

**BRITISH AMPHIBIOUS OPERATIONS IN THE AMERICAN WAR OF
INDEPENDENCE
1775 – 1783**

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates British amphibious operations in the American War of Independence between the outbreak of war in 1775 and the Peace of Versailles in 1783. It assesses the strategic, operational and tactical context of the efforts of Great Britain to impose a settlement on the rebellious colonists by use of expeditionary warfare techniques. Particular attention is given to command decision making, both local and national, with reference to the North American theatre of war. The response of the military and government to the entry into the war of France and Spain is investigated. Fighting techniques and operational art are also evaluated. The findings are compared with secondary writing to determine whether traditional narratives adequately explain the failure of the 'British Way of War' in this insurgency conflict.

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*They came three thousand miles and died,
To keep the past upon the throne;
Unheard, beyond the ocean tide,
Their English mother made her moan.¹*

¹Excerpt from *Lines Suggested By The Graves Of Two English Soldiers On Concord Battle-Ground*. by James Russell Lowell. *The Complete Poetical Works of James Russell Lowell, Cabinet Edition*. (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1942)

INTRODUCTION

Although the problem of American Independence was one that did not immediately lend itself to a military solution, once the first shots were fired at Lexington and Concord, Britain's armed forces found themselves embroiled in a conflict whose scope and complexity dwarfed even the staggering challenges of the Seven Years' War. For one thing, the American colonies were bordered by over a thousand miles of coastline; it was impossible in the opening stages to prevent arms and military stores being landed more or less at will by European supporters of the revolt.

Moreover, the sheer size and the inhospitable terrain that covered most of the continent of North America allowed the small numbers of patriots involved in hostilities to avoid a decisive engagement with British regular forces on anything like equal terms. Neither were there major cities whose capture would bring the patriots to heel. Even the capture of Philadelphia, the seat of the rebellion, in 1777 had very little effect on the course of the war, other than to improve the rather staid social scene in the city.

Equally, the distance separating the colonies from the metropole, and the shortage of transports and escort ships, were probably the major and most often overlooked reasons for the survival of the rebellion beyond the initial skirmishes in 1775. Yet, despite what seems in hindsight to be an insurmountable task, opinion in government in Britain remained sanguine about the prospects of restoring order and royal authority in the thirteen colonies. The provincial troops raised from the colonists, with one or two

honourable exceptions, had performed poorly against the French and their Native American allies between 1754 and 1763, and lack of confidence in the ability of the colonists to defend themselves during the Pontiac Rebellion in 1764 led to the establishment of a garrison of 8,000 regulars in the colonies, the cost of which had occasioned the taxation crisis in the first place.

If the colonists could be separated from European aid then this would strangle the revolt at birth, but France still smarting from the reverses of the Seven Years War had ample motive and opportunity to support and succour the fledgling Congress. British foreign policy therefore came to centre on the deterrent value of the fleet.¹ Indeed, as early as 1770 Chatham had noted:

The first great and acknowledged object of national defence in the country is to maintain such a superior naval force at home, that even the united fleets of France and Spain may never be masters of the Channel. ...

*The second naval object with an English [prime] minister should be to maintain at all times a powerful western squadron. In the profoundest peace it should be respectable; in war it should be formidable. Without it, the colonies, the commerce, the navigation of Great Britain lie at the mercy of the House of Bourbon. ...*²

Nevertheless, Britain's customary command of the ocean was to be disastrously challenged by the new and unforeseen prevailing circumstances of the American War. Whereas the Earl of Sandwich had followed Chatham's stricture in providing at least a match for continental and Bourbon naval power, of some 86 warships of the line in 1771,

¹ A.T. Mahan, *The Major Operations Of The Navies In The War Of American Independence* (New York, Greenwood Press, 1969 reprint), Chapter 1

² Speech by the Earl of Chatham, November 22, 1770, in the *Debate on the Duke of Richmond's Motion respecting the Seizure of Falklands Islands*. (Parliamentary History.) in E. Hughes (ed.), *Select Naval Documents* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), p.145

only 15 were ready to put to sea the following year. In 1779, of 43 in service, 26 had been taken in for major repairs, despite the fact that the fleet was now at the size it had been in the *annus mirabilis* of 1759. The strain of financing the pre-war fleet meant that some means of clearing the debts incurred by the Navy Board was therefore vital, and the hated Stamp Tax was one measure designed to raise money for the fleet.³

Notwithstanding this, however, the French fleet was much reformed and improved after its rather lacklustre performance in the Seven Years War.⁴ While the Royal Navy's reputation might for the time being deter French intervention, there was a real possibility that the Spanish would side with France and the combination of the two fleets could overwhelm British naval defence, if only by weight of numbers.

When Lord North became Prime Minister in 1770 there were dangerous cracks in the edifice of British Maritime deterrence: France entered a cordial relationship with the Turks to partition control of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Spanish occupied the British post on the Falkland Islands with seeming impunity. North mobilised the fleet using the tried and tested expedient of impressments, and the show of strength led to a resolution of the crisis.⁵

The crisis of 1774 and the failed assault on Breed's Hill in Boston harbour in 1775 damaged confidence in the North administration and the understandable focus on operations in American waters led to the neglect of maritime security at home, and

³ P.D.G. Thomas, *Lord North* (London: Allen Lane, 1976), p.95

⁴ G. Auphan, *La Marine dans l'Histoire de France* (Paris: Editions France-Empire, 1989), pp. 116-29

⁵ Thomas, *Lord North*, pp. 46-51

crucially failed at this important juncture to separate the rebellion from ever more eager European support.

The complete victory over France in 1763, while preserving the European balance of power, had removed the incentive for continental states to seek alliance with Britain. It was the freedom from involvement in a European war (especially after the outbreak of the War of the Bavarian Succession in 1778) that allowed Vergennes to contemplate intervention in the American War, and devote significant funds to improving the Navy rather than expanding the army. Famously, William Pitt the Elder had ‘won Canada on the Banks of the Elbe’, by subsidising German allies to distract French attention from the colonies, but now Prussia, while not actively hostile, was at best lukewarm. France and Austria were very close – Louis XVI had married the Austrian princess Marie Antoinette, and the minor German princes were unable to act independently. In any case, they would be called upon to provide sorely needed manpower to back up British troops in America. There was no chance of embroiling France in a difficult and costly land war in Europe and the whole of the Bourbon family compact’s fleet (after Spain joined the War in 1779) could be turned on the Royal Navy.

In the event, the strategic direction of the war was found wanting. Neither Lord George Germain, Secretary of State for the Colonies, nor John Montagu, 4th Earl of Sandwich, First Lord of the Admiralty from 1771 – 1782, could balance the requirements for deterrence in Home Waters and tactical exigencies of the war in North America. Sandwich is generally held to be responsible for the dire condition of the fleet on the

outbreak of war. He is generally held to be a corrupt and incapable politician whose shortcomings led to the fleet going to war in an execrable state. Notwithstanding this, Nicholas Rodger's sympathetic portrait has done much to mitigate the hitherto uniformly damning indictment of Sandwich's leadership.⁶ For his part, Germain although an able politician and staunch supporter of Lord North, did much to damage the Crown's war effort. He was not held in high regard by the army, following his disgrace at Minden, and was at loggerheads with Sir Guy Carleton, possibly over the latter's evidence against him in his court martial. Moreover, he was 'not too well disposed toward Howe'⁷ and managed to enrage Sir Henry Clinton (not too difficult a feat in itself) by tampering with his report on the fiasco of the 1776 Charleston expedition. More fatally for the British cause, he contrived to get his revenge by supporting Cornwallis' plan for the Southern Campaigns and constantly interfered at the worst possible moments in the lead up to the siege and surrender at Yorktown.

Yet despite the impact of defeat, there were still considerable achievements. Control of the Caribbean and North American waters was lost between 1778 and 1782, but the challenge of a Franco-Spanish invasion of England was foiled in 1779, and threats to Gibraltar and Jamaica defeated. All this was in the face of a severe disadvantage in numbers of ships of the line (64 guns and above) between 1779 and 1782, and while co-operation between the Bourbon fleets was patchy, the French Royal Navy was a modern, re-vitalised force with the latest warship designs.⁸

⁶ N.A.M. Rodger, *The Insatiable Earl: A Life of John Montagu, 4th Earl of Sandwich* (London: Harper Collins, 1993)

⁷ J. W. Fortescue, *A History of the British Army. Volume III.* (Uckfield, East Sussex: Naval and Military Press, 2004 reprint), p.174

⁸ A. Boulaire, *La France Maritime au Temps de Louis XV et Louis XVI* (Paris: Layeur, 2001) p. 26

It is against this background that expeditionary warfare must be considered. The illusion of maritime supremacy engendered since the conclusion of the Spanish Succession War in 1713-14 stood up well in peacetime where the deterrent value of a powerful fleet served a useful political and diplomatic purpose. However, in wartime the efficacy of force projection using the Royal Navy to disembark the army on hostile shores was limited, and its potential to win the war against the rebellious American colonies was overestimated thanks to signal successes in the Seven Years' War.

Moreover, the record of British amphibious operations in the Eighteenth Century before 1775 was mixed at best. Vernon's 1741 Expedition to Porto Bello and Cartagena had ended in fiasco. Byng had famously failed to take Minorca in 1756, and ended up paying with the ultimate penalty and the initial assault against Louisbourg had foundered in 1756. Overall British colonial experience of the Seven Years' War had seen the success of small armies of regular troops supported by local auxiliaries capturing fortresses accessible from the sea such as Louisbourg, Quebec, Montreal and Havana. In contrast, operations in the interior of the North American Continent had proved hazardous and fraught with difficulty.

There are broadly speaking two schools of historical thought on the American Revolutionary War. One suggests that the Americans won the war and the other that the British squandered their opportunities and lost it. Of the writers that focus on the British conduct of the war there are those that argue that the failure was due to political

mismanagement, strategic incompetence, a failure to understand the nature of the conflict, old-fashioned army and naval commanders, logistic failure, the limited support of American Loyalists, financial crisis and lack of political support at home.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, most commentators had been participants and inevitably brought a measure of bias to their accounts. The King, Lord North, Lord George Germain all left self-serving accounts of their involvement⁹ and the Whig opponents of the war too, Burke and Walpole in particular, were vocal in their opinions.¹⁰ Among the military commanders, the Howe brothers, Henry Clinton and John Burgoyne all left accounts of their part in the war, and while these were far from impartial they represent an important contribution to the historiography of the war.

Contemporary historians such as Charles Stedman¹¹ in Britain, and David Ramsay¹² in the United States produced impartial accounts of events. Stedman had served with Cornwallis in 1780 and knew well the war he described, blaming Britain's downfall on poor leadership and command. Ramsay too produced a remarkably modern-sounding and balanced account, considering he had been an active participant in the events he described and an opponent of the British. He ascribed the British defeat to an excess of hubris, overconfidence and ministerial arrogance toward the colonists.

⁹ John Fortescue (ed.), *The Correspondence of George III, from 1760 to December 1783* (6v. London: Macmillan, 1927-1928); Historical Manuscript Commission, *Report on the Manuscripts of Mrs. Stopford-Sackville of Drayton House, Northamptonshire* (2v. London, 1904-1910)

¹⁰ Horace Walpole, *Journal of the Reign of King George the Third, From the Year 1771 to 1783* (2 v. London, 1859); Edmund Burke, *An Appeal From the New to the Old Whigs, In Consequence of Some Late Discussions in Parliament Relative to the Reflections on the French Revolution* (London, 1791)

¹¹ Charles Stedman, *The History of the Origin, Progress and Termination of the American War* (London: J. Murray, 1794)

¹² David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*; edited by Lester H Cohen (Philadelphia: [S.L.] 1793, and reprinted, Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1990)

In the nineteenth century few British historians wanted to write about the American War of Independence. Imperial pride prevented the gentlemen scholars describing a conflict where significant colonies were lost. However, the topic remained popular among historians and their readers in America, and Bancroft's *History of the United States*¹³ enunciated the 'Whig' interpretation of the war and Britain's unhappy involvement in it. For Whig historians, like Bancroft the American Revolution was the culmination of the heroic resistance of freeborn Englishmen to tyranny, started by the English parliament in 1640, and continuing through the reign of the later Stuart kings. He condemned the military conduct of the war as unduly harsh, and attempts at conciliation as half-hearted. This remained the standard interpretation of the war for the rest of the century and was bolstered by Sir George Otto Trevelyan's *The American Revolution*, in the early twentieth century.¹⁴ While praising the exploits of his forebears, the Rockingham Whigs, to the skies, the gentleman politician turned historian wrote Germain off as an utter idiot and criticized William Howe for failing to crush Washington's army at New York.

Another tradition of historical writing about the war is exemplified by John Fortescue's third volume of his *History of the British Army* published in 1902.¹⁵ The patriotic author was merciless in his pillorying of the Yankee enemy, but was objective enough to catalogue the many episodes of mismanagement of the British army and navy by the King's ministers, and their unrealistic assumptions about the nature of the war. Despite Fortescue's obvious partisanship, he remains the definitive military historian of the war.

¹³ G. Bancroft, *History of the United States, from the Discovery of the American Continent* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1841)

¹⁴ Sir George Otto Trevelyan *The American Revolution*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 4 v. 1898-1917, reprinted by Longmans 1965)

¹⁵ J. W. Fortescue, *A History of the British Army. Volume III*. (Uckfield, East Sussex: Naval and Military Press, 2004 reprint)

At about the same time a new school of historians began writing revisionist accounts of the war, questioning the naïve assumptions of Trevelyan and Bancroft. The ‘Imperialists’, as they were dubbed, examined the nature of British administration prior to the war in a new light. George Louis Beer in his *British Colonial Policy, 1754-1765*,¹⁶ opined that the British colonial administration was shamelessly exploited for the defense of homes and livelihoods from French aggression and once the threat was removed, the protective mantle of colonial dependence was thrown off. Equally he downplayed the political revolution as insignificant when compared to later events. Other Imperialists such as Andrews,¹⁷ Gipson¹⁸ and Labaree¹⁹ concurred with Beer in concluding that the colonists were motivated by greed and selfishness, and changed their constitutional arguments as the situation changed.

Under the leadership of Lewis Namier, British historians began to re-examine the nature of eighteenth century British politics that lay at the core of the struggle. In Namier’s 1930 work, *England in the Age of the American Revolution*,²⁰ he denied the existence of Rockingham Whigs as a separate political party, and their role as the defenders of liberty, placing more influence on the actions of George III, who he asserts was no tyrant either.

¹⁶ George Louis Beer, *British Colonial Policy, 1754-1765* (New York: MacMillan, 1907)

¹⁷ Charles M. Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934-1938)

¹⁸ Lawrence Henry Gipson, *The Coming of the Revolution, 1763-1773* (New York: Hamish Hamilton, 1954)

¹⁹ Leonard Wood Labaree, *Royal Government in America: A Study of the British Colonial System Before 1783* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930)

²⁰ Sir Lewis Namier, *England in the Age of the American Revolution, 2nd Edition* (London: Macmillan, 1961)

At the about same time, American historians were turning to the military history of the war, especially the British part in it. Edward Curtis²¹ showed the army's severe and systemic problems just prior to the war, and Claude H. Van Tyne²² focused on the ineptitude of Germain and Howe at decisive stages of the war.

Since the end of the Second World War there have been a number of eminent historians working on the British involvement in the War of Independence. Chief among these are Eric Robson, Esmond Wright and Piers Mackesy. Robson's *The American Revolution in its Political and Military Aspects, 1763-1783*²³ is hugely important and represents the most commonly held interpretation of the war today. He argues that the task facing the British military and government was Herculean, and that America was 'lost through absence of mind' and that British policy 'shuffled between policies of firmness and appeasement until it was too late effectively to apply either'.²⁴ He pointed out the lack of a coherent overall plan, frequently impossible terrain, outdated tactics and persistent supply problems as key elements in the British defeat.

Wright²⁵ generally followed Robson's interpretation, delving further into British objectives and explaining the hostilities as a result of mismanagement rather than an attempt at tyrannical rule. Piers Mackesy translated Namier's examination of political history into a military context, calling the British military effort 'the last great war of the

²¹ Edward E. Curtis, *The Organization of the British Army in the American Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1926)

²² Claude H. Van Tyne, *The War of Independence, American Phase. Being the Second Volume of a History of the Founding of the American Republic* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1929)

²³ E. Robson, *The American Revolution in its Political and Military Aspects, 1763-1783* (Batchworth, 1955)

²⁴ Robson, *Ibid*, pp.113,151

²⁵ E. Wright, *Fabric of Freedom* (London: MacMillan, 1965)

ancien regime'²⁶. Mackesy demonstrated too that the political-military organization of late eighteenth century Britain mitigated against victory, ensuring that field commanders were appointed for their political influence rather than their skill and competence. Equally, he rounded on Lord North who, he claimed, while a sound financial manager, was too careful with the purse strings to devote adequate resources to the war. Nevertheless, he commends the administration for defeating the Bourbon threat with a number of remarkable naval victories.²⁷

Another approach to Britain's defeat was taken by authors who sought to examine the lives and psychology of key participants through historical biography, although some have received a more comprehensive treatment than others. Lord North is one of the most mysterious figures of the British administration, and he still awaits a definitive biography. Both of the most widely read biographies by Alan Valentine²⁸ and Peter Thomas²⁹ have their critics and neither adequately explains his performance in the American War. However, Lord Germain remains for many the villain of the piece, and Valentine's biography did little to advance his or the author's reputation³⁰. A far more balanced treatment is Gerald Saxon Brown's *The American Secretary: The Colonial Policy of Lord George Germain, 1775-1778*,³¹ and as Mackesy points out his strategy in the South was essentially the right one.³²

²⁶ Piers Mackesy, *War for America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964)

²⁷ Mackesy, *Ibid*, pp.4-11, 14, 19, 21-22

²⁸ Alan Valentine, *Lord North* (Norman: Oklahoma UP, 1967)

²⁹ Thomas, *op. cit.*

³⁰ Alan Valentine, *Lord George Germain* (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1962)

³¹ Gerald Saxon Brown, *The American Secretary: The Colonial Policy of Lord George Germain, 1775-1778* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963)

³² Mackesy, *op. cit.*, p.409

It is perhaps the Howe brothers around whom the controversy rages most fiercely. In 1927 Claude H. Van Tyne placed the blame for Burgoyne's defeat squarely on Sir William's shoulders,³³ but the most comprehensive review of Sir William and Admiral Lord Richard Howe's conduct is in Ira Gruber's *The Howe Brothers and the American Revolution*,³⁴ where he argues that they spent a third of the time trying to bring about negotiations, another third trying to raise loyalist support in Pennsylvania, and the rest of it preparing to leave America. Nonetheless, Gruber's work is based on exhaustive archival research, and while the Howe brothers' overall contribution to British defeat remains open to debate, this is a major contribution to scholarship on the subject.

