-soldiers. The Swabian mutinies of 1757 highlighted an exceptional occurrence. The Württemberg Army suffered five mutinies and significant desertions within the space of a few months.¹⁶ The two phenomena coalescing only happened once during the Revolutionary War but was much more common in Europe. Only in the winter of 1780 to 1781 could the same be said of the Continental Army. The winter of 1780 saw a spike in desertions, and, early in 1781, the largest mutiny of the war happened.

In the Continental Army, the soldiers who were likely to desert were not those who mutinied, and peaks in either action happened independently. This is in contrast to trends seen in contemporary, old-regime armies. Typically, in these armies, mutiny occurred simultaneously with large-scale desertion. Although contemporary European armies experienced comparative levels of desertion to the Continental Army, they saw significantly fewer mutinies, underscoring a key difference in the function of mutiny and desertion within the Continental Army and its European counterparts. As such, a study of mutiny within the Continental Army is particularly revealing regarding the various ways in which morale functioned and the determinants of morale in the Continental Army. When considered as acts of protest, mutiny and desertion also highlight soldiers' dedication to and understanding of Revolutionary ideals. The persistence of mutiny within the Continental Army reveals a rank-and-file that was aware of their importance to the war and aware of what was owed to them from their enlistment contracts. Soldiers understood they had certain rights and were due compensation as payment for a temporary abdication of their personal freedoms, in favour of military service for the public good. Enlisted men in the Continental Army used mutiny to express their dissatisfaction and advocate for what they believed the army owed them. Although both actions were against the Articles of War set out by the army, soldiers' utilisation of them as forms of protest demonstrated a clear inculcation of the revolutionary ideals.

Conceptually, it is important to understand mutinies simultaneously as direct challenges to authority figures and structures and breaches in military discipline. As Peter H. Wilson argues regarding the Swabian mutinies of 1757, the frequency of mutinies highlighted the army's inability and, in some cases, unwillingness, to enforce the harsh punishments dictated by military law regarding mutinies.¹⁷ European armies were not sympathetic

15 Don Higginbotham, *The War for American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789* (Macmillan Press: New York, 1971), p.406.

16 Peter H. Wilson, 'Violence and the Rejection of Authority in Eighteenth-Century German: The Case of the Swabian Mutinies in 1757', *German History*, vol.12, no.1 (February 1994), p.2.

17 Wilson, 'Violence and the Rejection of Authority', p.2.

or tolerant of mutinies – participation in any collective action risked capital punishment. Similarly, choosing not to act against a mutiny garnered the same punishment. Collective action such as mutiny was thus fairly rare in eighteenth-century armies. The same cannot be said for the Continental Army. Mutiny represents an important area of negotiation between officers and the rank-and-file, as well as between soldiers and the Continental Congress, and state authorities.¹⁸ The punishment for mutiny, if any was given, was much more flexible than punishment for other crimes due to a mutual understanding of the importance of the individual soldier, and the validity of their grievances. Even if officers disagreed with enlisted soldiers' method of protest, few disagreed that protest was merited. Due to the consistent manpower shortages within the Continental Army, officers needed to dole out punishments carefully. Soldiers needed to both be punished but see the justice in the punishment – enough to entice them back to service in the army. As such, flexibility and uncharacteristic expressions of forgiveness were common in mutiny court martials, in a way they were not for other crimes. Punishment for mutiny in the Continental Army rarely resulted in death sentences and occurred with relative frequency during the Revolutionary War. Two reasons explain this difference.

First, there was an acknowledgement on behalf of the Continental Army that the grievances of those participating in the mutiny were legitimate. Officers may not have agreed with mutiny as a course of action, but could not deny the lack of supplies, sustenance and pay the soldiers endured. If military service was a contractual agreement then the Continental Army rarely held up their end of the contract in full. Baron Ludwig Von Closen wrote his assessment of the situation, following the Pennsylvania line mutiny: 'The lack of pay, the bad food and dearth of clothing, together with the fact that Congress does not permit them to leave military service, even when their terms expired one or two years ago, are the reason for their being driven to this extremity. In Europe, they would do the same for less.'¹⁹ Mutiny may have been an extreme reaction, but it was one warranted under the extreme circumstances.

Second, it was impractical to punish large groups of soldiers. The Continental Army always lacked manpower, and enough men mutinied in multiple instances that it would have been a severe blow to the army if they punished or executed all involved. In addition, the nature of enlisted men's service in the Continental Army was different to that of most European army soldiers. The men were almost all volunteers – citizens fighting for a cause – and were taught repeatedly by officers to consider themselves as such. Sentencing large groups of soldiers to death who brought forth grievances does not inspire confidence in the cause or the justice system. As a result of the light punishment mutineers received, mutiny was a relatively safe form of protest for individual soldiers, while still ensuring a degree of success for the collective. Although ringleaders of the mutinies were at great risk

18 William P. Tatum III, 'The Soldiers Murmured Much on Account of this Usage: Military Justice and Negotiated Authority in the Eighteenth-Century British Army,' in Kevin Linch & Matthew McCormack (eds) *Britain's Soldiers: Rethinking War and Society, 1715-1815* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press: 2021), p.111.

