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The 3rd New Jersey Regiment's Mighty Dueling Frolic

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Mr. Duncan McDougall, a merchant from German Flats area of New York's Mohawk Valley, joined Capt. Joseph Bloomfield's company of the 3rd New Jersey Regiment on June 27, 1776, as a volunteer (with the pseudo rank of "cadet").¹ This was well into the campaign year, so he was walking into an already functioning unit. McDougall must have been unhappy, or realized this was a mistake, as, he "obtained a discharge from his enlistment" (resigned) on July 12.²

Bloomfield's company had started out, on May 3, with two other cadets, Edmund Thomas and John Kinney.³ The idea was that such young gentlemen would serve with the company and, if they proved worthy, they could be promoted into the officer corps of the company or somewhere else in the regiment when a vacancy occurred. As anticipated, once time and attrition set in, Thomas and Kinney would be promoted within their company to the lowest officer rank of ensign on July 19, 1776.⁴

Bloomfield seemed to have liked and trusted Thomas. At one point he even referred to him as "my brave volunteer."⁵ In fact, on July 5, 1776, when there was a sudden alarm at the German Flats camp, 2nd Lt. Ebenezer Elmer wrote that "Captain Bloomfield took all his hard money, amounting to 30 or 40 pounds, giving charge to Edm. Thomas, if he should chance to get killed, to secure it...."⁶ Though the alarm proved false, Bloomfield and many others were clearly shaken by the implied attack. Presuming that Cadet McDougall was there as well (there is no known record either way), it suggests that it may have been the real reason for the new cadet to resign. After all, he had only been with the company a week when the alarm had sounded.

In either case, after applying for and obtaining a discharge from his enlistment, McDougall did not treat Thomas with "proper decorum." So, on the evening of July 11, Thomas sent a challenge to fight with pistols for satisfaction, which was accepted in due form by his antagonist.⁷

The actual challenge was written by the regiment's second-in-command, Lt. Col. Anthony Walton White, and then signed and sent in the name of Thomas. The 3rd New Jersey's Maj. Francis Barber retained a copy of the challenge. It read as follows:

*SIR:—As I have the Honor of being in A Company that condescended to receive you in the same Company As a gentleman volunteer, Now, sir, I am to inform you that the Character of a Volunteer has always been held sacred and unblemished, till you was pleased, by your Dastardly, cowardly behaviour, to sulliet. I must therefore as a gentleman, Vindicate the Character of a Volunteer—Must therefore insist upon it that you will meet me to-morrow morning at 8 o'clock with a Friend and A Case of Pistols upon the Hill back of your house, to count for your Damn Raskley behaviour for asking a discharge from our Honorable company.*⁸

After the challenge was accepted, McDougall chose a Major Yates, of an unnamed regiment, for his second. Thomas chose 1st Lt. Edward McMichael of the 3rd New Jersey. At 7:00 AM, the morning of July 12, the duelists took the field with their seconds, a Doctor Dunham, and Captain Bloomfield. Both of the cadets were very sedate, particularly McDougall who had not only written his will, but also written to his brother, and, apparently, said his prayers before arriving.

After some altercation about the ground, fifteen paces were measured off. Thomas then repeated the challenge and offered McDougall the choice of pistols (which he had borrowed from Captain Bloomfield) and the first fire. Thomas then added that he wanted all to take notice that if either of them should be killed they forgave the survivor.

McDougall took the signal from Thomas's second and fired at Thomas—without injury. Thomas then took the signal from Major Yates and fired, with as little effect as his antagonist. The two seconds interceded to try to compromise matters, which was readily embraced by McDougall. Unfortunately, Thomas, the aggrieved party, obstinately refused and, swearing the pistols had a half load in them, demanded they be charged better and have another exchange.

By this time Colonel White, Capt. Thomas Patterson, and several other officers who had been watching from a short distance away, came up and joined the six individuals involved. They told the two cadets that their honor was at stake and they must now fight until one or the other was killed! Now, what the cadets did not know, and everyone else did, is that the pistols were loaded with nothing but a paperwad for a ball, and that the duel was set up by Colonel White, himself, to divert the officers and test the resolution of individuals involved.

