

A groundbreaking book, honest and inspiring, showcasing black soldiers in the American Revolution. *Scarred Vessels* is peopled with flesh and blood characters and true events that not only inspire and entertain but educate. Well done!

— LAURA FRANTZ, CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING
AUTHOR OF *AN UNCOMMON WOMAN*

While America fights for freedom, a young widow fights her feelings for the sergeant who delivers the news of her husband's death. Micah Hughes just might have more of a task winning the love of Lydia Saunders than he does in preparing a regiment of freed slaves for combat—especially when Lydia's dark family secrets surface, pushing them into desperate decisions and danger. Elaine Marie Cooper has delivered her most gripping, heart-warming story yet. You won't rest until Lydia and Micah find forgiveness and freedom in each other's arms.

— DENISE WEIMER, MULTI-PUBLISHED AUTHOR
OF *THE WITNESS TREE*

Head to 1778, and immerse yourself in Elaine Cooper's heartbreaking, fast-paced story of one woman's saga during the Revolutionary War. Readers will connect with Lydia Saunders' losses, new love and family guilt on the road to her redemption. A historic tale of how our ancestors suffered to form a new country, it's a study in love, slavery, the fragility of life, and one woman's enduring determination to do the right thing.

— CAROL GRACE STRATTON, AUTHOR, *LAKE SURRENDER*

Elaine Cooper's latest release, *Scarred Vessels*, is a poignant, realistic depiction of war's losses for those left behind to tend families, farms, and businesses as well as for those on the front lines of the battle. Vividly set during a crucial period of the American Revolution, the story doesn't dwell on the scars tragedy causes. Instead, Cooper portrays in a very affecting way the grace and blessing God pours out amid great trial and how He uses the storms we endure to not only grow us spiritually but also satisfy the deepest longings of our hearts. *Scarred Vessels* is a gripping story full of both action and deep reflection that entertains even as it inspires readers to trust God through their own hard struggles.

— J. M. HOCHSTETLER, AUTHOR OF *THE AMERICAN PATRIOT SERIES*, AND, WITH BOB HOSTETLER, THE *NORTHKILL AMISH SERIES*

Scarred VESSELS



Elaine Marie Cooper



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All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either fictional or historical, is purely coincidental.

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This book is dedicated to my son, Commander Benjamin Cooper, USN.

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First I want to thank my son, Commander Benjamin Cooper, Commanding Officer VAQ-130, who gave me the idea for this story line. From the moment he suggested writing about the black soldiers in the American Revolution, I knew he was inspired. What I did not anticipate was the research journey this story would take me on. As a girl who grew up in New England, I was left astonished by some of the facts I gleaned from my studies of black people in the Revolutionary War—facts that were often difficult to swallow about the slave trade in the north.

My friend, Cherrilynn Bisbano, who is from Rhode Island, practically begged me to visit her home state. I was so glad I took her up on the gracious invitation. She took me on tours of several important locales presented in this book. We even traveled to Aquidneck Island where the Battle of Rhode Island occurred. I walked atop the rampart that protected the Continentals from the Brits. It was ... awesome! Thank you, my friend!

The gracious and knowledgeable member of the Portsmouth

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Mostly I want to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,
from Whom all blessings flow.



Bristol, Rhode Island, March 1778

Dawn spread faint beams across the sky. Lydia scanned the gray horizon from her bedroom window as though her hopes for an early spring would materialize with the intensity of her gaze. But it was not to be.

Bare trees topped countless snow mounds that clung to the frozen acres of land. All life awaited the coming thaw.

The long, bitter winter brought storm after storm, pummeling the rafters of the barn and Lydia's two-story home. Comfort, her four-year-old daughter, slept most nights in bed with her, the child's small hands gripping the quilt tighter with every creak from the roof. Lydia treasured her daughter's presence, truly a solace while Jeremiah served with Washington's troops in New Jersey.

Through his letters, her husband tried to reassure her all was well. But unsettling news of little food and even less fuel for warmth filtered from neighbor to neighbor through correspondence from other sons and husbands. They revealed more than Jeremiah wanted her to know.

Her mind drifted to their final evening together on his brief

furlough October last. If she closed her eyes, she could almost taste his kisses that still sent chills of pleasure through her. She smiled despite the gloomy day and prayed God would bring her husband home soon.