19 Evelyn M. Acomb (ed. & trans.), *The Revolutionary Journal of Baron Ludwig von Closen, 1780–1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), 12 January 1781, p.54.

of punishment, it was rare that all participants suffered.²⁰ The lack of robust punishment undoubtedly ensured the continuing practice of mutiny across the Continental Army.²¹

Although the Continental Army suffered a number of mutinies during the war, and the British Army in North America suffered virtually none, this did not impede the army's victory in 1783.²² Why, when soldiers were seemingly at their wits end, did they still refuse to leave military service? If, as many historians have argued, their willingness to stay in the army was largely economic, and soldiers were the dregs of society with no other option, why then did they stay despite the lack of pay? Mutinies occurred in European armies, but they occurred less frequently and typically with a preceding or subsequent mass desertion. This culmination of events rarely happened in the Continental Army. The function and character of mutiny in the Continental Army must therefore be analysed as separate to the action in other contemporary armies. Both the mutineers, and the armies that presided over the situations, managed the situations vastly differently in the Continental Army and European armies.

Mutiny in the Continental Army evolved throughout the eight years of the Revolutionary War in a way not comparable to its European counterparts. The newness of the military institution, and soldiers' understandings of their position in society and the military, meant that mutiny was used from the army's inception to highlight soldiers' dissatisfaction. Soldiers, aware of their rights, and wary of a standing army anyway, used mutiny as a form of protest and as a way to highlight their willingness to serve in the army, while simultaneously demonstrating their inability to do so. As a result, mutiny's characteristics evolved greatly throughout the war. Earlier in the war, mutinies were results of power struggles. They started in 1775, but hardly ever occurred in 1776 or 1777. Mutinies later in the war were typically the result of military authorities' failure to fulfil their contractual obligations to the soldiers. Mutinies increased in frequency from 1778 to 1779, culminating in the largest mutiny of the war in 1781. As military authority and structures were defined throughout the war, mutinies became a last resort for soldiers to protest and address their grievances.

Certain patterns existed in all mutinies during the Revolutionary War. Mutiny was an action carried out by a group of soldiers. Without the group, these acts against the army would be stopped quickly and punished harshly. Coherence safeguarded soldiers' protest. Mutiny was always motivated by a grievance against the army, in one way or another. As the war developed, the nature of these grievances shifted, grew, and amalgamated, but a grievance was always present. In each mutiny there was an emphasis attached to the soldier's

20 Neimeyer, *America Goes to War*, p.141.

21 William Pennington, a soldier from New Jersey, angered at the mutiny, argued as such in his diary: 'The mild treatment of the Pennsylvanians met, by the state appointing a committee to treat with them and redress the grievances they supposed themselves to labor under, and was the principal incitement to the Jersey line to take the steps they have been led into by some turbulent fellows.' 'Our Camp Chest, 1780–1781,' Copy of Diary of William S. Pennington of New Jersey, original diary on deposit in historical society of New Jersey, pp.326–327.

22 Only 15 soldiers in the British Army were tried for mutiny during the Revolutionary War. Each of these instances were individual acts of mutiny (disrespecting an officer, or the crown, etc.), rather than collective crimes like the instances of mutiny in the Continental Army. Arthur N. Gilbert, 'British Military Justice during the American Revolution,' *The Eighteenth Century*, vol.20, no.1 (Winter 1979), p.30.

persona. Soldiers accentuated their suffering for the cause – their strongest rhetorical device and the only bargaining chip available to them. These men understood that they needed officers to view them as incredibly loyal but demoralised soldiers with no other choice because of the army's inability to provide for them. Soldiers needed the army to understand that they were forced to mutiny in order to rectify their situation, laying the blame for the mutiny with the army, rather than the soldiers partaking. If a pattern of suffering for the cause could be proven, then perhaps their concerns would be listened to, or, at the bare minimum, their punishments lessened.

Similarly, the timing of mutinies tended to follow specific patterns. On the whole, mutinies most frequently occurred around New Year. That was typically when enlistment terms were up, and they faced additional hardships because of the elements and had been cooped in winter camps for multiple months. The increased time in camp, less consistent but more monotonous duties and clear lack of supplies undoubtedly contributed to the organisation and frequency of these mutinies. Additionally, when soldiers are encamped for months, there is no enemy to fight. With the absence of a clear 'other' in the Crown Forces, the other became Congress and officers. New Year mutinies became so commonplace within the Continental Army that General Anthony Wayne remarked of the month that he 'sincerely wished the ides of January was come and past.'²³ The winter of 1780–1781 in the Morristown encampments was particularly harsh on the soldiers, which contributed to the string of mutinies in which Continental Army soldiers participated.

Soldiers understood their military service as a contract they volunteered to sign. The notion of this contract was crucial in soldiers' conceptions of their role in the broader society as citizens, and therefore what rights they were entitled to. Both parties, in this case the soldier and the army he fought for, were responsible for upholding their side of the bargain. For soldiers, their contracted terms were simple: they would serve in the army for a specified period of time and in return they would receive pay, food, and clothing. When the terms of the contract were not met, problems arose. The army was expected to provide just as soldiers are expected to serve. Failure in this happening resulted in soldiers attempting to leverage the only thing they had: their service. Problematically, however, in the Continental Army, soldiers who participated in mutinies *wanted* to serve. Indeed, as Ilya Berkovich argues, mutiny was not a way for soldiers to reject their military identity. In fact, many soldiers who mutinied did so with an added emphasis on their soldierhood.²⁴

The existence and success of mutinies also relied on a sense of shared group identity, making it more likely that experienced soldiers participated rather than newer recruits. The longer a soldier served in the Continental Army, the more hardened they became to the sufferings of military life and the more attached they were to the cause, their service, and their fellow soldiers. Mutiny was the reserve of the experienced soldier – soldiers with limited service experience deserted, rather than protest, in the face of grievance. For instance, army returns for the winter of 1780–1781 at Morristown recorded that no more than 11 percent of the men were on the sick rolls at any time. This would suggest that the men encamped

23 Anthony Wayne to Colonel Johnstone, 16 December 1780, quoted in Charles J. Stillé, *Major General Anthony Wayne and the Pennsylvania Line* (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1893), pp.240–241.