Sir Henry Clinton remained for many years neglected by biographers, but this was resolved by one of several works examining Clinton's personality from a psychological point of view, illustrating that he either did too much or too little in his conduct of the war in the south after the capture of Charleston in 1780.³⁵

As for the war in the south, controversy still rages over the Yorktown campaign. As late as 2005, John D. Grainger³⁶ has suggested that the siege and capitulation was not the complete debacle as has often been suggested, and that the role of the much improved French artillery has been underestimated, all this goes against traditionally accepted narratives of the campaign.

³³ Van Tyne, *op. cit.*

³⁴ Ira D. Gruber, *The Howe Brothers and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1972)

³⁵ William B. Willcox and Frederick Wyatt, 'Sir Henry Clinton: A Psychological Exploration in History', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3 (16) (1959), pp. 3-26

³⁶ J. D. Grainger, *The Battle of Yorktown, 1791: A Reassessment*. (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005)

Nevertheless, there has been a resurgence of British scholarship in the field, led by Stephen Conway and Jeremy Black, notwithstanding that these authors represent different historical traditions.³⁷ Black tends to follow Mackesy's tried and trusted formula, in that he contends that the American War was the last fought in the style of the great eighteenth century dynastic struggles. Conway, on the other hand, describes the War of Independence as the first true 'world war', although this is a claim that has been made for the Seven Years' War too.³⁸ While it is true that the Seven Years' War was indeed fought in far flung parts of the globe, it is not really until 1778 that the interconnectedness of the widely separated theatres of war, such as the North American colonies, the West Indies, India and West Africa, became of such paramount strategic importance. A catastrophic loss in any one of them was to have far-reaching long term consequences.

As far as primary sources are concerned, the scholar suffers from an embarrassment of riches. The British Library holds an unparalleled collection of manuscripts, including the Haldimand Papers. The William L. Clements Library at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor is home to the papers of Sir Henry Clinton, Sir Thomas Gage, Lord George Germain and those of the leading Loyalist, John Graves Simcoe. At Williamsburg Virginia, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation holds the Headquarters Papers of the British Army in America. Happily, copies of these were presented to Queen Elizabeth II

³⁷ S. Conway, *The War of American Independence 1775-1783* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995); J. Black, *War for America. The Fight for Independence 1775-1783* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1994)

³⁸ Tom Pocock, *Battle for Empire, The Very First World War, 1756-1763* (London: Michael O'Mara Books, 1998)

in 1957, and now reside in the National Archives at Kew. At Kew too, there is veritable treasure trove for researchers of this period. Not only does hold the complete Colonial Office series but one can find the Home Office Papers, and also the War Office Papers. The Colonial Office series has proved the most useful, for its unparalleled wealth of correspondence to and from Germain, Howe and many other key protagonists in the war.

Moreover, the Society for Army Historical Research has been thoroughly active in reprinting contemporary diaries of participants in the war. Those of John Peebles and William Leslie are particularly remarkable for what they reveal of the detail of the American War.³⁹ The witness testimony of these and other participants has proved most useful in reconstructing the human experience of combined operations in the American War.

As to the structure of what follows, this work falls into three major parts. Firstly, the *modus operandi* of amphibious warfare in the period is discussed at length, as a precursor to a description and analysis of operations in the two phases of the war. Next, Operations using the projection of armed force from sea or river onto land in what George III dubbed the ‘war of the legislature’ from 1776 to 1778 are described and evaluated. This is followed by a narrative and analysis of amphibious warfare during the ‘world-wide war’ from 1778 to 1783. Each of these two sections is preceded and placed in context by a synopsis of the strategic picture, illustrating how this affected operations, and dictated some of the tactics employed. Throughout, the words of the participants are used to

³⁹ Ira D. Gruber, (ed.) *John Peebles' American War 1776-1782* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing for The Army Records Society, 1998); M. Gilchrist, (ed.) *Captain Hon. William Leslie (1751-77) His Life, Letters and Commemoration* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing for The Army Records Society, 2005)

illustrate and demonstrate features of note. Thus, the three conjoined levels of amphibious warfare in the American War of Independence are described and analysed in detail: strategic, operational and tactical. A summary concluding section precedes a discussion of possible avenues for further investigation.

The approach taken here differs somewhat from that of its scholarly forbears in that it is written in the context of the 'New Military History', and with the conviction that operational history is worthy of scholarly investigation in its own right. While economic, social, political and diplomatic history are of great worth in understanding the War of Independence, it is battles that win or lose wars, and in turn battles are won by the application of superior strategic and operational art. It behoves us, then, to study and understand the strategic and operational background to the art of war in this period, and the tactics employed, to gain an insight into the whys and wherefores of victory and defeat. The hard lessons learned in the American War were of great use in the long wars against Republican and Imperial France. This British way of war from the sea had no equal in the period 1793-1815, and while there were not a few disasters and defeats,⁴⁰ the mobility, flexibility and strategic reach offered by the ability to land a seaborne force on an enemy coast more or less at will was an incalculable advantage, and one to which Revolutionary and Napoleonic France could never develop a satisfactory response. It was the cornerstone of victory, not least for the Duke of Wellington's campaigns in the Iberian Peninsula.⁴¹ It was during the American War discussed in this work that solid

⁴⁰ The Helder expedition of 1799, and the Walcheren expedition of 1809, to name but two.

⁴¹ Ian Yonge, 'The Royal Navy and the Peninsular War', *The Waterloo Journal* 23(2), August 2001, pp. 3-11; and 23(3), December 2001, pp. 3-15

practical lessons were learned, and during which Britain's soldiers and sailors perfected the art of amphibious warfare.⁴²

⁴² Charles J. Fedorak, 'The Royal Navy and British Amphibious Operations during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars', *Military Affairs*, 52(3), July 1988, pp. 141-46

Chapter One: THE NATURE, TACTICS AND METHODOLOGY OF AMPHIBIOUS WARFARE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Amphibious operations involve the projection of a military force onto a hostile or neutral shore and break down into four distinct types: assault; raid; withdrawal; and demonstration. Such operations are similar to other maritime activities such as disembarkation of forces on a friendly shore and ferrying troops and stores between ports and often the same transport vessels are used, the key difference between these and amphibious operations being the lack of traditional port facilities.

The ability to conduct successful amphibious landings has been a vital component of war fighting since ancient times. About seventy per cent of the earth's surface is covered by water - oceans, rivers, estuaries and lakes - and a military force can exploit this by using this access to land to great strategic advantage. Given adequate naval resources, and this was to prove a vital factor in our period, a maritime power can strike at an opponent's coastline at a time and place of their own choosing. With the ability to land a credible all-arms force this ability can be a war-winning weapon.

The amphibious landing force can act as a forward deployed independent army suitable for a varied range of operations. In the period under discussion (1775 - 1783) these were primarily raids, set-piece battles, sieges and assaults on fortresses. The strategic reach and flexibility provided by the naval assets allows amphibious forces to strike where least expected and where the opposition is unprepared. They can be readied in advance in times of political turmoil to demonstrate resolve and political will to deal with a crisis, or

in secret while other more subtle political and diplomatic measures are being deployed. Overall, the independence, mobility, flexibility and sustainability of amphibious forces, supported by effective naval assets, make them a very effective instrument of war and one which England (and, after 1707, Great Britain) as a maritime nation had made full use of.

Yet by their very nature, amphibious operations are among the most difficult to execute. They require close co-operation between army and navy, as well as clear definition of the boundaries of each service's responsibilities. Consequently, the history of these joint operations before, during and after the American War of Independence shows many examples of the worst characteristics of both, and the best performance of neither. What makes the study of amphibious warfare in the period so fascinating is the sheer range of clear examples of superbly well-planned and executed landings juxtaposed with an admittedly smaller number of miserable fiascos. The study therefore acts both as an object lesson and a grim warning. Amphibious landings face the hazards of the elements as well as the enemy, and are initially vulnerable before they can bring ashore heavy weapons and supplies, but despite these problems, landing a capable military force on a hostile shore has been one of the best means of achieving success in war.

Great Britain had never relied on a large army, and the political hangover of the Civil Wars and Commonwealth period (1642 – 1660) and the reign of James II (1685-1689) made large standing armies objects of suspicion and political mistrust. In a series of wars against France and Spain a style of warfare was established, sometimes known as 'the

British Way of War', that embodied a blue water strategy employing powerful naval forces and small highly trained bodies of troops, who could have an effect out of all proportion to their numbers. Drake's activities in the Caribbean between 1585 and 1586 acted as a model for a series of amphibious operations that brought glory and not a little profit to England's coffers. The most famous episodes amongst many were the capture of Gibraltar in 1704 and the seizure of Louisbourg and Quebec in 1758 and 1759. The American War of Independence therefore is a vital part of the perfection of amphibious warfare techniques that were to play such a vital role in the defeat of Napoleon, particularly in Spain (1808-1814) and Egypt (1798-1801). Nevertheless, amphibious operations in the age of sail were notoriously difficult to conduct: Drake's 1595 expedition was an unmitigated disaster and he died of dysentery off Porto Bello the following year. The disastrous Cartagena expedition of 1741 cost the lives of 7,400 of the 10,000 men involved.¹

The major difficulty was that the army and the navy had to support each other, and land and naval commanders had limited understanding and less sympathy for each other's problems and the requirements of their branch of the service. The army needed to maintain contact with the ships of the fleet for resupply and, if needed, withdrawal. The equipment for long range operations in the interior, particularly horses and guns, were hard to transport and put ashore.

¹ R. Harding, *Amphibious warfare in the Eighteenth Century. The British Expedition to the West Indies, 1740-1742* (London: Boydell Press for the Royal Historical Society, 1991)

Yet, nearly all secondary accounts of littoral operations in the war, and indeed in the Seven Years War, include some glib statement along the lines of ‘the British landed at such and such a bay’, entirely neglecting the delicate business of physically putting troops ashore, and moreover getting them ashore not only in a fit state to fight against an opposed landing, but providing them with all the stores and heavy weapons (cannon in this period) needed to overcome the enemy and achieve their operational objectives by manoeuvre. Furthermore, the question of handling horses between ship and shore is even more fraught, and if mishandled can seriously undermine mobility. Mounts are needed for the cavalry, admittedly few in the American War, but more importantly, draught horses are necessary to move all but the lightest guns, and to pull wagons and carts loaded with the impedimenta of war for anything but the smallest of raids. The problem of horseflesh becomes more acute in 1775, since during the Seven Years’ War the Army could rely on the more or less willing loan or sale of horses from the local population. In a situation of civil insurrection local livery services could obviously not be relied upon.

This silence by modern historians of the War of Independence on the matter of amphibious tactics is curious. One only has to think of the much vaunted ‘British Way of War’ to understand the importance of landing operations for an island nation. Indeed, British and American military history of the twentieth century is dominated by amphibious warfare. Gallipoli, the Pacific Campaign, D-Day and Inchon are only the most famous examples amongst many others. Contemporary military thinking is centred on the concept of force projection, and while nowadays airpower provides tactical and

operational mobility, the sea remains the only highway for the strategic movement of heavy stores and armour. Plus ça change.

For these reasons some assessment of the means and methods of landings by British forces and the drills and procedures for naval-military co-operation used will be necessary. Firstly, it will be possible to establish important precepts on a ‘what works’ basis and attempt some failure analysis for discussion of instances where the ‘British Way of War’ broke down in the War of Independence. This will establish significant historical trends; many of the lessons learned by both the Royal Navy and the Army between 1775 and 1783 were carried forward into the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1793-1815). Even Nelson, like many of his contemporaries, took part in amphibious landings in the American War, and his experience at San Juan in 1780 must have given him a keen appreciation of the challenges of littoral warfare. While British experience of amphibious warfare in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic War was not always a happy one, co-operation with the Navy on a strategic, operational and tactical level was the basis of Wellington’s victory in the Peninsula. It provided extreme mobility, the element of surprise, forcing French Imperial troops to disperse their forces in coastal garrisons. It also allowed consistent resupply via Lisbon, Oporto and the Northern Spanish ports, and finally, in extremis it provided for evacuation of the army, as in 1808 after the Convention of Cintra, or from Corunna in 1809. Despite these factors, the amphibious and naval elements of the Peninsular war are often neglected by modern historians in favour of triumphalist accounts of Wellingtonian martial genius.²

² This has happily been rectified by C.D. Hall, *Wellington’s Navy: Sea Power and the Peninsular War 1807-1814* (London: Chatham Publishing, 2004)

Among the operations of war, amphibious assault (and *inter alia* assault river crossing) is among the most difficult. The great successes of Louisbourg, Québec, Guadeloupe, Belle Isle, Martinique and Havana in the Seven Years' War have tended to eclipse the steep learning curve undertaken by the Royal Navy and the army in the eighteenth century, and the many fiascos suffered prior to 1757. The expedition to Cartagena in 1741 illustrates the severe difficulties encountered before reliable methods and tactics were developed and refined, and the necessary organizational and command changes put in place.³

The American War saw several major amphibious assaults, both in an effort to resolve the crisis of the legislature before French and Spanish entry to the war in 1778, and thereafter to secure, or at least stabilise, Britain's worsening strategic situation. Quite apart from the transport of armies from home across thousands of miles of ocean, there was the problem of landing on a hostile coastline. Separate operations were conducted to capture New York, Rhode Island, to mount a strike against Philadelphia, and to seize St Lucia and Charleston, and these are discussed in detail separately in the section on operations.

Ships carrying troops for amphibious operations carried distinguishing flags and pennants, showing clearly their purpose and their place in the convoy. This was vital so that other vessels would give them more 'sea room'; the extra weight and over-crowding above and below decks would make them less manoeuvrable and slower at making way.

³ R. Harding, *Amphibious Warfare in the Eighteenth Century. The British Expedition to the West Indies, 1740-1742* (London: Boydell Press for the Royal Historical Society, 1991)

Ships carrying general and staff officers flew special flags and separate communication systems were set up to summon various officers to the land forces commanders to conferences onboard the army commander's ship.

Another important factor was establishing boundaries between the responsibilities of the senior Royal Navy and senior Army officers. The admiral or senior naval officer retained command of the Fleet and all the boats used for the landing operation. The Navy had command of the transport convoys, assisted by an army officer on each ship. Each ship would have special orders to be followed in case of separation from the main body. Smaller craft, sloops and the like, would act as pilots through straits, channels and narrows, carefully charting the way ahead. Captain James Cook had performed this task down the St Lawrence prior to the assault on Quebec in 1759. This was more difficult than it might first appear: naval charts were frequently inaccurate or out of date, and Clinton's 1776 expedition to Charleston came to grief, when the flagship and one other vessel HMS *Actaeon* became grounded on sand bars, spending 9 hours under sustained shore bombardment.⁴ These measures were crucial in ensuring that the entire fleet arrived in the assembly area in good order prior to the next phase, disembarkation.

Previously, in the eighteenth century there had been confusion over where the Navy's command left off and the army's command of the operation was supposed to begin. The Rochefort expedition 1758 was mired in confusion, resulting in the court martial of General Sir John Mordaunt. The Navy, and particularly Hawke, seemed to view the navy's role as a shuttle service to ferry the army to an offshore position, leaving the rest

⁴ see 'Charleston 1776' section below

of the operational command decision making to the senior army staff. After this a staff comprising officers from both services decided jointly on the landing site, the army only taking over the operation once the troops had fully disembarked.

The transports also had to be protected whilst they were particularly vulnerable during the landing process. The army and navy commanders would then consult on the tactical disposition for the assault itself. This would require scouting of the landing beach and the surrounding terrain, and rangers were used in the Seven Years' War to scout the Ile d'Orléans on the St Lawrence prior to landings. After this a briefing would be held to ensure that all officers knew their expected place in the operation.

While all this was progressing, the assault troops would make their preparations, and parade on deck to have their weapons and equipment subjected to a final check. Each soldier would have sixty cartridges, two flints but most of the heavy kit was left on board ship although the muskets were provided with waterproof leather or cloth oilskin to protect them from damp and sea spray.

A commodore or senior captain would command the actual landing operation: William Hotham commanded the landing on Long Island, and Captain Keith Elphinstone, later Lord Keith, commanded the landing at Charleston in 1780, described in detail below. Sometimes where operational exigencies were such the squadron commander might personally take command; in a series of raids on Virginia and Connecticut in 1779 George Collier himself took charge of the loading and disembarkation of troops.

The landing craft themselves were formed into assault waves ready to form up for the assault or approach march on landing. The troops were conveyed in flat bottomed boats (see figure 3) developed as a result of the abortive Rochefort landings in 1758. They were basically of two types: 36 or 30 feet long and could be fitted with bedding rolls as primitive ablative armour, or even a small mortar or swivel gun to provide some direct fire support to the troops as they landed (see illustration). Even more bespoke specialised craft were sometimes constructed, an example of which is shown in the illustration. These were used in 1776 in the landing on Long Island where the British employed a number of boats with ramps at the bows that could hold up to 100 infantry and land guns and their carriages ready to fire. Benedict Arnold when in British service had a number of specialised flatboats fitted out for service in the rivers of Virginia (see section on the 'Tobacco Raids' 1779-1781). In an emergency the ships' boats could be used too, but this was hardly satisfactory, both Gage and Howe protested that their operations were hampered by the lack of flat-bottomed boats.

These boats would be carried on the upper decks of a warship adding to the problems of overcrowding on troop transports, and rendering the vessel virtually unable to clear the decks for action, if attacked. The crews manning the sweeps would be navy personnel commanded by a lieutenant or senior petty officer. They would raise a special flag on the way inshore and lower it once the troops had been landed. Each boat carried between forty and sixty soldiers who would form up immediately on landing, being members of the same company. The troops sat facing each other down the length of the boat, with the

officers and sergeants fore and aft. The troops were under strict orders to remain silent and not to fire their weapons, which would have been difficult in any case, as they were wrapped in leather or oilskin.

