

A ragtag band of brothers takes on the largest empire in history.

Among them, not just founding fathers and future presidents,

but the unsung heroes who also played their part.

Ordinary men and women, whose extraordinary acts of courage and sacrifice

are the real story of the American Revolution.

Charleston, 1780. The British army is on the rampage.

And appears well on its way to crushing the revolution.

Once and for all.

Fighting in the northern colonies left no decisive winner,

but now the British forces are pouring into the American south.

They have routed every army and militia force

the southern patriots have thrown at them.

Once they have control of the south,

the British plan to direct their full power on an isolated north.

A key factor has fueled their recent success.

The south is teeming with tens of thousands of loyalists.

The idea in London, at least, was that the south was

more loyal and less of the hotbed of the revolution,

farther away from Boston and New England.

And so let's try the south, they'll be more loyal there,

we can capture important ports and agricultural centers

and kind of restart and regain the momentum in the war.

The southern loyalists oppose the revolution,

mainly because their allegiance to the king is hugely profitable.

It was an agricultural economy and those products

that were being produced on southern farms were shipped.

To Britain. And so that link was very close.

So what do they have to gain?

By breaking away and becoming an independent country

that now has to protect itself and spend money on national defense

when they're making money the way things are going.

Why change?

Just because a bunch of hotheads in Boston don't

want to pay their taxes doesn't make any sense.

Now, as the British storm through the southern colonies,

the patriots' strongholds are crumbling.

And with them, the revolution's last hopes of victory.

Georgia and South Carolina have fallen.

As the British press inland to the untamed backcountry,

they leave loyalist militias behind to hold the captured territory.

By 1780, 8,000 American loyalists are fighting to crush the revolution.

Nearly equal to the number of soldiers in the Continental Army opposing them.

In the south, the dark side of the revolution is fully exposed.

They were fighting their own brothers and their own cousins.

And it shows how personal this war really became.

But the bitter fighting between loyalists and

patriots isn't confined to the battlefields.

It sweeps through the homes of civilians,

where ordinary people rise to extraordinary acts of courage.

Nancy Hart is a mother of eight and an outspoken patriot in the backwoods of Georgia.

With her husband serving in the local rebel militia,

she's often left on her own.

Ah, Buford's fever broke. He wants ya.

Nancy Hart embodied the tough, raw-boned frontier woman.

She was imputed to be close to six feet in height.

Extremely strong.

You did not cross Nancy Hart.

Between backbreaking chores and tending to her eight children,

Nancy has found the time to serve the revolution in her own way,

as a patriot spy.

Because of her height and her somewhat masculine appearance,

she could disguise herself as a man

who could cross over into the British encampments

and they would ignore this individual,

thinking this man could pose no threat

and she would gather valuable intelligence for the patriots.

Nancy's covert moonlighting is never discovered.

But like all patriots in the south,

her allegiance alone is enough to attract the attention of local loyalists.

Where is he?

Get out! This is my house!

Where is he?

Where is he?

Loyalists were chasing a patriot and suspected that Nancy Hart was harbouring

this patriot that they were after.

She wasn't.

And how many men he has with him?

I'm getting tired of asking these questions.

Where is he at?

And they decided to intimidate her.

The next one is real.

When it comes to her own safety, Nancy is fearless.

But as a mother, she's terrified.

One false move could endanger her children.

So when the loyalists order Nancy to cook and feed them her own turkey,
she doesn't resist.

But she also hatches a ploy.

If she can get the loyalists drunk, she may be able to disarm them and send for help.

The soldiers had stacked up their muskets.

And one by one, she was sneaking the muskets to her daughter.

Hey!

Stop!

First toy that twitches I shoot stone dead.

Who's next?

Nancy manages to hold them off and tell her husband the rest of the militia show up.

And he wants to shoot them on the spot.

She says, no, that's too good for them.

I want to see them strung up.

And that's what they do.

Skirmish by skirmish, courageous patriots like Nancy Hart

help to slow the advance of the British forces.

But every bitter clash deepens the hatred between the Americans on rival sides.

The colonial slaughter reaches its peak at King's Mountain.

Of the 2,000 men fighting on both sides, only one is a British soldier.

It's a preview of the carnage to come during

the civil war 80 years in the nation's future.

It encapsulates the reality of how bitter this war was.

This partisan action, friend against friend.

Thousands more patriots will die before the revolution is over.

But most of them will lose their lives nowhere near a battlefield.

