



The American Revolution

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Sons of the American Revolution

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Author, Dr. Patrick D. Hollis

Article 8-1

The Northern Campaign

I - The Battle of Long Island

General Washington had moved the Continental Army from the Massachusetts Colony down through New England to the city of New York under the firm belief that the British would next strike there. Washington had sent his second in command General Charles Lee farther south to scout the eastern coast for other possible British attacks. On 17 June 1776, British General Clinton had launched his unsuccessful attack against General Lee and the militia forces of Charleston, South Carolina.

Washington had been steadily increasing fortifications in the New York City area, principally Brooklyn on the eastern side of the East River. A series of forts were erected bearing 36 coastal batteries and prepared to house a congressionally approved

Continental Army of up to 28,501 troops. General Washington knew the actual size of his army to be nearer 19,000 poorly disciplined, inadequate, disorderly, inexperienced recruits, who routinely disobeyed orders.

On 28 June 1776, Washington learned that a large reinforced British fleet had set sail from Halifax, Nova Scotia on 9 June and by 29 June 1776, the first 45 British vessels set anchor off Staten Island. Their commander was Admiral Richard Howe, brother to the General Howe. By 2 July 1776 there were over 120 British vessels anchored off Staten Island and the first of British troops began to land. The Continentals on Staten Island fired a few volleys at the British and then retreated. The citizen's militia promptly switched sides and went over to the British.

The British continued to strengthen their positions and conduct probing attacks to frustrate the Continentals. By 1 August 1776, an additional 45 British vessels arrived, bringing an additional 3,000 fresh troops along with British Generals Clinton and Cornwallis. By August 12th, 3,000 more British troops arrived and they were accompanied by 8,000 Hessians. This brought the total British force up to 400 ships of which 73 were war ships, and a total of 32,000 troops camped on Staten Island. General Washington huddled with Generals Greene and Reed for strategizing. Both Greene and Reed thought the British would attack Long Island, but Washington thought such an attack would be a diversion and that the real British attack would come on Manhattan. Washington then made the first of several military blunders by splitting his army into two fighting forces, one to cover Manhattan, while the other would protect Long Island. The army guarding Manhattan was led by General Reed and was approximately 9,500 in

number, while the army guarding Long Island was led by General Greene and likewise numbered approximately 9,500 men. Keep in mind that the British have 32,000 men under arms, which could be concentrated where ever they choose. The stage was set for an uneven fight on a less than level fighting field.

At 05:10 AM, on 22 August 1776, Generals Clinton and Cornwallis came ashore unopposed on Long Island with a lead force of 4,000 men. By noon that day, the British had landed 15,000 troops and 40 pieces of artillery. This failure to oppose the British landing was the second blunder made by the Patriot army in this contest. Hundreds of Tories came out to join the British, when the British set up encampment in the village of Flatbush. Cornwallis was given orders to proceed no further.

Washington learned of the British movements the same day they occurred, but was told that the British unit numbered only 8,000 men. This convinced him that the British move was the feint he had expected, so he sent only 1,500 Patriot soldiers as reinforcement to Brooklyn. On 24 August 1776, Washington placed Israel Putnam in command of Patriot troops on Long Island. Putnam brought six battalions of reinforcements with him making the total Patriot army on Long Island 6,000 men. That same day the British forces on Long Island received 5,000 Hessian reinforcements making their total about 20,000 men.