After embarkation the boats were rowed to an assembly point, where the naval officers arranged them into echelons for the landing ashore. The first troops to land would be elite formations of sharpshooters, grenadiers and light infantry. In 1777 at Head of Elk the first echelon was made up of light infantry and grenadier companies, German riflemen, the foot guards, Hessian Grenadiers and the crack loyalist formation, the Queen's Rangers. Once these troops had fanned out on the shore to secure a bridgehead, the bulk of the line infantry, cavalry and artillery would be landed. Captain Johann Ewald of the Hessian Feldjägerkorps describes the landing thus:

On the 22d, about five o'clock in the morning, the anchors were raised with a favorable east wind and the transport ships, which had the jägers, light infantry, and grenadiers on board, were given the signal to take the head of the fleet under full sail. Since Lord Howe, out of caution, frequently took soundings himself in a boat at the head of the fleet, the passage went very slowly, and the anchors were cast three times today.

The 23d. The fleet arrived at noon today at the mouth of the Susquehanna, where it anchored. Admiral Howe and General Howe went on board the boat again to reconnoiter the mouths of the Susquehanna, the North East, and the Elk rivers, taking along two row galleys for their protection. Captain Wreden and thirty jägers were loaded on one galley, and I with the same number of men on the other one. In the vicinity of Turkey Point we discovered a number of armed men, on foot and on horse. The galleys approached within gunshot range, whereupon the Americans withdrew and we sent several rifle shots after them. We returned to our ships during the night.

At the same time, all the brigade majors and adjutants received orders to appear on the Roman Emperor at four o'clock on the morning of the 24th, returning about six o'clock with the following order: "The troops are to prepare immediately for disembarkation. They will be supplied by the ships with rum, biscuit, and cooked salt pork for five days. They are to board the flatboats at once when they arrive alongside the transport ships. During the landing, they will try

to assemble with the greatest expedition, without maintaining company position. Each boat will take aboard fifty men."

The first disembarkation, under Lord Cornwallis and Colonel Donop, consisted of the foot jägers, the light infantry, the English grenadiers, and the Guards. Should the enemy oppose the landing, Lord Cornwallis would order the disposition for further attack.

The second disembarkation, under General Agnew, consisted of the Hessian grenadiers, the Queen's Rangers, Ferguson's sharpshooters, and the 4th and 23d regiments.

The third, under General Grey, of the 28th, 49th, 5th, 10th, 27th, 40th, 55th, 15th, and 42d regiments.

The fourth, under General Knyphausen, of the 44th, 17th, 33d, 37th, 46th, and 64th regiments.

The fifth, under General Stirn, of both Hessian brigades, the Leib, Donop, and Mirbach regiments, and the Combined Regiment under Colonel Loos. The cavalry disembarked after the infantry, and all the artillery and ammunition, supply wagons, and other stores after the cavalry.⁵

Warships would lead the first wave inshore,⁶ the officer commanding controlling the operation by means of signal flags to ensure the flotilla arrived at the beach in good order. Other ships could be deployed to make a demonstration against another part of the coast or shore, or come close inshore to give fire support, particularly against fortifications, although this carried its own hazards.⁷ For the landings on Long Island in 1776 HMS *Rainbow* brought her 44 guns to bear on the beach. In the assault on Kip's Bay on 15 September 1776 (not strictly a landing but an assault river crossing of the East River from Brooklyn to Manhattan) the frigates HMS *Phoenix* (44), HMS *Roebuck* (44) and HMS *Rose* (20) came close inshore to batter the American earthworks in a one-hour

⁵J. Ewald, *Diary of the American War. A Hessian Journal* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 73-74

⁶D. Syrett, 'The Methodology of British Amphibious Operations in the Seven Years and American Wars', *The Mariners Mirror*, 58 (Greenwich: The Society for Nautical Research, 1972), p. 275

⁷ See section 'Charleston 1776' below

bombardment at almost point-blank range that completely levelled the fortification and forced the surviving occupants to flee.⁸ After the success of naval gunnery support in the operations round New York and Long Island in 1776 a shallow draught merchant ship, *Vigilant*, was refitted with sixteen 24-pounders (Ewald says that this ship carried forty 32-pounders, but this seems unlikely)⁹ specifically designed for shore bombardment.

Naval gunfire would cease as the boats approached the shore, the boats' crews would fling a grapnel (grappling hook) or kedge anchor onto the beach, attached to a line, leap overboard and drag the boat up the beach. The troops would jump over the side into the water, wade ashore and form up on the beach ready to move off. The crew would then turn the boat around and row alongside a ship indicating by a signal that they had remaining troops to unload. The process was repeated until all personnel were ashore.

The next phase was the landing of horses, stores, heavy equipment and guns. Horses were carried in adapted transports (see figure 2) but they seem to have made poor sailors, those on Clinton's 1780 expedition to Charleston became very distressed during the storms that bedevilled the voyage, and thrashed against their stalls. Most of them suffered broken legs and had to be destroyed. Howe's mounts loaded on the transport ships heading for the Delaware and the Chesapeake in 1777 suffered greatly too, and most perished ashore, compelling the army to seek animals on landing before it could move inland.

⁸ J. J. Gallagher, *The Battle of Brooklyn 1776* (New York: Sarpedon, 1995) p.160

⁹ Ewald, *op cit*, p.72, see instead W. Hugh Moomaw, 'The Naval Career of Captain Hamond', 1775-1779 (Ph.D diss., University of Virginia, 1955)

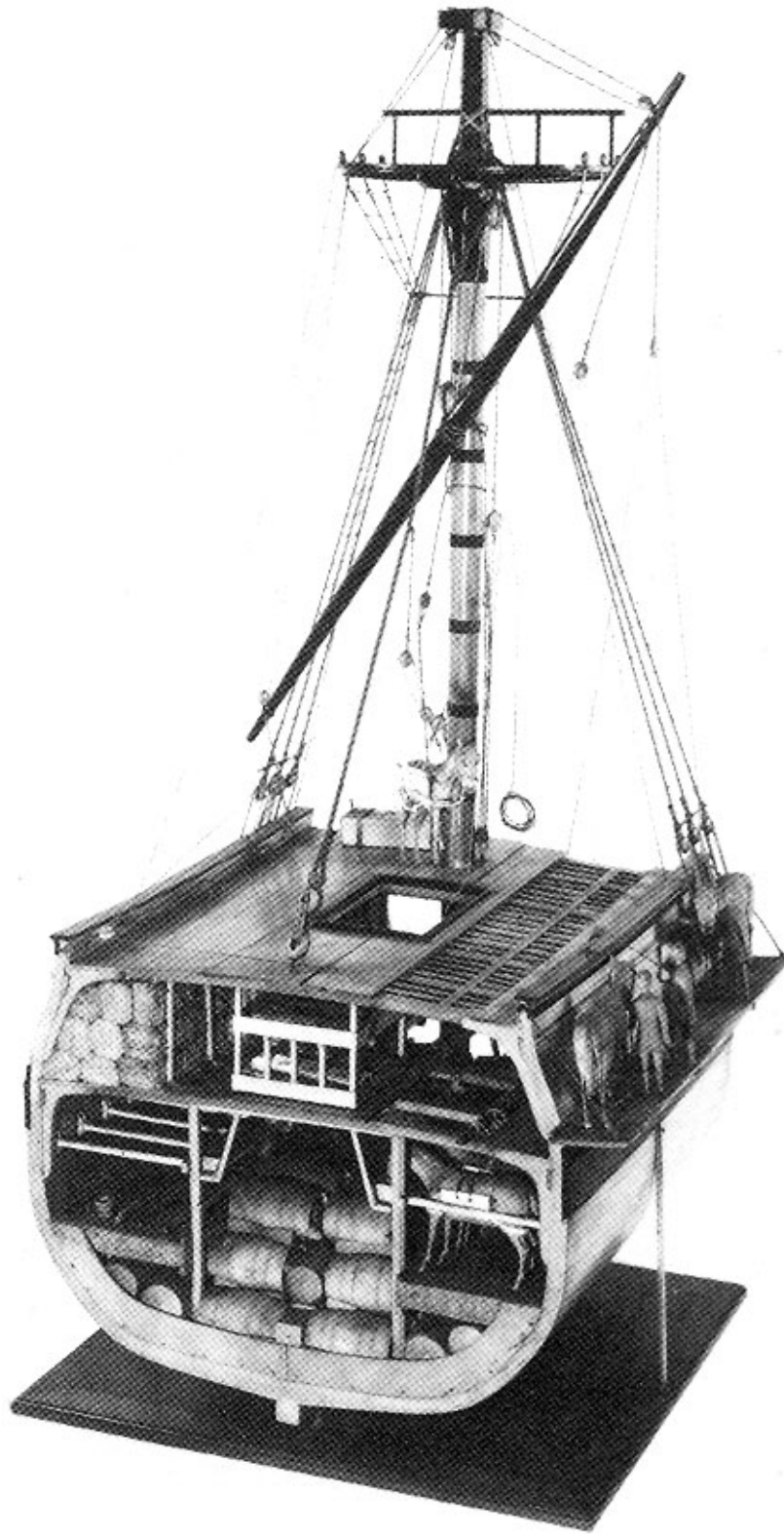
After the landing the support of the navy was vital for successful operations on shore. During the siege of Charleston the military effort depended entirely on the Royal Navy to land supplies, and the boats and small craft were used for scouting the waterways. During the fighting around New York in 1776, the whole operation was dependent on naval support, as described in the 'Operations' section below. Ships' crews also formed shore parties to provide gunners or generally support the army's activities.¹⁰

Amphibious operations in the American War provided the opportunity for Great Britain to exploit the advantages of sea power. The skills acquired earlier in the Eighteenth Century in planning and executing operations involving the transport and landing of troops on hostile shores allowed great strategic and operational flexibility and mobility. Amphibious capability acted as a force multiplier, allowing a relatively small regular army to act with a range and striking power out of all proportion to its size.

¹⁰ A superb treatment of this aspect in a subsequent conflict is in M. Duffy 'Science and Labour'. The Naval Contribution to Operations Ashore in the Great Wars with France 1793-1815', in P. Hore, *Seapower Ashore: 200 Years of Royal Navy Operations on Land* (London: Chatham Publishing, 2001), p.39-52



Specialised Eighteenth Century Landing Craft (Anne S.K. Brown Collection)



Ship model in section showing horse transports (NMM)

Chapter Two: OPERATIONS 1775 - 1778

The Strategic Context

As well as the political and diplomatic difficulties faced by the British government, the Navy's North American squadron under Vice Admiral Graves faced considerable strategic difficulties at the opening of hostilities.

In addition to the flagship HMS *Preston*, the squadron in North America comprised some thirty vessels of various sizes; frigates, schooners and brigs, reinforced briefly by three 64 gun third rates: *Somerset*, *Asia* and *Boyne*, before these were recalled for the defence of the Channel and Western Approaches, these being replaced by decidedly inferior 44 and 50 gun ships. This force was plainly inadequate to watch the coast from Canada to Florida, and the fleet's manning was accordingly increased from 18,000 to 28,000 at an estimated cost of £1,456,000.¹

Immediately there were problems supporting the army at Boston. Graves had to station ten of his ships there to protect supply convoys arriving at the port, and no ships were available to attack rebel ports. Equally, Nova Scotia and Halifax were vulnerable and had to be defended in order to protect Canada. Montgomery and Arnold's raid on and siege of Quebec of 1775 had showed how truly weak British defences were.

¹ Hansard, Vol 18, Col 841

With the fleet so dispersed the American patriots could land arms and powder more or less at will. There was no effective blockade, and munitions could easily be shipped via the West Indies. It was no doubt with some relief then that Graves found himself replaced in December 1775 by Rear Admiral Molyneux Shuldham, but even with a change in command the Royal Navy's continuing weakness was highlighted by the capture of the schooner *Hawke* and the brig *Bolton*, not great prizes in themselves, but a warning of things to come.

However, Quebec was relieved by sea on 6 May 1776, and thereafter the British effort switched to New York. Once the rebels had occupied the Dorchester Heights overlooking the harbour, Boston was evacuated, it could not be used as a safe anchorage for the fleet. However a desperate lack of transports meant that it was not until 7 June that General Howe was able to start disembarking at Staten Island. Reinforcements from Britain had brought his strength to some 25,000 men. There had been a curious simultaneous assault on Charleston in support of the Carolinian Loyalists, discussed in detail below, but this diversion had proved abortive.

In the event the strategy for 1776 proved far too ambitious for the naval resources available to the Howe brothers, in particular there were far too many delays in securing adequate transports, as the following report shows:

Observations upon the present state of transports for the several embarkations now depending.

For the Guards

5 ships are at Portsmouth ready for their reception; 4 are in this river ready to proceed to Portsmouth; 1 more will be ready to sail from this river on Saturday. [Total:] 10. These complete the Guards, and wind permitting may all be at Spithead by the time the Hessians arrive there.

For the Hessians

The tonnage to bring them is 13,840. Of this, 11,500 have been sent to Bremen Leye and would have been nearly sufficient if the number of men had not been increased above what was first proposed.

1500 tons more are at Gravesend on the way to Bremen Leye, and 820 tons more in the river and will be ready to sail very soon.

And lest any disappointment should happen in the arrival of these two last mentioned quantities, two ships, whose tonnage is 1800, have been ordered to proceed from Hamburgh.

The additional tonnage that will be wanted for the Hessians when they get to Spithead is about 4000 tons. In part of this, 2000 tons are already arrived there and ready, and the rest are on the way.

The transports for the Highland corps are complete at Greenock and ready. After providing for the Hessians and Guards, there will remain unappropriated about 3000 tons of transports, part at Plymouth and part in Clyde. They are fitted and victualled and ordered to rendezvous at Spithead.

The service next to be provided for is the carrying of the tents and camp equipage, for which 1100 tons are required; 800 tons are provided. Two or three Dutch ships are daily expected to arrive, and on these the further tonnage will be taken to complete the abovementioned 1100 tons.

The tonnage that will then remain unappropriated will be about 2000 tons. The tonnage wanted for cavalry and dragoon horses is computed at 15,000, vizt. 5000 for the former and 10,000 tons for the latter, and this whole quantity is provided for upon contract in Holland, and these are daily expected to arrive in order to be fitted. One of them is already in hand at Deptford.

The transports for the 6000 foreign troops for which no provision is yet made, and which with other services will amount to about 13,000 tons, must depend on the success of endeavours to be used at Hamburgh and in Holland. There is reason to doubt of the success at Hamburgh, but it is hoped there will be procured in Holland 6 or 8000 tons more than have been already procured there.

There is not any prospect of increasing the tonnage by English shipping.²

² Observations by War Office on Present State of Transports, 4 April 1776, C.O.5/168, fo. 133

Howe's failure to pursue his advantage, by following the retreating forces of Washington up the Hudson, and his brother, Admiral Lord Howe's ambiguous role as peace commissioner, failed to provide the decisive stroke to crush the rebellion decisively. Indeed Howe's caution has been the source of much speculation,³ but it is true to say that the choice of Long Island for the initial assault, rather than a direct attack on the Bronx or Manhattan itself allowed Washington to withdraw his forces more or less intact across the East River and thence into New Jersey, thereby ensuring that the war would continue into 1777, and allowing more time for the French to prepare their planned and much-awaited intervention.

Curiously, rather than dispatching Clinton in hot pursuit across the Hudson, to encircle Washington via the Delaware, Howe diverted him to the strategically irrelevant capture of Newport, Rhode Island. Although this was an interesting and well executed landing (discussed in detail below), it is hard to see how this might have brought the war to an early and successful conclusion.

Thus the strategic impact of the operations in and around New York and the Hudson Valley in 1776 was to ensure that the bulk of the Royal Navy was acting in support of the army. Some 54 out of a total of 74 ships in American waters were engaged on this task, leaving very few to engage in the urgent matter of intercepting increasingly large cargoes of muskets and powder coming from France and Holland, or intercepting and sequestering American commercial cargoes. Worse still these ships had to provide crews

³ I.D. Gruber, *The Howe Brothers and the American Revolution* (New York: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, Va. (by) Atheneum, 1972), Chapter IV

for the innumerable small craft engaged in landing and supplying Howe's troops, and many were effectively out of action for want of hands to man them.

More serious still was the Navy's weakness in European waters.⁴ As noted, Britain's defence in the Western Approaches and Channel relied upon the deterrent value of the fleet. All the frigates and 50s and 64s were on station in North America, along with 15,000, or fully one half of the navy's sailors.⁵ Despite this parlous state of affairs, the French still hesitated over intervention, but increased patrolling by the Royal Navy around Brest and Toulon encouraged them to accelerate their warlike preparations.

The strain on naval manpower and vessels continued throughout the winter of 1776-7, as the land campaign rumbled on without the traditional pause in winter quarters. Every crumb of rations for the army had to be carried across the Atlantic by convoys.⁶ The chief problem seemed to be apparent inability of the King's ministers to grapple with the logistic requirements of the war, and the persistent mistake of ordering large scale movements of troops without the necessary transports with which to effect them.⁷ The boards responsible for hiring vessels were in infrequent communication with the cabinet and even at the end of the war, Sir Charles Middleton at the Navy Board read about the evacuation of North America in a newspaper! The Navy Board was responsible for troop transports and the Treasury for hiring victualling ships, whereas the Ordnance Board

⁴ D. Syrett, *The Royal Navy in European Waters during the American Revolutionary War* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), p.16

⁵ G.R. Barnes and J.H. Owen (eds), *The Private Papers of John Earl of Sandwich* (London: Navy Record Society, 1932), I p.212; and Rodger, *op cit*, p.233-34

⁶ R.A. Bowler, *Logistics and the Failure of the British Army in North America 1775-1783* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), Chapter III

⁷ This is a problem that has persisted until recent times. The troops of the task force for the liberation of the Falkland Islands in 1982 were largely transported in rapidly hired STUFT, ships taken up from trade.

hired ships to carry guns, gunners and ammunition. Often all three were bidding against each other for the same vessels. It was a farcical situation that was happily reformed in March 1779, when the boards were combined into one body. Nevertheless, the total tonnage of shipping available was limited, and once vessels had made the voyage across the Atlantic, they were often hired there for local use. The supply line across the Atlantic was precarious in the extreme; ships were subject to numerous delays through shortage of crews, calm weather, storms and the need to stay together in slow moving convoys, safe from attack by privateers. Consequently, troops in the Americas suffered shortages of the most basic necessities, and the ability to plan and execute ambitious campaigns was often curtailed by lack of supplies.

