

First Heroes for Freedom, by Marcia Bjerregaard, is the story of Cuff, a fifteen-year-old slave from Rhode Island, who joins the Continental Army to fight for America's freedom from England and his own freedom from slavery. Set on Aquidneck Island in August, 1778, the story opens with the burning of Newport by British troops. That night, Cuff is sent to join the Continental Army as a member of the Rhode Island Regiment, one of the first largely African-American regiments in American history. Cuff befriends other former slaves who share his dreams of living as a free man after the war. Shortly after Cuff joins the Army, a major storm hits the island, sending the militia (volunteer soldiers) back to their farms and the French Navy to Boston to repair their ships. The Rhode Island Regiment is left behind to fight off the British, with Cuff joining in to make ammunition, secure tents, dig trenches and forage for food. Cuff is fortunate to be assigned to Major Samuel Ward to deliver messages from one commander to the next. His most important mission is to carry a message to Marquis de Lafayette, a French nobleman who has come to fight with the Americans, urging him to convince D'Estaing, the French Admiral, to return with his ships. The Rhode Island Regiment fights a tough battle, without the help of the French Navy, driving back the enemy on all fronts for an American victory. The story ends with Cuff retreating with his troop to the mainland to do more soldiering, holding on to the dream that one day he will be a free man.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Before reading ***First Heroes for Freedom***, discuss with your class what they already know about the Revolutionary War. After sharing responses, read the title and tell them that the story takes place during the time leading up to the war.

Some questions for discussion might be:

- If this story takes place in Rhode Island in August, 1778, where does it fit in chronologically with other already studied events of the Revolution?
- Look at the cover illustration. What do students notice in the picture? Who might be the “first heroes for freedom” in this story?
- Look at the map at the beginning of the book. Four hills are shown. Why might these hills be important during a war? What other geological landmarks do you notice?
- Have any students been to Aquidneck Island? Visited any historic sights? What are their impressions of the area now?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Literature • Social Studies • Art • Writing

1. After reading all or part of the book, discuss historical fiction as a type of literature, a mixture of fact and fiction. Some of the characters in the story actually existed and many of the events really occurred. Even those characters that are created by the author probably shared some of the experiences and feelings of real people.

Discuss how the reader can distinguish between what is fact and what is fiction. Groups of students might try researching events and characters in the story using sources such as encyclopedias, almanacs, atlases, historical documents, newspapers, etc. Have a mini-lesson about how to use these sources and a class “debriefing.” What names and events could they read about in other sources? Which were most likely created by the author?

2. This story exposes children to an important battle during the Revolutionary War, but does not tell the whole story. Encourage them to dig a little deeper into the past to discover more information:

- This story took place in 1778, two years after the “shot heard round the world” that signaled the beginning of the Revolutionary War. What other important events in the War were happening nearby around this time?
- What other information can you learn about the Battle of Rhode Island? What more can you learn about other African-American soldiers who fought in the Revolution?
- Choose any aspect of the Revolutionary War to investigate further. Brainstorm a list of possible topics as a class.

3. After reading Chapter 2, stop and record some predictions about the story. Do you think Mr. Barker is a loyalist, supporting the British, or a patriot, on the side of the Americans? Did Mrs. Barker act alone, or did Mr. Barker tell her to send Cuff to join the Continental Army? What have you read so far that leads you to these predictions? You can do this activity as a group, recording predictions on chart paper, and/or individually, having students record their thoughts in a reading log or journal. After completing the story, students can revisit their predictions and the story to see if there were certain clues they noticed or missed on their first reading.

4. On page 16, there is a description of all of the sounds that Cuff hears on his way to join the Continental Army. At one point he stands still for a full ten minutes when he hears a cracking sound, thinking it might be a soldier instead of the raccoon that it turned out to be. Have your students try this activity with a friend on the playground or a family member at home: for ten minutes record every sound you hear. Afterwards, check with your partner to see if he/she heard the same sounds. Were there any differences? Why might two people hear the same noise but think it is coming from a different source? You can try this activity using the different senses and sitting in the same place at different times of day.

5. Pass out paper and drawing/painting materials to your class. Read the middle two paragraphs on page 17 beginning “As Cuff walked past a wheat field . . .” (or select other descriptive paragraphs elsewhere in the story). Ask students to draw or paint the scene from this description. Afterwards have students wander around the room to notice other artists’ interpretations of the same scene.