As the revolutionary war rages in the south,

thousands of American prisoners are being held

on 16 retired British warships in New York.

The POWs have been captured from every theater of the war,

beginning with the thousands of soldiers that

surrendered during the 1776 invasion of Long Island.

The infamous prison ships are anchored in a bay in the East River

that is now the site of the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

Their masts, canvas and rigging have been stripped away and their gun ports sealed.

In their glory days, they carried crews of 350 men.

Now, as many as 1,400 are crammed below their decks.

Other than the prisoners and their guards, humanitarian Elizabeth Bergen

is one of the few witnesses to what takes place here.

Take it.

Thank you, Miss.

Elizabeth Bergen makes regular trips to the prison ships,

providing food and supplies and comfort to the men there.

The British only allow women to perform that role as a security measure.

And she sees the conditions under which the

men are being held there, and she's horrified.

The food was miserable, wormy bread, undercooked meat,

and disease and malnutrition was rife among the prisoners.

One soldier wrote that the air was so thick and disgusting

below deck that you couldn't even light a candle.

There wasn't enough oxygen.

All these men jammed together with no ventilation.

Illnesses swept through the prison ships constantly.

People would die every day, literally 10, 12 people would die every day.

Each morning begins with the same grim command.

Turn out, you're dead!

Every day, bodies were brought off the prison ships

and taken to the nearby shore and buried right along the shoreline.

The British have a standing offer.

If they will join the British Navy and swear loyalty to the King, they're free.

And instead, these men chose agonizing death or returning traitor.

Rather than surrender, the courageous prisoners chose

to face the deadly conditions of the prison ships,

knowing their chances of survival were slim.

And without help from someone on the outside,

they also knew that the odds of escape were close to zero.

This will offer comfort.

I'm not a believer, ma'am.

Salvation lies within.

History doesn't record the specifics of Bergin's bold escape plan.

But some claim it hinged on a smuggled drug

to be slipped into the guards' drink at midnight.

Bergin knows that trying to free the King's prisoners invites a death sentence.

But with the help of an American spy,

she works out the last details of her daring mission.

Her plan is believed to have worked as follows.

At midnight, the smuggled drug was secretly placed in a guard's beer.

As the drug took effect, Bergin and her patriot

allies would quietly row up to the prison ship.

Once the guard was unconscious,

a prisoner would steal his key to the hatch leading to the deck.

The rescuers arrived just as the prisoners emerged onto the upper deck

and transported them across New York harbour to safety.

Elizabeth Bergin is rarely mentioned in the history books,

but none of the men she rescued over the next several weeks would ever forget her.

She may have been responsible for the escape of as many as 200 prisoners, an extraordinary number for the daring do of a single individual.

Eventually, the British discovered what she was doing and they put a price on her head, 200 pounds.

It may not seem like much today, but that was about equal to 20 years of pay for a British soldier.

Now a wanted woman, Bergin makes her own secret escape from New York and that the urging of George Washington is later granted a pension by the Continental Congress for her services to the nation.

Her only regret is having to leave thousands of prisoners still in captivity to face almost certain death.

Between 10 and 12,000 men died on the prison ships during the course of the war, so that's over a period of about six years when these ships were heavily occupied, some 12,000 men.

By contrast, there were perhaps 8,000 patriot battle deaths in the entire Revolutionary War.

So it's possible that as many or more patriots died aboard the prison ships than actually died in battle during the entire American Revolution.

In 1908, a monument was erected in Brooklyn's Fort Green neighborhood

to honour the 12,000 patriots who perished aboard the prison ships,
a reminder of the terrible losses sustained far from the battlefield.

We should never forget that war is sacrifice

and no less than those who died on the battlefield.

The prisoners who died and suffer aboard the ships

also gave their life and their health for the same cause of American freedom.

As rebels by the thousands were dying in the British prisons,

they were also falling in alarming numbers on the southern American battlefields.

The colony's quest for independence was fading with them,

and the patriots knew they must soon turn the tide of battle or face defeat.

In the summer of 1780, 4,000 Americans attempt to make such a stand

by launching a major offensive against the 2,500 strong British forces

in a desperate effort to hold their relentless advance through the southern colonies.

If they fail, Britain's conquest of the entire south seems all but assured.

Although the patriots outnumber the Redcoats,

they are no match for Britain's commander,

General Charles Cornwallis.

The rebels' defeat is also partially self-inflicted.

The day before, the starving soldiers had devoured a stash of unripe peaches.

Prior to Camden, the American troops were apparently suffering

from dysentery, a good number of them, which made them anything but battle-worthy.

