

Soldiers, Sleds, and Sam

By Elizabeth Weiss Vollstadt

The snow squeaked beneath their boots as the three boys tramped toward Sherburn's Hill, their favorite coasting hill in all of Boston. The streets were quiet that snowy January morning in 1775. Only a tight group of British soldiers marched boldly past the silent houses.

The boys ignored the soldiers. They were used to them. A few thousand British troops were now in Boston, hoping to crush the colonists' growing rebellion against the king and his laws.

"Hurry, Sam," called Edward. "You're making us late again!"

Sam struggled to keep up with his brother and their friend Joshua. He wanted to ride the big wooden sled down Sherburn's Hill to School Street, just as they did. But his stiff right leg slowed him down.

Every step reminded Sam of that awful day last spring when a British officer had come to his father's blacksmith shop.

"Hurry," the officer ordered. "This horse needs a new shoe at once."

Sam was proud to hold the horse's leg for his father. But then the horse had kicked hard. A bone in Sam's leg cracked. The break hadn't healed properly.

Now Sam's cheeks turned red when Joshua said, "I thought we were going to get there early today—before General Haldimand's servant came out."

Sam protested, "It's not my fault the servant sprinkles ashes on our coasting hill when he cleans the general's fireplace."

But Joshua didn't hear. They

Sam wanted to run, but he had come too far to back down now.



were at School Street at last. Joshua looked up and groaned, "Oh no, late again."

Sam and Edward looked, too. A man was standing in the middle of Sherburn's Hill, trampling the snow and scattering ashes.

"Well, that's it," said Edward. He kicked the sled. "If we'd gotten here sooner, we could have had a few good runs before he ruined our hill."

"Sure could have," said Joshua. He looked at Sam. "Next time *he* stays home."

Sam jammed his icy fingers into his pockets. He lifted his chin. "I may be slow," he finally said, "but I'm not afraid of the Redcoats. I'll get the servant to stop."

The two older boys hooted with

laughter. "You?" said Joshua. "What can you do?"

"I'll—" Sam hesitated. What could he do? He looked at the servant again. "I'll tell him to scatter the ashes someplace else."

"Go ahead," Edward said, "if you dare."

Sam didn't want to dare. He wanted to go home. But he was tired of the jeering remarks. He started to limp up the hill. Edward and Joshua followed. The cold wind bit into Sam's cheeks, but he kept going until he reached the servant.

"Please, sir," Sam said, "I . . . I'd like to make a request."

The man frowned. "And what might that be?"

"Could you . . . could you . . ." Sam wanted to run, but he had



come too far. "Could you scatter the ashes someplace else? They ruin the snow and we can't coast."

The servant laughed, but it wasn't a happy sound. "What do I care for your hill? I will scatter the general's ashes wherever I wish," he said. "It is not for colonist children to tell the British army what to do. Now run along before I—"

Sam didn't hear the rest. Edward grabbed his arm and pulled him away.

"Come on," he said.

Sam followed Edward and Joshua. How he despised that servant! And the general! And the whole British army! Coasting was the one time his bad leg didn't matter. He could fly down the hills as fast as anyone.

"Stop!" Sam called suddenly. "I'm going to see General Haldimand himself."

"Then you're going alone," said Joshua. "He'll never listen to us."

Edward looked at Joshua. "We'd better stay with Sam," he said. "Ma will blame me if anything happens to him."

Sam headed for the general's house. He could feel his heart—thump . . . thump . . . thump—like the steady beat of a drum. He stopped at the heavy wooden door. His knees shook. But he lifted his hand, made a fist, and pounded as hard as he could. A young soldier opened the door.

"Who is it, private?" a voice boomed from inside. "Let them in and close the door! The wind will blow my fire out!"

The three boys crowded into the hall. A big man in a red uniform stood in a doorway. Joshua and Edward pushed Sam in front of them.

"I'm General Haldimand," the man said. He led them into his office. Flames leaped about in a huge stone fireplace. Sam took off his woolen hat and twisted it. The snow melted off his clothes with a steady drip. His leg felt tired and sore.

"Go on . . . you started this," Edward hissed.

Sam swallowed. "Well, sir . . ." he began. He told the general about the hill and the servant. "We are free citizens of Boston," he said. "You have no right to destroy our hill."

General Haldimand frowned. Edward tugged at Sam's sleeve. "Let's go," he whispered.

But this time Sam stood his ground. For ten long seconds, no one moved.

Then the general raised his hands and smiled. "You win, my lad," he said. He turned to the

private, who was standing in the doorway.

"These lads are surrounded by talk of liberty and rights every day of their lives," he said. "It's no wonder that they come marching to me with such demands."

He looked at Sam. "There are already bad feelings between our army and the people of Boston. I shall not add to them. I shall give orders that my servant repair the damage and no longer scatter ashes on your hill."

Back outside, Joshua and Edward whooped and shouted in the falling snow. Edward draped his arm around Sam's shoulder. Joshua patted Sam on the back. "You can have the first coast tomorrow," he said. "Even if you are the last one to reach the hill."

Sam's eyes shone. His sled would fly faster than anyone's! The boys tramped home together through the snow. And no one told Sam to hurry up—not once.

Author's note: This story is based on a true incident. It is described in a letter written on January 29, 1775, by John Andrews of Boston to his brother-in-law in Philadelphia. A group of boys in Boston did go to see General Haldimand to complain about his servant ruining their sledding hill. And General Haldimand did give orders that the servant repair the damage.

When British General Thomas Gage, who was the governor of Massachusetts, heard about the affair, he observed that it was "impossible to beat the notion of liberty out of the people," as it was "rooted in 'em from their childhood."