TEACHER'S GUIDE

First Heroes for FREEDOM

6. On page 19 is a description of two different types of soldiers in the Continental Army: those in the Militia and those in the First Rhode Island Regiment. Later on page 27, Cuff notices the different uniforms worn by different soldiers. Ask students to do more research about the different soldiers and the uniforms they wore in the Continental Army. They should then display what they learned in a creative way. Some students or groups of students may wish to make an illustrated book with pictures and written descriptions; others may like to trace their bodies on large pieces of paper and color or paint on different uniforms; still others may like to dress up as different types of soldiers, perhaps even visiting other classes to describe what they have learned about the Continental Army.

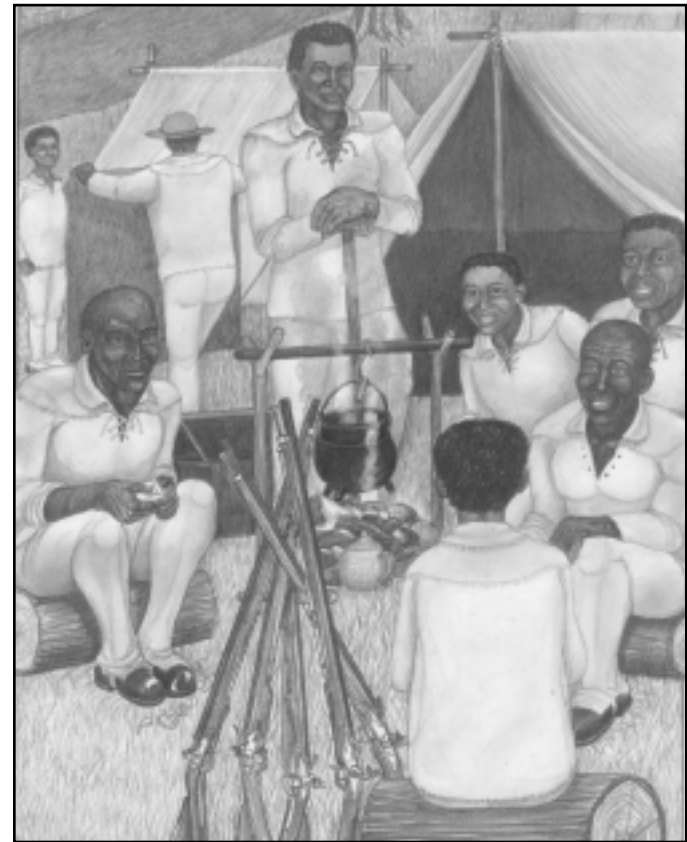
7. Chapter 9 contains some graphic descriptions of the battlefield and the horrible injuries that occurred during the war. Yet through this battle and others like it, America won independence from England. Stage a debate: war is terrible, but are there times when it is justified? If possible, invite students from a high school debating team to your class to teach your students how an official debate is staged. These older students could coach different teams of younger students and also act as judges of the class debates.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING ACTIVITY

Break the Code!

Throughout the story, important messages are being delivered. Cuff's main job is to deliver written messages for Major Ward. But many important messages are delivered by secret code. On page 27, Cuff learns that the most important responsibility of the drummers is to relay battle orders. On pages 89-91, he learns that Mr. Barker had been using rails and crossbars on a gate to relay news about the war. There are many activities involving secret codes that your students will enjoy. Try some of these, and no doubt students will come up with more ideas of their own.

- Have students draw pictures of the gate on Barker's Hill, making the crossbar and rails different in each picture. They should make up their own code of what each placement means (i.e. one horizontal rail equals 10 British ships approaching) and teach the code to a classmate.
- Have students research other secret codes, like Morse code, and try to send short messages to one another.
- Make up signals as a class to signify important happenings in the day. Use hand signals, written codes, or musical beats to indicate when it's time for recess, lunch, free-time, etc.
- This is a great opportunity to introduce sign language to your class. Invite a parent or community member who is familiar with sign to teach the alphabet and important signs to your students. Incorporate this language into your daily communication.
- Ask students for their ideas on ways to explore secret codes. Have fun!



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New York, NY 10010
1-800-874-3320