Troops were carried in the ratio of 100 men to every 200 tons of the ship's weight, packed tightly below decks six to a four man berth, where they could neither stand nor sit up in their beds. On top of the inevitable scourge of sea sickness, they were so close together that if one man rolled over, then all had to and this inevitably led to fights and arguments. Most soldiers preferred the dangers of campaigning against the enemy to a sea voyage.⁸

1777 saw an amphibious descent on the Chesapeake and town of Philadelphia that employed so many of the available ships, that blockade and interception of munitions cargos was practically discontinued for three months while the troops were disembarked and the obstacles and fortifications along the Delaware were cleared.

⁸ D. Syrett, *Shipping and the American War 1775-83. A Study of British Transport Organization. University of London Historical Studies XXVII.* (London: Athlone Press, 1970)

The strategic dispersal of land forces meant that the Royal Navy was kept more or less constantly occupied in supplying and transporting scattered army units throughout 1777 and 1778.

With news of the surrender of Burgoyne after a series of running fights with the Continental army and militia at Saratoga on 17 October 1777, French ports were placed under blockade prior to the expected outbreak of war. It was too little too late. Naval deterrence had failed and the twin failures of the Saratoga and Philadelphia campaigns had guaranteed French intervention and a protracted war. The Royal Navy had been distracted from its primary task of securing command of the seas, running a close blockade of French or American Ports and commerce raiding, in a series of ultimately fruitless diversions.

Thus naval power in the period 1775-1778 was primarily given over to the exigencies of amphibious operations and support of land forces,⁹ and not used offensively against patriot bases along the Atlantic coast, after the controversial expedition to Falmouth in 1775. The navy's main role was the reinforcement and evacuation of troops in Boston to Halifax, Nova Scotia, the landings at Staten Island and the amphibious assaults on Long Island and New York, and the landing at Head of Elk prior to the capture of Philadelphia. All these are discussed in detail in the 'operations' sections.

⁹ J. Black, 'Naval Power, Strategy and Foreign Policy 1775-1791', in M. Duffy (ed.), *Parameters of British Naval Power 1650-1850*, (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1992).

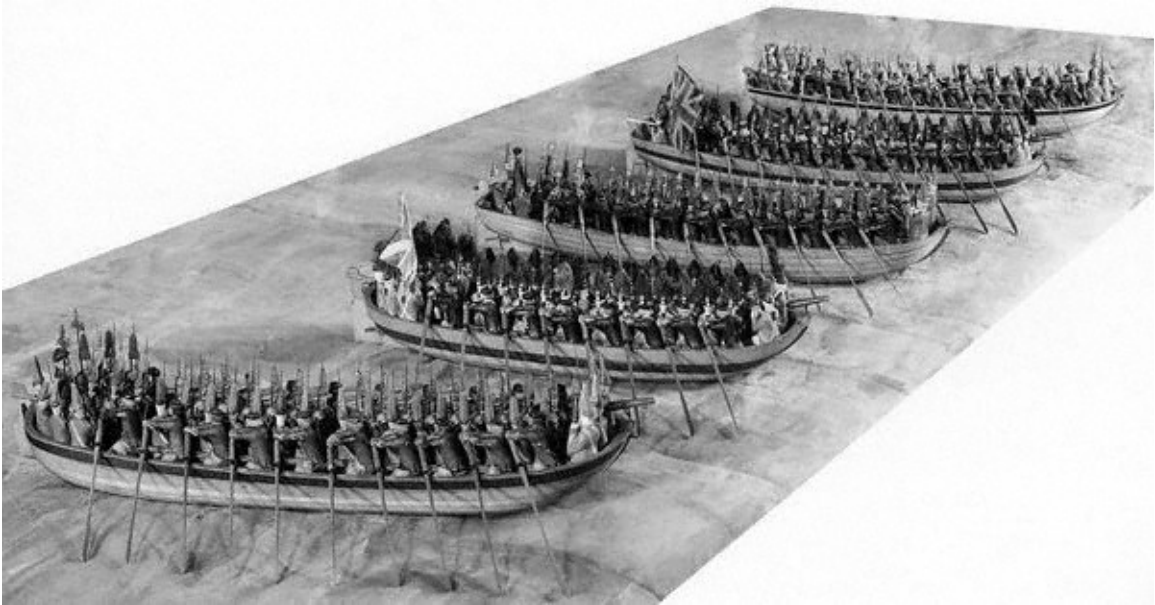
A major offensive expedition to North Carolina was planned for December 1775 to support Lord Dunmore's Loyalist forces, but this arrived too late and an assault was launched against Charleston instead. This, too, is discussed in detail below.

The major problem with raids on towns and ports sympathetic to the patriot cause was political rather than military. Punitive raids may well have been counter productive in alienating public opinion. The raid on Falmouth (Portland, Maine) on 18 October 1775 was widely regarded among patriots and their supporters as an atrocity, and many communities were subsequently reluctant to provide victuals to British ships and troops. Black calls this a 'failure of judgement' in that 'Naval power was not used in a politically acute [sic] fashion'.¹⁰ However, it seems more likely that commanders on the ground, and indeed those in London, considered tactics and operations in depth, but failed to carry out a comprehensive strategic appreciation. This was in no small part due to the convoluted and confused higher command structures in place throughout the war.¹¹

The key strategic conundrum of naval and amphibious strategy between 1775 and 1778 was the question of whether to concentrate or stay dispersed. Small 'pinprick' raids risked being defeated in detail: Concord and Lexington repeated a thousand times over. Certainly, Bunker Hill had proved a salutary lesson, and while landings in support of the Loyalists may have seemed superficially attractive, there were simply not enough suitable vessels to carry out multiple and simultaneous landings in order to provide support for pro-government provincials wherever they might choose to tackle the patriots head on.

¹⁰ Black, *Ibid*, p100

¹¹ W. Seymour, *The Price of Folly* (London: Brassey's, 1995), p. 32



British Landing Boats (Contemporary models NMM)

Charleston 1776

In 1776 the Southern colonies seemed to offer possibilities for a signal success that would boost British fortunes, damaged by events at Boston. Bitter fighting had erupted between supporters of the King, Loyalists, and patriot rebels. This was a war of ambush, raid and skirmish involving very small numbers of troops, but it included a ferocious campaign against the British-supported Cherokee people on the Western frontier, where no quarter was given or expected.¹

In May Lieutenant General Sir Henry Clinton planned an assault on the Chesapeake Bay area in support of local Loyalists. Reinforcements and Lord Cornwallis had just arrived from Ireland, and Howe inexplicably had left no clear instructions for uniting their forces or where he should attack. A conference with the Naval Commander Sir Peter Parker revealed that the defences of Sullivan's Island covering the approaches to Charleston harbour were still under construction, and a determined coup de main might seize them, rendering the town untenable by the rebels. This seemed to be a traditional amphibious assault, which both navy and army had practiced with success during the Seven Years' War. There was no design to assault the town, Clinton lacked the numbers and siege artillery for such an undertaking, but the capture of Sullivan's Island would prevent American shipping using the port for supplies, and provide a jumping off point for some future attempt against the town itself. The British would be able to launch further seaborne raids on the surrounding coastal islands and farms in order to capture supplies

¹ C. G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country. Crisis and diversity in Native American communities*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Chapter 7.

and deny them to the patriots. Lumpkin² asserts that the British ‘strategic concept thus showed wisdom and imagination’.

On 1 June Parker’s fleet anchored a few miles north of the harbour, and the president of South Carolina, John Rutledge, ordered alarm guns to be fired and the militia to be mustered. On 7 June the transports and frigates were brought to the mouth of the harbour over the sandbar into the 5-fathom channel (see map). Parker suggested a landing on Sullivan’s Island itself, and an immediate storming of the as yet unfinished palm-log and sand fortress from the rear. However, there were large Atlantic breakers on the island’s shore and Clinton feared that his boats would be capsized on the run in. He pointed out that the surrounding sandbanks would prevent the supporting ships from standing close in shore to fire accurately on the fort as the troops went in.

Clinton therefore decided to land on Long Island (now called the Isle of Palms) across a strip of water known as Breach Inlet, or simply ‘The Breach’. This was supposed to be 18 inches (45cm) deep at low tide, and the assault troops would be able to wade across covered by field guns dug in on Long Island itself. However, after the troops had landed, on a closer inspection the Breach was discovered to have a dangerous riptide even at low water, and there were a number of seven foot sink holes that could engulf a heavily laden infantryman wholesale. Crossing the Breach would have to be done by boat, and Clinton only had 15 flat-bottomed landing craft available whose draught was shallow enough to avoid running aground. Given that each one could take at most 60 troops, ferrying

² H. Lumpkin, *From Savannah to Yorktown. The American Revolution in the South*. (New York: Paragon House, 1981), p.10

substantial assault forces of 2,200 across might take some time. There seems here to be an elementary failure of the basic scouting procedure, Clinton had personally checked the surrounding marshes on two separate nights, being rowed around in a ship's boat, but failed to accurately assess the nature of this strip of water.

Charleston was originally built for ease of maritime and not land communications, it sits on the end of a peninsula between the Ashley and Cooper Rivers. It could easily be surrounded by land and sea, as it was to be in 1780, but the area north of the town and both banks of the two rivers would have to be occupied. The coastline of South Carolina is fringed by islands more or less joined to the mainland by salt marshes intersected by muddy creeks. It was impossible for troops to move through this terrain without boats and even then navigation was very difficult and only possible during certain tidal conditions. Sullivan's Island covered the north of the harbour entrance and James Island covered the south, Fort Sullivan and Fort Johnson were built on each respectively and in 1776 were garrisoned by 1,950 South Carolinian regulars, 500 Virginian regulars, 700 militia from Charleston, along with 1,972 militia from the South Carolinian countryside, and another 1,400 from neighbouring North Carolina. Commanding this force was Major General Charles Lee, an experienced officer with European service behind him, including a spell with Frederick the Great! He had served with British forces in the Seven Years' War. Whilst his record was impressive, he was a mercurial character who exasperated his contemporaries, and presented a rather odd, spindly figure.

The design of Fort Sullivan was conventional: a square with a bastion at each corner, manned by about 435 soldiers of the 2nd South Carolina Regiment and the artillery of the 4th. It was built of locally available material: palm logs laid into two rows and infilled with sand and mud. This construction proved perfectly well adapted to absorbing solid roundshot fired from the ships. Flanking the fort were two breastworks facing the beach, although the northern sections of the fort itself were as yet unfinished, and although Lee, pronouncing the place a deathtrap, had ordered a trench to be dug to cover the rear, this had not taken place. Troops assaulting from this side would have had a clear run. The fortress was armed with eight 18-pounders, and 7 9-pounders, supported by some infantry, but all the weapons faced the sea. If a British frigate could get between Sullivan Island and the mainland, the fort would be cut off from all hope of help. Nevertheless, the fort's commander William Moultrie, colonel of the 22nd South Carolina Regiment, determined to hold out come what may, even spurning Lee's suggestion of building a floating bridge to safeguard his line of retreat. His bravery seemed reckless: there was only 10,000 pounds of powder stockpiled, which would soon be expended in any extended cannonade.

At the north of the island facing Long Island was Colonel William Thomson with 300 3rd Carolina Rangers, 30 Catawba Indian riflemen, 200 North Carolina Continentals, 200 South Carolina militia and the colourfully named 'Raccoon Company' made up of 50 Peedee, Waccamaw, Cheraw and Catawba Indian riflemen. A log and sand breastwork had been thrown up to provide some cover for this heterogeneous force and an 18-pounder and 6-pounder provided to give some fire support.

At about 11:15 on the morning of 28 June, the wind at last being fair and the tide being favourable, HMS *Active* (28), HMS *Bristol* (50) and HMS *Experiment* (50) and HMS *Solebay* (28) in the van, followed by HMS *Sphinx* (20), HMS *Actaeon* (28), HMS *Syren* (28) and the bomb-vessel HMS *Thunder* sailed into firing range of the fort. Things went awry almost at once: *Sphinx*, *Actaeon*, and *Syren* ran aground, and *Thunder's* mortars firing at extreme range, missed their targets, and were overcharged with powder, such that the ferocious recoil broke the timbers of their mountings, and the ship was silenced.

The fort opened the engagement, while *Active* anchored at 400 yards, followed by *Bristol*, *Experiment* and *Solebay* and commenced firing broadsides on the fort. During these exchanges the South Carolina flag was blown off its flagpole and one Sergeant William Jasper strapped it to a ramrod and re-hoisted it, becoming one of the first heroes of the American Revolution. However, the fort soon ran out of powder, and 500 pounds was dispatched in a boat from Charleston along with imprecations from state governor John Rutledge to keep up the fight. Later, General Charles Lee arrived and personally fired a cannon, made a brief inspection and retired to Charleston. American casualties were light, despite the terrifying bombardment, with only twelve men killed. The roundshot merely buried itself in the walls of the fort or the surrounding sand. Most of the casualties and damage were on the other side. *Bristol's* anchor cable was shot away and the ship swung stern on to the fort and raked mercilessly, losing forty-four killed and thirty wounded (numbers vary), including the captain who later died. *Experiment's* captain lost

his arm and lost fifty-seven killed and thirty wounded, and *Active* lost one killed and one wounded while *Solebay* lost three killed and four wounded.

Parker had to endure the unequal fight until the tide came in and he could get his ships out across the sandbar at the harbour entrance. *Sphinx* and *Syren* were floated free but *Actaeon* remained stuck fast and had to be abandoned and burnt by its crew with the loss of one life.

Clinton and Cornwallis mounted a diversionary attempt to cross Breach Inlet at the same time, protected by the armed schooner *Lady William*. The flat-bottomed boats had light guns mounted in their bows to give some fire support, but this proved of little avail. As they approached the shore they were swept by rifle, musket and canister fire and were forced to pull back to Long Island under Clinton's orders. The Americans defending here soon received a further 700 reinforcements and no further attempt to cross the stretch of water was made. Even the commodore himself, Sir Peter Parker suffered an embarrassing ignominy to cap this resounding defeat. A near miss among several by shot had torn the back of his trousers out, a gift for Whig satirists in London who penned the following piece of doggerel:

*Now bold as a Turk
I proceed to New York
Where with Clinton and Howe you may find me
I've the wind in my tail
And I'm hoisting my sail
To leave Sullivan's Island behind me³*

³ *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 1926-1927, LX, 239 in W.P. Cumming and H.F. Rankin, *The Fate of a Nation. The American Revolution through contemporary eyes* (London: Phaidon, 1975), p. 98

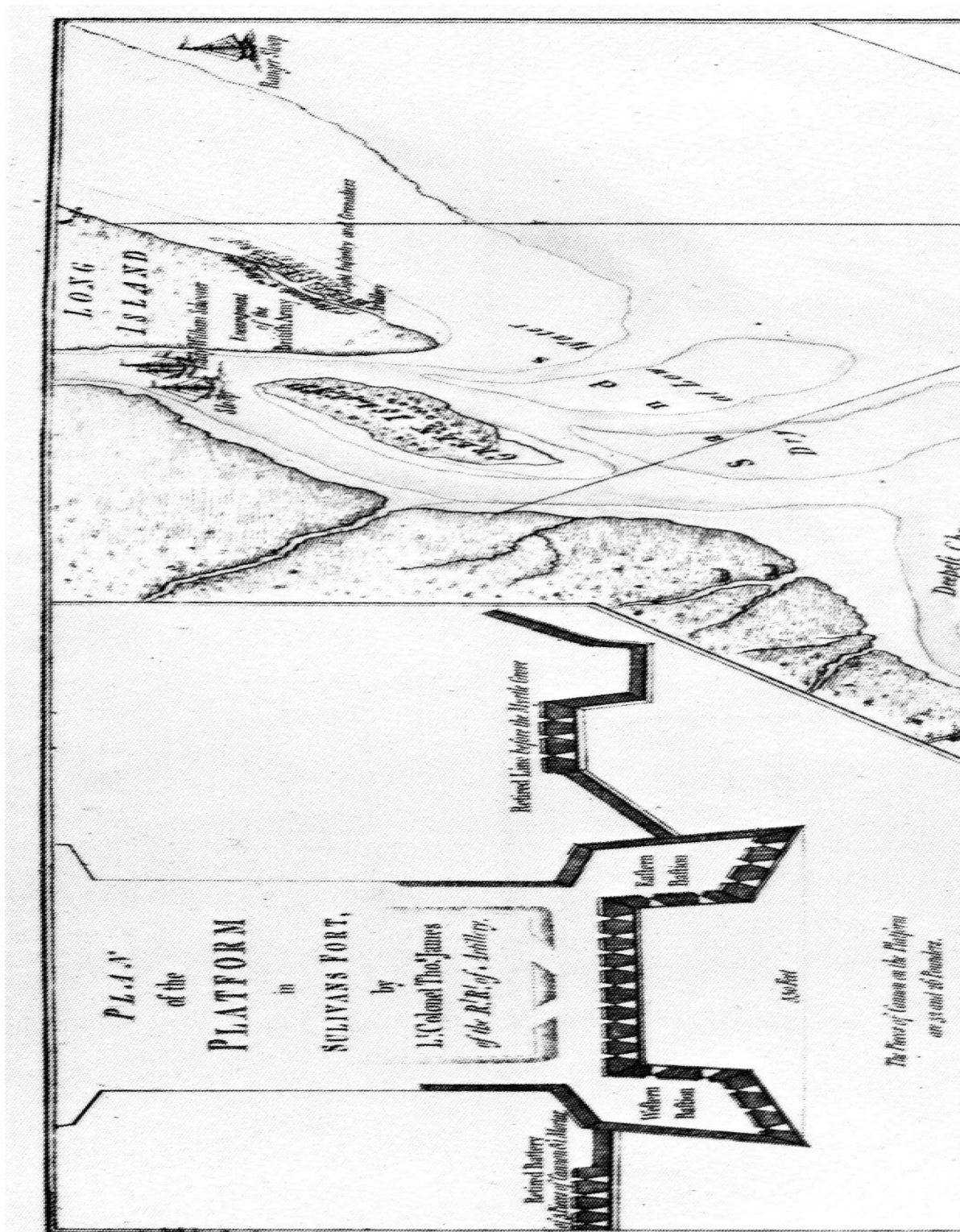
The victorious colonists celebrated with a hogshead of rum. The defenders of Charleston, with largely amateur soldiers occupying unfinished defences, had bested the combined efforts of the Royal Navy and British army, supposed past masters of this type of warfare. It provided a fillip for Patriot fortunes, and decided many wavering supporters in the South to declare for the rebellion. It was swiftly followed by the Declaration of Independence on 4 July, indicating that the intractable war of the legislature would be a hard fought one.