The pistols were again loaded and discharged with as little bloodshed as the first. As a result, the duelists became much more courageous and proposed firing five paces nearer. Thomas swore he would load his own pistol and that McDougall might do the same. Such behavior brought on the laughter of the whole parade, which made the duelists think they were firing only for the amusement of the gallery; in a way, they were doing just that.

The seconds, who were opposed to more firing, told the duelists they had both showed their resolution and they must now make friends. McDougall, whose heart was clearly not into any of this, again offered to comply, but, like before, was stubbornly refused by Thomas. So, with matters growing more serious and Thomas's determination to fight McDougall at all costs, Colonel White and Captain Bloomfield interceded and ordered them to shake hands.⁹

Why Thomas was so irritated by McDougall's resignation is rather hard to understand. Even Lieutenant Elmer included the text of the challenge note in his journal "purely for the oddity of it."¹⁰ Officers came and went all the time. The regiment's 1st Lt. Robert Hagen had resigned from Capt. Thomas Reading's company on July 19, 1776, without any kind of a kerfuffle at all.¹¹ Even Thomas's own second, Lieutenant McMichael, left to go over to the British;¹² however, unlike Hagen's, McMichael's departure did cause some consternation within the regiment, but that is a story for another time.

Captain Bloomfield wrote some closing remarks in his journal about this incident, which he dubbed a "Mighty Dueling Frolic." Here he lamented the practice of dueling and that the "Frolic" only served to show:

...the absurd folly of this piece of Gallantry. Never did I look upon dueling in such a contemptible light as I now do. This ridiculous custom serves only to show the Passionate Temper & absurd Folly of those who expose themselves to satisfy their brutish thirst for what? Why for nothing else but to keep the world from thinking they are Cowards, & to show that they have rashness enough to expose their Life as a testimony of their false Bravery.¹³

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A similar scene depicting what initially occurred at the duel between Thomas and McDougall. The necessary Doctor Dunham and the impartial observer, Captain Bloomfield, would be close by, but out of view.

Notes

- ¹ Mark E. Lender & James K. Martin, ed., *Citizen Soldier: The Revolutionary War Journal of Joseph Bloomfield* (Newark: New Jersey Historical Society, 1982), 64, June 27, 1776.
- ² Lender & Martin, *Bloomfield*, 68, July 12, 1776.
- ³ Lender & Martin, *Bloomfield*, 40, May 3, 1776.
- ⁴ Lender & Martin, *Bloomfield*, 60, June 7, 1776.
- ⁵ Lender & Martin, *Bloomfield*, 69, July 12, 1776.
- ⁶ Ebenezer Elmer, "Journal Kept During an Expedition to Canada in 1776," *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society*, #2(1847), 137, July 5, 1776. This source indicated Thomas's first name was "Edw." This was likely an understandable transcription error in reading the period handwriting, as his name was Edmund, not Edward.
- ⁷ Lender & Martin, *Bloomfield*, 68-70, July 12, 1776.
- ⁸ Elmer, "Journal," 176-177, August 12, 1776.
- ⁹ Lender & Martin, *Bloomfield*, 68-70, July 12, 1776.
- ¹⁰ Elmer, "Journal," 176-177, August 12, 1776.
- ¹¹ Capt. Thomas Reading's Company in Col. Elias Dayton's Battalion of Forces raised in the State of New Jersey...in Camp at Ticonderoga November 23rd 1776, *Revolutionary War Rolls 1775-1783* (National Archives Microfilm Publications, M246, 138 rolls), War Department Collection of Revolutionary War Records, Record Group 93, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C. (NAB), Roll 63, Jacket 54.
- ¹² Elias Dayton to Philip Schuyler, August 15, 1776, Peter Force, ed., *American Archives* (Washington, D.C., 1837-53), 5th Series, 1: 1033-1034.
- ¹³ Lender & Martin, *Bloomfield*, 69-70, July 12, 1776.