

Thomas Kelly served with the 4th Light Dragoons 1777-1781. This unit was with George Washington at Valley Forge.

"Towards the end of 1776, the American Continental Army faced with the realization that the war was going to last longer than anticipated, underwent long reaching changes. Short-term enlistments were abandoned as recruits were sought who would join for three years, or "the war". Additional infantry regiments were raised, artificer battalions, and Naval privateers were expanded, and Washington finally realized the need for a mounted branch. Initially authorized to raise 3,000 light horse, it was soon realized that the enormous expense of raising, and equipping horsemen made the number unrealistic, and eventually only four regiments of light dragoons were raised. Among the four were the Fourth Continental Light Dragoons. This regiment was authorized in January of 1777. The command was given to Colonel Stephen Moylan, who was Irish born, and maintained a large farm in Chester County, Pennsylvania. Prior to this command, Moylan had been the Quartermaster General, and a close personal friend of Washington. The Fourth Dragoons were eventually to be counted among the strength of the Pennsylvania Line, and most of the men hailed from Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Maryland.

Each light dragoon regiment was given a specific territory in which to recruit, and draw supplies, so as not to conflict with one another. The Fourth Dragoon's territory was west of the Hudson River, and East of the Susquehanna. The territory comprised most of New York, all of New Jersey and Delaware, the populous area of Pennsylvania and eastern Maryland. However, most of the officers came from Virginia and Maryland which areas, then as now, were traditional horse raising areas. Officers eagerly sought after appointments to the cavalry and this was reflected by Washington's attitude, as all of the commanding Colonels were his friends or relatives. Every officer's appointment needed his approval, and he reserved spots in all the four regiments for his personal selections. Among the Fourth Dragoons, was the nephew of Washington, William Washington, who was given the rank of Major in the Fourth, eventual command of the 3rd Light Dragoons and the most famous cavalry commander of the war. Also, among the ranks of the Fourth Dragoons was Zebulon Pike from New Jersey, who was the father of the Zebulon Pike who discovered Pike's Peak in Colorado.

In 1777, the regiment took the field clothed in captured British uniforms of Red-faced Blue. This was to cause confusion, and the regiment generally wore hunting shirts to cover them, but on at least one occasion they were fired upon by American troops. On the other hand the red coats also confused the enemy and once a band of Loyalists were captured who mistook the Fourth Dragoons for British cavalry. The Fourth Dragoons wore their red coats at the battles of Brandywine, Germantown and Whitemarsh.

When the Continental Army went into winter quarters at Valley Forge, the Fourth Dragoons was there to share in the hardships and privations. The regiment was used in the areas for patrol and scouting, and to handicap the efforts of British

and Hessian foraging parties as many of the troopers were from Pennsylvania, and were familiar with the area. By March 1778, the Fourth Dragoons had relocated to Trenton, New Jersey to ease the tight fodder supply at Valley Forge. When the British army abandoned its occupation of Philadelphia in June of 1778, and headed for New York, the Fourth Dragoons was sent in pursuit of the Crown Forces to harass the retreat, and followed so close they overran the baggage train and captured some prisoners. Although the Fourth played no active combat part in the ensuing battle of Monmouth, they were again sent in pursuit, but were ineffective due to the worn out conditions of their horses.

During the summer and fall of 1778, the regiment was stationed around the area of Hackensack, New Jersey and patrolled north along the Hudson River. It was during this time that Moylan met his future wife and married her. During the summer the Fourth Dragoons received their new and distinctive Green faced Red uniforms which which they would retain until the end of 1781. The helmet worn by the Fourth Dragoons had a black bearskin crest and it would appear that the Fourth Dragoons actually wore the famous "Tarleton Helmet" sometime before Banastre Tarleton, the British cavalry commander who gave its name. After wintering in Lancaster, Pa., the Fourth Dragoons spent 1779 and early 1780 in Connecticut and West Chester County, NY. It was in this theater, the regiment saw very intense action. They were involved in countless small actions with British and Loyalist horse in the often-vicious warfare in that no-mans-land between the two armies. The winter of 1779-80 was spent in Weathersfield, Ct.

Throughout the war, until they were sent south in 1781, the regiment generally spent winter quarters in Lancaster. It was in this, the largest inland city in the colonies, that the regiment maintained their depot where new recruits and horses were sent for training, and the regiment was issued new clothing and equipment. The authorized strength of a light dragoon regiment was in excess of 400 men, but this was never attained, and the largest the Fourth Dragoons ever got was around half that. In 1777, each regiment was to have six troops of around 75 men per troop, but the number rarely grew over 30. In the spring of 1779, Congress decided that no new recruits were to be sought by the cavalry, as the regiments were just too expensive to maintain. By the summer, this decision was reversed and the colonels of the light dragoon regiments were instructed to attempt to recruit their regiments up to the authorized levels.

In October of 1780 Washington decreed all of the 4 Light Dragoon regiment would convert to a Legion effective January 1st, 1781. In addition to the troops of Light Dragoons a legion would contain one or more companies of Light infantry. So it was that on that date in Lancaster, PA (where the unit was in winter quarters), the 4th Continental Light Dragoons officially became the 4th Legionary Corp. The unit's strength on paper was listed as 5 companies of light dragoons and one company of light infantry. In reality, the infantry company did not exist at the time, and the genesis of how it was acquired takes some explaining.