What had gone wrong? Admiral Sir Peter Parker later said that the ships had opened fire at 400 yards, too great a range for any consistent accuracy needed to collapse the stout if makeshift bastions of the fort. Clinton⁴ said that range was even further, up to 800 yards, and that the guns fired many salvos over the heads of the defenders. In any event the ships were too far offshore to use case or grapeshot, which could have proved more effective in targeting the guns' crews with a spray of lead ball. In 1780, before the second attack, soundings were taken of the water's depth surrounding the fort, and ships could in fact have comfortably anchored within musket range. Clinton suggested that the vessels stood too far offshore, and that the three vessels that had run aground could have been used to interdict the flow of reinforcements and supplies from Charleston. He failed to mention that it was indeed he that had advised against a landing on the beach in front of the fort because of the shallows and surf there. The attempted amphibious assault across Breach Inlet turned out to be a fiasco, and was defeated close to the shoreline by a

⁴ W. B. Willcox, ed., *The American Rebellion: Sir Henry Clinton's Narrative of His Campaigns, 1775-1782, with an Appendix of Original Documents* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954)

determined defence, and it is certain that had this been better handled, the losses of the ships, while grievous would have been justified by the capture of Sullivan's Island.

The expedition had suffered from vague strategic direction on the part of Germain, Sandwich and Howe, leading to improper and inappropriate use of British complete dominance of the ocean, with little understanding of the dangers of using warships close inshore. Contrary to all experience of successful amphibious warfare hitherto, the navy and army commanders failed to cooperate effectively. It was a gloomy harbinger for the rest of British war effort.



*A Plan of the Attack on Fort Sullivan (BL Map Library
RUSI A30-31)*

New York 1776 – First Phase

Well before the evacuation of Boston, General Gage looked toward New York as a very attractive base for British operations in North America and had secretly started to prepare for the occupation of the city even before the battle of Bunker Hill on 17 June 1775. New York offered a deep water all-weather port with access directly to the Atlantic and Hudson River valley, and was far more easily defended than Boston. When General William Howe took over command in September 1775, like Gage, he initially intended to overwinter in Boston, but the occupation of Dorchester heights in March 1776, overlooking the harbour, from where rebel artillery could easily rake the fleet, made the city untenable. Lacking the requisite numbers to directly assault New York, he opted to withdraw to Halifax, Nova Scotia *pro tem*. The rebel threat to Canada delayed Howe for some time, and it was not until June 1776 that the assault on New York was launched.

General Howe had sailed from Halifax, Nova Scotia, arriving off Sandy Hook on 25 June with 130 ships and over 9,000 troops. Commanding the fleet that arrived on 12 July was his brother, Admiral Howe, with a further 13,000 troops in 150 ships. The combined fleet anchored off Staten Island, whose inhabitants were known to be friendly. The garrison and inhabitants of New York crowded onto the quaysides to view the spectacle. Howe sent various officers to invite Washington to a parlay, but he refused as they would not recognise his title as General of the Congress army. Meanwhile, on 1 August, Sir Peter Parker's fleet of thirty ships, with Generals Clinton and Cornwallis, returned from the abortive assault on Charleston, with a further 3,000 troops. As news spread of the defeat

of the expedition it seemed to give heart to the New York garrison, but Washington called this development alarming.

Later, on 12 August, 8,000 mercenaries from Hesse-Cassel arrived, bringing Howe's strength to 32,000 soldiers, 10,000 sailors and 2,000 marines, by far the largest expedition of its type ever mounted by Britain and certainly the greatest fleet ever seen in America, as noted at the time by the Admiral's secretary, English hymn writer Ambrose Serle.¹

Howe's options for the assault with complete command of the narrow waters were various. He could have landed on Manhattan Island, north of the city and trapped the troops defending it. On the other hand there was the possibility of landing further up the Hudson where the island of Manhattan is connected to Westchester County at Kingsbridge, which would have isolated the whole of Manhattan. However, the Americans had constructed a submerged boom further down the Hudson that would prove awkward to cross and dismantle. In the event Howe chose the third option suggested by Clinton, to cross at the shortest point and land at Gravesend Bay on Long Island. This was the exact spot chosen by Colonel Richard Nicoll for the assault on New Amsterdam on 24 August 1664. The town was captured, only to be recaptured by the Dutch in 1673, and then exchanged for Surinam at the Peace of Westminster in 1674.

¹ E.H. Tatum, *The American Journal of Ambrose Serle, Secretary to Lord Howe. 1776 - 1778* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1940), p.54

It is certainly possible to reproach Howe for his caution in selecting Long Island. The possibility of trapping the only substantial army the colonists had must have seemed tempting, but it is important to remember that the Brooklyn Heights, then as now, looked down on the town and any artillery posted there would have rendered the town unsafe for the British and prevented them from using the port to re-supply the expedition, the entire objective of the operation. Equally, defeated rebel forces could slip away across the East River to Long Island unless that too was held in strength by British and Loyalist troops. Howe was aware too that the Island could provide valuable food and fodder for the army and timber for the ships. Furthermore, many of the islanders were of Dutch stock and not particularly well-disposed toward the rebel Congress or the rebellion, and would be likely to co-operate with the British military commissaries.

The Island was dominated by a long ridge line, the Prospect Range, also known as the Heights of Guan, between 40 and 90 feet high, and while not being difficult to climb, it did form a natural, thickly vegetated wall that would prevent formed bodies of troops and artillery moving directly up the slopes. Behind the ridge were the man-made fortifications at Red Hook, protecting Brooklyn. These consisted of Fort Stirling, Fort Putnam, the Ring Fort, Fort Greene, Cobble Hill, Fort Box and Fort Defiance and were substantial earthworks with numerous obstacles and cleared fields of fire. The reverse slopes of this ridge were intersected with hedged lanes and dotted with small coppices. It was not ideal country for large bodies of troops, and any confrontation with the patriot forces would favour the defenders who could use the terrain as cover to fire from, and then melt away.

A network of roads in the rear of defensive position offered plenty of routes for re-supply and withdrawal.

Thursday 22 August saw the British assault crossing of the Narrows between Staten Island and Gravesend Bay. The landing beaches were in Gravesend Bay from Denyse Ferry at the north (now Fort Hamilton) and Coney Island at the southern end. The frigates *Rose*, *Phoenix*, *Rainbow* and *Greyhound* provided naval gunnery support. The *Rainbow* was positioned to cover the shore road to prevent reinforcements being brought up to the beach to oppose the landing. The bomb ketches, *Thunder* (now repaired after breaking its gun mountings at Charleston) and *Carcass* were detailed to provide counter-battery fire against rebel artillery on the high ground.

The landing craft used for the crossing were constructed for the task on Staten Island and were broad flat-bottomed craft, some, called 'batteaux', being fitted with ramps similar to those of the Second World War (see illustration). The troops sat tightly packed in rows, with weapons loaded and bayonets fixed. At 200 metres from the beach the Commodore, William Hotham commanding the landing signalled the 75 flat boats, 11 batteaux and 2 galleys to form a series of assault waves ten boats abreast by means of the prearranged signal of a red flag. Within ten minutes, four thousand men were on the beach in fighting order and ready to move to the assault. A few skirmishers fired some desultory shots before retiring, but to all intents and purposes the landing was unopposed. In hindsight this was a mistake on the part of the defenders, Charleston had shown how a small number of sharpshooters and cannon could wreak havoc on a landing of this type. By

midday the entire first wave of 15,000 supported by 40 guns was ashore – it was a remarkable achievement. The first troops to land were the Hessian Grenadiers and Jaegers commanded by Colonel von Donop, and in the afternoon the cavalry, remaining artillery and more Hessians under De Heister and von Knyphausen.

Washington was still unsure whether this was the main assault or a feint. His scouts only reported some 9,000 British unloading, which left a substantial force that could disembark anywhere on Manhattan or further up the Hudson. A further six regiments were ferried across to Long Island but half the total force was kept on Manhattan to counter an expected attack in that quarter.

By 25 August Howe had massed 20,000 troops on Long Island, about twice as many as those available to Washington, yet Howe declined to assault the heights frontally. Memories of Bunker Hill must have made him cautious, he had commanded the light infantry in the assault on Breed's Hill redoubt, and the heavy casualties that day had a profound effect on him.²

On the night of 26 August full two-thirds of Howe's force marched around the flank of the American positions on the heights, arriving in the flank and rear of Washington's defensive position. A bitter fight followed, but the patriot army was massively outnumbered, and despite heroic resistance by the Marylanders, suffered a humiliating defeat, losing about 1500 prisoners and over a thousand killed, although records for the

² R. Ketchum, *The Battle for Bunker Hill* (London: Cresset Press, 1963) p.137

American army were not very carefully kept. Howe estimated Washington's losses to be 3,300 while Clinton records that the Americans lost as many as 6,000!³

Washington pulled what remained of his 9,500 strong force into the strong fortifications constructed around Brooklyn. Howe declined to attack frontally and the British began digging a parallel and a battery position.

So far the weather had prevented the fleet from entering the East River, but at any time the British could bring their lighter vessels past Red Hook and cut off Washington's troops holding the entrenchments at Brooklyn. Their guns could be brought to bear on the rear of the American position and render the position untenable. Worse still, a landing on the island of Manhattan or even at Kingsbridge could seal the entire army garrisoned in New York, effectively ending the war in that theatre. Accordingly after a Council of War on 29 August, Washington ordered the evacuation of the Brooklyn position, and the entire army, apart from five heavy cannon, was successfully extricated by the morning of 30 August, Washington being among the last to leave. The British and their Hessian auxiliaries took possession of the empty position later that day.

³ J. J. Gallagher, *The Battle of Brooklyn 1776* (New York: Sarpedon, 1995), Chapter XI

New York 1776 – Second Phase

Howe was convinced he had won a major victory and his dispatch to London reporting the battle was received with much rejoicing. He was decorated with the prestigious Order of the Bath, but in the theatre of operations there were dissenting voices. George Collier, captain of the *Rainbow*, in a passage dripping with sarcasm neatly summarises the criticisms of many:

The having to deal with a generous, merciful, forbearing enemy, who would take no unfair advantages, must surely have been highly satisfactory to General Washington, and he was certainly very deficient in not expressing his gratitude to General Howe for his kind behaviour towards him. Far from taking the rash resolution of hasty passing over the East River... and crushing at once a frightened, trembling enemy, [Howe] generously gave them time to recover from their panic-to throw up fresh works-to make new arrangements-and to recover from the torpid state the rebellion appeared in from its late shock.

*For many succeeding days did our brave veterans, consisting of twenty-two thousand men, stand on the banks of the East River, like Moses on Mount Pisgah, looking at their promised land, little more than a half a mile distant. The rebels' standards waved insolently in the air from many different quarters of New York. The British troops could scarcely contain their indignation at the sight and at their own inactivity; the officers were displeased and amazed, not being able to account for the strange delay.*¹

Nevertheless, Howe was reluctant to risk a humiliating check in front of the strongly defended lines of Brooklyn, and seems to have offered his enemy a 'golden bridge' to retreat across. Though thereafter, it was important to follow up with alacrity, despite the disorganization and fatigue that the battle of Long Island had caused to his forces.

¹ *Memoirs Long Island History Society*, II, 413-14, in W.P. Cumming and H.F. Rankin, *The Fate of a Nation. The American Revolution through contemporary eyes*. (London: Phaidon, 1975), p.110, (emphasis in the original)

Only the vagaries of the weather had prevented Washington's troops on Long Island being cut off by the Royal Navy, and now he began to reconsider the strategy of defending New York. The advantages offered to the British of complete mobility by sea and navigable waterways would force Washington to prosecute the war further inland where he could exploit the advantages of the interior of the continent, but first he would have to withdraw from New York. This was to be one of the most difficult operations carried out by Washington during the entire war, and above all the one that ensured that the war and revolution could continue, encouraging intervention by France and the other continental powers.

Howe lay supine on Long Island for two weeks re-organising his troops. At first this inactivity seems inexplicable, but in reality Howe's mission was a contradictory one. In the first instance he was required to inflict a convincing defeat on the patriot army, so significant and final that the Continental Congress would be persuaded to sue for terms. So far, while inflicting a stinging reverse on Washington's army, he had failed to deliver the decisive blow. Moreover, Howe was empowered to reach a negotiated settlement with the colonists, who were not at this stage fully recognized as a belligerent power, but as British subjects in a state of civil insurrection.² The two aims were simply incompatible, any victory of annihilation, as well as being anathema to the 18th century military mind, would be poorly received by those sympathetic to the revolution at home, and make a peaceful resolution harder to achieve. The revolution had to be wounded, but not

² N.A.M. Rodger, *The Insatiable Earl: A Life of John Montagu, 4th Earl of Sandwich* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), Chapter XIII

exterminated – the colonial oligarchy would have to be preserved in order to govern the country in the Post-conflict North American colonies.

Accordingly, on 11 September a peace conference was convened on Staten Island. In attendance were Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Edmund Rutledge (governor of South Carolina) Lord Howe and Admiral Howe. The Colonial delegation refused to withdraw the Declaration of Independence and the meeting broke up without conclusion. While Admiral Howe had tried to persuade the Americans that he could grant important concessions, he admitted that he would have to have any agreement ratified by North, parliament and the King. He reported to Germain that ‘for very obvious reasons we could not enter into any treaty with their Congress, and much less proceed in any conference of negociation [sic] upon the inadmissible ground of independency’.³ After mutual expressions of respect the conference dissolved, and the American delegates went back to Philadelphia, reporting to Congress on 17 September.

Now preparations focused on the anticipated crossing to Manhattan Island, while Washington struggled to keep his forces together. Many militiamen, assuming the campaign season to be over drifted away from the army, and the morale among the remaining troops, dispirited by the defeat on Long Island, reached a new low. The American forces, some 20,000 effectives, were concentrated in three grand divisions under Putnam, Greene and Heath. They were posted in New York, along the East River, and Harlem, and protecting Kingsbridge respectively. Fortescue⁴ calls the deployment

³ M. Boatner, *Peace Conference on Staten Island* in *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution* (Mechanicsville, PA: Stackpole Books, 1994) p. 847

⁴ J. W. Fortescue, *A History of the British Army. Volume III* (Uckfield, East Sussex: Naval and Military Press, 2004 reprint), p.187

‘fatuous’, and while that may be a little harshly overstated, it does seem quixotic to spread the troops over a front of some sixteen miles, with Greene’s command mainly consisting of militia, protecting the most vulnerable portion, eight to ten miles of shore. Having been given permission by Congress to evacuate the city on 14 September, Washington resolved to pull all his troops out and north of Fort Washington. However moving his baggage took far longer than he expected, and on the 15 September the troops were still in their positions when the British mounted their second amphibious assault.

Clinton continued to press for a coup de main against Kingsbridge, but Howe chose the safer option of a landing at Kip’s Bay, believed to be lightly defended, and still allowing the encirclement of nearly two-thirds of the patriot forces remaining in Manhattan. Howe hoped to force Washington to fight another, and this time decisive, general engagement north of the city.

In preparation for the assault on 3 September the frigate HMS *Rose* towed 30 flatboats in Wallabout Bay, but fire from the batteries on Manhattan forced her to take shelter in Newtown Creek. On 13th September four other frigates *Phoenix*, *Roebuck*, *Orpheus* and *Carysfort* moved up the East River, followed the next day by another warship and six transports. Meanwhile on the other side of Manhattan Island, three warships *Renown*, *Repulse*, *Pearl*, and an armed schooner, *Tryal*, ran past the Hudson batteries and anchored upstream preventing any evacuation to the Jersey shore. It was not clear to the Americans now on which side of Manhattan the expected landing would actually take place.

In fact, though 4,000 troops landed at Kip's Bay (where the modern 34th Street reaches the East River), starting at about 10 in the morning on 15 September. This sector was only lightly held by Colonel William Douglas and some Connecticut militia. Covered by the guns of the six warships, some 84 flatboats appeared from Newtown Creek, and assembled behind the ships, while they commenced an hour-long bombardment with more than seventy guns from about 11 o'clock. As the smoke cleared at about 1 o'clock, the boats came inshore against the tide, and on landing the troops were forced to scramble over the rocky beach. However, the defenders had fled under the withering bombardment which had razed their earth bank fortification. While the operational decision to land here may be open for debate⁵, the British had given another masterclass in combined operations and amphibious landing tactics.

With the British troops safely ashore, and the defenders of the East River flying in all directions, Washington sent Putnam post haste to withdraw Sullivan's troops out of the city along the main post road (now Lexington Avenue). However the British soon cut this axis of retreat and Putnam was forced to take to the Bloomingdale road on the other side of the island on the Hudson shore, only a few hundred yards (the width of Central Park) separating them from the encircling British. The probably apocryphal tale is told that General Howe and his staff paused to take a glass of Madeira and slice of cake with the patriotic wife of Robert Murray, a colonel in Washington's Army, Mrs. Mary Lindley

⁵ See I.D. Gruber, *The Howe Brothers and the American Revolution* (New York: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, Va. (by) Atheneum, 1972), Chapter IV, p. 120-121

Murray, delaying the advance for two hours and allowing Putnam to make good his escape. Such is the stuff of legends.⁶

The first wave under Clinton of 4,000 men was detailed to seize and hold Murray Hill a mile to the north west of Kip's Bay, until the second wave of 9,000 could be landed (which most likely accounts for the operational pause). At about 2pm Howe arrived with the main body, which did not complete its disembarkation until about five o'clock in the evening. At this point one brigade pushed south towards New York City and the remainder headed for the commanding ground of Harlem Heights. New York had been captured intact, Howe had secured his winter quarters but the main objective had been missed: Washington had escaped once again with his forces intact.

At the battle of Harlem Heights on 16 September, the British light infantry of the advance guard came up against a partially entrenched triple line of defences and in a sharply fought skirmish were checked by the American forces, who for the first time ever advanced to meet the oncoming British, overcoming at last their awe of the redcoats. It was a moral if small victory, but not enough to change the strategic situation, Washington was forced to withdraw north, but Howe was impressed enough to order consolidation of his position for the next month, and attempt to rebuild portions of the city destroyed after a disastrous fire on 20-21 September.