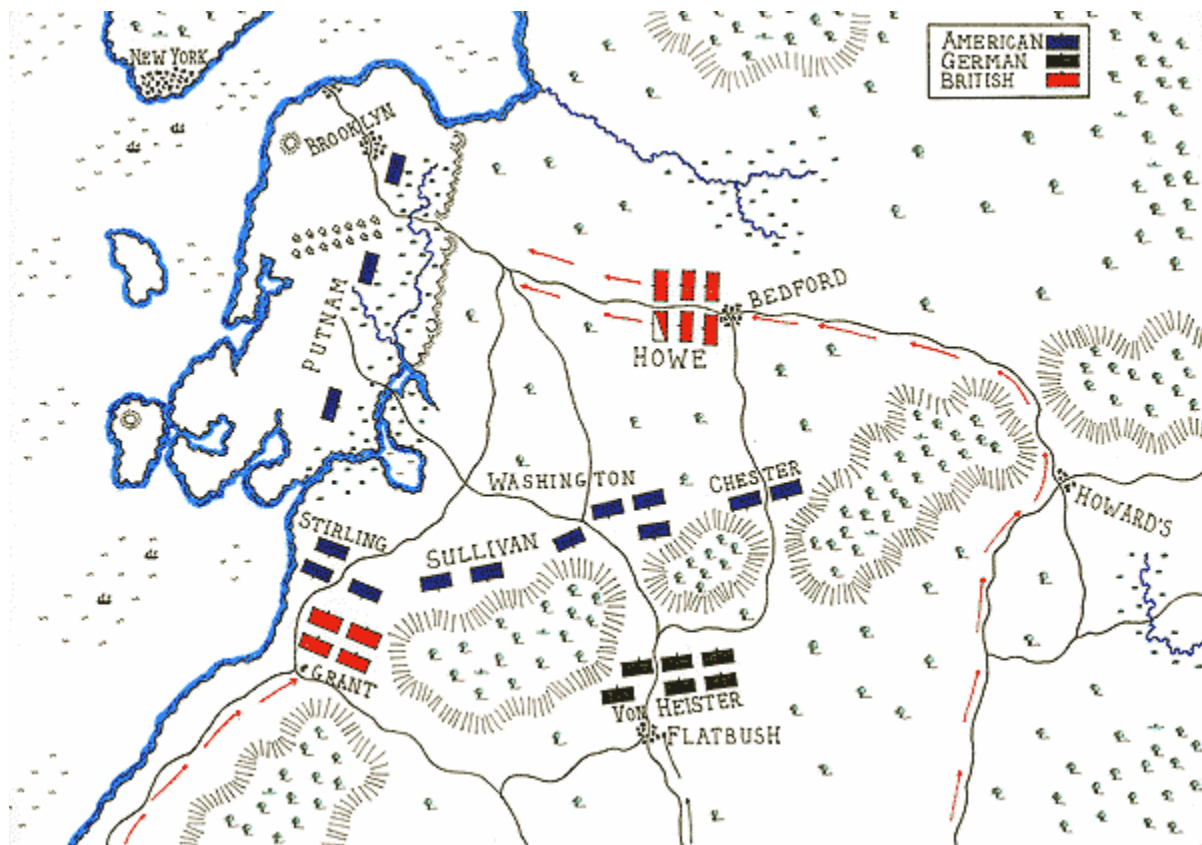
Washington reasoned that by occupying the high ground, he would have field position advantage in all defensive actions. General Putnam defended Brooklyn Heights, while Generals Sullivan and Stirling defended the Guan Heights. There were three main passes through these heights which would force the British to attack either through the

Gowanus Road to the West, the Flatbush Road in the center, or the Bedford Road further to the East. All of these passes were protected by Patriot soldiers and 6,000 additional men occupied the Brooklyn Heights in the rear of the Patriot army. A lesser known fourth pass, the Jamaica Pass, was covered by five Patriot militia officers.

British General Clinton learned of the lightly defended fourth pass from Tory informers and devised a battle plan. Clinton would have his army perform a night movement through Jamaica Pass. Meanwhile, British General Grant's combined British Hessian force would make a feint attack on the center of the Patriot line, and keep them engaged, while Clinton turned the Patriot left flank at Jamaica Pass and attacked the rear of the Patriot army. Military blunder number 3 took place while British General Clinton and 10,000 British troops were moving around Jamaica Pass. They captured all five of the Patriot militia guards watching Jamaica Pass, thus ensuring a total surprise attack.