So the real strength of the American force at this critical battle

was much less than you would think it was on paper,

and disease greatly contributed to the American defeat at Camden.

Nearly 2,000 patriots, half the Americans waging the southern campaign,

are killed, wounded or captured at the Battle of Camden.

Without a miraculous turnaround, the south will now fall,

the north will follow, and the revolution will be lost.

The retreating Continental Army at Camden

has abandoned a wealth of equipment on the battlefield,

leaving a handful of Americans trying desperately

to retrieve what they can as they flee from the British advance.

Among them, one patriot stands out from the rest.

His name is Peter Francisco,

but he's known as the Virginia Giant.

Peter Francisco was an unbelievable physical specimen,

6'6", 260, 80 pounds, almost unheard of

for someone to be that size in the 18th century,

and just incredible physical strength.

His heroics during the war often seemed too incredible to be true,

but none defines his legend better than what's said to have happened at Camden.

As the legend goes, he took an 1,100-pound cannon,
hoisted it on his shoulders and took it to a place where the British wouldn't fight.

The story is commemorated in the United States postage stamp,
so it does have some credibility.

Whether truth or legend, what is certain
is that George Washington referred to Francisco as a one-man army.

It's very clear that stories of Peter Francisco's
great strength were circulating all over.

He was a character almost like Paul Bunyan,
except we know that Peter Francisco was real.

We believe he was Portuguese, born in the Portuguese Azores,
but we have no idea how and why he got to America.

Francisco's fame isn't only due to his spectacular size and strength.

He's also one of the most fearless and ferocious fighters in the Continental Army.

With every battle, he cements his reputation as a one-man wrecking ball.

From Brandywine Creek in Pennsylvania
to Monmouth in New Jersey to Stony Point in New York.

But such brawn and bravery have made barely a
dent in the British advance across the South.

After routing the patriots at Camden,
Cornwallis and his troops swept north into North Carolina.

The depleted Continental Army, outnumbered and outclassed,
can no longer engage the Redcoats in a major battle and hope to win.

Their only chance is to break the rules.

George Washington assigns a new general to lead the southern campaign,

his most trusted officer, Rhode Islander Nathaniel Green,

who proposes a very unconventional plan of attack.

Nathaniel Green changed strategies and his new strategy proved to be brilliant.

We shall hit the British army and we shall pull back each time we hit them.

His objective was not to defeat the British in a pitched battle,

but to wear the British out.

The American strategy was, in essence,

outlast the British, outweigh the British.

Don't go into a major battle, because one major

defeat and it's all over for the Americans.

In a long series of hit and run skirmishes,

Green harasses Cornwallis and his army.

Each battle ends in defeat for the patriots.

He described it as we fight, we get knocked down, we lose,

then we get up and we fight again.

Now, that doesn't seem like a good way to win a war, but it was actually brilliant.

They chase him through North Carolina

and Cornwallis realizes after a number of these victories over Green and his forces that he's now several hundred miles away from his supply bases.

Brilliant strategic move on Green's part to bring Cornwallis and the British army so far from their supply bases that they can never recover their strength.

As the Redcoats grow weaker,

Green strengthens his army by recruiting more militia fighters.

The time is approaching when he will finally

be ready to take the fight to the British.

After his long series of fighting retreats,

Green decides that time is finally right to stop running and force a major showdown.

If his army is destroyed, the South is lost

and so he knows he must throw everything he has at the exhausted British.

Including Peter Francisco.

This is the moment that cements Peter Francisco into legend.

He's on horseback, he's galloping forward.

Wave after wave of British are coming at him.

He's hacking these guys.

In one charge, Francisco kills 11 Redcoats.

But Francisco's luck seems to have run out.

It seemed like he was doomed when a British soldier

with a bayonet pinned his leg to that of his horse,

virtually incapacitating him.

But then he helped the soldier withdraw the bayonet

and then killed him with his sword and made a miraculous escape.

Francisco's victims are among the 530 British soldiers

killed or wounded at Guildford Courthouse, twice the number of American casualties.

Green withdraws to minimize his losses,

turning the battle into another of his tactical defeats.

But the battered British are in no mood to celebrate.

When news of the victory at Guildford Courthouse reaches England,

one statesman declares another such victory will destroy the British army.

Peter Francisco's wounds are treated and he lives to fight another day.

By summoning all of their strength,

the Patriots had finally halted the British advance in the South.

In response, the Redcoats marched north to Virginia to regroup.

