

LIVING HISTORY: RE-LIVING THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

Discipline and Morale the Keys To Success Then and Now

by Joseph Ryan

The long column of troops trails up Mt. Defiance. The bright red coats make a sharp contrast to the green of the woods and brown of the dirt road. "Where a goat can go, a man can go," was the fateful observation which sent the troops toward the heights overlooking Ft. Ticonderoga. Through a break in the trees, Lake Champlain gleams below the ramparts of the fort, a gray stone contrast.

Sweat stains the black bearskin helmets of the Grenadiers as the Sappers and Miners lead the way in under their heavy leather aprons. As the troops struggle up the last few yards, a cheer breaks out on the summit. A whole regiment of American troops in their blue coats with red facings covers the top of the mountain. Their muskets are not aimed, but held high in salute. This is not the 1770's but the 1990's. All the troops are 7th graders at Blue Mountain Middle School.

"Living History" is a team program in which teachers tie together a year's activities with a three-day and two-night culminating encampment. The authentic campsite and Ft. Ticonderoga can be seen from the top of Mt. Defiance. The parade ground is the site of the complete drill of these troops in front of hundreds of visitors to the fort. The students garrison the fortification and live the lives of Revolutionary War soldiers: i.e. sleeping on the ground, standing guard duty by candle lantern light, eating stew, having no shower, hair dryers or MTV - and thriving!!! Some of these troops are, in fact, now second generation in the program which is now thirty years old. A year ago, three mothers who had themselves been part of the 7th grade troops, were at Ft. Ticonderoga with their own children in uniform.

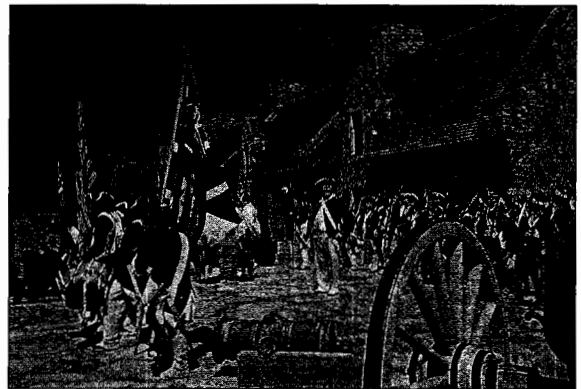


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"Where a goat can go - a man can go!"
Seventh grade teacher Joe Ryan leads his
"troops" at Fort Ticonderoga.

How does a program like this grow and prosper in a public school? What does it accomplish? What does it take to do it? At Blue Mountain Middle School, Hendrick Hudson School District in Montrose, New York, teachers use a team approach and strong community support to create an exciting educational environment. Students and their families eagerly participate in a program which immerses students in learning about their past and about themselves as people.

The Living History program weaves the magic of a cross-curriculum project that is based on a strong system of merits and demerits. Living History is a year long activity during which students earn their rank and responsibility. It takes discipline and morale to get to the top of Mt. Defiance (and through life) whether in the 1770's or the 1990's!



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Troops at attention awaiting further orders. Rank is earned daily through positive actions recognized through merits given by teachers, aides, administrators, office staff and custodians. These students have earned the "Order of Merit," (purple hearts) created by George Washington.

Organization of Troops/Students

Rank is earned daily through positive actions recognized through merits given by teachers, aides, administrators, office staff and custodians. Assisting a student who drops his/her books, helping a student on crutches, showing good behavior for substitute teachers, cleaning up the school grounds, etc. - hundreds of merits are earned each year for positive behavior. Only a few demerits for poor behavior must be issued. The results are few office referrals, high morale, self-esteem and a great deal of community support.

It should be noted that six demerits for the year will prove a student hasn't earned the experience. There is an appeal process which is student-staffed. This is a two-part process which has the student appear before the "officers' corps." The student's record is read, and the student must convince the officers that he/she deserves to go and can be trusted. After this appeal, the officers vote; a majority allows a student to go, if an officer will stand surety for him or her. This means if the student is sent home, then the officer goes with him or her. (No one has ever been sent home!!!)

Students are organized as they would have been in a real colonial era army. The quartermasters are busy with uniforms and equipment. The musicians practice period pieces while the sappers and miners work on camp life (tents, lanterns, cook gear). An active Committee of Safety made up of parents and teachers works on the logistics of the experience. Drills are conducted once a week.

