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November 1776

Written by Andrew Stough



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"Many of the Rebels who were killed in the late affairs, were without shoes or stockings and several were observed to have only linen drawers on, with a rifle and hunting shirt, without any proper shirt or waistcoat." Nov 1776 diary entry of an English officer in North America after losing the heights of Chatterton's Hill.

Washington was vulnerable to British cannon fire from that position. On the night of November 1st, he made a night march to a more secure position placing him beyond British General William Howe's reach – at least for a time. Much discussion has been made as to why Howe failed to follow up on his initial success at Chatterton's Hill with the same explanations given for his previous opportunities to annihilate General George Washington and his army.

Admiral Howe had earlier shown that Forts Washington and Lee were ineffective at preventing the fleet from moving up or down the river at will. Similarly, Fort Washington, perched on a rocky escarpment several hundred feet above the river, made the ships' guns ineffective. It could be approached on the landward side but with much difficulty.

Howe was the beneficiary of complete information on Fort Washington furnished by a young officer who defected from Magaw's Pennsylvanians. Howe now assigned three British brigades and General Knyphausen's newly arrived Hessians to attack the most vulnerable north and east side of the fort. It was a steep climb but it was made under heavy fire. The south side of the fort was attacked by British, Black Watch and Hessians. Now the fort was totally surrounded and under British guns. A British officer with a flag of truce approached the fort. In the name of General Howe he demanded an unconditional surrender or the entire garrison would be put to the sword.

Magaw's complement now totaled roughly 3,000 men in a fort too small to hold more than half that number. Resistance against the overwhelming force ready to invest the fort would be useless. Magaw surrendered and his men were led off to fill jails and prison ships. Conditions on the prison ships was worse than disastrous. Anyone consigned to a prison ship would probably die on board or if released would be broken both in health and spirit. The ill advised attempt to hold Fort Washington resulted in the loss of 2,837 captured and 59 killed and a multitude of armaments and supplies.

With Fort Washington captured, Howe sent Cornwallis across the river to assault Fort Lee. General Nathanael Greene, commanding Fort Lee had been warned by General Washington to abandon the fort. Either the warning came to late or Greene was too slow in reacting. Fort Lee, caught by surprise, was abandoned in panic by soldiers who escaped with the clothes on their backs, their muskets and little else. I am unable to determine if the following is a total from both forts or of Lee alone. At any rate the British took 146 iron and brass cannon, 12,000 shot and shell, 2,800 muskets, 400,000 musket cartridges, besides all tents and entrenching tools and 1,000 barrels of flour. Fortunately, gunpowder stores at Fort Lee had been moved to General Washington's position the previous day in anticipation of abandoning Fort Lee on the morrow. This dual catastrophe was almost a mortal blow to the little army.

The natural discomforts of winter in the open was sufficient to try men's bodies as well as their souls. The loss of tents, blankets and all other supplies including entrenching tools in the fall of Fort Washington and the later hasty abandonment of Fort Lee created what appeared to be an impossible situation for Washington's troops to survive without winter quarters. Washington had thought of retreating to Pennsylvania where hopefully there would be sufficient support for the army to survive. When told that public sentiment there had turned against them due to continued losses, Washington then thought of going beyond the Appalachians but this refuge was also ruled out due to the large number of Loyalists in the area.

Remembering Bunker Hill, Howe had not been too willing to attack fortified works or to fight running battles, but sought a classic battle where the two sides would fight decisively. With winter coming on, Howe in overall command, elected to remain in the comfort of New York. Assigning Lord Cornwallis as field commander and assigning Banastre Tarleton to assist him in hunting down Washington.

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If Howe had not always been eager to jump into the fray, Cornwallis was more than eager to hunt down the quarry, Banastre Tarleton was even more eager to join the fight. Howe, following Washington in New Jersey, turned over to Cornwallis the "foxhunt" to run Washington to ground.



Considering an intelligence report that the British appeared to be in New York and Newport, Rhode Island, Washington notified Charles Lee that he was not available for him to join Washington in New Jersey. Lee, Archibald Spots of Liberty, CASAR's niece, and others in a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. repeated several times had the same result. Washington, who declined to make his request a direct order, is faulted for his lack of decisiveness and forcefulness as the Commander-in-Chief of all American Forces.

Washington, who had moved to Hackensack, was unable to fortify his position due to lack of cannon and entrenching tools lost in the two forts. Departing Hackensack, he left a rear guard to engage the enemy, then to destroy bridges which would temporarily deny the British a crossing as the American force moved on to Newark. The retreat across New Jersey was on. His only hope now was to move to Virginia where he felt his force would be well received.

Another short aside then I will get on with the story. Since the days of Greece up to and including the Revolutionary Days most land battles (as opposed to sieges) of any consequence were fought with the two armies drawn up on a plain facing each other. Battles actually began by an attempt to so damage or intimidate the enemy by a hail of arrows in the early days and by artillery in Washington's time in order that one side would be forced from the field or at least weakened.

If neither side was forced to abandon the field or if a retreat was not pursued then both sides charged across the field to engage in close combat.

The colonists had now governed and defended themselves for several hundred years developing their own style of warfare to cope with Indians. This explains why Washington and other patriot generals, having been blooded in Indian warfare, were not always capable or willing to fight in the European manner. The British generals were quite disdainful of an army that wouldn't stand and fight in the European manner.

The Battle of Long Island and the subsequent engagements in New York have been studied and restudied, fought and re-fought by historians and professional soldiers. Such "Monday Morning Quarterbacking" has found blame aplenty for the commanders from Washington on down.

Found particularly faulty are basic command decisions made by patriot generals in the dispositions of forces which allowed the British to surprise American forces. Those leaders sometimes by desperation, sometimes by choice, forgot the lessons which should have been learned from Long Island and subsequent losses. It was not a question of courage. Caught unawares on Long Island where they had not anticipated a British circular assault, the American forces fought bravely and courageously but the results were disastrous.

It is a lesson which has had to be learned and relearned countless times in history; that battles fought for bravery and courage alone sacrifice precisely those who are most needed in later, more decisive battles. Again, pundits have agreed that communication between commanders was available during the battle and that proper command decisions in the field could have saved the bulk of American forces.

Fort Washington, which had been left behind, had been considered impregnable by Israel Putnam and other generals, even by General Greene. Its commander thought that he could hold the fort through December and if need be, even retreat across the river to Fort Lee. Washington had allowed himself to be overruled.

Napoleon is reputed to have said that an army travels on it's stomach and fights and dies for scraps of ribbon and metal. If that had been true in the American colonies in 1776 then all would surely have been lost. Washington's army fought and died for an idea. The colonies had been founded by people fleeing the old order in Europe; seeking in the new world an opportunity for a new and better life. They depended on themselves for their own protection and to furnish their daily needs. Government was of their own making and limited to what they needed. That had worked for several hundred years until the European powers had made them a part of their wars. Now those who chose to fight, fought to retain the freedom that they had enjoyed before King George III and his ministers had interfered. It is unbelievable the suffering that they endured to once again become their own masters.

Washington had no working logistic system to support his army. Supplies and manpower came at the whim and will of the Continental Congress and the individual colonies. The fall of Forts Washington and Lee and the loss of supplies and armament was disastrous. Now, Washington was retreating across New Jersey, desperately in need of what was lost in the two forts.

References: Christopher Ward's "The War of the American Revolution"; Don Higginbotham's "The War of American Independence"; Robert Leckie's "George Washington's War".

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