For the first time in years,

George Washington had his enemy on the run.

And with British superiority on the battlefield fading,

the endgame of the six-year campaign was finally approaching.

But while the Redcoats' relentless momentum had been reversed,

the battles had also taken a heavy toll on the American forces.

And Washington knew his own ragged army was in no shape to press home its advantage.

Casualty report, General.

Thank you, Lieutenant.

He knows he can't score a knockout blow without the help of his French allies.

Since France joined the Patriot side in 1777,

its supplies have kept the Americans in the fight.

6,000 French troops have helped Washington hold the British army at bay in New York.

But as the French watch their expenses soar without much progress in the war,

they're tempted to cut their losses and put an end to the Patriot cause.

Washington knows that time is running out for

him to deliver an impressive military victory.

And it's a Virginia slave named James Armistead

who now steps forward to help tip the balance.

General Cornwallis believes Armistead is a loyal British servant.

That he's actually a Patriot spy.

Gentlemen, the question to you, my officers,

how best to attend to General Washington and his French boy?

Espionage was just crucial to Washington's army

and it always is when you have a small insurgency

fighting against a great empire.

So he poses as an escaped slave and he won the trust of British officers.

It is simply the shortest distance from one point to the other.

Armistead is among several slaves recruited as spies by the Patriots.

They blend in with the tens of thousands of runaways

who have already sought refuge with the British.

Most African Americans gave their allegiance to the British

because the British had proclaimed that any African American

who came to serve in the British cause would be guaranteed freedom.

But James Armistead believed in the goals of freedom and liberty of the revolution.

And of course an African American could be a very good spy

because the British believed all the African Americans are obviously on our side.

If the intelligence is true,

we shall come face to face with General Washington.

The one thing the Americans needed to know

was where the British are and which direction they're moving in.

So they asked Armistead to do something incredibly dangerous,

gathering intelligence right from the source

and delivering that information back to the American camp.

Remember, we are attempting to regain familial ties with the former colonials.

If you were caught as a spy,

you would likely be summarily executed.

As the British march through Virginia,

Armistead relays everything he learns to other spies who carry the intelligence to the charismatic 23-year-old Marquis de Lafayette, the French leader of an outnumbered American force shadowing the British.

In August 1781, Armistead uncovers a secret that has the potential to change the course of the war, the new base of operations for the British forces in the South.

Gentlemen, General Clinton has tasked us with a grave responsibility to identify a deep-water port sufficient to accommodate our fleet.

Now, I have determined our best position appears to be near Yorktown.

Yorktown is a port on the Virginia coast, an ideal site for Cornwallis to receive arms, supplies and troops transported by the British Navy.

When Lafayette receives this intelligence, he wastes no time in relaying the information to Washington in New York. Cornwallis has no idea he's just committed a catastrophic military blunder.

In one of history's great coincidences, a huge fleet of 28 French ships were sailing directly towards Yorktown.

And thanks to Armistead's advance warning, Washington now has the time to plan the perfect trap.

When the French Navy arrives, they'll have Cornwallis' escape by water cut off.

If Washington can march south into Virginia,

he can trap Cornwallis by land.

If they can spring this trap,

they can take half of the British forces in North America in one fell swoop.

But Washington's scheme will only work if Cornwallis stays put in Yorktown.

And Cornwallis is about to ruin everything by preparing to move inland

and attack Lafayette's outnumbered American force.

Even though he has only 3,200 troops compared to Cornwallis' 8,000,

Lafayette must somehow convince the Redcoats to stay where they are.

And with the help of James Armistead,

he comes up with a clever ploy.

One of the great ironies is that Cornwallis

assigns Armistead to go and spy on the Americans.

And Armistead delivers, he brings back a document.

The document is a phony, fabricated by Lafayette.

But Cornwallis buys it.

He thinks the American force is twice as big as it really is.

And so he decides not to attack.

Thanks to Armistead's false information,

Cornwallis remains in Yorktown.

In September, Washington's Allied ground forces arrive outside the port.

While the French navy blocks any possible escape route by sea,
the British are now outnumbered two to one.

Over three weeks of American and French bombardment,
Britain's mighty Imperial Army,
the most highly trained, best equipped,
most professional fighting force on Earth,
is brought to its knees.

On October 19th, 1781, Cornwallis finally surrenders.

The news rocks Britain to its core.

For Prime Minister Lord Frederick North,
it's a shattering blow.

When he heard this information,
he acted as if he had been shot in the chest.

