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From the Archives

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Ambition

A prominent Boston Tory in the American Revolution, after the Battle of Bunker Hill, visited the Boston jail, where a number of American prisoners were languishing. Approaching one, a wounded lieutenant named Scott who appeared to be a man of some intelligence, he asked him how he had come to be mixed up with the rebellion. The Tory, in a book published after the war, recorded the lieutenant's answer verbatim:

The case was this Sir! I lived in a country town; I was a shoemaker, and got my living by my labor. When this rebellion came on, I saw some of my neighbors get into commission, who were no better than myself. I was very ambitious, and did not like to see those men above me. I was asked to enlist as a private soldier. My ambition was too great for so low a rank; I offered to enlist upon having a lieutenant's commission, which was granted. I imagined myself now in a way of promotion: if I was killed in battle, there would be an end of me, but if my captain was killed, I should rise in rank, and should still have a chance to rise higher. These sir were the only motives of my entering into the service; for as to the dispute between Great Britain and the colonies, I know nothing of it; neither am I capable of judging whether it is right or wrong.

It turns out that Lieutenant Scott was a real person. American records show a Lieutenant William Scott of Peterborough, New Hampshire, wounded several times and captured at Bunker Hill. Everything the Tory said about him that can be checked appears to be accurate. But we also know, as the Tory did not, what happened to Scott after his interrogation. He was taken to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he escaped after his wounds healed by stealing a small boat. He rejoined Washington's army at New York just in time to be captured again, but this time he escaped by swimming the Hudson River, according to a newspaper account, with his sword tied around his neck and his watch pinned to his hat. He was ordered back to New Hampshire to recruit a company of light infantry, which he led against Burgoyne's invasion from Canada. By then a captain, he is mentioned in reports as having cut off Burgoyne's last effort to break out of the trap at Saratoga. Later he retired because his wounds pained him, but he spent the last year of the war on a privateer attacking British shipping. Ruined financially by the war, he lived in poverty until the War Department gave him a job with a surveying party in Ohio. When the party came down with "lake fever," Scott led them back to civilization, but a few days later, in 1796, he himself died. No one interviewed Scott a second time to ask him whether he had changed his mind about the American Revolution or whether, in 1775, he had been misquoted.

Source: Richard J. Sommers, ed., *Vignettes of Military History*, Volume I (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army Military History Research Collection, now the US Army Military History Institute, October 1976), Vignette No. 4, contributed by Dr. John Shy, drawn from Peter Oliver, *Origin & Progress of the American Rebellion* (Stanford, 1961), and Jonathan Smith, *Peterborough, New Hampshire in the American Revolution* (Peterborough, 1913).

Reviewed 17 November 2000. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil