



The American Revolution

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Sons of the American Revolution

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Battle of Bunker Hill: Article 3 of 3

Across the battle field, British General Howe led his light infantry down near the Mystic River shore on the extreme colonial left flank, and sent his grenadiers into the middle of the colonial line. The British Regulars were in a long line, four deep in number. As they approached the colonial line an anxious colonial fired, causing a premature ineffective British volley. The Regulars regrouped, reloaded, and then advanced inside the previously marked killing zone. Both sides fired in unison, but British lead mostly hit the dirt walls and rails. The rails provided a steady brace for colonial muskets, and aided colonial accuracy. Many colonial shots found British flesh, causing their line to waver and retreat in disarray. The colonial militia held its position.

General Howe sent General Pigot to attack Bunker Hill, while his regiments attacked the colonial left flank in the center, where the rail fences were most prominent. The second attack was a repeat of the first attack. The British sounded the retreat. A British field officer observed, "Most of our Grenadiers and Light Infantry lost 3/4's to 9/10's of their men, and some companies were reduced to 8 or 9 men." After these two attacks, the colonial lines were in confusion. The British troops regrouped for a third attack on Bunker Hill itself. General Clinton sent General Howe 400 extra

reinforcements for this third attack. The British with fixed bayonets struck the redoubt in a line, and took withering fire from the colonials. With the ammunition exhausted , the colonial line broke. British Major Pitcairn was killed during this fierce hand-to-hand struggle in the redoubt.

The colonial retreat was an organized maneuver and not a runaway. Colonel John Stark's rail fence regiments made a disciplined withdrawal and prevented the British from encircling the retreating colonials. Most of the colonial wounded were saved. All artillery and entrenching tools, however, were abandoned.

We must remember that 100% of America's fighting force were volunteers. The contrast with Great Britain was stark. They were 100% professional. Colonial casualties were 140 killed and 310 wounded, but on the British side the grim statistics were 226 killed with 828 wounded. The colonials lost one officer, Major Andrew McClary. Their greatest loss was that of Dr. Joseph Warren, who was fighting as a Private, as his commission to Major General had not been finalized.

The British lost 100 of its commissioned officers, the highest casualty count among officers for a single encounter during the entire Revolutionary War. Much of General Howe's field officer corps was destroyed and three days after General Gage's battle report reached London, he was dismissed. Sir Henry Clinton commented in his diary, "A few more such victories would have shortly put an end to British dominion in America."

For the survivors, the realities of war were lucid. The colonials were painfully aware that chain of command and discipline were lacking in their army, however each

militiaman could walk away from this battle knowing that when well led and fighting on the defensive, they were able to sustain themselves against the World's best army. A British officer summed it up this way, "We have learned a melancholy truth, which is, that the Americans, if they were equally well commanded, are full as good soldiers as ours." General William Howe said it most prophetically in his battle report, when he wrote, "If His Majesty's troops must pay this dearly for their victories in America, then the cause is lost. A large army must at length be employed to reduce these people, and this will require hiring foreign troops."