It was devastating news.

The consequence of Yorktown was more important politically than it was militarily,
because it told the British government,
it told the British opposition,
it told British voters and taxpayers,
you know, this war in America is nowhere near over.

We could keep fighting, we have to send a whole other army there
and more ships, and that's way too expensive.

We're simply not going to do it.

Yorktown killed the British will to continue the war.

But America's independence is far from one.

More lives will be lost before the final clash of the revolution

brings the bloodshed to an end and a new day dawns for the young nation.

Yorktown may have been a decisive turning point in the American Revolution,

but the war grinds on for another year.

More Americans are killed after Yorktown than during the first year of the war.

Companies of redcoats continued to clash with

local militias before being called home to Britain.

September 11, 1782, marks what many consider to be the revolution's final battle.

A hundred patriots in the Virginia wilderness

are trapped in Fort Henry by 50 British soldiers and 250 Indians.

The Americans' meager supply of musket balls

is barely enough to hold the invaders at bay.

But something just as crucial is also running out fast.

On day three of the siege, their gunpowder is nearly exhausted.

There's one last powder keg left, but it's not in the fort.

It's in a cabin 50 yards away.

Someone has to go get this thing, but it's a suicide mission.

None of the men could get the gunpowder because they needed

every single one of them to fire the muskets from the fort.

In this war, waged largely by the young,

it's only fitting that one of the last acts of heroism is performed by a teenager.

I can do it.

I can run fast.

Betty Zane is 16 years old.

Until recently, Betty Zane was going to school in Philadelphia,

far from the war.

Now she's immersed in it, and hundreds of lives depend on her.

And she took advantage of the fact, she hoped,

that if she left the fort, even though it's surrounded

by the British, that they wouldn't shoot at a woman.

But the keg is too heavy for her to carry.

So she collects as much powder as she can in her apron.

The enemy troops now know Betty's up to no good.

She's running back from the cabin.

Bullets are whizzing by her head.

If one strikes her, it's fatal.

If one of those hot bullets hits that gunpowder, it's all over.

She'll never make it.

The gunpowder Betty delivers allows the settlers

to hold off their attackers for one more day,

who finally give up their siege and retreat.

Thanks to her courage and quick thinking,

the Americans prevail in the last skirmish of the revolution.

Another year will pass before hostility's

formally end with the Treaty of Paris in 1783.

Benjamin West's unfinished painting, featuring only

the American delegation, speaks volumes about

the toll that the war had taken on Britain.

The British were so humiliated by having to sign this treaty

that they did not want any of their representatives depicted

in this painting.

West's painting of the Peacemakers is a great representation

of the Americans, this new nation, confident, assured,

leaving behind these pale ghosts of Europe who don't want

to be depicted in the painting, acknowledging this defeat.

Against all odds, a ragtag alliance of rebels, men, women

and children had defeated the world's mightiest empire.

America wins its freedom, even though it loses most of the individual battles.

There's no point at which the entire affair isn't on a knife edge.

Until this time, countries had emerged organically.

France, Spain, Britain itself had emerged over hundreds of years.

The United States of America emerged like that.

The idea that you could create a country that way was absolutely revolutionary.

In the end, it demonstrates the dedication of that generation to achieving independence and liberty.

Today, it's still possible to gaze into the faces of some of the heroes of America's revolution.

Not only depicted in paintings, but also preserved in a handful of rare photographs of revolutionary war veterans who posed for a portrait decades later.

The apprentice blacksmith who attended the Boston Tea Party.

The drummer boy, frozen with Washington at Valley Forge.

The surgeon's mate who tended to the wounded at Yorktown.

These few pictures remaining of these veterans serve an incredibly important purpose, and that is to remind us that regular people fought the American Revolution.

Ordinary people whose extraordinary courage and sacrifice had won America its independence.

When historians talk about events of the past,

we talk about battles, the big picture.

Rarely do we talk about the common man,

the unsung hero that changes a battle, changes a war of the course of history.

These people many times are unknown to us.

All those people's stories matter just as much as the stories of the great leaders.

It's easy to lose track of all of those individuals,

but they're there and they deserve to be remembered.

One of the great lessons of history, of all history,

is that ordinary people can do extraordinary things.

The men and women we think of as unsung heroes,

all of them realize that they are part of something bigger,

something grander, something that is part of making the world anew.

That they are doing something, not just for themselves,

but for posterity, for their children.

As Emerson's poem much later says,

these heroes who dared to die and leave their children free.