Excerpts from the Diary of Johann Conrad Döhla

Johann Conrad Döhla (1750-1820) was a Hessian, a German soldier paid to fight for the British during the American Revolution. He had been a soldier for eight years before being sent to America, and then served in America for five and a half years until 1783—one and a half years of which was spent as a prisoner of war after seeing Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown. He then traveled to Canada and eventually returned to Germany. In his diary, he records his observations of what is happening around him, as well as what he thinks is happening elsewhere.

16 October

At night I went on duty in the Horn defense, to which our two regiments sent 250 men because the Light Infantry, which defended this post, were packed up and taken over the river in sloops to observe the enemy in Gloucester and in the region of Kirlentown. It is said this was done to see if it was possible to break through in this region and move inland easier, or to move toward Maryland—because everyone could easily see that we could not hold out much longer in this place if we did not receive relief.

During this night the enemy side fired no shot. We continued our firing, however. The enemy busied himself with defenses and work, which toward morning approached, with a communication trench and a strong battery of fourteen cannon, so near to our Hornwork that he could almost have thrown a stone into it. . . .

17 October

At Daybreak the enemy bombardment resumed, more terribly strong than ever before. They fired from all positions without letup. Our command, which was in the Hornwork, could hardly tolerate the enemy bombs, howitzer, and cannonballs any longer. There was nothing to be seen but bombs and cannonballs raining down on our entire line.

In the morning the English Light Infantry returned from Gloucester and reentered their post in the Hornwork. They said that it was impossible to break out there, because all the surrounding area was strongly occupied and fortified by the enemy. Also, a cordon had been drawn around the entire region by several squadrons of French Hussars, so that not the least thing could enter or leave. This morning also, just after reveille, General Cornwallis entered the Hornwork to observe the enemy and his preparations. As soon as he was again in his quarters, he sent a flag of truce with a white flag to the enemy. The Light Infantry in the Hornwork began to cut up their new tents, and in general, much was destroyed, as it was believed there would be a surrender soon.
At twelve o’clock noon another flag of truce went over. About three o’clock in the afternoon we departed from our command and marched back into our lines. The enemy cannonballs accompanied us on our march.

Toward evening everything became still, and no further shots were fired by either side. During the evening several flags of truce went back and forth, and work on the surrender accord was conducted in earnest.

At nine o’clock at night a powder magazine in the city blew up and killed thirteen people, of whom part flew into the air in pieces, but part were horribly crushed and covered with earth. Among those killed was an Ansbach grenadier who was on watch there, and also three English cannoneers who wished to take out powder and munitions and who apparently touched it off.

18 October

The entire day was quiet with no cannonading on either side.

Today Private [Christoph] Andig, of Eyb’s Company of our regiment, deserted from our line.

At noon two frigates and one schooner from the French fleet entered the harbor.

All troops during the last fourteen days have received much sugar and chocolate, or cocoa as the English call it, with the daily ration. These were taken from a Dutch merchant ship that the English captured and divided it among the regiments. We drank chocolate three, four, or even more times a day. Also we ate it with sugar on bread, but still could not use it all. It served us well during the present sleepless work and fatigue, which we had day and night with the greatest danger to our lives.

19 October

The unfortunate day for England when the otherwise so famous and brave General Lord Cornwallis, with all his troops and the ships in the harbor, had to surrender to the united French and American troops under the command of General Washington, and the Marquis de Lafayette.

On this day, in the morning, I went for the last time on the engineer watch. At twelve o’clock noon all watches and posts were cancelled. Only a regimental watch of one sergeant with twelve men remained on duty a few hours more. During the cancellation of the watches, Private [George Friedrich] Riedel, of Beust’s Company of our regiment, deserted. He had a wife and child at New York.

Now the capitulation was final.

The French and Americans immediately occupied our works and the line and all magazines and storehouses.
Nothing of our equipment and uniform items was taken or even touched; instead we were treated according to law and fairness and the customs of war.

We were, on one side, happy that finally this siege was ended, and that it was done with a reasonable accord, because we always believed we would be taken by storm. If it had continued only a few more days, it would really have resulted in a major attack, because the French Grenadiers already had such orders.

For my part, I also had good reason to thank God that He was my Protector, Powerful Helper, and Savior, who during the siege had so graciously saved my life and protected my body and all my limbs from illness, wounds, and all enemy shots. Oh! How many thousand bullets and deathly situations have I encountered face to face!

During this siege the enemy had thrown more than eight thousand bombs of 100, 150, 200, and even 250 pounds at us. We had more than seventeen or eighteen thousand killed and wounded. Supposedly, the enemy also counted more than ten thousand men dead and wounded.

[Note: Washington’s officers actually reported only 309 British/Germans killed, 120 wounded, 79 captured, and 44 deserted.]

Letter From Wilhelm Heinrich Florus, Graf von Schwerin, to His Uncle

Wilhelm served the French in the Royal Deux-Ponts Regiment of Germans under Rochambeau, and was part of the historic storming of Redoubt No. 9 in the siege of Yorktown. A young sous-lieutenant in a grenadier company, he wrote home to keep his family updated, and historians have recovered ten of his letters. The letters record Wilhelm’s observations and experiences as well as prices, wages, and what it was like to be a young noble during the Revolutionary War period.