⁶ M. Boatner, *Murray Hill Myth* in *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution* (Mechanicsville, PA: Stackpole Books, 1994), p.755

On 12 October Clinton led another landing of 4,000 men, covered by thick fog at Throg's Neck threatening to cut off the Harlem Heights – Fort Washington position at Kingsbridge, but found themselves blocked by a marshy creek defended at the only two crossing points by 1,800 Americans who managed to bottle them up on the peninsula. Howe considered his options for six days and then shifted landing operations about three miles north to Pell's Point, while at the same time Washington had begun to recognize that his position was untenable and began withdrawing north. The landing on 18 October was only opposed by about 750 men, but they managed to delay the British until nightfall allowing Washington to complete his withdrawal to White Plains.

In the ensuing battle on 28 October the Americans were again outflanked but Washington managed to withdraw with his forces largely intact, while Howe turned south again to reduce the strongpoint at Fort Washington. This coordinated assault, with the frigate *Pearl* giving fire support, and 3,000 Hessians under von Knyphausen landing to take the fort from the north, netted him some 2,813 prisoners and a quantity of stores, but had diverted the operation from the pursuit and destruction of the American army. Soon after on 20 November Fort Lee on the opposite Jersey Shore was abandoned by its garrison and captured by 4,500 men crossing in boats under Cornwallis. The British now had total mastery of the Lower Hudson, but the American army was still at large and a serious threat, as it was to demonstrate at Trenton and Princeton in December of 1776.

Howe had used his operational and strategic mobility for tactical advantage. His tactical sense both in using the surprise element of an amphibious landing and in outmanoeuvring

his enemy time and time again was impeccable, if accomplished against a numerically and qualitatively inferior enemy. With the landing on Long Island, and subsequent campaign, Howe had secured New York as a base of operations and a secure anchorage for the Royal Navy.

Nevertheless, his lack of purpose and reluctance to use the amphibious capacity to gain decisive strategic advantage was a major fault of his command decision making, and one which gave Washington significant time to prepare the defences. On 6 August he wrote to Germain saying:

The troops that have arrived to this day are expressed in my returns to the Secretary at War and Adjutant-General, whereby your lordship will observe that we are in force sufficient to enter upon offensive operations; but I am detained by the want of camp equipage, particularly kettles and canteens so essential in the field, and without which too much is to be apprehended on the score of health at a time when sickness among the British troops was never more to be dreaded, from a due consideration of their importance in the prosecution of this distant war and esteeming the army present as the stock upon which the national force in America must in future be grafted. However, if the camp equipage should not arrive with Commodore Hotham, we must use every means to provide against those wants and the army will immediately begin to act.⁷

It seems here that Howe is looking for reasons to delay the assault on Long Island. While it is certain that the catering arrangements for the army were important, they were not in and of themselves a good reason to postpone the attack

Even the choice of an assault on Long Island is questionable, a landing on Manhattan itself could well have isolated the garrison of Long Island and bottled up the remaining part of Washington's forces in the city itself. This would have ended the war at a stroke.

⁷ General William Howe to Lord George Germain (No. 20) 6 August, Staten Island. TNA, C.O.5/93, fo. 228.

Yet, having encircled half of the enemy forces on Long Island he then allowed the remainder at Red Hook to withdraw right under his nose.

Howe had lost sight of the purpose of his campaign, Germain's (the King's) instructions to him as peace commissioner had been indeed ambiguous, but Germain was careful to allow him to use his own judgment, separated as they were by thousands of miles of ocean. It is certain that the two aims were incompatible, but a conclusive military victory would have allowed the Howe brothers to impose any settlement they liked on the colonists, but the contradictory instructions to them as peace commissioners left them somewhat hamstrung. Indeed by 25 September he was beginning to despair of a swift resolution to the campaign. In a private letter to Germain, he gave his assessment of the prospects for the campaign:

My Lord, from the present appearance of things I look upon the farther progress of this army for the campaign to be rather precarious... I presume I must not risk, as a check at this time would be of infinite detriment to us.

The enemy is too strongly posted to be attacked in front and innumerable difficulties are in our way of turning him on either side. Though his army is much dispirited from the late success of His Majesty's arms, yet have I not the smallest prospect of finishing the contest this campaign, nor until the rebels see preparations in the spring that may preclude all thoughts of further resistance.⁸

Howe's arguments here seem curious given that he had passed up many opportunities to ensnare and completely destroy Washington's dwindling command. Gruber contends that Howe did not intend to allow Washington to escape, but that he was more interested in acquiring territory⁹. However, this is to misunderstand the eighteenth century military

⁸ General William Howe to Lord George Germain [Private] 25 September, New York Island, Copy. TNA, C.O.5/93, fo. 283

⁹ Gruber, *op. cit.*, p.126

mind.¹⁰ Howe was only acting within the understood conventions of the time. Total annihilation of the enemy was not the object of military operations, that is something that belongs to a later age in warfare. Contemporary army commanders were much admired for the ability to direct elegant manoeuvre and to force an enemy to retire from his position with minimal effusion of blood. The colonists needed a demonstration of British military power, determination and skill that would convince them that the war was unwinnable. In any case, a massacre of patriot combatants on the lines of Culloden would have created much ill-will and made the colonies even harder to govern in post-war North America.

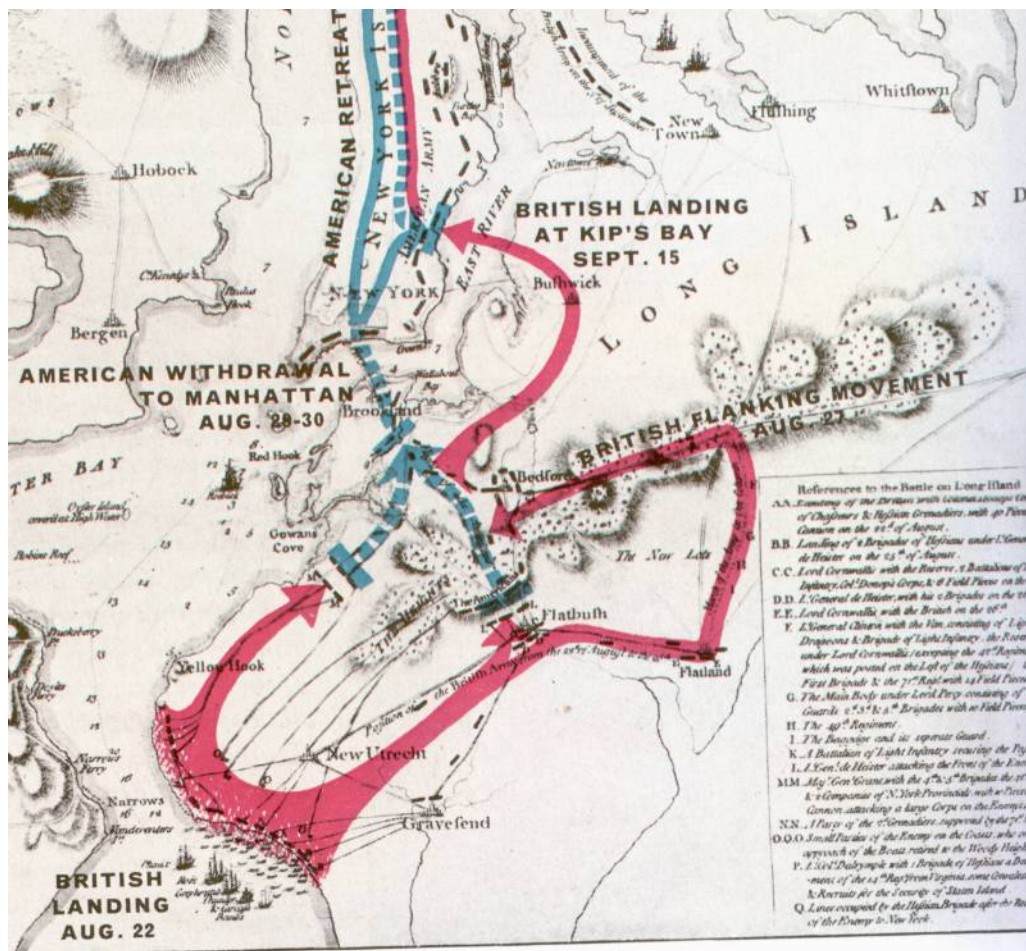
Having been given the freedom to determine the strategy and operational objectives by Germain, Howe simply reverted to type, and while he did lose sight of the overall strategic purpose of the New York campaign, it is somewhat anachronistic for later commentators historians to expect him to have the expertise in counter-insurgency warfare needed to put an end to the conflict, and along with his brother, impose terms on the rebellious colonists.

Seymour¹¹ calls the conduct of Sir William Howe and his brother Admiral Lord Howe ‘the greatest puzzle to solve for this period of the war’ and goes on to say that ‘it seems obvious that in the last six months of 1776 there was every opportunity to crush the rebellion and create a situation in which sensible negotiations could lead to a satisfactory future.’ Yet hindsight always affords a perfect view, and while General Howe was

¹⁰ See C. Duffy, *The Military Experience in the Age of Reason* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), p.12 and p.140

¹¹ W. Seymour, *The Price of Folly* (London: Brassey's, 1995), p. 80-81

perfectly capable of exploiting the tactical and operational advantages afforded by the Royal Navy's complete dominance of the ocean to use surprise amphibious landings in a series of well-executed operations. The thornier political problem of resolving the crisis eluded him, due in part to the contradictory and ambiguous instructions issued to him by Germain and his natural reluctance to utterly destroy Washington's army. Given the partial success of the 1776 campaign, the plan for 1777 was being drawn up to finally put an end to the insurrection.



Detail of previous map, showing British manoeuvres in the New York Campaign, first and second phases.

Newport, Rhode Island 1776

The capture of New York had provided the Howe brothers with a base for the fleet, its facilities were not ideal for major repairs to the larger vessels and at certain times of year the entrance to the Hudson and East Rivers could be treacherous at low water. To provide an alternative harbour, an expedition to capture Newport Rhode Island was prepared.

This was to be a classic amphibious operation, taking full advantage of British strategic mobility. 7,000 men were embarked in 51 transports escorted by some 15 warships. Clinton took charge of the land forces and Parker the naval contingent, as they had at Charleston, but this time their partnership would prove more fruitful.

The fleet anchored off Newport on 7 December, the approaches were defended by shore batteries pointing south which the British avoided by coming in from the North, brushing aside a small flotilla of American frigates consisting of the *Warren*, *Columbus* and *Providence* that swiftly took refuge at Providence in the northern end of the Narragansett Bay.

For the landing the transports were arranged in four divisions, each one was commanded by an RN lieutenant, and each unit carried its own distinguishing pennants. The assault wave consisted of light infantry, grenadiers (elite troops considered to have the élan to press home the attack) and artillery for close fire support, followed by the second wave of

two infantry brigades, the Hessian corps in the third and the cavalry following in the fourth wave. The horses were awkward to unload and this made them vulnerable to panic by enemy fire, and so it was safest to get them ashore on a secure beachhead.

The landings began at 8am and all but 400 men of the 22nd Foot were ashore by three in the afternoon. Mackenzie describes the arrangement of the landing force thus:

The Army landed this morning at Weaver's Cove near Mr Stoddard's house, following order -

The first Embarkation consisted of the Light Infantry, Grenadiers, and 10th Regiment, under the Command of Major General [Richard] Prescott. As soon had landed, the boats returned for the three other Battalions of the 3rd brigade, which formed the whole of the 1st Division.

The 2nd Division consisted of Losberg's brigade, & Wutgenau's Regt under command of Major General [Frederick Wilhelm Freiherr von] Los[s]berg.

The 3rd Division consisted of the 43rd, 54th, & 63rd Regiments of the 5th and the two other Hessian Regiments of Schmidt's brigade, under the command of Brigadier General [Francis] Smith: - All these Corps were landed succession at the same place, and the whole of the Army on shore by 3 o'clock in the afternoon.¹

The first wave marched straight away to Bristol Ferry at the north end of the island pursuing the fleeing patriot garrison who were trying to escape across the Narragansett Bay. A few prisoners and a large number of cattle and sheep were captured. The town of Newport was captured without a fight on 8 December along with the defensive batteries protecting the harbour. There was some desultory firing by rebel batteries from the mainland at Bristol, but there were no casualties and this was the sum of American resistance.

¹ F. Mackenzie, *Diary of Frederick Mackenzie, Giving a Daily Narrative of His Military Service As an Officer of the Regiment of Royal Welch Fusiliers during the Years 1775-1781 in Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New York* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1930), I, 123-24

Alexander Cochrane (who was to play an important role in the War of 1812 as Commander-in-chief of the North American station) described the operation to his father the Earl of Dundonald, Thomas Cochrane:

You will have heard of our leaving New York with the rest of the fleet under Sir Peter Parker & Commodore Hotham, and the land forces which amounted to about 6000 under General Clinton & Lord Piercey upon a private expedition which proved to be Rhode Island, where we arrived about a Month ago and effected our Landing the next day without any Opposition, the Rebels having entirely left the Island. (I mean their Troops, for the whole Inhabitants are Rebels.)

A day or two after our arrival we were sent about 15 Miles above the Town to assist in blocking up the Rebel Admiral Hopkins and his Squadron which consists of a 32, one 30 & one 28 gun Frigate, & a 16 gun brig, and a few sloops & Schooners. If you will look at any draught of the Coast you will perceive their situation. The Rebels now lay up at Providence - We lay between Hope Island and the Main. There is a Frigate [that] lays up above us in the passage from Patience and Connecticut, and below us the Renown between Rhode Island and Providence is guarded by Frigates. And at Town the two Commodores lay ready to run out in Case they attempt to make their escape. I think they are pretty safe for this Winter.²

To Cochrane and others it appeared that the war was just about over, and many looked forward to returning home and others began to send for luxuries to make their stay in the supposedly now pacified colonies more bearable.

The Newport operation represents something of an enigma, it seems to represent a dispersal of available forces in the face of an enemy still far from beaten. Fortescue³ seems to think that it would act as a base for the movement of troops east toward the Hudson valley to support the forthcoming 1777 campaign coming south from Canada and

² University of Edinburgh Library *Cochrane to Lord Cochrane*, 8 January 1777, Laing Mss. (Dundonald) II, 98/5

³ Fortescue, *op. cit.*, p.195

the St Lawrence, but any cursory glance at any map of the area shows that this would have to take a route through the wilderness of Northern Massachusetts and Maine, hardly an obvious route! Even today this is a remote and largely trackless area, such roads as there are tend to run north-south and not east to west.

It is more likely that the capture of Newport had a dual strategic purpose; to use the port as a naval station in order to interdict privateers preying on merchant shipping from ports on the Connecticut coast, and to act as a springboard for further raids on American merchant ports and shipping. While this economic objective may well have been worthy in its own right, the six thousand troops used on the capture of what was essentially an undefended port, may well have been better employed in pursuing Washington's scattered forces across the Delaware and on into New Jersey. While tactically flawless, the whole operation was strategically unsound, and greatly contributed to the defeats at Trenton and Princeton of 26 December and 3 January, that according to Gruber 'were disastrous for the British government'.⁴

⁴ Gruber, *op. cit.*, p. 157



British Landing at Newport Rhode Island by R. Cleveley (NMM neg 2892)

Peekskill and Danbury Raids 1777

Colonel Bird and 500 troops, supported by four light guns, were landed from a frigate and several transports on 23 March 1777 with orders to attack Peekskill on the eastern bank of the Hudson. The American garrison burned what stores they could and withdrew. On 24 March a force from Fort Constitution sallied out to attack the raiders. Washington feared that this might mark the beginning of a general assault on the forts and portages along the Hudson toward Ticonderoga and eight regiments of Continentals were despatched to reinforce this fort.

Then, in April 1777, Howe sent Governor William Tryon on a raid to destroy rebel supplies held at Danbury in Connecticut. This was an important expedition of about 2,000 regular and loyalist troops accompanied by cavalry and artillery. On the 23 the force left New York escorted by two frigates and landed near Fairfield on the evening of the 25 March, arriving at Danbury at 3 o'clock the next day whereupon the town was put to the torch, the garrison having fled with what they could carry. The militia and a few continentals began to rally at Bethel under Benedict Arnold some four miles to the south and east, but the British withdrew by a different route than the one they had used on the approach march, fearing an ambush while they were weighed down with booty.

Arnold took up a blocking position at Ridgefield on the morning of the 27 March, and was attacked by Tryon's troops from both flanks and was forced to order a retreat, losing his horse and shooting his way out. A further attempt to block the British withdrawal was

foiled when they simply marched around the rebel position to Compo Hill near Westport, Connecticut, near what is now the picturesque Sherwood Island State Park.¹ Arnold prepared to attack but was surprised by a bayonet charge that effectively covered the British embarkation of the bulk of the raiding force, probably from Cedar Point.

The militia had failed to defend their home area and the attempt to intercept the raiders did not prevent the destruction of a major depot. The actions of Tryon show speed and decisiveness in attacking Danbury before the militia were formed, and pressing the attack at Ridgefield and Compo Hill.

Mahan is rather dismissive about this raid and others like it: ‘During 1777 a number of raids were made by British combined land and sea forces, for the purpose of destroying American dépôts and other resources. Taken together, such operations are subsidiary to, and aid, the great object of interrupting or harassing the communications of an enemy. In so far, they have a standing place among the major operations of war; but taken singly they cannot be so reckoned, and the fact, therefore, is simply noted, without going into details.’²

However recent scholarship has shown that this strategy of raiding struck directly at the heart of the American war economy, and prior to the intervention of France and Spain, almost caused its collapse. Along with naval attacks on American commerce these almost

¹ <http://www.friendsofsherwoodisland.org/>

² A.T. Mahan, *The Major Operations of the Navies in the War of American Independence* (Cambridge, Mass: The University Press, 1913), p.56-7

proved fatal to the Revolutionary cause. It is true to say that Mahan's argument was very much conditioned by the great debate of his time between the advocates of blue water battle fleets and independent squadrons of torpedo boats and submarines that would play havoc with an enemy's trade – so called commerce raiders.³

On the other hand, Buel⁴ argues that American naval power was insufficient to protect the long and vulnerable coastline, despite attempts to fortify key harbours. Amphibious raiding therefore prior to 1778, in the absence of any other strategy, was a viable means of bringing pressure to bear on the Congress to sue for peace: the economy was almost entirely based on export of grain and other crops, and recruitment of the continental army and militia seriously reduced the numbers of able-bodied men available for agricultural labour and merchant vessels' crews.⁵ The creation of an ocean-going US navy, suitable to protect the coast and ports was not at this stage possible, despite the plethora of semi-mythology on the subject.⁶ There was a real problem in recruiting the large numbers of proficient seamen needed to man ships of the line since pay was erratic and meagre, and the privateering vessels offered far more lucrative opportunities. Moreover, conscription was not used since this would have decimated the merchant fleet. There was however widespread use of the press for the American navy.⁷ It was not until the arrival of the French Royal Navy in American waters that the British were forced to re-evaluate the

³ J.R. Hill, *War at Sea in the Ironclad Age* (London: Cassell, 2000), p.92-3

⁴ R. Buel, *In Irons. Britain's Naval Supremacy and the American Revolutionary Economy*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), *passim*

⁵ Buel, *Ibid*, Chapters 2, 4

⁶ See for example the resplendent volume by N. Van Powell, *The American Navies of the Revolutionary War* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1974)

⁷ A. Preston, D. Lyon and J.H. Batchelor, *Navies of the American Revolution* (London: Leo Cooper, 1975), p.87

raiding strategy and shelve it in favour of concentrating their naval efforts on the defence of the West Indies.