While she relished the sun rising over the snow, a slight movement caught her eye. She leaned into the windowpane and squinted. *Jeremiah?*

As the two figures rode their mounts closer, Lydia's heart sank. Strangers. Continental soldiers. Fear gripped her. Were they deserters? Could they be trusted? She moved with caution so she would not disturb her still-sleeping daughter, then closed the bedroom door behind her before she hurried down the staircase.

"You should not be hurryin', Mrs. Saunders. Take care of yourself and that babe you be carryin'." Hannah took her arm when she reached the first floor and led her to a chair.

"Two soldiers are coming in the distance."

The young maid's eyes widened with fear. "You stay here. I'll go fetch Ezekiel."

Before Hannah left to search for him, Ezekiel burst through the front door. "Strangers. Two soldiers. Want to be certain they mean no harm." Ezekiel grabbed the musket from over the fireplace and went back outside.

Hannah squeezed Lydia's shoulders, but the trembling in the maid's fingers belied her calm expression. Lydia reached up and touched Hannah's brown fingers. She wasn't sure who comforted whom.

The men arrived and spoke with Ezekiel. Lydia strained to hear their conversation, but the wind prevented her from discerning the message through the manor's walls.

Lydia took a deep breath, released Hannah's fingers, and pushed herself awkwardly from the chair. Her belly had seemed to enlarge overnight, and an awareness that her steps resembled a waddle made her self-conscious.

She and Hannah reached the front entrance at the same

moment. They both gripped the handle, but Lydia released her hand and allowed Hannah to open it. Both men turned their gaze toward the women while Lydia stood behind her servant, hiding her pregnancy from them.

“Good day, Mrs. Saunders. Miss.”

The taller of the two men tipped his black tricorne hat and tugged at his neck cravat. His blue woolen coat, covered with dirt and splatters of mud, looked clean compared to his boots, which bore so much mud they seemed more brown than black.

He appeared to be in his twenties, but his eyes bore wrinkles brought on, perhaps, by too little sleep and too many battles. An ugly scar marked his forehead, yet his eyes were kind and his voice kinder yet.

The other soldier, dressed in a similar uniform, bore the darker skin tone and features of an Indian.

“I beg your pardon, Mrs. Saunders, but may I speak with you?”

She shivered at the tone in the taller man’s voice. “Of course, please come inside.” Lydia turned and went back to the parlor while Hannah opened the door for the men.

Before they entered, the men pushed the soles of their boots across the iron scraper on the porch. The man who spoke wore a higher military rank. He surveyed the interior, taking in the high ceilings and elaborate furnishings.

“You have a beautiful home, Mrs. Saunders.” He clutched his hat with nervous fingers. “Forgive me. I ne’er introduced myself. I’m Sergeant Micah Hughes, and this here’s Private Henry Bearslayer. We ...” He cleared his throat. “We’re from Lieutenant Saunders’s regiment, ma’am.”

Her heart leaped, whether from fear or joy, Lydia could not be certain. “You know my husband! Is he well?” She stood from the chair, and the two soldiers stared at her enlarged belly.

Sergeant Hughes’s face paled, and he swallowed. Private Bearslayer glanced downward then turned away.

“We ...” Sergeant Hughes paused. “We were not told you

were with child, Mrs. Saunders. Your husband ne'er said a word."

"Aye. I did not tell him for fear he would worry. He had such unease with my first confinement, and I did not wish him to be concerned." When the men remained quiet, Lydia's breathing increased, and moisture covered her brow. She found her voice. "How is Jeremiah?"

By now, palpable tension permeated the room.

"Perhaps, Mrs. Saunders, you'd best have a chair." Sergeant Hughes's voice sounded low and strained.

Unaware that Hannah had already grabbed her arm, Lydia plopped back into her chair.

"Please." Her voice caught, for ill tidings would surely be in their reply. "Please tell me my husband is well."

"I wish more than anything I could. But Lieutenant Saunders succumbed to fever in the service of General Washington's Army. I am so very sorry, ma'am." The soldier's gaze dropped to the carpet, and he swiped his hand across his face.

Lydia could not speak. A salty taste filled her mouth, and lights flashed in her eyes. She inhaled slow breaths and fought the sensation. Hannah placed a cup of cider in front of her and held it so she could sip the sweet liquid.

When her vision cleared, she noticed both soldiers sat on the edge of their seats and leaned toward her.

"Are you well, ma'am? Shall we fetch a doctor?"

A small voice came from the stairway. "Mama?"

Lydia gasped and turned toward Comfort. "Come here, my sweet."

