

From Mr. Haynes

The following writing samples are from Central Middle School 8th grade students who participated in a Valley Forge simulation. One Friday, unexpectedly, students were transformed into Continental soldiers at the Continental Army winter base-camp in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Some students were required to remove their shoes and march into the cold, dark classroom to better understand how many Continental soldiers had no shoes or clothing in addition to other troubles throughout their experiences during the winter of 1777-1778. The company captain (played by the student teacher) and the company surgeon (played by the mentor teacher) instructed students on the rules and regulations for the day. Then, students received colored stickers signifying whether or not they were ill, wounded, or promoted to company cook. "Soldiers" were then ushered to their "tents" (desks) where they had to sit huddled together on the cold, damp floor. Occasionally, winds would howl followed by squirts of rain. Students read an excerpt from the diary of Joseph Plumb Martin where they learned about the hardships soldiers experienced during this challenging time. Throughout the simulation, more students became ill. In addition, the wounded students' limbs were amputated (duct taped hands), and only a select few students were given rations of bread.

To reflect on their experiences, students wrote a two-paragraph diary entry explaining 3 hardships they learned that the soldiers experienced and 2 of their own experiences during the simulation. Even the students with "amputated limbs" had to endure the pain and write their diary entry rough drafts. Later, students made final drafts. The writing samples you see before you reflect the top 5 student diary entries in each class.

January or December 1778

Dear Diary,

It all started when I fought in a war and came down with a disease, not knowing what I had was contagious, I put my fellow "tent mates" at risk and unintentionally got them sick.

Natasha (one of the people in my tent) is now not only sick, but has also been wounded in a previous battle, because of her disability she has to learn to write with her left hand in order to write her letter. Which by looking seems pretty difficult for her to do so.

We also have been low on supplies especially food, for everyone has to split one slice of bread in 4 ways, if that. Let me just say we are lucky to get any food at all.

Have to go, need to get prepared for next battle.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Vicki Roberts". The signature is stylized with large, flowing loops and a prominent "V" at the beginning.

Vicki Roberts

December 19, 1778

Dear Diary,

Supplies is so low here, many men only have a single blanket. Several soldiers are without clothes and shoes. Smallpox and typhoid fever are also spreading among the people at this camp. It is unfortunate that many are dying even when we are not fighting the British. Food is very low. There are days where all we have to eat are fire cakes- a bread we make from flour and water paste. It is not very appetizing.

I am lucky enough to have a set of ragged clothes, although I am without shoes. My feet are numb with cold, but I can see the blood tracks I leave behind when I walk. So far, I have escaped the diseases here, but I am sure my good fortune will soon run out. We live in close quarters, twelve men to a small hut. The spread of sickness is unstoppable.

Signed,
Emma Whipkey

Dear Diary,

I feel as if my fatigued body will never halt shivering until my weary heart ceases. My body is in dreadful condition, but I endeavor to keep my mind in a different state. If you could contemplate my gruesome and bare feet you would be appalled. For the icy ground stings them with frost bite, while turning them charcoal black. When I numbly begin to march I barely even heed my bloody tracks falling behind my step. Cowardly, I envisage of the day when my poor, worn "hooves" will be amputated. Sympathy engulfs my emotions when I reckon about my soldier comrades who teem with awful boils that daub their skin. "Food...Water..." is all my brain will process at the moment. Eagerly, my stomach awaits, and aches for anything substantial. The taste buds on my tongue have seemed to dry up, maybe even shrivel from the lack of water. They are parched from dehydration. Any comfort I will find will have to come from my one and only, oh one and only, shirt and blanket. I will absorb the encouraging strength with all my last might.

Luckily, our beggared army has just received help from France and Spain. Thank our dear God! Besides this exciting news, we have received the common message of defeat; General Howe has just forced Washington to retreat from Philadelphia. We are now camping at Valley Forge. Only to the mercy of the Lord may I be brought through the cold, dreary night.

~Emma Wagner~

December 12, 1778

Dear Diary,

I don't know how much more of this war I can take. We have trampled through these barren landscapes for days now. My shoes were worn to shreds and my feet bleed as I write this. I have no blanket at night and the icy ground has made my toes turn blue. My only friend here is in the medical area right now. His arm was blown to bits and they had to amputate it. Learning to use a gun was tricky at first, but I believe that I have finally gotten it right.

