

Almost Beyond Endurance: Christopher Hawkins

Born in Providence, Rhode Island in June of 1764, Christopher Hawkins was one of thirteen children. At the ripe old age of twelve years, in an effort to both aid his new country and make his personal fortune, he joined up with the crew of the American Privateer, *The Eagle*. The Eagle's mission was to intercept British trade ships and either loot their booty, or in the event they resisted, send them straight to the bottom of the Atlantic. While on his first trip back across the Atlantic, Christopher was the first one of his crew to notice something in the distance that resembled "a very small bush without leaves." Other crewmembers soon realized this was the sail of a potential enemy ship. *The Eagle* immediately set out in chase. As the distance closed it became apparent the hoped for enemy ship was not a trade ship, but rather an "English Sloop of War." Upon this realization, the American ship turned from a chase to a retreat. Within minutes the English ship forced *The Eagle* to surrender. Christopher was taken captive and remained in this condition for more than a year. (Cohn, 2004, p. 115 - 118).

Eventually, Christopher's respectful demeanor and young age led to his captors transferring him to a British frigate where he was forced to serve as a waiter. Because of his level of maturity, Christopher was given precedence and command over loyal British boys also employed as servants and waiters. Although he was respectful to his captors and always willing to carry out orders, he was continually mindful of ways to escape. Despite his true feelings and intentions, Christopher was allowed to have a decent life serving and socializing amongst the British officers. As the months passed, he was looked upon rather favorably by most of the British crew. (p. 118-119).

One day when Christopher was allowed to disembark the ship and go into New York to do laundry, he decided it was a good time to escape. Over the course of the next couple weeks, Christopher made the arduous journey across Connecticut and arrived back home in Rhode Island in November 1778. He put his sailing days behind him and went to work on a farm. (p. 120).

After staying home for a couple of years, Christopher once again heard the cause of freedom and the gentle waves of the ocean calling his name. Like before, he enlisted with a crew whose mission was to raid British trade ships. This time however, he was captured after only a few days at sea. Unlike his first stint as a prisoner, this imprisonment was “uncomfortable almost beyond endurance.” He was transferred from one prison ship to another causing his circumstances and condition to worsen beyond imagination. (p. 121).

It was in these circumstances that Christopher once again decided to attempt an escape. This escape would be far more dangerous because his current prison ship was anchored more than two miles off the coast, the water was frigid, and if he was heard in his attempt, the crew would assuredly shoot to kill. After a long night of battling the elements and swimming in terrible conditions, Christopher had lost not only his knapsack, but all of the clothes on his body, yet he was once again a free boy on dry land. It was in these conditions, alone and completely naked, that he was finally helped by two young men who provided some basic necessities and pointed him towards his family’s farm. For Christopher at least, the Revolutionary War was over. (p. 121- 123).

References

Cohn, S. (2004). Almost Beyond Endurance: Christopher Hawkins. *Liberty's children: stories of eleven Revolutionary War children*. Guilford, Conn: Two Dot.

Suggestions for teaching the content: (10th & 11th grade)

- Read the first two paragraphs of this paper to the class. At the conclusion of the second paragraph, ask the question, “*Should Christopher attempt to escape?*” Follow this up with the questions, “*What are some reasons why he should attempt to escape?*” and “*What are some reasons why he should stay put?*” Explore all given answers and add to student’s thoughts and conclusions if necessary.
- Read the third paragraph to the class. Have them write a one paragraph response to the prompt, “*Should Christopher re-enlist with another Privateer crew or stay home on the farm? Explain your reasoning.*”
- After students have had an opportunity to write their response, read the remainder of the paper to them. Ask for concluding thoughts.