



The American Revolution

A Historical Series Sponsored by William Hightower Chapter #35
Sons of the American Revolution

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Article 5

Battle of Sullivan's Island:

General Assembly President, John Rutledge and 46 year old militiaman and Indian fighter, Colonel William Moultrie began construction of a fortification on the southeast tip of Sullivan's Island. This particular mass of land was an offshore barrier island sitting in Charleston Harbor due east of the town of Charleston. On the backside of Sullivan's Island and North up the coast lay Long Island, which was separated from Sullivan's Island by a narrow body of water. Ships coming in off the Atlantic would be compelled to make a strong northerly turn and sail north by northwest toward Sullivan's Island before making a turn to the West and Charleston Docks. The Patriot fortification, to be known as Fort Moultrie, was ideally situated on Sullivan's Island to direct its fire at on coming vessels making this twisting approach to the Charleston Docks.

Fort Moultrie was described as an immense pen about 500 feet long with walls made of palmetto logs and filled with sand to a thickness of 16 feet. The front wall of the fortification facing incoming traffic off the Atlantic rose to an elevation of 20 feet, but the back wall facing Long Island was only 7 feet high and posed a significant weakness to infantry attack from that quarter.

On 17 June 1776, General Clinton attempted such an infantry attack on the low north wall of Fort Moultrie. He directed his 2,200 man attack force to wade the small body of water separating Long Island from Sullivan's Island and breach the North wall. General Clinton was acting on faulty intelligence gathered earlier, which indicated that the low tide water way depth would be no more than 3 feet. It turned out to be over 9 feet deep. Also, he was unaware that the North wall had been reinforced with infantry, cannon batteries, and snipers with rifled muskets. After a frantic search for boats to use as landing craft, General Clinton quickly concluded that his planned attack on the North wall had to be aborted. Clinton signaled Admiral Parker to commence the naval battle without him.

Admiral Parker, at 9:00 AM on 28 June 1776, brought nine warships to anchor directly in front of Fort Moultrie. The HMS *Thunder* and the HMS *Friendship* anchored about one mile off shore, while the admiral took the *Active*, *Bristol*, *Experiment* and *Solebay* to within 400 yards of the fort's batteries. At this close range something was going to happen and it was going to happen fast.

The British broad side gunfire began with cannon ball after cannon ball simply disappearing into the spongy palmetto logs, The return fire from the fort was deliberate in pace, not rushed, and well-aimed by a crew of officers working the forts guns. One British officer observed, "Their fire was surprisingly well served, slow, but decisive

indeed; they were very cool and took care not to fire except their guns were exceedingly well directed.”

HMS *Thunder* went out of action soon after commencing fire. Due to its distance from the fort, her men had to super charge the guns with powder, and this led to the eventual destruction of most of her guns. About noon the frigates *Sphinx*, *Syren*, and *Actaeon* sailed around a series of shoals in an attempt to direct enfilade fire upon the main firing platform of the fort. All three ships ran aground on an uncharted sandbar. By the afternoon phase of the battle, Colonel Moultrie had ordered his men to concentrate their fire on the two largest British vessels, HMS *Bristol* and HMS *Experiment*, both ships taking direct hit after direct hit from the Fort Moultrie guns. Their riggings were destroyed and both main and mizzenmasts were wrecked. At one point a Patriot cannon ball made a near miss on Admiral Parker himself, wounding his knee and tearing off his pants. This fire fight continued until 9 PM and darkness fell upon the battle causing the British to break off the attack.

Counting casualties, Admiral Parker reported 40 sailors killed and 71 wounded aboard the *Bristol* alone. She was hit more than 70 times with much damage to her hull, yards, and rigging. The *Experiment* lost 23 sailors killed and 56 wounded, while the *Active* and *Solebay* each lost 15 sailors. The Americans reported 12 men killed and 25 wounded. As night fell and the huge clouds of smoke drifted away, a young South Carolina farm boy leaned on his rifled musket and thanked God for his survival. He was none other than William Hollis, the grandson of that Virginia Tavern keeper, John Hollis.

Sunrise the next day saw the British fleet fail to make any attempt at attacking Fort Moultrie or assaulting Charleston itself. By 21 July 1776, this British fleet would

totally break off action, and sail northward to help in the main British army campaign against New York City and General Washington. To add insult to the already tremendous British injury, one of their transports grounded off Long Island and was captured by the Patriots.