The small bare feet pattered across the wooden floor, and the child climbed onto her lap.

I must be strong for her.

She forced a smile. "Comfort, these nice men are here to visit. They know your papa." Lydia threw a warning glance at the soldiers. She preferred to tell her daughter the news in private. And perhaps, if she put off telling Comfort for a long while, she could convince herself it was just a bad dream. A very bad dream.

Private Bearslayer nodded at the child. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Saunders."

"I'm pleased to meet you as well, sir." Her tiny voice held all the purity and sweetness of childhood. An innocence often lost in times of war. How long would Comfort continue to see life through her uncorrupted view? Lydia remembered she had been Comfort's age when her own world shattered.

Sergeant Hughes sat taller. "I am pleased to meet you as well, miss."

Comfort's eyes squinted, and she walked over to his side. She placed small fingers on the scar on his forehead. "Does it hurt?"

He grinned. "Nay. Not a bit."

"Did it hurt when you got it cut?"

"Aye, it hurt a fair bit." His face clouded, and he glanced to the side.

Comfort put her hands on his cheeks and pulled his face down so she could kiss his scar. "Mama says that makes it feel better."

Sergeant Hughes struggled to keep tears at bay. "Well, your mama is right. It feels better already."

"Comfort, thank you for tending Sergeant Hughes's wound. But we must get these gentlemen some victuals and tend their horses." She regarded the two men. "You will stay at least a day and night? And rest? And mayhap, you might tell me more about my husband." She pulled her lips inward.

"Aye, Mrs. Saunders, we shall. You can feed us in the barn. We are not dressed for dining." Sergeant Hughes straightened the facing on his coat.

"Nonsense, gentlemen." She arose with difficulty.

The men stood as Lydia rubbed her lower back that ached more each day.

"You are our guests. Ezekiel will show you to your room where you can wash up. Breakfast will be ready forthwith." She took Comfort's hand and walked the child back upstairs. If Lydia

did not think about the message these soldiers brought, she might survive this day.



THAT EVENING, Lydia lay in bed next to Comfort. She had yet to tell the precious child about her beloved papa. Every time she'd seen an opportunity, her own distress overcame her ability to share the tragic news. It was difficult enough to deal with her own grief. The anticipation of her daughter's emotions would push her own over the edge of reason.

War kept her on the brink of fear at all times. She thought it would be over after the Battle of Saratoga in 1777. But here it was, '78, and the conflict raged on. Would it never stop?

And now, with Jeremiah gone, a part of her died as well. How would she overcome the loss of this man who stole her heart in Newport so long ago? Just then, her unborn child pushed outward against her firm belly. She touched the spot through her thin shift and felt the outline of a tiny foot press back against her finger.

How she wished she had told Jeremiah. The knowledge of another child—perhaps a son—might have filled him with enough hope to survive the terrible sickness he endured. Had her secret kept him from surviving? She forced these thoughts to flee, lest they drive her mad.

She lightly touched Comfort's soft hair while the child slept. Her daughter took after her husband in so many ways—not just with her russet hair and blue eyes but her sweet personality. She could make friends with anyone, unlike her mother.

Ever since Lydia had discovered the truth about her father, she'd withdrawn into a shell of guilt. Jeremiah had been the only one who could draw her out of her mind's darkness and help her realize the guilt did not leave its stain upon her soul. Her husband could always shed light in the darkness. And now? Who would encourage her in her desperate moments?

Lydia sat up and placed the quilt snugly around Comfort. She glanced around the empty room, then realized she'd never heard the soldiers return from tending their mounts in the barn.

Panic seized her. Had they left? She'd never know the details about Jeremiah. And she needed to know.

Tiptoeing across the room, she grabbed her shawl and left her bedchamber. Lydia closed the door behind her, making every attempt to be quiet. She saw streams of light from underneath Hannah's door and knocked with a light touch.

Hannah answered with widened eyes. "Oh, 'tis you, ma'am. I thought ... never mind."

Too preoccupied with her own fear, Lydia didn't question Hannah about her apparent worries.

"Hannah, where are the soldiers? I didn't hear them return from the barn. And I see their doors are open." Open, with no light within.

"I don't know, Mrs. Saunders. I never heard them return from tendin' their horses."

Her breaths quickened, and she spun toward the stairs. Hannah cautioned her to be careful on the steps that led to the main floor. Clinging to the rail, Lydia descended as quietly as she could. She grabbed her woolen cloak from the hook near the front door then placed it over her shawl.

