

The Tides of War 1776-1783

The Declaration of Independence may have sounded great to American rebels, but George Washington's army was getting trounced.

I think I shall soon hear...loyal subjects, returning to that duty they owe to an indulgent sovereign.



KING GEORGE

It was Christmas 1776, and the weather was bitter cold. A well-equipped army of 1,400 British-backed Hessian troops was encamped in Trenton, New Jersey, where their commander was sleeping off a holiday feast.



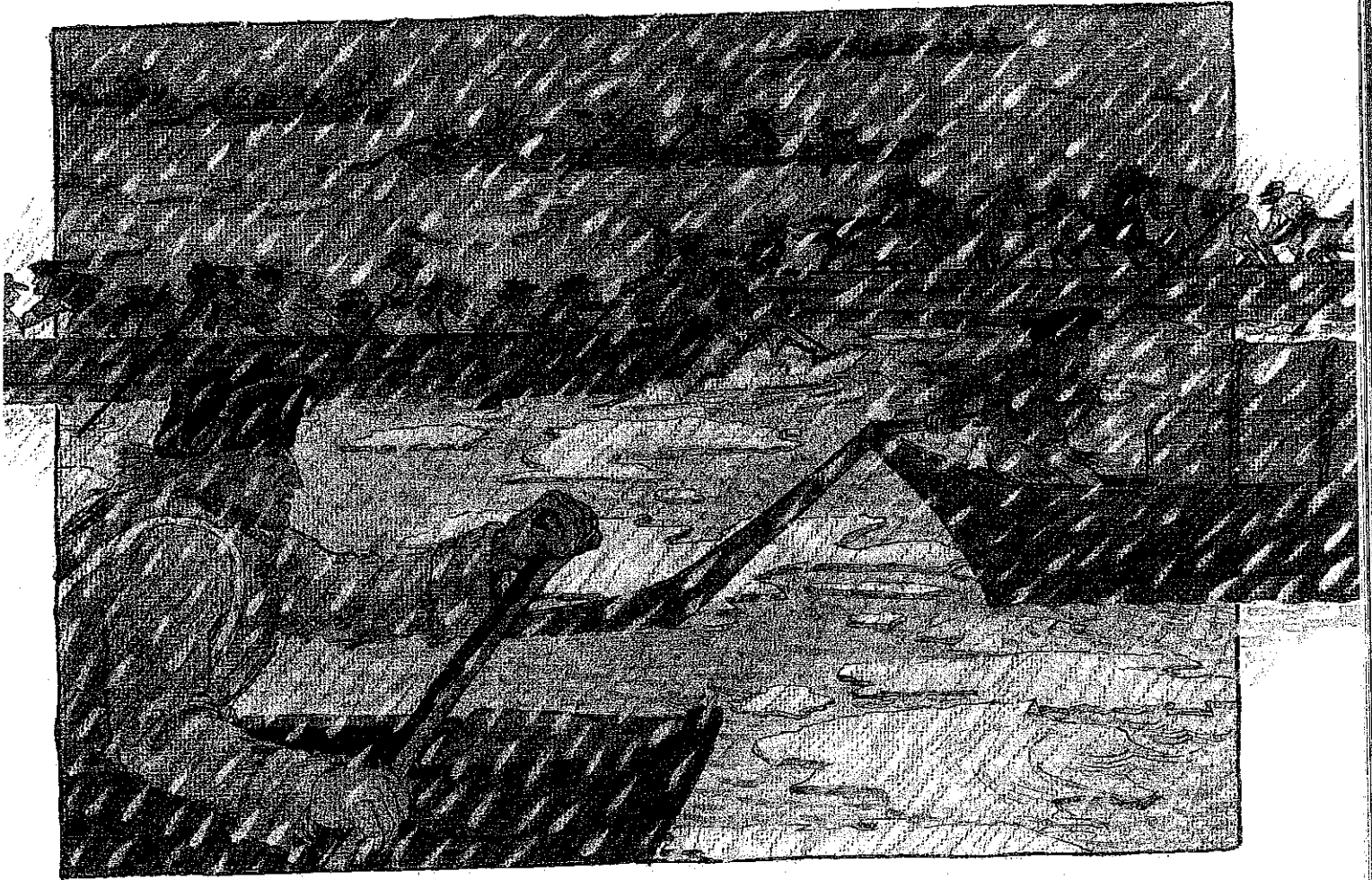
George Washington and his dejected volunteer army of about 6,000 sick, starving, and mostly barefooted rebels had little to celebrate. They had been on the run all the way from New York through New Jersey, finally reaching Pennsylvania, where they camped across the Delaware River from the enemy. In just one week, about half of these men were due to leave for home when their enlistment time ran out.



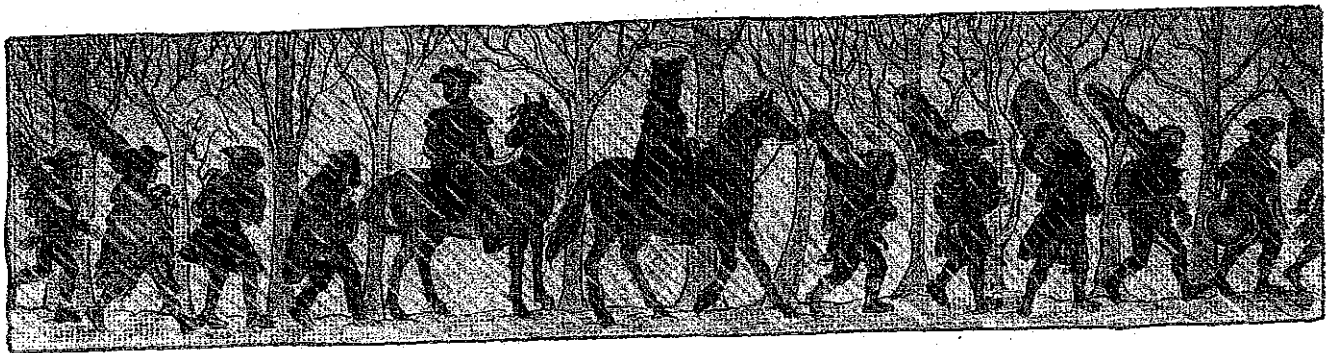
I am wearied almost to death. I think the game is pretty near up.

