

Letter from Andreas Wiederhold to Georg Ernst von und zu Gilsa, Long Island (August 29-31, 1776)

Abstract

As so many of his fellow countrymen, the Hessian Andreas Wiederhold (1732-1802) fought for the English in the American War of Independence. He had served in the regiment of Eitel Philipp Ludwig von und zu Gilsa and had later gone with Wilhelm von Knyphausen – the commander of the Hessian troops in British service – to America. In this 1776 letter, which is addressed to his former commander's son, Georg Ernst von und zu Gilsa, Wiederhold describes the battle for New York. He is full of enthusiasm about America and its natural riches, but has only contempt for the rebels against whom he is fighting because he interprets their revolt against the English king as ingratitude toward the king and God.

Source

S.T.

Dearest Friend,

That we fortunately arrived on the 12th of this month in America you will have already seen long ago in my letter that I sent to you on the 15th of this same month. We debarked the same day and pitched camp on State [sic] Island to put up some resistance. On the 25th we went on flat boats from this island to Long Island without being hindered by the rebels – who occupied the island and were 8,000 men strong – they were all in the woods. On the 27th we attacked them, hit them hard, and took many prisoners. We Hessians took 500 prisoners, and acquired two cannons, one mortar, and one flag. Among the prisoners are two of their generals whose names are Lord Sterling, who commanded the left wing, and Sullivan, who commanded the right wing. The latter was captured by our regiment. Overall, the prisoners include 1,500 men and 38 officers, and the dead and wounded are impossible to report, because they are still lying all over the woods and bushes. – The so-called riflemen or sharpshooters who are so notorious in all the newspapers for being such good shots are dogs, etc., with each other, and not as terrifying as they are made out to be. With eight men and two subordinate officers, I captured 19 of them who had hunkered down in almost impenetrable bushes. They fell down on their knees before me and called for quarter. But before I gave it to them, they had to beg the king for mercy and pardon, with their heads bare and their hands folded. They did so with tears in their eyes, and afterwards, I not only gave them quarter, but also had the wounded carried directly to the field surgeon, gave them as much rum and bread as I had, and treated them humanely as long as they were in my power, with the result that they did not want to leave me when they were transported away from the regiment. They are so dreadful for us Hessians when fleeing; it's indescribable. One of them nearly shot Corporal Küstner. It would have cost him his life, if he had not immediately fallen to his knees; and afterwards I asked him why he had still taken the shot when he saw that he was surrounded? He answered that their generals and officers had told them that we would not treat them humanely when they were our prisoners. We would catch them immediately, scalp them, mutilate all their limbs, and whatever other such atrocities there are, and for that reason he did it because he was afraid. But I answered him that these were the acts of monsters and barbarians, and perhaps of their generals, but not of civilized regular troops like we were. He

knew that I, or rather Küstner, now had reason to kill him, but he should see that he had been told lies, and I let him go. The losses will total about 3,000 to 4,000. Of all of us, one single soldier of Prince Carl's was shot dead, but in all about 50 were wounded; among them is Lieutenant Donop of the Jäger unit. The remaining officers are all well and healthy except for several attacks of diarrhea. All the gentlemen you know send their most respectful regards. We had to cut all the gold and silver from our uniforms and hats so as not to be recognized by the sharpshooters, for they shot a large number of English officers at the affair in Boston. This was on the order and warning of General Howe. But we took away their guns – which are actually quite good – and drink to them ourselves out of them, because almost every officer has one with him, as well as the items such as a powder horn, a sack, and the like, just like they carry them, and shoots with them; for withdrawn you cannot operate. Yesterday we moved closer to New York, close to their entrenched camp, and today made preparations to attack them tomorrow. They moved out, formed up, but they were all gone, as it was daytime; they had abandoned 12 cannons and left behind many tents, livestock, and every kind of food humanly possible; there we had great fun. I had five cows and two pigs brought from there by a couple of men; the Jäger and the English drove over 30 or 40 for themselves. Some men from the regiment had already moved into the camp when they left, and early the next morning we also marched over there. Just then a couple of frigates exchanged cannon fire with a fort on an island near New York. Too bad that such unsettled people possess such a blessed land. Livestock in abundance! Wheat, corn, and every possible grain of the best sorts, enough! Fruit, chestnuts, some other nuts, cherries, apricots, peaches, whole forests of them, and just like at home, oak trees and other kinds of wood. It is not possible to consume all the fruit. Up to now, the 29th, 5 o'clock. On the 30th it got around that they were beginning to leave New York. We saw and heard that ourselves, for the regiment came on the same day to the redoubts right before New York, so we could observe exactly what was going on in the city. Only a deserter from their side said that all of the women were supposed to leave the city at around 10 o'clock and that preparations to burn the city had been made. Whether they will really do that, or whether it was only a threat, time will tell. Too bad for such a big, beautiful city which has everything needed for human enjoyment that it should be [illegible, possibly: "burned down"]. We hope to be there the day after tomorrow, if the fire does not happen. Everything is going well in our army, and we have been lucky up to now. All the troops are in good spirits and fight bravely, aside from the battleships not taking enough action, in our opinion; otherwise everyone who was on Long Island would have to be a prisoner, but we do not know and understand their orders and operations. If I may, I ask most obediently that you pay my respects to your gracious sister and my compliments to all our dear, good friends and [illegible, possibly "female friends"], and especially say to Mademoiselle Brieden that I and her brother wish for her presence [illegible, possibly "here"] in order to take a walk in a wild but very pleasant region. Briede – who is healthy and well and who likewise sends his regards – and I both wish to have a pleasant second half and to conclude our lives here. An honest man's heart pounds in his body to see such a happy land and dwellings stripped by wicked and defiant rebels and [who] are not satisfied with their undeserved blessings from heaven, are not true to God and the king – to see it ruined (!). However, God will give us luck and them regret, so that everything is not spoiled according to their misguided wishes. Will you please, out of friendship and goodness, let the honorable pastor Paulus in Ziegenhayen also hear some of what is in this letter?

I commend myself to your inestimable friendship and live and die as your true and most obedient servant, Your,
Wiederholt

In the Long Island camp near
New York, August 31, 1776

(On the Envelope)

The messenger for this letter dutifully sends his regards.

Sobbe

Source: Holger T. Gräf, Lena Haunert, and Christoph Kampmann, eds., *Krieg in Amerika und Aufklärung in Hessen: Die Privatbriefe (1772-1784) an Georg Ernst von und zu Gilsa*. Marburg: Hessisches Landesamt für geschichtliche Landeskunde, 2010, pp. 146-49.

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