Barefoot, she left the house. When her feet met the snowy ground, she didn't stop in her quest to reach the barn some fifteen rods away. Lydia opened the creaky door and slipped inside. The scent of fresh hay and horses filled her nostrils. She prayed it would be the soldiers' mounts she smelled and not her family's mare and gelding.

Lydia trod across the crunchy straw on the wooden floor and exhaled with relief when she saw the military horses still in their stalls. Where were the men?

Feeling like an intruder in her own barn, she waddled with careful steps down the row of stalls. In one horse stall, she saw Private Bearslayer asleep. In the next lay Sergeant Hughes.

She feared breathing too loudly lest she awaken them. She thanked God they'd not left. But why did they not accept the warmer accommodations within that she'd offered?

While she observed the sleeping sergeant, her thoughts traveled to Jeremiah. In the dark of night, she could imagine the man's hair could be russet in color and the uniform that of an officer. She clamped her hand across her mouth and spun toward the entryway. Moonlight shone through the still-open portal.

When she neared the door, she fell to her knees and sobbed into her hands. Her grief, once allowed to emerge, transformed into an unstoppable flow of memories. Any hopes for a future with Jeremiah dashed with cruel force upon the rocks of eternity. Spasms of lament seeped out of her tight grip covering her mouth as she attempted to smother them.

"Mrs. Saunders."

Lydia gasped and peeked toward the voice.

"I'm so sorry I awoke you, Sergeant Hughes." Her face, covered with tears, must be swollen. She felt him touch her hand with his handkerchief.

"Please take this, ma'am."

She unceremoniously blew her nose then handed the wet linen back to him.

"Please keep it. You may have need of it in the future." He grinned and combed his fingers through his long hair, which had come undone from his military queue.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Might I help you up, Mrs. Saunders? The floor is mighty cold, and you are without shoes."

"Aye."

Sergeant Hughes pulled her up with strong yet gentle hands. "Let me take you back to your house."

He gave her his arm, and she clung to him, surprised by the thinness of his muscles.

The rumors must be true about insufficient victuals at Valley Forge. No wonder Jeremiah succumbed. He'd likely shared his

portions with his regiment. She inhaled and swallowed with force to keep from crying again.

She made a checklist in her mind of the stores from last year's harvest. These soldiers would return to camp with bulging knapsacks overflowing with victuals.

When they reached the house, she invited the sergeant indoors. He declined, but she urged him to comply.

"Please, Sergeant. I need to know about my husband. I need to hear from those who knew him ... in his last days."

"Very well, ma'am."

"If you like, I can awaken Ezekiel to be nearby, in case you deem that more proper."

His face reddened in the candlelight of the foyer. "Very well, ma'am."

There was no need to awaken Ezekiel since her servant had already lit the candles. The distressed man walked into the parlor.

"I was worried about you, Mrs. Saunders." Concern etched Ezekiel's furrowed brow. "I heard you get up in the middle of the night and came to fetch you. It's still freezin' out there."

"Aye." She turned toward the sergeant. "Which is why I welcomed you and Private Bearslayer into our home, Sergeant. Hughes. The barn is fit for beasts, not men."

He sniffed and glanced to the side. "I fear years of war have gotten us used to sleeping in all manner of places. Most, none too comfortable. Me and Henry—Private Bearslayer—didn't want to bring our dirty uniforms into your rooms upstairs. Seemed more fitting to sleep in the barn."

The realization of what the army endured on a daily basis enlightened her sympathies. "I'm so sorry, Sergeant Hughes. Truly. I would not have minded one bit. You have served our country with much sacrifice, and I thank you. Please. Come sit in the parlor. Ezekiel, can you bring us biscuits and coffee?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ezekiel, bring some for yourself, too. I know you are

interested in the army and our cause.”

His white teeth shone in his dark face. “Thank you, ma’am.”

When he’d gone to the kitchen, she sat, then motioned Sergeant Hughes to sit on her right.

“Please, tell me about Jeremiah. I wish to hear anything—whatever memories you have.”

“Well, he was one of the bravest. And kindest. Always seeing to our needs. When victuals were low in camp, or there were none at all, he managed to scrape up a few morsels for his men.” Sergeant Hughes stared down at his hands, and his hair almost covered his face from the side. “That’s likely why he could not fight off that sickness. We thought he fed himself enough. But ’twasn’t so. He looked as skinny as the rest of us.”

