

David Sproat: Keeping 'Hell' Afloat Decision Activity, Hudson River and the New Jersey coast, 1779



I'm remembered in history as one of the men responsible for keeping "hell afloat" during the American Revolution. Even though historians may have pieced some memoir and diary entries of others together to determine this as *my* legacy, little is known about me.

So how'd a European guy like me end up fighting for the British cause? Are you surprised I wasn't one of the rebels, supporting a flimsy attempt at self-government and using unconventional warfare strategies? Well, I set my sights on America in 1760. I'm a Scottish man, and I made decent money for myself as a merchant and land speculator. I settled in Philadelphia, where the hubbub about independence was pronounced. I had joined the Patriot cause in 1776, but feared imprisonment so I joined the British cause under General Howe after the Battle of Brandywine.

From here, I made a name for myself in the Loyalist community and started to get the attention of well-known leaders like William Franklin. Franklin was the last royal governor of New Jersey, and when he saw this colony taking a leap toward freedom, he started the "Refugee Club" for fellow Loyalists. I was able to join this club after I moved to New York City in 1779. In this same year, I was named the Commissary of Prisoners and was stationed in NY Harbor. In this role, it was my responsibility to provide food, clothing, and shelter to those on board British prison ships. The notable ship I served on was the *HMS Jersey*, a Royal Navy ship that first launched in 1736, and was then converted to a hospital ship before becoming reserved for prisoners of war during the Revolution.

HELL. In other words.

This so-called "hell" was in squalor. Thomas Dring described me as a man who "gloated" over the death of prisoners. His memoir, *Recollections of Life on the Prison Ship Jersey* details the horrors aboard: rotten food, rat infestation, dead bodies, and more. Dring talks about how the Continental Congress abandoned the American prisoners on board, having no urgency to exchange them for British soldiers,

or mandate their removal from the horrors. These words would become gospel for historians wishing to know more about these facets of life during the Revolution. But was it the whole story?

In 1909, a publication titled *David Sproat and Naval Prisoners in the War of the Revolution*, James Lenox Banks showcased a collection of letters that prove my empathy for the prisoners on board. I requested funds from the Continental Congress to secure new bed linens and clothing-I even fronted this cost with my own money. At one point, I had asked Lord Rodney, British naval commander, if I could resign from my position. He informed me that no one was worth enough to take my place. Oh, lucky me.

My legacy is tainted, and I won't again get the chance to speak for myself. So which version of me do you believe? What causes historical truths to become abandoned?

Supporting Questions

Think about the line from the song "History Has Its Eyes on You" from the musical, *Hamilton*: **"You have no control. Who lives. Who dies. Who tells your story?"** How does this line reflect the actions and remembrance of David Sproat?

Based on your comments above, what decisions did David Sproat have to make as prisoner Commissary? Who do you think was influential in helping him make these decisions or do you think he made them alone? How important were his decisions?

What are some examples or situations of decisions that were wrong, immoral or unethical? How do you think war influences the decisions people make?

David Sproat lived in America for almost 20 years before deciding to support the Loyalists and become a member of the Refugee Club. Do you think he regretted his decision after the war ended? Why or why not? What additional information do you need to know to answer this question?