

Chapter Four

Day Two, Monday, Dec. 30, 1776

Delaware River, NJ Side

General Henry Knox's boots sank four inches into the mud with every step. A lighter man might have had less difficulty walking toward the boats if it were dry ground, but a lighter man might not have been able to pull his boots out now. Henry's immense strength allowed him to move along the Delaware River's shore with seemingly little effort.

He shouted orders to the boats coming up. "Stop. Let your neighbor in there. You, turn left. Come ashore over there. That's it. Easy now. Get a rope out there."

Henry sloshed up the Delaware to a tangle of boats and men who strained to lift cannons out of boats and drag them to dry ground. Boats collided with each other as they made for the small area of beach. Men yelled at each other, "Get away from here. Watch it, get away." Officers and sergeants on shore struggled in the mud.

As one boat made it to shore, another plowed into its stern and tipped over. Sacks of supplies fell into the river. Men spilled out of the boats and waded up to shore. Some men reached under water and picked up the bags, but most of them just tried to get out of the freezing water. Another boat approached fast. Henry pointed and motioned for it to go to his right. Men jumped out of the boats and waded up the bank.

Captain Murphy rode up on a horse. He addressed General Henry Knox without a salute, because it would never occur to Murphy to salute Henry Knox. Henry Knox was just 'Henry.' Murphy said, "Hello, Henry. The General sends his regards."

Knox replied, "How are ya, Murph?"

Murphy watched the confusion. A small, flat-bottomed boat to the left was almost to shore, but a rope holding the cannons snapped. Two cannons careened to the left, causing the boat to list. Men on the right side leaned out over the gunwale to try to keep it balanced, but two of them fell overboard. They struggled in the icy water and tried to climb back in, but it was too deep, so they just hung onto the side.

The boat listed more to the left. The force pulled the two men right out of the water as their side of the boat shot high in the air. The cannons spilled out of the boat and sank into the river.

The boat turned over. All the men found themselves underneath an overturned boat as they found their footing in the mud, standing upright in five feet of water with a boat for their roof.

Henry Knox and Murphy watched the bottom of a boat creep toward shore. Henry shook his head. Men from shore helped get the boat off the tops of the men underneath. Everyone on shore and in the boats was soaked.

Murphy asked, "So, how's it going?"

“All right, so far. Do you know how many times these guns have crossed this river? Four times in the last month, back and forth, back and forth. I wish I’d get to shoot these once in a while.”

“You might get your chance pretty soon, Henry. Sorry, I mean ‘General.’”

“Ah, that’s all right.”

Murphy recovered from his embarrassment at addressing a senior, highly respected officer by his first name. It was just that Henry Knox, plump, gentle, friendly, smart, competent, and brave, didn’t fit the ‘yes, sir, no sir’ military demeanor of most generals.

Murphy asked, “So, what do you think?”

“We should be in Trenton tonight, if nothing goes wrong.”

Murphy surveyed the confusion. “What could go wrong?”

“Ha. Indeed. Any word on the enemy?”

“Nothing, so far. We have sentries all over, so we’ll know if anything happens.”

“Tell the General I’m sending Sullivan’s division into town.”

Murphy said, “Yes, I passed Sullivan on the road.”

Henry moved to the side to get a better view of an overloaded vessel that was stuck. “Excuse me, Murph.” Henry trudged up to a group of men who sat in the mud. He pointed at them, “You. Get those boxes out of there. Yes, you, you heard me.” The men got up, groaned, and unloaded the boxes.

Ropes flew through the air from the shore and from the arriving boats. Henry picked up a rope and pulled hard. The men in the boat fell backward and out, into the cold Delaware, but the boat came fast to shore from Henry’s pull. Henry turned toward Murphy. “It helps to have a little oomph.”

Murphy saluted with a smile. Henry Knox returned it.

“See ya, General.”

Murphy continued down the shore on his horse toward Trenton. He approached an officer on horseback directing a group of men trying to unstick a cannon from a ditch. Just as Murphy arrived, the officer yelled to his men, “Push. Harder. Jackson, take the wheel. You have to push harder, damn you.”

Murphy looked at the men, then at the officer, and asked, “What are you doing?”

“Trying to get this gun out, obviously. Jackson, no. Push on the wheel, for the sake of God.”

Murphy watched the struggling men sympathetically. “Why don’t you help them?”

“I am helping them. Satchel, put your weight into it, you stupid imbecile.”

Murphy asked, “Why don’t you help them push?”

The officer’s eyebrows went up. “I’m an officer. I don’t push.”

Murphy glanced at the officer’s horse and noticed a rope looped on the saddle horn. He slipped his right leg out of the stirrup, swung it over his horse’s back, and deftly touched down. Walking over to the officer, his eyes stayed focused on the rope. He took the rope off the officer’s saddle and swung one end down to the men quickly, before the officer could tell what was happening.

The officer covered the saddle horn with his hands. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Murphy tied the near end of the rope to the officer’s saddle horn. “Trying to get this gun out, obviously. Turn your horse.” Murphy pushed the officer’s hands aside and continued to wrap the near end around the saddle horn.

“Get out of here. I outrank you. Who do you think you are?”

Murphy finished tying the rope. “Captain Warren Murphy, First Pennsylvania Riflemen. Turn your horse, Captain.”

The officer said, “Murphy?” He hesitated, but then turned the horse.

Murphy slid down the bank to the men and the cannon. He tied the end of the rope to the axle, placed himself next to Satchel, behind the gun, and shouted to the officer, “Go,” then to the men along side, “Push.”

Murphy pushed as hard as he could. He slipped, fell in the mud, got up, and pushed again. The gun skidded sideways twice, but ultimately became unstuck. Murphy followed it up to the road, making sure it wasn’t going to fall back, and then diverted to higher ground. Jackson followed him. Satchel and the other soldiers untied the rope and pointed the gun toward Trenton. Murphy and Jackson rested on dry ground.

Jackson asked, “You’re an officer?”

“Yes, Captain Murphy.”

“You think we’ll see any British?”

“I reckon we will, son.”

“Good. I didn’t join the army to serve in the navy.”