24 Berkovich, *Motivation in War*, p.117. Mutineers in Europe (Swabian mutinies) proudly marched in formation and wore their regimental colours as a way to highlight their dedication.

in Morristown were more experienced soldiers than their Valley Forge counterparts three years earlier, of which one-third of all soldiers were on the sick roll at all times. Their experience in the army earned them immunity from the diseases that frequented camps.²⁵ The Continental Army clearly understood that mutinies thrived on bonds between experienced soldiers, as longstanding regiments squashed the larger mutinies. When the Pennsylvania and New Jersey lines mutinied in 1781, New England regiments were called in to stop the protest.²⁶

Critical in understanding the action of mutiny is understanding attitudes surrounding the practice. Unlike desertion, starvation or marching – things that happened daily to Continental Army soldiers – mutiny was a discussion almost absent in their diaries. Narratives published after the war, like Joseph Plumb Martin's, included details of the mutinies that Martin participated in and heard about during the Revolutionary War. But diaries written during the conflict leave discussion of mutinies out of their accounts, except on a few occasions when the author helped put down a mutiny.²⁷ This is not particularly surprising. Mutiny was a crime punishable whether soldiers participated in one, or merely discussed the prospect. A successful mutiny was reliant on a collective action against officers they took by surprise. Regardless, the language used by officers to describe mutiny is telling, and sheds light on our understanding of why they punished it the way they did, as well as how it affected relationships between officers and soldiers more generally.

Officers felt that general dissatisfaction in camp could lead to a mutiny if unchecked and referred to this possibility as a 'spirit of mutiny.' The phrase covered many different behaviours, although it was not used to discuss mutiny when it broke out, only when officers were suspicious it might.²⁸ The description was used to articulate the rumblings of dissatisfaction within the army they feared would escalate into something more. Officers' description of mutiny as a 'spirit of' highlights their acceptance that the action was gradual. Similarly, officers frequently referred to mutiny as an infection that could and would spread throughout the ranks and the whole army. Yet again, this underscores officers' under-

25 James Kirby Martin & Mark Edward Lender, *A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), p.168.

26 Neimeyer, *America Goes to War*, p.152.

27 'The mutineers returned to their duty and received a general pardon. This unhappy circumstance will reflect the eternal dishonour on the character of their line, and sully their former actions.' 'Our Camp Chest, 1780-1781,' Copy of Diary of William S. Pennington of New Jersey, original diary on deposit in historical society of New Jersey, p.326.

28 Washington first used the phrase in 1777 concerning pay: 'Nothing can so effectually lay the Foundation of Discontent, and of Course encourage a Spirit of Mutiny and Desertion among the Soldiers, as withholding their Pay from them.' George Washington to John Hancock, 10 May 1777, Philander D. Chase (ed.), *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series, vol.9, 28 March 1777-10 June 1777* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), pp.375-376. On 26 May 1779 Washington wrote again, this time to James Duane, about 'a spirit of mutiny': 'The principal one was that a spirit of mutiny had appeared among the men which I thought it absolutely necessary to suppress rather than encourage.' The spirit itself in both instances is not an indication of mutiny, but rather murmurings about the possibility. The phrase 'spirit of mutiny' was used to describe the feeling of unhappiness within camp, which could result in a mutiny if not contained. George Washington to James Duane, 26 May 1779, Edward G. Lengel (ed.), *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series, vol.20, 8 April-31 May 1779* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), p.633.

standing of the grievances and their acknowledgement that the soldiers' situation was cause for such discontent.²⁹ They understood that there needed to be an evolution of thought and experience over a period of time, which culminated in the expression of dissatisfaction.

Officers in the Continental Army were not oblivious to the hardships soldiers endured during wartime. They also had a vivid understanding of the bonds soldiers formed during their service. Indeed, as discussed in chapters two and three, officers went out of their way to encourage those bonds. Soldiers with deep regimental connections were less likely to desert than those who had recently joined the army. A sense of belonging and brotherhood was essential to the success of individual regiments and the army as a whole. These same bonds were what made mutiny an attractive option to soldiers. The desire to stay in the army and fight alongside their fellow soldiers necessitated another way for soldiers to express their dissatisfaction. As leaving was not a good option, and their circumstances were not changing, they turned to the threat of mutiny.

Officers were deeply concerned that a mutiny in one regiment would cause a domino effect and result in mutinies across others. Inherent to this was an acknowledgement among officers that the complaints of any one unit were almost always universal. Following the Pennsylvania line mutiny, George Washington wrote to George Clinton detailing it, iterating his concern that this may not be a single incidence:

What will be the event of this affair I do not know, or whether the spirit of defection will be confined to that line. The Officers have been apprehensive of something of a like nature among the troops at these posts, who have the same causes of complaint.³⁰

This was a justifiable fear in this particular case, and in many others, as that is exactly what happened. Every mutiny that happened fed off previous ones, building on grievances and changing tactics to be more effective.