At 1:00 AM on 27 August 1776, a 400 man British force approached the Red Lion Inn [near present-day 39th St. and 4th Ave.] and were fired upon by resisting American forces. After two American volleys, the Patriots retreated up Gowanus Road. This first engagement was fought near a swamp alongside of Gowanus Road [38th & 39th streets between 2nd and 3rd avenues]. At 3:00 AM General Putnam was awakened and told the British were attacking through the Gowanus Pass. Putnam lit signals to warn Washington who was on Manhattan Island, before riding south to warn General Stirling of the attack. In the next series we will examine the conclusion to this first battle of the northern campaigns.

Patriot General Stirling had men of the Delaware, Maryland and Pennsylvania regiments deployed along Gowanus Pass. A series of hills, *Blokje Berg*, was separated by the Gowanus road and drainage ditches [this would be along 18th and 20th streets today]. This position allowed Stirling's men to fire upon British General Grant's men as they came up the road and through the pass. Just southeast of *Blokje Berg* [near 23rd street today] were other hills and among them was the tallest point in King's County. At 220 feet, this point [Battle Hill, today] became the focal point for this stage of the battle. Some of the most brutal fighting took place there with the Americans inflicting the highest number of casualties against the British during the entire Battle of Long Island.



Battle of Long Island

Americans: Putnam, Washington, Chester, Sullivan, and Stirling

British: Howe, Grant Germans: Von Heister

The Hessians under command of General Von Heister were poised directly across from American General Sullivan and prepared to attack through Battle Pass. At 9:00 AM, General Howe fired his signal cannon, and began his attack through Jamaica Pass. Simultaneously, the Hessians attacked through Battle Pass. American General Sullivan realized at this point, that the Americans had been out maneuvered and sent his advanced guard forward to meet the attacking Hessians. Meanwhile, he turned the remainder of his army around to meet Howe's soldiers attacking in his rear. Heavy casualties were taken by both Americans and British during this fight. The Hessians over ran Sullivan's advanced guard, and the entire left flank of the American army collapsed. The fighting became hand-to-hand and many of the Americans who surrendered were bayoneted by the Hessians, anyway. Although General Sullivan was himself captured, he did manage to save most of his men by evacuating them to Brooklyn Heights.

The American right flank still held against British General Grant's attacks and American General Stirling thought they were actually winning the fight. Stirling held on for four hours, unaware that the American left flank had vanished. At 11:00 AM a reinforced Grant hit the center of the American line and the Hessians attacked Stirling's left flank. Stirling pulled back, only to discover that Howe's men were attacking his rear. The only escape route for Sullivan's men lay across Brouwer's millpond on Gowanus Creek.

The Americans under Stirling formed up and made their escape, but only because General Stirling and Major Mordecai Gist, along with a contingent of Maryland troops, formed a rear guard. This rear guard was known to history as *The Maryland 400*. Their actual number was more like 270 men, and they attacked the British force of over 2,000 men supported by two cannons. The Americans attacked not once, but twice. This fighting was directed toward the Vechte-Cortelyou House [known today as Old Stone House]. After the last attack, the remaining troops fled across Gowanus Creek. Two hundred fifty-six Maryland troops were killed in these assaults on the Old Stone House, but most of General Stirling's army was saved by their actions. General Stirling was captured by the Hessians.

The retreating Americans made their way to fortifications on Brooklyn Heights, where they along with General Washington, were completely surrounded by the British. Hostilities continued sporadically around the perimeter of the American camp.

29 August 1776, General Washington ordered every available boat to be rounded up and available for transporting his army from Brooklyn Heights across the East River to Manhattan. The cannon wheels were cushioned to reduce the noise of evacuation, camp fires were kept burning bright, and all men were ordered to silence. They were told that they were preparing for a night time attack on the British, so not even Washington's men knew they were actually retreating to Manhattan.

The sick and wounded were evacuated first. They were followed in order by all military units, until only the rear guard remained. By the time the last units were loading, it was clear that dawn had arrived and the evacuation was in danger of exposure, but the weather was in favor of the Americans as a thick fog with zero visibility had settled in. Soon afterward, the British discovered that there were no

American pickets stationed around their camp, and realized that the Americans had escaped during the night. As the British made this startling discovery, the last American stepped into the last boat, he was General George Washington.