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Early Experience Shaped Brant's Skills

Early experiences shape

Joseph Brant's place in history rests primarily on his military exploits during the American Revolution and his ability as a negotiator both with his own people during that conflict and with the white man after it was over.

Both of these skills were fostered by personal experiences that took place prior to the Revolutionary War.

Before Brant could achieve any status among the Six Nations, it was vital that he prove himself as a warrior as he was not a sachem or hereditary chief.

Brant's first moments in battle were against the French when he was only 13 years old. This initiation was recorded by a friend:

"This being the first action at which he was present, he was seized with such a tremor when firing began that he was obliged to take hold of a small sapling to steady himself; but that after the discharge of a few volleys he recovered the use of his limbs and the composure of his mind, so as to support the character of a brave man of which he was exceedingly ambitious."

It was also during this particular battle that Brant began to learn his diplomatic skills.

After the skirmish, Sir William Johnson, the British commander, refused to hand over the captured French commander to the Indians, knowing that if he did, the Frenchman would be tortured before he was put to death. This example of mercy to the enemy had considerable influence on Brant and the practice of sparing captured enemy was one that he adopted.

Evidence of this came during the American Revolution when two of Brant's friends had been captured. Brant threatened retaliation if they were harmed but hoped that nothing would happen to them because, as he said "...it would be disagreeable to me to

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hurt any Prisoner: therefore I hope they will not force me."

Brant was later involved in a minor way in the military action against the Pontiac rising of 1763. Pontiac, chief of the Ottawas, had united several Indian tribes in an effort to drive out the white man. Brant's role in this crisis proved that he was learning the ropes of diplomacy.

REBELLION FUTILE

Realizing that any rebellion against the British would be futile, Brant set out to keep as many of the Six Nations tribes as possible out of the fight. Although he was lacking any real title or status at this point he was able to persuade the Oneidas and Mohawks to remain neutral.

In this issue his diplomatic sense did fail him in one way, in that he was involved in attacks on some of the villages of the Iroquois who were supporting Pontiac and this action was held against Brant by some tribes when he tried to preach unity among the Six Nations prior to and after the American Revolution.

In time, Brant did become a war chief and was also elected a pine-tree chief, the latter being a title given to a leader who showed concern for the Indian people and who enjoyed high standing among them.

Although his reputation as a fighter and diplomat did help Brant achieve a higher position

than might have been expected among the Six Nations, his status was also enhanced by his close association with Sir William Johnson, the British representative for Indian affairs in the colony of New York.

Johnson's dying words were reputedly, "Joseph control your people," all evidence that, at that point, Brant's standing among the Six Nations was high.

When the Revolutionary War did erupt, Brant made a conscious decision to join the British. Disrespectful treatment by the Americans, his personal respect for Sir William Johnson, a trip to England which left him convinced that Britain could not lose and a sincere belief that the Indians would receive fairer treatment from the British than the colonists whom he felt were bent on continental expansion with no regard for the Indian, were all factors in his decision.

DIPLOMATIC CHALLENGE

One of his greatest diplomatic challenges came in his attempt to move the Iroquois away from their neutral position when the war broke out. In meeting this challenge he was only partially successful. The Oneidas and the Tuscaroras refused to join the British. The tradition among the Iroquois nations had been that they would only fight as a complete unit. The decision by the Oneidas and Tuscaroras shattered this tradition along with Brant's dreams of a United Six Nations Confederacy fighting for the British Crown.

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