Mutinies in 1775 and 1776 were power struggles rather than expressions of grievance. Although the same grievances existed in those years of the war as would come to a head later on, the soldiers' complaints were not the cause of the early mutinies. Instead, these power struggles were undoubtedly manifestations of the confusion wrought from the shift from militia to a standing army, and all that it implied, in June 1775. Early mutinies of the war were of a similar ilk to those of colonial soldiers during the French and Indian Wars. These mutinies started with an expression of grievance – normally about supplies – punctuated by threats for officers and soldiers alike to march home if demands were not met.³¹ These actions were somewhere between mutiny and mass desertion. Two mass desertions

29 'An alarming spirit of mutiny and desertion has shown itself upon several occasions, and there is no saying how extensively the infection might spread.' George Washington to William Livingston, 22 April 1779, in Lengel (ed.), *The Papers of George Washington*, vol.20, pp.166–167.

30 From George Washington to Anthony Wayne, 3 January 1781, *Founders Online*, National Archives, <<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-04428>>, accessed September 2023.

31 Fred Anderson, *A People's Army: Massachusetts Soldiers and Society in the Seven Years' War* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, VA, by the University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

occurred very early in 1775 – one from the Connecticut line in December, and another in October during the Quebec Campaign.³² Occurrences such as this happened exclusively in 1775, not afterwards, and relied on the manipulation of a nascent institution's regulations. Misunderstanding of power between enlisted soldiers and officers and how the army would function as an institution, resulted in command problems and a number of mutinies.

One of the first mutinies of the war, in September 1775, demonstrated this grey area of authority well. Lieutenant David Ziegler of William Thompson's Pennsylvania Rifle Battalion punished a sergeant for neglecting his duty and confined him. John Leaman, a member of the sergeant's company furious about the arrest, led a group of soldiers determined to set the sergeant free. Ziegler successfully captured Leaman and placed him in jail too.³³ Shortly afterwards, while enjoying his dinner alone with Colonel Thompson, Ziegler and the other officers heard a ruckus outside, only to discover that the other mutineers had broken out Leaman and the original incarcerated sergeant. Undoubtedly frustrated by the persistence of the soldiers, Ziegler and Thompson recaptured Leaman and confined him in Cambridge, a mile away from the encampment. This was successful for about 30 minutes, until members of other companies joined the mutineers and marched to Cambridge to free Leaman. With no other option, Ziegler alerted General Washington, who ordered some 500 soldiers to go and protect the jail. The mutineers, realising their situation was unwinnable, turned back and were eventually captured.³⁴ In the aftermath of the mutiny, Washington was at a loss about what to do. The men were guilty of mutiny, and the court martial decided that swiftly, but the threat of another mutiny still loomed. The soldiers were sentenced to pay 20 shillings and the leaders of the mutiny were imprisoned for six days – overall, a light sentence given the severity of the crime.³⁵ Although the authority structure of the Continental Army was clear, this rebellion demonstrated the limits of that authority. The nascent officer corps could not truly exercise the full extent of their authority without severe consequences or the threat of another mutiny.

A similar, and perhaps the most famous, example of mutiny in 1775 happened later that year at Fort Ticonderoga. Benedict Arnold attempted to forbid Ethan Allen's men from plundering after the fort was captured. When Arnold was met with threats, he informed Allen that he would take command of his soldiers, which resulted in the soldiers collectively refusing to obey Arnold and threatening to go home. To appease the men, Arnold allowed Allen to remain their direct commander, and they were allowed to continue plundering

32 In December 1775, 80 men deserted from camp in Cambridge due to their 'great uneasiness at the Service and determination to leave it.' George Washington to Jonathan Trumbull Sr, 2 December 1775, Philander D. Chase (ed.), *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series, vol.1, 16 June 1775–15 September 1775* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985), pp.471–473. In October 1775, Lieutenant Colonel Roger Enos and his company deserted the Quebec expedition. He was later subject to court martial and acquitted. It was ruled 'the prisoner was by absolute necessity obliged to return with his division.' General Orders, 4 December 1775; Chase (ed.), *The Papers of George Washington, vol.1*, p.482.

33 'Journal of Phinehas Bemis,' 10 September 1775, File of Phinehas Bemis, W 14278. (National Archives Microfilm Publication M804, roll 210, frames 664–675), p.14. Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files, Records of the Veterans Administration, Record Group 15.

34 Nagy, *Rebellion in the Ranks*, p.4.

35 Chase (ed.), *The Papers of George Washington, vol.1*, pp.454–455.

houses in the surrounding area.³⁶ This incident began a dangerous precedent within the Continental Army. The coherence of Allen's Green Mountain Boys in their refusal to obey Arnold created a situation in which they remained unchallenged. Their collective insubordination resulted in exactly what they had intended it to – they faced no recrimination, and their demands were met. Although at this early stage of the conflict it is not surprising that Allen's men refused to recognise Arnold's, and by extension the Continental Army's, authority over them, it represents a foundational moment in group insubordination and protest. As the war developed, soldiers came to understand that cohesion was the key to their success. If they could create a group willing to challenge the issue at hand, it was likely that they would succeed in their endeavour. If the leaders of mutinies were clearly identifiable and were punished, rarely did all the participants face punishment.