York in Virginia, 21 October 1781

My very dear uncle,

I am delighted to be able to give you my news, and to inform myself at the same time about the state of your dear health. I hope that you have received my last letter that I had the honor to write to you while passing through Philadelphia. Since then we have traveled through a lot of country with the American army and been subjected to a lot of fatigues, but God be thanked that we were rewarded with the capture of the English General Cornwallis, who had been in Virginia for some time already to subjugate it.

My very dear uncle, I have to tell you the outcome of this campaign without forgetting the least or being led astray by the little things, for example that we embarked at the Bay of Chesapeake to betake ourselves to Virginia, which took 12 days.

We arrived on the 29th of September less than 1 and 1 1/4 miles from York, where the enemy had fortified himself. Our camp was in such a forest that we could not be discovered. The grenadiers and chasseurs of our army formed the advance guard and were posted within sight of the enemy. During the night the enemy sentinels fired but a few musket shots. We spent a few days in this camp to rest up. The enemy did not appear to be afraid. During the night from 6 to 7 October we began to open our first trench or line to lay siege to Monsieur de Cornwallis.

When we opened our first line or entrenchment, a lot of cannons were fired at us which did not do great damage to our workers. The work took but three or four days and we already had our fortifications arranged to respond to the first of the enemy, who could respond with but a few bombs and a few small pieces. But one has to admit that our artillery was much superior. We had lots of 24-pounders and an abundance of bombs. Not finding our first siege line close enough to the enemy, our general, Monsieur de Rochambeau, decided that we had to take a position closer to the enemy. . . .
The French forces consisted of 7,000 men, the Americans 8,000. . . . Normally our forces in this country are only 4,000 men, but Monsieur [Admiral Joseph Paul,] comte de Grasse, who is commander of our Squadron of the Islands, joined Monsieur [Admiral Louis, comte] de Barras, who commands our fleet in Rhode Island, and they betook themselves to the entrance of the Bay of Chesapeake, which is the place where the British could have come to the aid of Monsieur de Cornwallis in Virginia. Monsieur de Grasse landed 3,000 men to join himself to us in a way that the English general, seeing himself surrounded on land and on sea, gave himself up as a prisoner of war on 18 October once he was without hope for the least help. And now we are masters of this beautiful province of Virginia, which the English had already thought was theirs. Our sea forces were 36 ships of the line and frigates without number; the English had but 26. My dear uncle, I can assure you that I can hardly contain my joy at having been part of such a beautiful and glorious campaign, which was so fortunate for us. We have lost in our whole army but 300 men, that is to say killed as well as lightly wounded, which is not much for a siege that lasted 12 days. Hessian officers of the Regiment Erbprinz assured me that they have lost more than 800 men. After the capitulation was signed I went to York to talk to our German prisoners; I assure you that they behaved very honorably toward me. I wanted to inform myself about Count Wittgenstein, but nobody could tell me any news. These are, my very dear uncle, the news from this country.

Map of the Siege of Yorktown

This is the first American map of the battle of Yorktown, and was drawn within 10 days of the surrender of Cornwallis. The map shows British and American troop positions, British defenses, fields of fire, the headquarters of all generals and officers present, the ships in the York river, and the field where Cornwallis surrendered.

Detail from “This Plan of the investment of York and Gloucester…” by Sebastian Bauman, Philadelphia, 1782. From the collections of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.
Marquis de Lafayette

Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de La Fayette was a French aristocrat who joined the American forces in their fight against the British in the Revolutionary War. He became Washington’s aide-de-camp at only 20 years old.

Just prior to the siege of Yorktown, Cornwallis attempted to push Lafayette and his troops out of Richmond. Lafayette withdrew, and followed Cornwallis’ army through Williamsburg and into Yorktown, where Lafayette’s army joined French troops against Cornwallis’ forces.

“Le Marquis de La Fayette,” by Jean Baptist Le Paon, France, circa 1781.
Articles of Capitulation (October 18, 1781)

Settled between his Excellency General Washington, Commander-in-Chief of the combined Forces of America and France; his Excellency the Count de Rochambeau, Lieutenant-General of the Armies of the King of France, Great Cross of the royal and military Order of St. Louis, commanding the auxiliary troops of his Most Christian Majesty in America; and his Excellency the Count de Grasse, Lieutenant-General of the Naval Armies of his Most Christian Majesty, Commander of the Order of St. Louis, Commander-in-Chief of the Naval Army of France in the Chesapeake, on the one Part; and the Right Honorable Earl Cornwallis, Lieutenant-General of his Britannic Majesty's Forces, commanding the Garrisons of York and Gloucester; and Thomas Symonds, Esquire, commanding his Britannic Majesty's Naval Forces in York River in Virginia, on the other Part.