On the same day the 4th Dragoons became the 4th Legionary Corps in Lancaster, PA, trouble was brewing across the Delaware at Jockey Hollow located within Morristown, NJ. On January 1st, 1781, having endured a harsher winter than Valley Forge and owed several months of back pay, there occurred the infamous mutiny of the Pennsylvania line. When the mutineers were quelled and the dust settled the Pennsylvania line was reduced from eleven to six under-strengthened regiments. In order to replenish the ranks, in June of 1781 the Pennsylvania government passed a measure that would allow these units to draft militia men into their ranks to serve for the duration of the war. This would also allow the 4th Legionary Corp to fill the ranks of their allotted light infantry company.

So as not to have recruiters competing with each other for potential soldiers, recruitment territories were divided up amongst the units. The 4th Artillery, 6th Pennsylvania infantry, and the 4th Legionary Corp were given Lancaster County as their territory. By July of 1781 there were mounted and infantry recruits at the depot, and the county commissioners rounded up the men of the Lancaster County Militia to be absorbed into the regulars. It was Moore Fauntleroy, acting Major, who signed most of their recruitment papers, and in September of 1781 the light infantry company for the 4th Legionary Corps was official. The company had a strength of 60 men, 55 privates and NCOs, and 5 officers. The company was issued 55 muskets, bayonets, bayonet belts, cartridge boxes and whisks and picks. They were also issued "cap hats", brown stable jackets, brown waistcoats, shoes, and linen overalls drawn from the public stores in Philadelphia, and the sergeants were issued blue, faced red coats of superior quality material. They then marched south with the main army to Yorktown while the mounted troops marched in the vanguard with Lafayette's light corp.

At Yorktown the 4th Legionary Corps was given the position of honor on the right flank of the besieging army. While initially the unit was used as provost for the siege lines, a contingent of light dragoons was with the French unit Laumon's Legion at the battle of Gloucester Point. It was at this battle, outside of Yorktown, that the 4th, along with 800 Virginia Militia and Laumon's Legion routed Tarleton's Legion and British Regulars under the command of Lt. Col. Dundas and cut the last British supply line from outside Yorktown. This single engagement was the largest cavalry battle of the war. After the surrender of Lord Cornwallis, forty light dragoons were amalgamated with Baylor's 3rd Light Dragoon's. However, Baylor had been bayoneted in the lungs and captured at the "massacre" of Old Tappan, NJ in 1778, and William Washington had taken command. Washington (a cousin of George Washington), who was the original Major of the 4th Light Dragoons, was captured at Eutaw Springs in September of 1781, and in early 1782 Baylor came out of retirement to command the 3rd Light Dragoons. He traveled farther south with these men and absorbed what was left of the 1st Light Dragoons into the newly christened "Baylor's Dragoons".

The remaining light dragoons and light infantry of the 4th remained in Yorktown under Moylan for the beginning of the winter of 1781. At this time the paper strength of the unit was 5 troops of light dragoons and one company of light infantry. The light infantry was under the command of Captain Erasmus Gill, who, having been a light dragoon for many years, commanded from horseback. On January 9th, 1781 they traveled to Georgia with General "Mad" Anthony Wayne, in order to help establish United States authority in Savannah, now the principal British stronghold. It was there; during the close of the war in the south that the unit underwent perhaps its most grueling combat yet, fighting many violent skirmishes against the Crown forces and their native Creek and Cherokee Indian allies. Shortly after the march farther south began, Moylan left the regiment citing health concerns, and command of the 4th was given to Lt. Col. Benjamin Temple of Virginia

It was in Savannah that a particularly noteworthy battle took place. Three-hundred Creek warriors were sent to secretly join Colonel Clarke, head of the British forces under siege in Savannah. En-route they learned of a small American piquet at Gibbons' Plantation, which they decided to capture. The piquet turned out to be Wayne's entire force, with the 4th camped at its head as an advance guard. When the Creek's attacked on the night of June 23rd 1782, General Wayne personally led the 4th Legionary Corp on a surprise counter attack on the Creek's right flank. At the same time, Wayne's line infantry bayonet charged their front, effectively catching the natives in a pincer move. The Americans fought so stiffly in the ensuing hand to hand combat, and the casualties were so great, that the entire Creek force was routed and withdrew from the war entirely.

With the surrender of the remaining British forces at Savannah, the entire 4th Legionary Corps returned with Wayne to Charleston, where they assisted General Greene in besieging the city. During those closing months of 1782 the Legion suffered heavy casualties due to an unknown plague that swept through its ranks. The remaining men were brigaded into one troop of light dragoons and one company of light infantry. Fauntleroy, who was promoted to Major during his captivity by the British, had been exchanged, and now linked up with the regiment in the south to take over full command. The 4th Legionary Corps, at its reduced strength, survived to see the British withdraw from Charleston on December 14th, 1782. In May of 1783 the Legion was marched back to Philadelphia, and furloughed in the city. They were mustered out in June of that year "after being received with the ringing of bells by the joyous and gratified populous", a fitting end to a long and distinguished military career."

Written by Riding Master Don Waldo

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