Both of these mutinies highlight an important element to group cohesion, and a force that officers in the Continental Army spent much of the war simultaneously fighting against and encouraging: regionality. The strength of Ethan Allen's Green Mountain Boys lies at least partly in their title – they were 'Green Mountain Boys.' As a unit, they were conceived in Vermont and had an identity predicated on being a united force from the same area. Their coherence stemmed from their shared identity and regional connections, which predated the war. The same can be said of the revolt in September 1775. The Pennsylvania Rifle Battalion was known for their musketry skills and their insubordination.³⁷ As a unit they understood that they possessed a skill that the army needed, and, as a result, demanded special treatment. Unlike other less specialised battalions, the unit was exempt from fatigue duties and often asserted their own rules, rather than obeying the army.³⁸ When a member of the battalion was threatened, much of the battalion sided with him, rather than accepting the strictures of military discipline. The Green Mountain Boys and the Pennsylvania Rifle Battalion prioritised their own units over the entire army. The Continental Army officers understood that they were essentially powerless when confronted with such regional loyalty. The soldiers needed to be punished, but, to keep them on side and vaguely cooperative, the army was unable to stretch their military authority far. Both units were known for being highly skilled 'mountain men' – loners with a rebellious streak that set them apart from other soldiers in skill and required obedience.³⁹ What made these units able to rebel in the way they did was not their skill but their coherence.

Inherently these mutinies say less about morale than later mutinies did. Maintaining morale in the army was, to some degree, about mitigating expectations. These early mutinies represent the confusion inherent in the creation of an army and the defining of the powers within it as well as the shift from militia to regulars. As an institution, the Continental Army lacked the robust structures or authority to quell mutinies with the ease of later years. The officers lacked the reputation and rapport with the men to appeal on a more emotional level, and regionalism still manifested itself in home regiments rather than larger units. The mutinies of 1775 and 1776 were not units threatening to leave service in the army – in fact,

36 Benedict Arnold, quoted in John William Kruger, 'Troop Life at the Champlain Valley Forest during the American Revolution.' PhD Dissertation, State University of New York at Albany, 1981, p.29.

37 Nagy, *Rebellion in the Ranks*, pp.3–4.

38 Nagy, *Rebellion in the Ranks*, pp.3–4.

39 Neimeyer, *America Goes to War*, p.146.

the mutinies rarely had anything to do with whether or not service would continue. Instead, the mutinies reflected the process of defining what that service would look like and who it would be under. These soldiers attempted to leverage their service, and the larger need for it, in an attempt to define what exactly their service would look like. By 1779 soldiers were unable to do the same. The structures of the Continental Army had developed enough that expectations of soldiers and structures within the army, although nascent, were at least defined from the outset.

Mutinies in 1777 and onwards were of a markedly different nature to those of 1775. Although power dynamics were being challenged, mutineers did so with specific grievances. These grievances built up and occurred with increasing frequency and severity from 1777 to 1779. Mutiny happened less in 1777 and 1778 than in other years, but still happened. The Continental Army majorly restructured in 1777, which allowed it to better supply the soldiers and deal with grievances before mutinies escalated. Similarly, 1777 was the start of new enlistment terms. As soldiers more frequently deserted within their first nine months of service and mutinies relied on soldiers being loyal to one another, years of high enlistment rates saw lower numbers of mutinies than others. However, the mutinies that occurred in 1777 and 1778 were not often the result of authority disputes as in the previous two years, but rather a consequence of supply and pay issues.

In 1777, Connecticut militiamen mutinied over unequal pay between them and the Continental Army troops of the same state. After Governor Jonathan Trumbull reduced their rations, making militia rations less than their army counterparts, the militiamen mutinied. To end the dispute, Connecticut restored militia rations to normal and the mutiny ended quickly. Similar clashes over inequality between Continental Army regiments also occurred – certain colonies paid soldiers higher bounties than others, and disputes frequently arose surrounding the inequity. Such issues were consistent throughout the Revolutionary War. Washington wrote to John Hancock in 1776, wary of such practices. If states could levy their own bounties, he wrote that he was ‘certain when the Troops come to act together, that Jealousy, impatience & mutiny would necessarily arise. a different pay cannot exist in the same Army.’⁴⁰ Despite the army’s attempts to form a cohesive *Continental* Army, free from regional jealousies in favour of national cohesion, regional distinctions acted as an underlying cause of many issues.

Lack of provisions was also often the cause of mutinies between 1777 and 1779. Within days of arriving at Valley Forge, soldiers in the army mutinied over improper supplies and rations. Famously, the winter at Valley Forge was a trying experience for the army encamped there, but the immediacy with which soldiers experienced hardship upon arrival is often misunderstood. The mutiny, although relatively small, occurred on 21 December, but was quickly put down by ‘spirited officers’.⁴¹ The next day, just five days after Washington marched troops into Valley Forge, he wrote to Congress in desperate need of supplies, as he observed soldiers unable to even stand in their weakened state.⁴² Brigadier General James Varnum pointed out to Washington that many of his men had not had bread in three days,

40 Philander D. Chase (ed.), *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series, vol.7, 21 October 1776–5 January 1777* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), pp.142–143.

41 George Washington in Nagy, *Rebellion in the Ranks*, p.31

42 George Washington in Nagy, *Rebellion in the Ranks*, p.31.

nor meat in two.⁴³ The desperation at Valley Forge only increased in severity. With every passing month, officers grew more concerned that the situation would destroy the army. Nathanael Greene described the situation as perpetually being ‘on the eve of starving and the army of mutinying’ in January 1778.⁴⁴ By the middle of February, Greene’s prediction came true. After months in camp with few provisions, and even less to do, the 12th Massachusetts regiment approached General John Patterson and threatened to quit if their grievances were not met. Finally, the general agreed to allow the men to leave camp in search of food and the soldiers in turn agreed to end their protest.⁴⁵

These two instances at Valley Forge were so small compared to the mutiny the officers predicted that Washington completely discounted them in his letter to George Clinton on 16 February 1778. In the letter, he praised the soldiers for their fortitude: ‘Naked and starving as they are, we cannot enough admire the incomparable patience and fidelity of the soldiery, that they have not been, ere this, excited by their sufferings, to a general mutiny and dispersion.’⁴⁶ Washington understood the supply situation at Valley Forge to be so severe that he expected the whole camp to rebel, rather than just smaller groups. The instances of that winter in Valley Forge were the first of many mutinies that arose to address grievances in the following years. A string of mutinies occurred in 1779 highlighting the lack of provisions and pay. The Connecticut line mutinied in 1779 in an attempt to ‘raise some provisions, if not, at least to raise a little dust.’⁴⁷ Similarly the North Carolina line ‘demanded their pay... and would not march till they had justice done them.’⁴⁸ In each of these instances, the mutinies were stopped with relative ease.