Phrases echo throughout the year, "What separates an army from an armed mob? - Discipline." "What will get you to the top of Mt. Defiance - Morale!" In addition to the annual encampment at Fort Ticonderoga, the troops celebrate the holidays, in December, with an authentic regimental dinner. They march in at least three local parades and are invited to other events.

The handmade and researched regimental flags hang in the cafeteria. Uniforms are worked on at home, while equipment is made in school. Funds are raised locally with tremendous support from parents and the community. Living History provides a thread of year-long activity which binds the team of students, teachers and parents together.

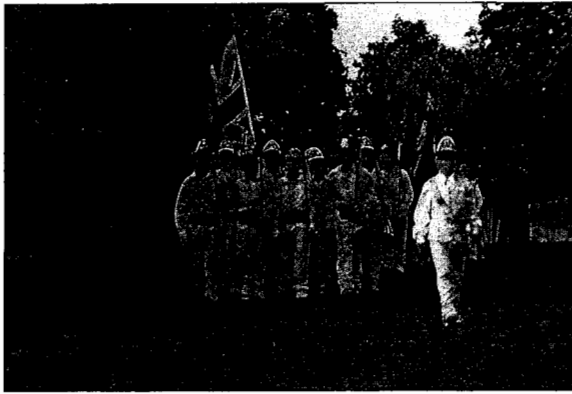


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Discipline and morale improve as troops drill.

Advice for Starting

The key to starting is in getting students interested. Show them tapes or bring them to Revolutionary War re-enactments. Brainstorm and build excitement first with a small group of interested students and their parents. Include equal numbers of boys and girls. Appoint a few students as staff officers to maintain accurate records. Create a ranking sheet, a system of merits and demerits and a staff folder for each student. Four or five times a year you can conduct a ranking, reviewing each student's folder with officers.

We began by collecting twenty-five cents a week in dues. A regimental treasurer was assigned to keep track of student funds. Greater sources of funding for equipment, uniforms and field trips might include the school board, parent-teacher organization or local groups such as the Elks Club, American Legion or Veterans of Foreign Wars.

While the Parris Manufacturing Company of Savannah, Tennessee, is the best source of toy muskets and rifles (around \$10 each for a full regiment), you may wish to create your own or buy the parts and assemble them yourself (much cheaper - we do that). There are many sources of period hats and a local hardware or Army/Navy store may have a book of supplies - hats, canteens, webbing, etc. Choose either the Civil War or Revolutionary War for your historical period since those are the easiest to do. Uniforms can be as simple or as authentic as you wish. Blue pants, jeans jackets and long-sleeved shirts are all common and look quite authentic as an inexpensive Civil War uniform.

Don't forget parents! They can play a big part. Parents love the idea of an encampment, but that may be too much for the first year. Start with a day march, open-fire cooking, and, of course, a battle re-enactment. The local fire company may be able to supply smoke candles to add realism. Having your troops march in the local Veteran's Day or Memorial Day Parade is a sure way to win local support and, possibly, additional funds.

A regimental dinner during the holidays helps troops become focused and rekindle the fire during the winter doldrums. Drill once a week (most students will happily give up a study hall!), but outdoors, because this is a way to discipline and boost your troops' morale.

Re-enactment groups are a great source of information. Many of these groups exist in every state. They will usually give demonstrations, presentations, provide assistance and may invite students to join them.

Discipline and Morale

The moonlight reflects off Lake Champlain as the guards march their posts with candle lanterns. At headquarters the officers work on the guard roster and plan for fall-back (the tactical activity which recreates the reality of battlefield decisions and feelings). The drummers and fifers play "retreat" as the troops settle into their tents. The smoke from the fire drifts over the camp creating a hazy outline over the scene. Could this be how it was over 200 years ago? It takes discipline and morale to make this step back in time.

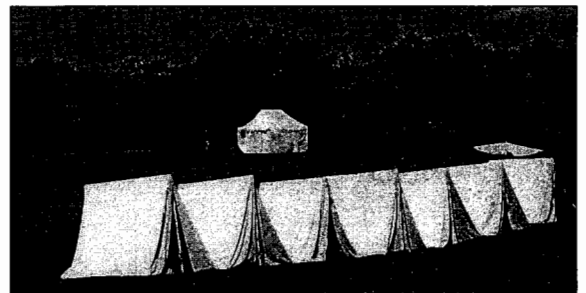


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Joseph J. Ryan (resting at right) is a Seventh Grade Teacher at Blue Mountain Middle School, Hendrick Hudson School District in Montrose, New York. He is a member of the New York State Board for Historic Preservation. Other team teachers include Sean Bugara, Wendy Arnold and Kathy Fitzmaurice.