GEORGE WASHINGTON

Desperate for a victory, Washington had decided to chance a surprise attack on the Hessians. Along with about 2,400 soldiers who were strong enough to fight, he spent an entire afternoon and night crossing the ice-choked Delaware River in blinding sleet and snow.

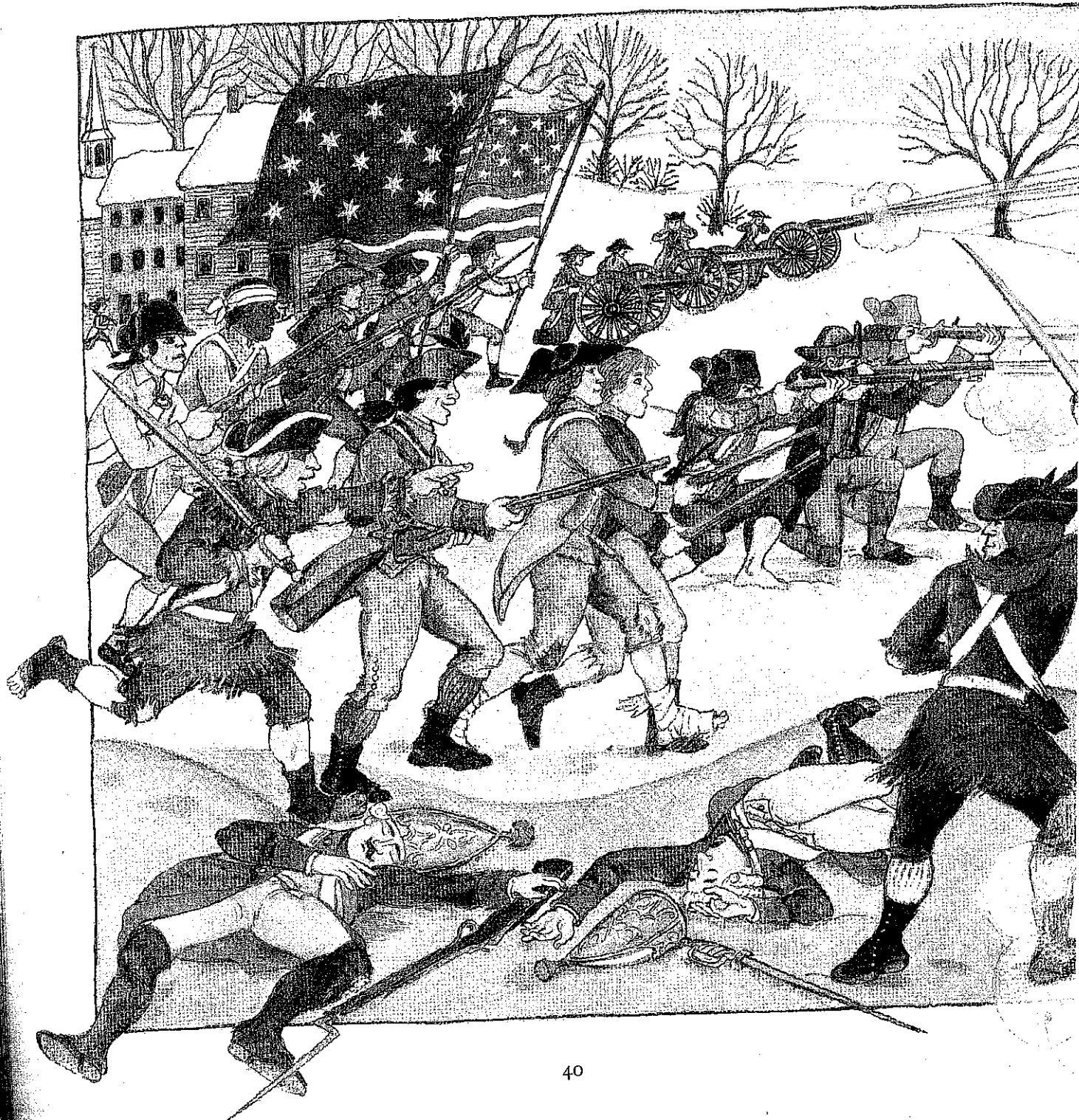


They covered their muskets with blankets to keep them dry and marched nine miles toward Trenton in "profound silence."



Washington's men ambushed the sleeping Hessians, who were taken completely by surprise. The disorganized Hessian commander and 150 of his men were killed. The Continental Army captured well over 900 Hessians, and not a single American died in the battle.

As soon as he heard that Washington had clobbered the Hessians, British General Charles Lord Cornwallis sent another 8,000 men to



Trenton to teach the rebels a lesson. Washington and his outnumbered but spirited troops went on to win the Second Battle of Trenton on January 2, 1777, and they won again at Princeton the very next day. In just ten days, Washington's victories had turned the entire war around. Now both sides knew that the Americans had a real army and a chance of winning the war. Many men who were about to leave for home signed on to fight again.



Background scene shows the First Battle of Trenton. In the foreground, Washington leads his troops at the Battle of Princeton.