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September 1776

Written by Andrew Stough



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September brought the first hint of fall with warm to hot muggy days and increasingly chilly nights. General Washington had a surprising number of troops, and despite losses on Long Island, still seemed unaware of the devastating force of the Howe brothers' land and water capability as he prepares to defend Manhattan Island. He realigns his forces into three divisions: one to hold New York, the second to hold the north end of the island against the British which is the presumed focus for an attack and the third is at King's Bridge to maintain a way for Washington to retreat from the island, if necessary.

The Howe brothers spent their first two weeks in an approach by Admiral Lord Howe to try his hand at pacifying the rebels by making peace overtures to Congress. While the actual conference lasted only one day, time was required to contact Congress. Then more time was consumed due to travel from Philadelphia to Staten Island. Congress sent a commission of three; Franklin, Edward Rutledge and John Adams. The Admiral is reported to have been most pleasant to deal with but on examination admitted that neither he nor his brother had any real authority beyond pardoning individuals and restoring them to the status of British subjects. There could be no bargaining of any kind. In effect it was a "take it or leave it" proposition. If accepted, the Declaration of Independence would have to be rescinded. Congress would have to be adjourned; its authority nullified and the Continental Army would have to lay down its arms. It required very little thought to refuse the terms and to start the long the journey back to Philadelphia.

The September 11th Staten Island meeting lasted only the one day. However, time spent on travel arrangements and the meeting itself was not a total loss, it allowed time for the Continental Army to recoup their losses and improve their fortifications. It also aroused an even greater spirit to be independent from the throne. With the refusal to Lord Howe, Congress now knew, like Caesar at the Rubicon, that it had burned its bridges behind it and must live or die free. If it were not apparent before, the meeting brought out the truth of an earlier Franklin quip, "We can all hang together or assuredly we will hang separately."

On the 13th the British landed on the Hudson side of the island above New York. On the 15th Howe landed troops at Kipp's Bay, disregarding Harlem Heights which Washington had thought would feel the brunt of the next attack. The young British officers were right, the raw American troops panicked; throwing away anything that slowed their flight and ran like rabbits. Washington dashed up and tried to stem the tide but it was hopeless. The next day Howe moved against Harlem Heights.

On the 16th, a scouting party of 150 Connecticut Rangers met British infantry including troops from the Scottish Black Watch. The Rangers began an orderly and successful withdrawal from a superior force. Feeling that they had cornered another bunch of rabbits, British buglers sounded the fox hunter's call. The Americans who were now receiving reinforcements were enraged. Bursting forward they drove the British back in a dead run for their lives. The Battle of Harlem Heights was not a major engagement and the loss on either side was small but it was a shock to the British who began to realize that they could not dismiss the Americans off-hand, in or out of defensive positions.

Why had the Howes not taken the two weeks to crush Washington and his army instead of dallying with Congress in a plan that was not liable to be accepted? To begin with the Howes appear not to have seen their offer as anything but generous. Within their own ranks the younger officers were still angry that they had not been allowed to continue the slaughter on Long Island. They were now discontent that they were standing down because of a conference, while Washington grew stronger by the day.

Leckie spends some time theorizing why the Howe brothers failed to act. One was that in the British camp the American army was considered little better than frightened rabbits. They had not seen the slaughter at Breed's Hill, but Howe had. He may have been loath to waste men against entrenched rebels whom he considered to be easy targets on the open field.

Additionally, even moderate military combat was a terrific user-up of men and materiel. Replacements for almost anything had to come from England. Transport over the stormy North Atlantic alone required from three

to six months depending upon the weather encountered on the journey.
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It is not known how a fire started, but early on the morning of September 21st, fire begun in a shed, whipped through New York city, destroying many fine homes, churches, public buildings and wharves. The Tory population went wild. Whigs suspected as arsonists were summarily hanged, others were cast alive into the fire. A wind change occurred bringing the fires to a halt, there was a great deal of damage to the city.



The next day an American officer, Captain Nathaniel Bacon of the Connecticut Rangers, was captured by the British.

company of Queen's Rangers on Long Island. Caught in civilian clothes and with written notes of British troop movements and fortifications he was charged as a spy. Delivered immediately to General Howe he was ordered hanged. Denied contact of any kind including a clergyman or the use of a Bible during the night; he was marched down a road the next morning and unceremoniously hanged from a tree. It was at this time that he said "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."

References: Don Higginbotham's "The War of American Independence"; Robert Leckie's "George Washington 's War"; Encyclopedia Britannica's "The Revolutionary Years"; Languth's "Patriots: The Men Who Started the American Revolution".

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