Article I. The garrisons of York and Gloucester, including the officers and seamen of his Britannic Majesty's ships, as well as other mariners, to surrender themselves prisoners of war to the combined forces of America and France. The land troops to remain prisoners to the United States, the navy to the naval army of his Most Christian Majesty.

Article II. The artillery, arms, accoutrements, military chest, and public stores of every denomination, shall be delivered unimpaired to the heads of departments appointed to receive them.

Article III. At twelve o'clock this day the two redoubts on the left flank of York to be delivered, the one to a detachment of American infantry, the other to a detachment of French grenadiers.

The garrison of York will march out to a place to be appointed in front of the posts, at two o'clock precisely, with shouldered arms, colors cased, and drums beating a British or German march. They are then to ground their arms, and return to their encampments, where they will remain until they are despatched to the places of their destination. Two works on the Gloucester side will be delivered at one o'clock to a detachment of French and American troops appointed to possess them. The garrison will march out at three o'clock in the afternoon; the cavalry with their swords drawn, trumpets sounding, and the infantry in the manner prescribed for the garrison of York. They are likewise to return to their encampments until they can be finally marched off.

Article IV. Officers are to retain their side-arms. Both officers and soldiers to keep their private property of every kind; and no part of their baggage or papers to be at any time subject to search or inspection. The baggage and papers of officers and soldiers taken during the siege to be likewise preserved for them.

It is understood that any property obviously belonging to the inhabitants of these States, in the possession of the garrison, shall be subject to be reclaimed.
Article V. The soldiers to be kept in Virginia, Maryland, or Pennsylvania, and as much by regiments as possible, and supplied with the same rations of provisions as are allowed to soldiers in the service of America. A field-officer from each nation, to wit, British, Anspach, and Hessian, and other officers on parole, in the proportion of one to fifty men to be allowed to reside near their respective regiments, to visit them frequently, and be witnesses of their treatment; and that their officers may receive and deliver clothing and other necessaries for them, for which passports are to be granted when applied for.

Article VI. The general, staff, and other officers not employed as mentioned in the above articles, and who choose it, to be permitted to go on parole to Europe, to New York, or to any other American maritime posts at present in the possession of the British forces, at their own option; and proper vessels to be granted by the Count de Grasse to carry them under flags of truce to New York within ten days from this date, if possible, and they to reside in a district to be agreed upon hereafter, until they embark. The officers of the civil department of the army and navy to be included in this article. Passports to go by land to be granted to those to whom vessels cannot be furnished.

Article VII. Officers to be allowed to keep soldiers as servants, according to the common practice of the service. Servants not soldiers are not to be considered as prisoners, and are to be allowed to attend their masters.

Article VIII. The Bonetta sloop-of-war to be equipped, and navigated by its present captain and crew, and left entirely at the disposal of Lord Cornwallis from the hour that the capitulation is signed, to receive an aid-de-camp to carry despatches to Sir Henry Clinton; and such soldiers as he may think proper to send to New York, to be permitted to sail without examination. When his despatches are ready, his Lordship engages on his part, that the ship shall be delivered to the order of the Count de Grasse, if she escapes the dangers of the sea. That she shall not carry off any public stores. Any part of the crew that may be deficient on her return, and the soldiers passengers, to be accounted for on her delivery.

Article IX. The traders are to preserve their property, and to be allowed three months to dispose of or remove them; and those traders are not to be considered as prisoners of war. The traders will be allowed to dispose of their effects, the allied army having the right of preemption. The traders to be considered as prisoners of war upon parole.

Article X. Natives or inhabitants of different parts of this country, at present in York or Gloucester, are not to be punished on account of having joined the British army.

This article cannot be assented to, being altogether of civil resort.

Article XI. Proper hospitals to be furnished for the sick and wounded. They are to be attended by their own surgeons on parole; and they are to be furnished with medicines and stores from the American hospitals.
The hospital stores now at York and Gloucester shall be delivered for the use of the British sick and wounded. Passports will be granted for procuring them further supplies from New York, as occasion may require; and proper hospitals will be furnished for the reception of the sick and wounded of the two garrisons.

**Article XII.** Wagons to be furnished to carry the baggage of the officers attending the soldiers, and to surgeons when traveling on account of the sick, attending the hospitals at public expense. They are to be furnished if possible.

**Article XIII.** The shipping and boats in the two harbours, with all their stores, guns, tackling, and apparel, shall be delivered up in their present state to an officer of the navy appointed to take possession of them, previously unloading the private property, part of which had been on board for security during the siege.

**Article XIV.** No article of capitulation to be infringed on pretence of reprisals; and if there be any doubtful expressions in it, they are to be interpreted according to the common meaning and acceptation of the words.

Done at Yorktown, in Virginia, October 19th, 1781.

Cornwallis, Thomas Symonds.

Done in the Trenches before Yorktown, in Virginia, October 19th, 1781.

George Washington,
Le Comte de Rochambeau,

Le Comte de Barras,
En mon nom & celui du Comte de Grasse.

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Source: [http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/amerrev/amerdocs/art_of_cap_1781.htm](http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/amerrev/amerdocs/art_of_cap_1781.htm)