Philadelphia 1777

The surprise winter campaign launched by Washington on 26 December 1776 and the battles of Trenton and Princeton had rolled the British back out of New Jersey and back to the line of the Hudson. Howe's plan for 1777 was to strike at the seat of the revolution in Philadelphia. Meanwhile, General Burgoyne would strike south from Canada along the northern Hudson Valley into upstate New York. As part of the plan, Howe was also expected to send a force north to link up with Burgoyne's expedition in the forests of the Upper Hudson Valley. In the event it would prove impossible to achieve both objectives. British strategy for 1777 was fatally flawed by splitting its efforts in opposite directions.

It was not until June that reinforcements reached Howe, whereupon he determined once again to exploit the possibilities of strategic manoeuvre offered by the Royal Navy's command of the ocean. Rather than advance overland, and face possible stiff opposition, Howe envisaged an amphibious assault in the enemy's rear. The original plans had called for an assault on Boston via Rhode Island, an offensive from New York to Albany, followed by a lightning campaign in the South via Philadelphia! These ambitious designs would require at least 15,000 additional troops over and above the reinforcements already received. It soon became obvious that Howe was unlikely to dispose of anywhere near this number of troops, and the total force for 1777 would only number around 20,000.

Consequently, Howe modified his plan; he had to content himself with reducing Pennsylvania, while somehow attempting to support Burgoyne in the north. This he outlined to Germain in December 1776:

...the offensive plan towards Boston must be deferred, until the proposed reinforcements arrive from Europe, that there may be a corps to act defensively on the lower part of the Hudson's River to cover Jersey on that side as well as to facilitate in some degree the approach of the army from Canada.¹

Yet Germain somehow failed to warn Burgoyne of Howe's reduced scale of operations before he departed on his ill-fated expedition.

By April 1777, it was apparent to Howe that the scarcity of reinforcements would mean that any operation to the North would be even more seriously curtailed, and that he would be obliged to launch a seaborne assault on Pennsylvania to avoid extending his lines of communication overland from New York, the routes through the New Jersey countryside being vulnerable to enemy raids. Howe had 18,000 regulars and 3,000 Loyalists under his command, 11,000 would take part in the Philadelphia campaign, 5,000 would garrison New York and 2,500 would hold Rhode Island. In May 1777 Germain gave his approval to the plan, notwithstanding the fact that only 2,900 reinforcements could be supplied:

As you must, from your situation and military skill, be a competent judge of the propriety of every plan, His Majesty does not hesitate to approve the alterations which you propose, trusting however that whatever you may meditate it will be executed in time for you to cooperate with the army ordered to proceed from Canada and put itself under your command.²

¹ TNA, C.O. 5/94, fo. 20

² Lord George Germain to General Sir William Howe (No. 11), 18 May 1777. TNA, C.O. 5/94, fo.169

Meanwhile, Washington was in a position to block any overland advance to Philadelphia, and although Howe was informed in June of Burgoyne's expedition, Germain made no modification to his campaign orders to assist the advance from the North.

Howe's objective was to tie down large numbers of Washington's men in defence of the rebel 'capital', thereby forcing a conclusion and inducing congress to sue for peace before the French entered the war, multiplying British problems a hundredfold. However, he had to be circumspect: he lacked the numbers for a trial of strength. Heavy losses, even in victory, would prejudice the successful prosecution of the British war effort. These were the contradictions that Howe laboured under and, by contrast, Congress could draw on comparatively huge reserves of local manpower in the form of the state militias. Furthermore, he lacked the strength to oppose Washington frontally by assaulting his positions in New York state and pushing on to Albany. Even if he were successful in this object, it is difficult to see what he would accomplish thereby.

On the other hand, Philadelphia, being the seat of the Congress, furnished men and money for the patriot cause and Howe was anxious to prevent the flow of both to the American forces. The surrounding land was fertile and wealthy and would easily support his army during the campaign.

By July, Burgoyne had taken Ticonderoga and was pushing southwards quite convincingly, and Howe felt confident when on 23 July the fleet of 267 vessels of all sizes set sail heading for the Delaware River and a landing at Philadelphia. However, on

arrival the blockading squadron informed Howe of the myriad of submerged and surface obstacles in the river that would pose a considerable hazard to his transports and their escorts.

Therefore, Howe sailed on and up the Chesapeake, but the fleet was soon becalmed and beset by contrary winds and it was not until 25 August that it reached Head of Elk.

Washington was confused, thought the expedition abandoned and that Howe had either sailed north to join Burgoyne, or carried on south to attack Charleston.

By now the army had been at sea for forty seven days and had suffered badly, most of the horses had died and replacements had to be rounded up before the march could begin.

Washington felt confident, was well entrenched and supported by artillery at Chad's Ford on the Brandywine River. 'The damned rebels' as Howe admitted 'did form well'.³

On 11 September one column under Knyphausen engaged Washington at Chad's Ford, as another crossed the river upstream and worked its way around the American right flank.

Washington was convinced that Knyphausen was preparing to assault, and launched a counter attack with some 2,000 men. However, by the early afternoon Washington's scouts discovered the flanking column and he was obliged to reform his line at right angles to his original position, centred on the Birmingham Meeting House.

³ Quoted in D.G. Martin, *The Philadelphia Campaign: June 1777 – July 1778* (Conshohocken, PA: Combined Books, 1993), p.63

Having almost completed their dispositions, the Americans were assaulted by Cornwallis' column and recoiled in disorder, although the lead elements of the British force became entangled in some thick woods after fighting through the enemy positions, preventing a close pursuit, as the Americans, their positions hopelessly compromised, drew off in confusion.

As the British continued their advance on Philadelphia, General Anthony Wayne was ordered to demonstrate on the left of the British columns. Major General Charles Grey fell on Wayne's men at Paoli Tavern, while they were in bivouac and ruthlessly bayoneted 460 of them. Grey earned the soubriquet 'No Flint' for his order to remove the flints from his troops' firelocks to prevent them from firing, and preserve the element of surprise.

The next day, 22 September, Howe feinted against Washington's lines of communication towards Reading, and whilst he was distracted, quickly forded the Schuylkill at Flatland Ford. Three days later his army entered Philadelphia behind a parade of heavy guns with bands playing triumphant airs.

Howe's immediate task was to open the Delaware to shipping. Supplies were running low and the army was isolated from its base at New York, relying on the long overland route from the Chesapeake at Head of Elk. This long line of communication required 3,000 troops to secure against American raids.

On 27 September the Americans attacked the waterfront at Philadelphia with gunboats, but were blown out of the water by the British artillery.

Subsequently, Howe set about capturing Billingsport with the 10th and 42nd Foot, the town duly surrendered on 5 October. By the 7 October the Navy had breached the *chevaux de frises* place in the channel to obstruct shipping, and Howe could concentrate on Fort Mifflin, whose garrison had been reinforced by 1,000 Continental line infantry.

Simultaneously, on the 22 October, von Donop and four Hessian battalions assaulted Fort Mercer on Red Bank, but were bloodily repulsed with Donop mortally wounded. Things seemed to go from bad to worse when the 64-gun *Augusta* ran aground at Mifflin and was fired by American boat parties. The *Merlin* was also run aground, abandoned and fired by her crew.

Nevertheless, Fort Mifflin was bombarded at close range by shore and floating batteries for a week and forced to surrender on 15 November. Three days later, 3,000 British reinforcements arrived at Billingsport from New York and the Americans were forced to evacuate Fort Mercer, which was blown up on 21 November and by the 23 November the channel was clear.

The campaigning season was now over, and the British army had effectively been immobilised for nearly two months for want of supplies. Howe settled down to overwinter in comfortable quarters, while Washington and his troops endured very harsh

conditions in the camp at Valley Forge. The news of Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga put an entirely different complexion on matters, and 1778 was to bring some unwelcome surprises.

The Philadelphia Campaign was to have put a definitive end to the rebellion, and with its capture Howe had reason to feel satisfied with his performance. He had used the advantages of strategic manoeuvre by sea, and the aid of his brother Admiral Lord Richard Howe to approach Philadelphia from an unexpected quarter and gain some measure of surprise. The army had won a series of engagements in the open field, notably at Brandywine and Germantown, and reduced the heavily defended forts on the Delaware. The navy had carried out its duties remarkably well, and three major ports in the North were now closed to rebel shipping: Newport, New York and Philadelphia. The professionalism and skill of all ranks, army and navy was not open to question.

Yet Gruber⁴ calls the 1777 campaign 'disastrous for the British', citing as a primary reason Howe's obsession with capturing Philadelphia, and failure to support Burgoyne's expedition in the Hudson Valley. British strategic effort was split in two diametrically opposite directions, despite Germain's instructions and Clinton's request for a determined push north up the Hudson to meet with Burgoyne coming south. Howe seemed to ignore Burgoyne's attempts at communication,⁵ and failed to give Clinton the means, especially much needed regular troops, to effectively support Burgoyne.⁶ Worse still, General Howe did not match his desire to secure Philadelphia with timely and decisive action. The

⁴ Gruber *op cit.*, p. 266

⁵ *Burgoyne to Germain (Private)*, 20 August 1777, TNA, C.O. 42/37, fo. 38. Burgoyne is perhaps being charitable in suggesting to Germain that his couriers have been intercepted

⁶ See *Lieut. Gen. Sir Henry Clinton to Gen. Sir Wm. Howe*, 9 October, 1777, TNA, C.O. 5/94, fo. 345

campaign did not start until June and even then it was not until 23 July that Howe's expedition sailed. The unforeseen diversion and terrible weather via the Chesapeake rather than the Delaware cost him another month and most of his horses, and while this kept the Americans guessing as to his destination, the campaigning season was already well advanced when the army landed at Head of Elk on 22 September, too late to offer any real assistance to Burgoyne.

Hoped for Loyalist support in Pennsylvania was not forthcoming, the state legislature had enacted some pretty draconian anti-Tory laws,⁷ and in any case the type of person likely to remain loyal to the King and his ministers was by definition less politically militant than the patriots and consequently less willing to take up arms for the King. Some provincial units were raised in Philadelphia, and some recruits joined the dashing Queen's Rangers, who were among the first British troops to enter the city,⁸ but there was not the mass return to allegiance to the crown that might have justified the expedition in the first place.

Equally, the most effective strategy of an economic war against American trade was neglected and subordinated to the operational and tactical requirements of the capture of Philadelphia. Raiding was discontinued, and the blockade of ports used by American privateers carried on with only one third of the ships available, the rest being deployed in

⁷ C. H. Van Tyne, *The Loyalists in American Revolution* (Simon Harbor, FL: 2001, reprint of MacMillan 1902 edition), Appendix B, p. 321

⁸ The Pennsylvania Loyalists never numbered above 200 men, fairly paltry for the largest city in America. See also R. Ketchum, *The American Provincial Corps 1775-1784* (Reading: Osprey 1973), p.13

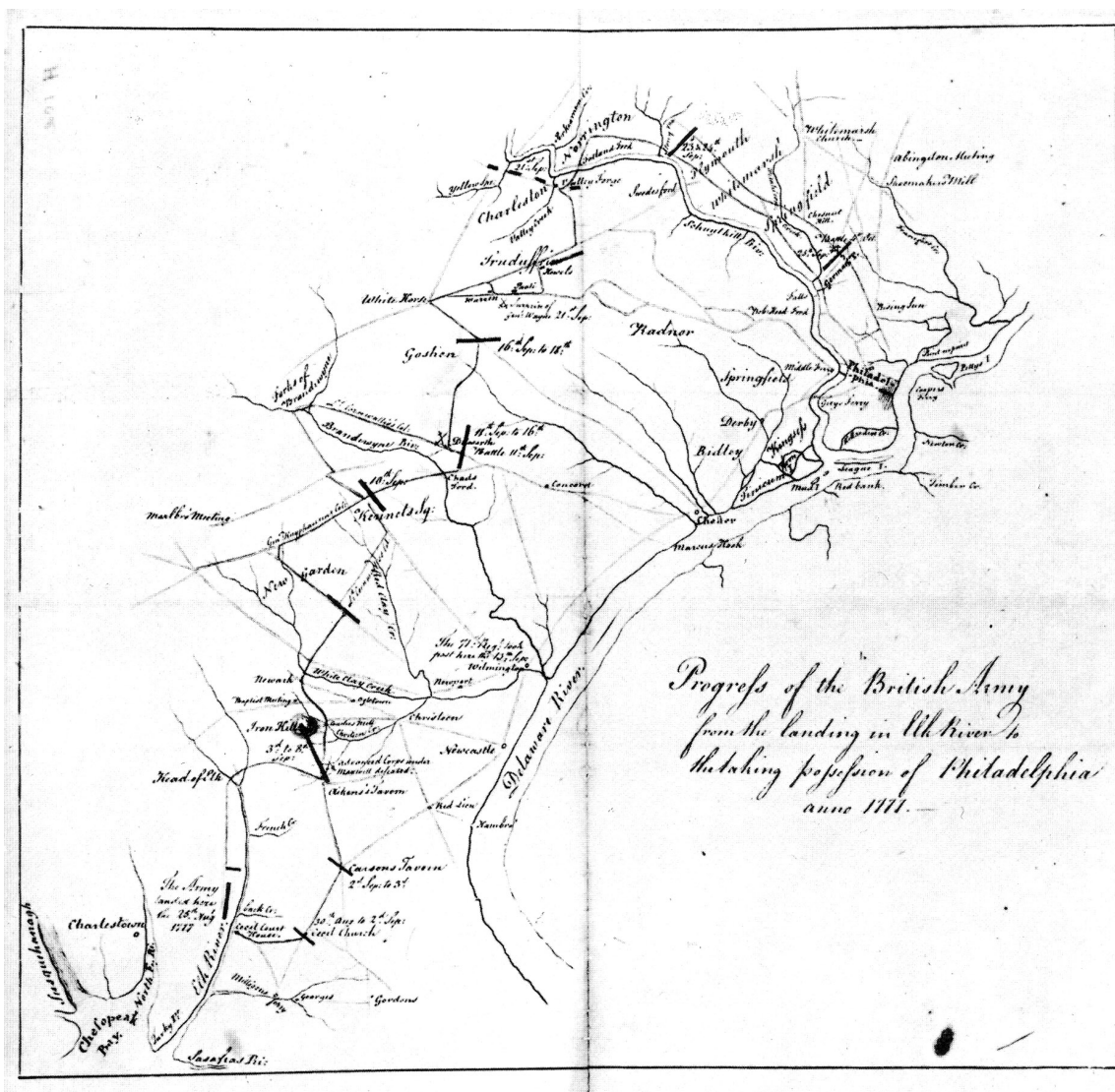
support of the army.⁹ Buel's magisterial survey¹⁰ has shown how much damage raids, blockade and anti-privateering operations were doing to the American economy at this stage. A little more pressure may well have encouraged the merchant interests in Congress to consider negotiations and ended the war before the entry of France (and Spain) made victory in the North American colonies a remote prospect indeed.

Finally, the Philadelphia expedition exposed the weakness of amphibious warfare or 'operational manoeuvre from the sea' as it is now called: it is very much subject to the vagaries of the elements. The extraordinary diversion via the Chesapeake had only brought Howe's army about thirty miles closer to Philadelphia than if he had set off over land from his positions in New Jersey. Trenton is in fact much closer to Philadelphia than the actual landing site at Head of Elk, which lies about fifty miles from the city. Much time had been sacrificed for little advantage. An amphibious landing was therefore not necessary and a swift decisive stroke by land may have allowed a major clash with Washington and his army, and then the time to offer assistance to Burgoyne in the North. Despite the fact that Seymour says 'that it is generally accepted that this would have been a costly folly',¹¹ sometimes in war the most direct route is the best.

⁹*Disposition of H.M.'s Ships and Vessels in North America, 28 August 1777, C. O. 5/127, fo. 224*

¹⁰ R. Buel, *In Irons. Britain's Naval Supremacy and the American Revolutionary Economy*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998)

¹¹ Seymour, *op cit.*, p.100



John André's 1777 Map of the Philadelphia Campaign (Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery San Marino)

Chapter Three: OPERATIONS 1778 - 1783

The Strategic Context

We have seen how naval power was subordinated to amphibious operations and support of the army's land operations in the early period of the war up to 1778. On the entry of France to the war the bulk of naval forces were re-deployed to European and Caribbean waters, and the emphasis of naval strategy changed to fleet action. There was disagreement between Germain, who pushed for the close blockade of French naval bases, Brest, Toulon and La Rochelle, and Sandwich, who wanted the fleet kept close at hand for the defence of the Channel and Western approaches.

The conflict at sea between Britain, France and Spain from the spring of 1778 onwards is often considered 'the classic naval war.'¹ It formed the basis of A.T. Mahan's writings and theories on the nature and uses of sea power, since it allowed him to discuss a war fought at sea between roughly equal fleets on a truly global scale. The skilful application of naval power would allow either belligerent to gain decisive advantage.