One of my comrades in our tent was sick today. He had repulsive boils all over him and I believe that I'm starting to get them too, as a few have appeared on my skin. Nothing too serious I hope. We weren't given food today, and I wonder if it has anything to do with that. There's hardly any food though so you never know. It is raining outside, and there are several holes in our tent. We are getting soaked. I must go now. Paper and ink are hard to get, but time is harder. Until then, I hope to stay alive in the next battle to come.

-Emily

January 3, 1778

Dear Diary,

I have been going through a lot of hardships lately. First of all, my right shoe got caught in the snow, so now I only walk with my left shoe. I am afraid that my right foot will cause me disease because it is frozen. I have also been suffering smallpox and I have given it to my tent mates.

It has been a long couple of months, and the days seem to drag on. I really doubt that I will survive. I still have smallpox and I wish it would go away. All of my tent mates have had accidents and some have had their hands amputated. I have to help them to eat and write. I feel sorry that they will be disabled for the rest of their lives. I might die now, maybe later, I will never know. I wish it could be over.

Hopefully I live,

Georgia Snelling

Dear Diary,

It is late at night on Christmas day and the candle light is dwindling, so my time is limited. I would like to take a chance to share my delight with you. Today my fellow men of the Continental Army and I had an incredible, inspiring victory. We were unimaginably low on supplies so we surprised the Hessians, mercenaries hired by the British, in Trenton. We killed over 900 of them and gained much needed supplies.

Before the victory from which we gained our supplies, my men and I faced terrible hardships. First, several men broke out with boils and small pox. Because we were living in such tight quarters, the illnesses spread throughout the army. Second, rations were extremely limited. Third, not only were there men with only one shoe, but also, many men had none. I myself was greatly affected by these hardships before, as I said, we won our battle.

Personally, I was first affected with illness. Because two of my tent-mates had small pox, I also contracted the sickness. After learning to cope with the itchy infection, I had to learn to live without my right hand after having it amputated due to wounds. I also forgot to mention that all the while, I had no shoes. This might not sound like a terrible hardship, but my feet had been frozen so raw from the ice and snow, I left tracks of blood in my path. One pleasant thing I was blessed with was plentiful rations since the camp cook shared a tent with me.

This is only a short summary of my experience in the Continental Army, but as I mentioned above, the candle light is dwindling, and I must go now.

Yours always,

Jasmine Wright

January 11th, 1778

Dear diary,

On our trek to Valley Forge, my friends and I have lost our shoes and are forced to walk upon the stark freezing snow. The frostbite has consumed my feet entirely to where I can hardly see a spot of pink left. I am scared that my toes may indeed fall off. We are also infected with a very serious illness but cannot be treated or given aide, for our supplies have been drastically dwindling.

After we arrived at Valley Forge, I was placed in a tent with three other soldiers. Unfortunately, myself and these others all contain the disease small pox. Since we are sick, we were denied food and water by the cook. How dare they leave us without rations, medicine, hydration! Us, who need it most! On the battlefield today I watched, horrified, as one of my dear friends was blasted to smithereens with a cannon and killed instantly.

It is very difficult to write this entry, for the cold outside and within me is so bitter and treacherous that my hands continue to shake endlessly. I am cold, dehydrated, sick, and frightened beyond comprehension. I wish I could be elsewhere now, but I chose to fight for our independence. My word is my honor, so I will continue to endure these hardships until the war is won, and every British red coat has fallen to his knees before me in cowardice and shameful defeat. We will have our freedom, our independence, our country.

Catalina

Petrescu

December 12, 1780

Dear Diary,

We have been walking for many days now it has become very difficult for some. Many have no shoes so their feet are bleeding across the ice and snow leaving marks so the British know where we are. The worst is many soldiers have broken out in boils all over their bodies and is spreading to others quickly. I luckily have neither the sickness but I do have food for today since the cook is going to the tents that do not have ill soldiers.

I spoke too soon as it turns out I do have the boils on my body. It feels like a sore that keeps getting bigger and bigger. I went to the doctor in the camp where I saw people with no arms or legs. Though the boils are all over my body I thank the lord that I have shoes on my feet and food in my stomach.

Lara Munoz