43 Brigadier General James Mitchell Varnum to George Washington, 22 December 1777, Frank E. Grizzard, Jr. and David R. Hoth (eds), *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series*, vol.12, 26 October 1777–25 December 1777 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002), pp.675–676.

44 Nathanael Greene to Alexander McDougall, 25 January 1778, Richard K. Showman (ed.), *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), vol.2, pp.259–261.

45 Frances Dana to Elbridge Gerry, 16 February 1778, Paul H. Smith (ed.), *Letters of Delegates to Congress* (Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, 1982), vol.9, pp.109–111.

46 From George Washington to George Clinton, 16 February 1778, Edward G. Lengel (ed.), *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series*, vol.13, 26 December 1777–28 February 1778 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), pp.552–554.

47 Martin, *Ordinary Courage*, pp. 96–99. Joseph Plumb Martin discussed this mutiny at length in his memoir. It left a lasting impression on him. This may be because of the cyclical nature of this particular mutiny. The men spent much of the winter of 1779–1780 in the Morristown encampment ‘absolutely, literally starved’ (p.96). He described soldiers eating their shoes or birch bark off trees if they could find it – one officer was driven to shoot and eat his dog for provisions. Soldiers raised their grievances and threatened to leave en masse. Officers convinced them to stay and instead to petition the Connecticut General Assembly. Soldiers returned to duty only to mutiny again shortly thereafter for the exact same grievances: ‘The men were now exasperated beyond endurance; they could not stand it any longer’ (p.98). Officers appealed to the soldiers’ patriotism and sense of duty, imploring them to remain with promises of provisions. Soldiers again agreed, received provisions, and within weeks, were starving again.

48 Taken from the testimony of Ann Glover, wife of Samuel Glover, who led the North Carolina line mutiny. The army put down the mutiny quickly, and Samuel Glover was executed for his role in it. Shortly thereafter, his widow petitioned the state for an income, highlighting that her husband’s and his conspirators’ actions, although morally wrong, were out of love for their family, whom they could not support because the army did not pay them as promised. Petition to the General Assembly from

A similar event happened in Brigadier General James Varnum's brigade in March 1779. Describing the incident to General Washington, Major General John Sullivan wrote:

... ninety Men of the Brigade, belonging to different Regiments collected, with a view, of relating their Grievances to the officers; imagining I suppose, that their Numbers wou'd give them a consequence. But tho' mistaken in their mode of Address, they had not the appearance of Violence, and were without Force, readily dispers'd.⁴⁹

Although there are examples to the contrary, most mutinies in the Continental Army played out similarly. A large group of soldiers, with a list of complaints, brought them to officers and disbanded quickly after the grievances had been aired.

A letter from Major General Horatio Gates to Major General William Heath, dated 30 April 1779, highlighted this in his plea for more supplies. Gates asked Heath to send 'at least, three hundred Barrels of Flour, to pacify the Troops' immediately and more as soon as possible.⁵⁰ The reason for this was that two mutinies within the space of a week had occurred and he was concerned that more would break out. His concern, however, was that he would not be able to bring himself to put the mutiny down. Gates wrote: 'the real Cause of the Mutinies is such, that I dare not, no, with Equity I could not exert the coercive Part of my Authority.'⁵¹ Here it is clear that, although Gates disagreed with how soldiers expressed their discontent, he found their grievances fully justified. Critically, these instances of mutiny between 1775 and 1780 were, for the most part, non-violent. The large group of unhappy armed soldiers marching in union undoubtedly and purposefully created a threatening image, but there were rarely shots fired in the process, let alone casualties. By 1781, this would no longer be the case.

As the war developed so too did the organisation and numbers behind the mutinies. Those that occurred in 1780 were larger than ever before. Mutinies in the Continental Army built off one another steadily for the first six years of the war until everything culminated at the end of 1780: major defection, high desertion rates and the largest mutiny of the war. It is not entirely surprising that 1780 marked a shift in the Continental Army. Currency depreciation was at its worst throughout 1780, the vast majority of soldiers' enlistments expired in the first few months of the year and the winter of 1779–1780 was the worst North America had seen in half a century.⁵² The winter encampment at Morristown, New Jersey, marked the

Ann Glover, widow of Samuel Glover, 10 January 1780, Walter Clark (ed.), *State Records of North Carolina* (Goldsboro, NC: Nash Brothers, 1898), vol.15, pp.187–188. A further discussion of widows' petitions, and Ann Glover's specifically, can be seen in Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War*, pp.296–297. The revolts of the Pennsylvania and Connecticut line are further detailed in Neimeyer, *America Goes to War*, p.148.

49 Major General John Sullivan to George Washington, 3 March 1779, Philander D. Chase and William M. Ferraro (ed.), *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series*, vol.19, 15 January–7 April 1779 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), pp.349–350.

