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November 1777

Written by Andrew Stough



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The Delaware River Forts and American Fleet are lost!

After the Battle of Germantown, British General William Howe began preparations to spend the winter in Philadelphia. While he could still send out foragers, he could also remember previous winters in Boston and New York where the main dependence had been upon supplies arriving by ship. Fort Mercer was an American fort along the Delaware river which could disrupt any attempt for re-supply by ship. He had established a series of temporary fortifications outside the city for protection but he also desired to secure the Delaware River and it's access to the Atlantic Ocean. To this end, in October he had directed a Hessian attack that focused on Fort Mercer with disastrous results for the Hessians.

During November 1777, General Howe and his elder brother Admiral Richard Howe combined their efforts to reduce all the American forts on the Delaware in order to effect a secure supply line. The second attempt was made on Fort Mifflin on Mud Island. Not only was the fort undermanned with a complement of 450 men but it was described by an observer as "a Burlesque upon the art of fortification." Not only was the faulty design of the fort a sufficient problem but the strong current of the river impeded by the chevaux-de-frise in the main channel promptly made a new channel between the island and the mainland. This new channel allowed Admiral Howe to take advantage of the fort's weaker side. Fort Mifflin was now open to cannon fire from all angles.

On November 10th, all guns that could be assembled by the British fleet opened fire on the fort; bombarding it for the next five days.

On November 15th, six ships of the line and several lesser gun barges moved up river joining the bombardment. The warships were drawn up so close to the fort that marines in the maintops shot down any in the fort who dared show themselves. By nightfall Fort Mifflin was destroyed. What little remained that would burn was set on fire by the survivors who under cover of darkness were able to escape to Red Bank Island near the fort.

Ward notes that a small American fleet under Commodore Hazelwood, located upriver from the action, had been called on for support but had remained in place, failing to come to the defense of Mifflin. There has been no real explanation for the failure of Hazelwood to engage the British fleet.

After the fall of Mifflin, the enemy fleet was free to move upriver unopposed and attack Fort Mercer. Washington sent General Nathanael Greene to reinforce the fort but Greene saw that he was so outnumbered in both men and cannon that it would be a waste of men and of no value to the revolution to try to defend Mercer. The fort's commander, Colonel Christopher Greene, agreed and the fort was evacuated. The unused American fleet that had failed to answer Fort Mifflin's call for help was now trapped and declined to fight. The fleet was abandoned and burned to prevent it falling into the hands of the enemy. Britain now held uncontested control of the Delaware from Philadelphia to the sea. Philadelphia was no longer in danger of being denied access from the sea. To further protect Philadelphia from harassment, a new series of temporary fortifications were positioned around the city to intercept any raids from patriot forces.

In New Jersey, the populace was as much or more of a threat to foragers as regular forces were. In Philadelphia Howe had only to be concerned with Washington. How ironic that the population of Philadelphia, the city that gave us the Declaration of Independence and was the seat of the Continental Congress, was predominantly loyal to Britain. There was little support for the Revolution in the entire area surrounding Philadelphia. Quakers opposed not only the war but any armed conflict.

Washington had been moving camp frequently, seemingly without purpose. However, he may have had several things in mind, first, to keep Howe off guard as to his intentions, second to keep the troops busy and capable of instant movement, additionally static camps bred two things, sickness and boredom.

The patriot army, despite it's defeats, had to date given a good account of itself. Add new troops, fresh from

other states or withdrawn from Saratoga, and the whole army was again ready for some action. On November 25th, a council of war considered an attack on Philadelphia, the army's only apparent target. All felt that something should be done, but only a few commanders were eager to try an attack on the city of Philadelphia. Wiser heads were in the majority and advised against an attack on the city especially with the beginning of winter upon them.

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