The Same Moon

by Liz Skoski
7th Grade



Quick puffs of breath escaped my lips and turned smoky in the frigid air. All around me seventh graders in red and blue uniforms scrambled frantically. It was such chaos that I felt like I had to sit down, but I knew I couldn't.

"Musket or fusil?" someone asked me out of nowhere. He looked extremely cold. I could tell by his bright red ears, almost the color of ripened strawberries.

"Ummmm...fusil," I stammered, remembering the blue dragoon helmet on my head. I took the smaller sized gun in my hand. My numb fingers ran trembling down the metal firelock. I shuddered as a cold wind chilled through my wool American Regimental coat and my warm, cozy sweatshirt. It felt as if ice crystals were forming on my bones. I sighed again, and another breath dissolved into the crisp air.

Suddenly I spotted a group of people talking. Clutching the dreary fusil, I began to walk toward them. The wind blew again, but this time it carried words from their conversation back to my beet red ears - words like "cold" and "freezing." I shivered again. "It's going to be a long night," I muttered to myself, kicking a stone. The noisy clattering it made on the sidewalk was no match for the bustle of students preparing for the St. Patrick's Day parade. I joined the conversation with the group.

We didn't get to talk long. A long drum roll pierced the frigid air. Every soldier knew what was coming next, the crisp shout of "Attention!" by Mr. Ryan. And then it came. Everyone lined up in their companies, but it took a lot of question answering and pointing.

"Commanders and second in command! Echo the commands! Forward..." Mr. Ryan bellowed, an almost twisted smile decorating his face.

The commanders and second in command echoed, "Forward..." My body tensed after the words left my mouth, anticipating what was coming next.

"March!" The drummers started an easy marching beat. Soon the fifes joined with a joyous tune that filled the cold, empty night sky.

Dusk was falling by the time we started our march. The veteran band blared behind us, but our two little, gallant fifes refused to be outdone. They strained until the joyous notes of Yankee Doodle could bring a smile to anyone's lips, despite the cold. The drums played along with the familiar da-da-dum-dum that every soldier knew from Fridays of drilling.

The last pink rays of the sun glistened in the distance across the dark blue sky. Each company marched in blocks glancing at the brigade. American and British commanders walked up and down the lines occasionally shouting commands. "Slow down, first company! Your faces shouldn't be in those flags!" they would call, gesturing to the companies with their long, pointed sticks.

The crowd cheered and clapped loudly when we entered the heart of the parade route. Their faces were bright red, and they were wearing gloves and hats to keep out the frigid windchill. For the moment, I envied them.

We had marched around a curve in the road and up a small hill when we were told to stop. My fingers and toes had stopped responding to signals, but I didn't care. I was too cold and tired. One glance around at the listless bunch of seventh graders and I knew they were feeling the same thing. I rested my weight carelessly on one foot and looked up at the sky. It was dark now and the satiny, blue sky was dotted with white, glowing stars and a brilliant full moon. I stared at it and smiled. I could swear that the man in the moon was smiling back down at me. The American flag waved peacefully in front of the moon, catching the tranquil light in its woven pattern. Suddenly it hit me, the true reason why we were there. As the moonlight illuminated the flag, I realized that Washington's Army had stood in the same uniforms, in the same cold, staring at the same moon. They didn't march because there might be a chance of a field promotion. No, they came because they were fighting for their independence. They needed their freedom from Britain. I felt guilty and ashamed for being so hung up on the cold. I looked down at the pavement.

"Forward, march!" Mr. Ryan barked from the front of the line. The drums began playing again, and the fifes soon joined in.

When we stopped again, it was the end of the parade. We were all eager to get home, but we stood patiently when Mr. Ryan went through his speech.

"Brigade... dismissed!" Mr. Ryan cried, his eyes strange. He looked at the regiment like a proud parent. The two words he had just said sounded strangely sweet to my ears. Right then and there I knew that I would never forget the brilliant moon smiling down on me, the freedom our country had, and the heavy price we had paid for it.