50 Major General William Heath to George Washington, 8 May 1779, *The Papers of George Washington*, vol.20, pp.378–379.

51 *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series*, vol.20, pp.378–379.

52 Nagy, *Rebellion in the Ranks*, p.70.

hardest winter encampment of the war – even more so than Valley Forge. The bad weather also meant that roads became impassable and supply lines lagged in delivering the pittance of supplies sent to the starving Continental Army.⁵³ All of this, unsurprisingly, resulted in three mutinies in the first few months of 1780. On 1 January, the Massachusetts line at West Point mutinied over their enlistment terms. They wanted their three-year term to end immediately at the new year, instead of being extended. The Connecticut line mutinied at Morristown on 25 May over the army's inability to feed or pay the soldiers. Finally, the New York line mutinied at Fort Schuyler in June over pay and lack of supplies.⁵⁴

The three mutinies have one essential thing in common – that they were stopped relatively quickly. The Connecticut line is perhaps the best example of the flaws with using mutiny as protest. Reports of the mutiny all noted that the officers were able to calm it by reminding the soldiers what they were contending for. Joseph Plumb Martin's account of the mutiny following the war described the officers immediately after seeing it as endeavouring 'to soothe the Yankee temper they had excited' and noted that the soldiers only backed down after 'an abundance of fair promises'.⁵⁵ Of course, this was the inherent weakness in most mutinies after 1777. The soldiers who participated in mutinies did so because they wanted to remain a part of the army. Soldiers used mutiny as a tool for reform but always failed to completely withdraw their service. As did the officers on their promises. Martin noted that the soldiers 'fared a little better for a few days after this memento to the officers, but it soon became an old story ... we endeavoured to bear it with our usual fortitude, until it again became intolerable'.⁵⁶ Although a terrifying prospect to the small Continental Army, soldiers' threats to leave the army were only viable as long as soldiers carried through and, within the Continental Army, few did. Instead, after ensuring that their complaints were heard, they continued with their duties until such a time where they needed to raise their grievances again. Mutiny in the Continental Army functioned in this perpetual cycle throughout the war.

Indeed, officers writing to George Washington following the Connecticut line's mutiny all emphasised the soldiers' suffering. Colonel Return Meigs wrote, 'this Brigade is now ten days deficient in Meat, notwithstanding my efforts to have them supply'd – there cannot possibly be a case where mutiny can be admitted: But that this Brigade has been worse served With provisions than any other in the Army'.⁵⁷ The lack of meat rations for over a week was not the mutineers' only complaint. In his letter to Joseph Reed following the incident, Washington expounded further: 'The troops very pointedly mentioned besides their distresses for provision' that they had not been paid for five months, and that Continental currency was depreciated to the point of virtually no value. Despite Colonel Meigs' reminders of their service, good conduct and the cause they were contending, Washington continued, the soldiers responded that 'their sufferings were too great – that they wanted present relief – and some present substantial recompense for their service'.⁵⁸ In this mutiny, as in so many others,

53 Nagy, *Rebellion in the Ranks*, p.74.

54 William M. Ferraro (ed.), *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series*, vol.26, 13 May–4 July 1780 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018), pp.250–251.

55 Martin, *Ordinary Courage*, p.99.

56 Martin, *Ordinary Courage*, p.100.

57 Ferraro (ed.), *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series*, vol.26, pp.194–196.

58 Ferraro (ed.), *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series*, vol.26, pp.220–225.

soldiers emphasised that the army had let them down but would continue in military service when some needs were met. Their ability to endure the war's hardships was nearing its end.

In this vein, understanding mutinies as expressions of morale is useful. The practice of mutiny in the later years of the war exposed the nuances of morale. These large mutinies highlighted dissatisfaction, undoubtedly. Mutiny was essentially soldiers' insistence that although they were *willing* members of the army, if circumstances did not change, they would no longer be *able* members of the army. They reached their limits of endurance, not because of the war itself, or because of their unwillingness to fight it, but because the structures of the army were not providing for them.

Most of the Continental Army's mutinies during the Revolutionary War highlighted similar problems. The mutinies of 1781 were the culmination of those factors, precipitated by Major General Benedict Arnold's defection and the harsh winter the army faced, which in turn resulted in high desertion rates. The year 1781 was the only one when high desertion rates and large-scale mutiny existed simultaneously. In the Continental Army, desertion and mutiny typically functioned independently and inversely of one another. The mutinies in 1781 were distinct because they sustained themselves with violence and took multiple days to squash. Previous mutineers may have marched in formation and carried weapons, but they were rarely used. Officers were shot and killed within minutes of the Pennsylvania line mutiny in January 1781. The mutinies of 1781 truly were a manifestation of all the built-up tensions, anxieties and dissatisfaction growing in the army up until that point.⁵⁹

The Pennsylvania line mutiny of 1781 was the most severe of the Revolutionary War. Three officers and a handful of mutineers were killed in the struggle. It was the only mutiny of the war that the army itself could not stop. Joseph Reed, President of Pennsylvania, ultimately ended it. The mutiny was the culmination of everything the Army and its officers had come to fear over the previous six years. Enlisted men in the Continental Army used mutiny as a form of protest throughout the war. As a practice among soldiers, mutinies developed and evolved alongside the army itself. As an expression of morale, mutiny functioned simultaneously as a manifestation of dissatisfaction and confirmation of dedication and loyalty.