He sniffed and wiped his face. Before Lydia could respond, Ezekiel strode in with biscuits and coffee.

“Thank you, Ezekiel. After you’ve served, please sit down and join us.”

Sergeant Hughes looked surprised but not displeased. “Not used to white folks being kindly to their slaves. ’Tis pleasant to see. My family—we came from simple farmers in Connecticut and never owned Negroes. Don’t think my pa ever wanted any. We had a small farm, and our minister preached against the sin of slavery. We managed okay.”

Discomfort needled her conscience, and she shifted in her chair.

The sergeant’s cup clattered into the china saucer. His face reddened. “Not that you don’t fear God, ma’am. I greatly apologize for my thoughtlessness. I meant no offense.”

She cleared her throat. “No offense taken, Sergeant. I have long abhorred the practice of slavery. I grew up with this sin and prayed God’s forgiveness on my family.” She paused. “My husband felt as I do. We kept on a few Negroes to work here and help in our house in Newport.”

“When the King’s Army took over that city, we escaped here to Bristol and settled on my parents’ farm. ’Twas deeded to

Jeremiah and me in my father's will." She glanced up at the flushed face of the soldier and smiled. "Again, I know your words to be both true and in no way improper."

Ezekiel sipped his coffee. "Mrs. Saunders and her husband have always taken care of me right nice. They've been kindly to all of us—Cuff, Hannah, Miriam, and Rose too. Even let Miriam keep that baby. Not all masters be that way."

"I'd never have let Miriam's baby be sold." Darkness threatened to consume her as memories flooded her thoughts. Her mother's gut-wrenching pleas for the baby to be sent away revolted her still. The nightmare visited her again and again. She resisted the memory and begged God to clear her mind of that recollection. She forced herself to focus on Ezekiel.

"I just wish there's somethin' I could do to avenge my master's death." The slave's countenance sobered, and he stared down at his hands. "Fill in for him. I know how much this cause meant to Mr. Saunders, and I feel like I should be doing somethin'." Ezekiel's eyes widened, and he stared into the distance, his hands folded into a tight fist that he held against his mouth.

His fiery words surprised Lydia. Ezekiel's distress over the loss of Jeremiah seemed to incite a passion for war.

"Beggin' yer pardon," Sergeant Hughes said, "are you aware your state passed a law that allows colored men to join a new regiment—the 1st Rhode Island? I'm here in Bristol not just to deliver your news but to recruit slaves for this regiment."

"Slaves? Their own regiment?" Lydia rarely read the papers, since she avoided news that filled her with anxiety.

"Aye, just last month. The State of Rhode Island will pay owners and, once the soldier passes muster with Colonel Christopher Greene, each man will be free. A full-fledged soldier in General Washington's Army."

"Free." The awe in Ezekiel's voice was undeniable.

Words choked in her throat. The vision of hope shining in Ezekiel's eyes thwarted all her attempts to speak.

All Ezekiel knew was slavery. The son of two slaves carried over as human cargo on one of the dreaded ships from Africa, he'd been torn from his mother's desperate arms when he was less than a year old.

Jeremiah's father purchased him then gifted him to his son when Lydia and Jeremiah wed. And even though she made sure Ezekiel learned to read and write, he still bore the color that labeled him as less than human in the eyes of many. Mere property to be used by others.

The injustice threatened to overwhelm her anew. She swallowed with great difficulty.

"Is this what you wish, Ezekiel?" Her eyes met his, and she knew the answer.

Ezekiel shook his head with force. "I promised Mr. Saunders I'd take care of you and the farm. I can't go and leave you and your children. Especially not now."

The thought of living without his protection began an uncomfortable racing in her heart. And how she would manage the farm, Lydia had no idea. If she could not keep up, would she be forced to move in with her Tory mother on the coast? She rebelled at the thought.

God, what should I do?

In a whisper to her heart, the answer came. *Let him be free.*

"I want you to go." With a firmness in her voice she did not feel, she stared straight at him. "You will be free. And you can fill in where my Jeremiah cannot. We will manage here. And we shall pray for your safety every day."

The thought of her beloved Ezekiel facing danger almost forced her to change her mind. But she could not disobey the whisper. Surely God must abhor slavery more than she did.

In the silence that followed her declaration, peace filled the room. And Jeremiah's baby kicked gently within her womb. It seemed like an affirmation to Lydia, even when confronted by the greatest challenge of her new life as a widow. She sensed there would be more difficult challenges ahead, and she shivered.