A mutiny of this magnitude raised concerns within the officer corps of the Continental Army that no other had. The seriousness of the situation was not lost on anyone. Officers' immediate concern was losing the Pennsylvania line to a large-scale desertion, or worse, to the British. News of a mutiny this large would travel quickly. Washington was uncertain whether the army would be faced with a mass defection in addition to a mutiny. He wrote to Major General Anthony Wayne immediately after finding out about the revolt, commending him on his attempts to stop it but warning him not to attempt to with force again. Washington feared 'that an attempt to reduce them by force will either drive them to the Enemy, or dissipate them in such a manner that they will never be recovered.'⁶⁰ Although driving such a force to the enemy would be catastrophic for the Continental Army, a mass

59 The Pennsylvania Line mutiny of 1781 did not happen without warning that soldiers' discontent was brewing. Congress received petitions from the Pennsylvania Line on Christmas Day in 1780 for 'half pay, and of the other Emoluments.' Petition to Anthony Wayne, 25 December 1780 in Herrera, 'Self-Governance and the American Citizen as Soldier, 1775-1861,' pp.21-52, p.49.

60 George Washington to Anthony Wayne, 3 January 1781, *Founders Online*, National Archives, <<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-04428>>, accessed September 2023.

desertion would inflict as sharp a blow. The Continental Army under Washington from December 1780 to January 1781 had at most 9,000 soldiers – losing 1,500 would have reduced their number by a sixth.⁶¹

The British saw this mutiny as an opportunity. At 4:00 a.m. on 7 January Major General Wayne was awoken from his sleep by two sergeants who had mutinied six days previously. With them, they had two British soldiers and a letter from the enemy offering them positions within the British Army. Wayne received the message loud and clear. He wrote to Washington eagerly the next morning that ‘The Soldiery in General Affect to spurn at the Idea of turning *Arnolds* (as they express it)’ and that they should not fear the mutineers defecting.⁶² Crucial to the success of mutinies in the Continental Army was the persistent affirmation from those participating that they were loyal soldiers.

A secondary concern was that this would incite other troops nearby. Writing to John Hancock on 5 January, Washington admitted that he was yet unsure how extensive the mutiny would become: ‘At present the Troops at the important Posts in this vicinity remain quiet, not being acquainted with this unhappy and Alarming Affair, but how long they will remain so cannot be ascertained, as they labour under some of the pressing hardships with the Troops who have revolted.’⁶³ Much of the Continental Army was camped within the mid-Atlantic colonies and it would not be long before they found out about the revolt. Washington emphasised to Hancock that these soldiers were without clothes in winter, had not been paid for over a year, and rarely had adequate provisions. With the same grievances as the mutineers, Washington had little confidence that this rebellion would not spark more throughout the army. His fears were legitimate. Rebellion bred rebellion. The aftermath of the Pennsylvania line mutiny was almost as trying for the Army as the mutiny itself. News of the mutiny in its aftermath spread throughout the ranks, and frequent minor incidences occurred across the colonies. Nothing on the same scale was arranged, but the events of the first week of January clearly unsettled the army.

Evaluating mutiny in the Continental Army reveals a consistent pattern of development and escalation in mutinies during the war. From 1775 until the end of the war, officers understood that the army was under a constant threat of mutiny. As the war progressed, so too did the character of the mutinies. In 1775, mutinies represented power struggles inherent in the transition from militia units to a professional army. These early mutinies demonstrated to soldiers that collective protest was an effective tool for change, that also safeguarded the participants from punishment. After 1775, mutinies grew in size, frequency and outlook. They served as protests against the army when specific grievances (lack of pay, clothing, shelter, supplies) were not responded to. Mutinies between 1777 and 1780 provided short-term compromises between the soldiers and the army, however, grievances were often repeatedly raised after the initial promises were not kept. Eventually, these mutinies culminated in a mass desertion and the Pennsylvania Line Mutiny of 1781. The

61 See, Charles H. Lesser (ed.), *The Sinews of Independence: Monthly Strength Reports of the Continental Army* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

62 Anthony Wayne to George Washington, 8 January 1781, *Founders Online*, National Archives, <<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-04474>>, accessed September 2023.

63 Walter Stewart to George Washington, 4 January 1781, *Founders Online*, National Archives, <<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-04436>>, accessed September 2023.

grievances raised that year were essentially a summary of those raised in the preceding years. The Continental Army was unable to quell the mutiny and the state government had to step in. The increase of the number of mutinies after 1777 is closely tied to the creation of regimental bonds between soldiers – the longer soldiers served, the more committed they became to their units as well as to broader revolutionary ideals. Patterns of mutiny clearly demonstrate soldiers' reliance on one another, as well as their understanding of the value of their service to the Army.

Mutiny and its frequency during the Revolutionary War within the Continental Army highlights the agency soldiers had and used to express their dissatisfaction from within the system. The absence of provisions drove soldiers to a breaking point, and mutinies acted as a final way to raise grievances. The subjects of these grievances represent factors important to morale. These soldiers were not merely drill bots who marched on command. The army was a socio-economic sphere with complex relational structures unique to the military. The persistence of mutinies within the Continental Army simultaneously highlights a failure on behalf of the Continental Army and Congress to meet their end of the enlistment contract and provide for their soldiers, but also demonstrates a clear pattern of loyalty amongst enlisted men. The mere existence of these continual mutinies demonstrates that soldiers clearly understood their value to the army, and their position as citizens fighting for a cause. As the war progressed, so too did soldiers' consciousness of the value in their service, and the severity of mutinies. In mutinying, soldiers leveraged their service to obtain what was owed to them. Although an act of protest, mutiny in the Continental Army demonstrates soldiers increased utilisation of the conflict's revolutionary ideals for their own benefit.

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