In the event, the failure to keep a close watch on the French fleet allowed D'Estaing to sail for American waters unmolested, arriving at the Chesapeake in July 1778

In 1778 the Mediterranean theatre was neglected entirely, Admiral Keppel failed to inflict a serious reverse on the French in the first major fleet encounter off Ushant on 27 July

¹ R. Harding, *Seapower and Naval Warfare from 1650 – 1830* (London: UCL Press, 1999), p. 241

1778. The central problem of strategy in North America after 1778 was that any redeployment of land forces in N. America or the Caribbean had to move by sea from Philadelphia, for example to New York, and thence by sea again to reinforce the West Indies, Florida and Georgia, all potential points for French intervention. Furthermore, victory in North America had to be won on land, and this with dwindling numbers of regular troops, dispatched to bolster the defences of Canada and the West Indies. These were to be replaced with increasing numbers of Loyalist Provincial Regiments, difficult to recruit and lacking the training and flexibility of regular soldiers.

At first it seemed as if the arrival of the French fleet in North America, consisting of two 80s, six 74s, three 64s and one 50, off the Delaware on 8 July 1778 would be a decisive intervention. D'Estaing's fleet appeared off New York but could not get into the Hudson, and so on 21 July he sailed to Rhode Island, planning to attack the British naval base at Newport. However bad weather and storms scattered the French fleet, and it repaired to Boston with its landing party, where Lord Howe, considerably outnumbered, with only six 64s and three 50s, declined to attack it. The first intervention of the French had proved a disappointment for the allied cause and thus far indecisive.

Indeed, there was no truly decisive clash at sea until 1782, despite British defeat at the Capes in 1781, prior to the capitulation of Cornwallis at Yorktown. De Grasse's victory at the Capes failed to inflict any significant losses on Admiral Graves' fleet. Certainly, local advantage was gained as the British fleet withdrew from the Chesapeake, leaving the garrison at Yorktown isolated and with little choice but surrender.

There was no major decisive fleet action in European waters either. The Franco-Spanish project for the invasion of England of 1779 was cancelled amid acrimony over the lack of cooperation between the Bourbon fleets and an outbreak of scurvy. It had been the greatest threat to Britain since the Spanish Armada of 1588 and it was only the mismanagement of the Franco-Spanish fleet that prevented a disaster.

Nevertheless, there were some Bourbon successes – the Spanish took Pensacola in Florida by an amphibious assault, and Minorca was recaptured, but Gibraltar withstood siege. However, the Royal Navy ended the war stronger in men and ships than when it had started, as the following table shows:

The balance of naval forces, 1775-1785²

	British battleships	French/Spanish battleships
1775	106 (244,000t)	119 (306,000t)
1780	103 (234,000t)	126 (337,000t)
1785	121 (282,000t)	118 (331,000t)

The Treaty of Versailles did not signal an end to British maritime supremacy and only perpetuated continuing colonial rivalry.

The strategic conundrum in the period 1778-1783 centred around the proper uses of sea power. Whereas the fleet in being was a useful deterrent for use in coercive diplomacy, it was difficult to translate into a war-winning weapon in the war on the North American continent. The requirements of colonial and expeditionary warfare necessitated that the

² Source: J. Glete, *Navies and nations. Warships, navies and state building in Europe and America, 1500-1860*, 2 vols (Stockholm, 1992), vol. 1, p. 276.

fleet be split up into small detachments to escort troop transports and cover landings or intercept privateers and conduct attacks on enemy commerce. For work close in to the coasts of North America small ships sloops, brigs and frigates were most useful, but these vessels had no place in the line of battle in fleet action. Conversely, the larger ships of the line: 64s, 74s and the like, required to pose a credible deterrent to the French and Spanish fleets, were simply too large to be manoeuvrable enough to navigate inshore waters and tidal rivers and estuaries acting in support of the army. One navy had to do the job of two or more.

For all the skill and bravery of naval crews, the strategic advantage gained from the mobility at sea could all be undone by a disastrous continental campaign. Great Britain in North America and the West Indies could still mount daring and effective raids and landings, securing operational surprise and significant strategic gains but these temporary advantages could not be sufficiently exploited in the continental war inland, particularly when the seat of war shifted to the southern colonies. The territory was too vast and the numbers of soldiers too small to do other than control the piece of ground on which they stood at any given moment.

St Lucia 1778

Immediately on the entry of the French into the war the West Indies assumed a major strategic significance. In fact, more battles were fought at sea here than in any conflict before or since. The West Indies were of enormous economic value to both France and Britain, and the importance of the islands dwarfed the relative worth of the American colonies. In fact Mahan states that 'the West Indies were then the richest commercial region on the globe in the value of their products'.¹ Accordingly, in a despatch of 21 March 1778 Germain gave specific instructions that Clinton should go over to the defensive in the North American colonies, withdraw from Philadelphia, defend West Florida (Pensacola and St Augustine) and prepare an expedition to the West Indies in under two months, before the hurricane season started in July:

Whereas the French King contrary to the most solemn assurances and in subversion of the law of nations hath signed a treaty of amity and commerce with certain persons employed by our revolted subjects in North America, and it being our firm purpose and determination to resent so unprovoked and unjust an aggression on the honour of our Crown and the essential interest of our kingdoms, we have come to the resolution to make an immediate attack upon the island of St Lucia in the West Indies.

It is therefore our will and pleasure that you do with the greatest secrecy and dispatch make a detachment of a body of five thousand men from the troops under your command, and putting them under the command of such officer of rank and experience as you shall think most fit to execute the service, and adding thereto a proper corps of artillery and such a proportion of ordnance and stores and a sufficient supply of provisions, embark the whole on board of transports. And so soon as the commander of our fleet in North America shall appoint a proper number of our ships of war to convoy the said embarkation, you do direct the commanding officer of the troops to proceed with them to the island of St Lucia and to attack and if practicable reduce and take possession of the said island.²

¹ A.T. Mahan, *The Major Operations of the Navies in the War of American Independence* (Cambridge, Mass: The University Press, 1913), p.98

² *Secret Instructions for General Sir Henry Clinton*. TNA, C.O. 5/95, fo. 97

This represents reverting to a maritime strategy that had been a leitmotif of British policy since the start of the Anglo-French wars in the seventeenth century. The French would be forced to divert forces away from the Thirteen North American colonies to defend their lucrative sugar islands. For Great Britain therefore, the war in the North American colonies would have to be subordinate to the needs of the war against France, and this approach offered good prospects of success, providing a separate peace could be forced upon the Americans by the Carlisle Commission, leaving France alone to face the weight of the whole British fleet. The French, of course, would have to cooperate by refraining from an attack on the St Lawrence or Nova Scotia, where defences, although reinforced, were still weak.

However, the French were first to strike, the energetic and capable Marquis de Bouillé capturing the island of Dominica between Martinique and Guadeloupe on 7 September. The British however turned their attention as planned on St Lucia, a larger and more attractive prize. The island boasted a sheltered all-weather port, a safe refuge from the storms of the hurricane season, and very close to the French islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe.

Commodore Hotham's squadron of two 64s and three 50s sailed from New York with 5,800 troops consisting of the 4th, 5th, 15th, 27th, 28th, 35th, 40th, 46th, 49th and 55th Foot and 200 gunners detached from the garrison there, and joined Admiral Samuel Barrington with two men of war at Barbados. The force proceeded at once to St Lucia, landing on

the 12 December. Hotham had much experience in amphibious warfare and had supervised the landings at Long Island in 1776.³

General Grant sent two brigades from his force ashore who quickly pressed inland and captured the high ground and a battery of four guns, and the remainder of the force was disembarked the next morning. A fort, known as La Vigie, contained fifty-nine guns and was perched on high cliff, overlooking the bay (the Carénage or Castries Bay). This strongpoint and the hill known as Morne Fortuné were immediately taken with trifling losses.

At this point D’Estaing arrived from Martinique, with 9,000 troops from the Armagnac, Martinique and Guadeloupe Regiments and some militia,⁴ determined to retake the island. Barrington had skilfully deployed his ships in the shelter of the Cul-de-Sac Bay where the guns of the superior number of French vessels could not be brought to bear. D’Estaing’s two attacks failed to make an impression on the British fleet. The French ships could not close with the wind blowing offshore and dared not risk complex manoeuvres near the rocky coast. Instead, D’Estaing landed his troops at Choc Bay (Anse du Choc) on 16 December, planning to storm La Vigie, held by Colonel Medows and 1500 men of the 5th Foot accompanied by grenadiers and light infantry. The five companies of skirmishers held the isthmus and shredded the French attacking columns. After three hours of fierce combat the French withdrew with the loss of some 850 casualties. The British infantry were using typical North American bush war tactics,

³ See Section above

⁴ R. Chartrand, *The French Army in the American War of Independence* (London: Osprey, 1995)

skirmishing and retiring through the low scrub toward their entrenchments, and the French were entirely unused to this 'loose file and American scramble'. Their dense packed columns, struggling across broken ground made superb targets. It was a scene that was to be repeated again and again some thirty years later on the battlefields of Portugal and Spain.

The French remained on the island until 28th in a state of shock and stupor, and then re-embarked for Martinique, whereupon the remainder of the garrison surrendered. St Lucia was held until the end of the war and permanently ceded to Great Britain in 1815.

Fortescue called the capture and defence of St Lucia a 'brilliant series of little operations'.⁵ Certainly the speed and decisiveness of the operation and the conduct of Admiral Barrington and General Grant were exemplary. Small formations of troops using the advantage of surprise and strategic mobility could have a decisive strategic impact. This depended on close cooperation between the Royal Navy and the Army and the use of naval gunnery support to enfilade the French attack on La Vigie showed inter-service cooperation at its best. In many ways this was to be the template for British operations in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic War.

The speed of movement, especially in covering the distance from New York to the West Indies, and gaining a full day's head start on D'Estaing who was racing south from the failed attempt on Newport, was in no small part due to the technological edge of the

⁵ J. W. Fortescue, *A History of the British Army*. Volume III. (Uckfield, East Sussex: Naval and Military Press, 2004 reprint), p.265

coppering of ships.⁶ This is all the more remarkable considering the fact that the men of war were escorting fifty fully loaded transports.

Equally, the skill and tenacity shown by Grant and Medows' troops in seizing the ground of tactical importance and conducting a spirited and active defence prevented the French from bringing artillery up on to La Vigie, and raking Barrington's squadron from higher ground forcing them to leave the shelter of Cul de Sac Bay, where D'Estaing's fleet could have fallen upon the outnumbered British vessels and mauled them very severely.

The British fortified Pigeon Island on St Lucia (the ruins are still standing and are a popular tourist excursion) which provided a safe harbour only thirty miles from France's main base in the Caribbean; Port Royal on Martinique. St Lucia had been returned to France at the end of the Seven Years War, and the Admiralty had long coveted it. The successful capture of the island allowed the British to maintain a credible defence of the West Indies during the ensuing struggle and was of critical strategic importance.⁷

⁶Sir Charles Middleton, *Memoranda of Advice. Forethought and Preparation*. (almost certainly intended for Lord Melville, on his appointment as First Lord), May 1804. *Naval Records Society*. XXXIX, p. 24., and R. Harding, *Seapower and Naval Warfare from 1650-1830* (London: UCL Press, 1999) p. 252

⁷ G. S. Graham, *The Royal Navy in the War of American Independence* (London: HMSO and NMM, 1976), p.12

Central America (Honduras and Nicaragua) 1779-1782

In September 1779 a small flotilla consisting of one 44-gun ship, two frigates and a 20 gun schooner and some other small vessels commanded by Captain Luttrell attacked the Honduras coast. With the naval forces were a small number of troops, some local militia and Mosquito (Mayan) Indians.

Hoping to intercept some treasure ships in the Bay of Dulce, the fleet made an unsuccessful attack on the fort from the sea on the 15 October. The arrival of the sloop HMS *Porcupine* and troop transports from St George's Key, where they had driven off an attack on British logwood-cutters by the Spanish, allowed a landing to be carried out the next day at Porto Caballo, some 9 miles away. The landing force consisted of sailors, marines, some 250 local 'baymen' and a detachment of the Royal Irish Regiment. The shore party soon became bogged down in the swamps and rugged country of the area, only managing to cover three miles that night. The following day when the expedition arrived the town was captured quickly but the town held out, the baymen had abandoned the scaling ladders in the swamps. HMS *Charon* and HMS *Lowestoft* stood offshore and provided naval gunnery support, but *Lowestoft* ran aground and suffered severe damage to her hull.

HMS *Pomona* managed to land some guns, and the bombardment of the fort continued, distracting the garrison as a party of 180 seamen, marines and soldiers carried out an escalade on the eighteen foot thick walls, in spite of being outnumbered three to one. It is

not certain whether the defenders were stunned by the effrontery of this attempt on the largest colonial fort in Central America, or were simply looking the other way, but the assault succeeded. Only two defenders were wounded, and 365 were taken prisoner along with two to three million dollars worth of treasure: gold, mercury and other goods. It was during this struggle that a famous and picaresque episode occurred. A heavily armed British sailor offered a spare cutlass to an unarmed Spanish officer to defend himself with!¹ Interestingly, the impact marks of the British cannonballs from the siege are visible to this day.² Omoa was abandoned on 28 December 1779, before the Spanish could mount a counter attack. The garrison was stricken with fever and Governor Dalling had another scheme in mind.

Flushed with success and profit from the Omoa raid, Dalling proposed a bold plan to link up with disgruntled Spanish settlers and indigenous peoples in Central America, to turn the tables on the Spanish New World imperial government. The target was to be the San Juan River, which leads into the Lake of Nicaragua, described as the ‘inland Gibraltar of Spanish America’, and on to Grenada and Leon. A chain of fortified posts could be established across Central America, splitting the Spanish empire in two and giving Britain much coveted access to the South Seas.

A detachment of 400 regulars from the 60th, 79th and Darymple’s Jamaica Corps was told off for the task in February 1780. They were to be escorted by the enterprising young Horatio Nelson, then the captain of HMS *Hinchinbrook*, who would accompany the

¹ J. W. Fortescue, *A History of the British Army*. Volume III. (Uckfield, East Sussex: Naval and Military Press, 2004 reprint), p.303

² <http://www.infohn.com/honduras/honduras.swf>

expedition up river to the lake. This tiny force was supposed to conquer an area larger than the one their comrades were defending farther north!

The expedition spent three weeks at Cape Gracias á Dios, before being joined by a ramshackle flotilla from the British post at Black River and a party of the local Native Americans. The combined force then travelled slowly to the mouth of the river and upstream in unbearable heat and an adverse current, facing leeches, snakes and mosquitoes, at the rate of five to ten miles per day. The sailors were forced to drag the boats through the shallow sections of the river clogged with mud, rocks and mangrove roots. Nelson insisted on accompanying the army up river, instead of taking his ship back to Kingston, where he was supposed to take over a new command, HMS *Janus*. He led the assault on the Spanish Fort St Bartholomew, which fell easily, yet no one knew where the other Spanish defences, if any, were located.

Finally, the principal Spanish defence work, Fort San Juan, was discovered and Nelson typically pressed for an immediate assault, but the army prudently opted for a formal siege. The guns were brought up, and with them orders for Nelson to return to Port Royal Jamaica, but by this time he too had contracted a malarial fever and was obliged to return to England to recuperate. If he had stayed with the expedition it is likely that he too would have perished.³ The fort surrendered through lack of water after a siege of six days on 29 April. Nelson had shown verve and a considerable amount of dash in the siege

³ R. Hattersley, *Nelson* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), p.23

laying nearly every gun personally with Lieutenant Despard the chief engineer.⁴ Indeed, Captain Poulson commanding the infantry commended his sprit and energy.

But by now the expedition had taken three times as long as predicted, and the hurricane season was approaching when amphibious operations would be dangerous, if not near impossible. Worse still, by mid-May the expedition was increasingly debilitated with malaria and it was unlikely that they would now reach the lake. Colonel Kemble who had taken over command ordered a withdrawal to the coast. Governor Dalling had sent a total of 1,400 reinforcements of varying quality to the expedition, of whom only 320 remained alive, and of these, only half were fit for active duty at the end of September. The local Indians had assumed that the British were on a slaving expedition, and melted away from whence they had come. Exasperated, Dalling ordered the demolition of the fortress and the adventure was abandoned on 8 November 1780.

There is something of a coda to British operations in Central America. On 26 August 1782 the new Governor-General of Jamaica, Major General Archibald Campbell learned that the Spanish were preparing a new expedition and Captain John Despard was sent with 80 Loyal American Rangers to Black River along with Commodore Parry in HMS *Preston* and five frigates. The expedition landed in October and soon collected 500 escaped slaves and 600 Mosquito Indians. All were eager for a chance to try conclusions with the Spanish. However the Spanish governor immediately surrendered the garrison of 740 men along with a quantity of money, muskets and artillery. Fortescue laconically

⁴ J. W. Fortescue, *A History of the British Army. Volume III.* (Uckfield, East Sussex: Naval and Military Press, 2004 reprint), p. 339

remarks that British Honduras was gained by ‘a motley collection of American rangers, British logwood-cutters and Indians’ under British officers...’⁵

These expeditions were a diversion of resources while Pensacola and St Augustine were under threat from Spanish forces. ‘While Dalling, faithful to the example set by Germain, was thus frittering away the lives of his men,’ Fortescue writes,⁶ Spanish forces captured Mobile and Pensacola that he was supposed to defend in 1781. It is true to say however that he did lack the ships and transports to intervene in the Floridas in any meaningful way.

For his part Germain was convinced that the defence of the islands should depend on a series of small detachments, any troops left over could then be sent to New York:

I have dispatched orders to Major-General Grant that, if no event happens that may afford a prospect of employing the troops with advantage in offensive operations before the approach of the hurricane season, he do return to New York or whatever part of the continent of America you shall direct him come to with all he thinks may be spared after providing for the security and defence of St Lucie and the other West Indian islands...

...It is not, however, His Majesty's purpose to relinquish the idea of further attempts upon the enemy's possessions in the West Indies if war continues; but it is proposed such attacks should be made by detachments from North America in the winter season and the troops, except garrisons, to be brought back when the service is over. The commanders of the King's ships upon both stations will have orders to furnish convoys and act conjunctly in the execution of this plan.⁷

Grant was far sighted enough to reject this plan, stressing that naval power was the key to the defence of the islands, and not scattered garrisons across the islands. He distributed

⁵ J. W. Fortescue, *A History of the British Army. Volume III.* (Uckfield, East Sussex: Naval and Military Press, 2004 reprint), p. 409

⁶ J. W. Fortescue, *Ibid*, p. 340 - 41

⁷ Lord George Germain to General Sir Henry Clinton, 1 April 1779, TNA, C.O. 5/97, fo. 146

This is a detailed historical map of the Caribbean Sea and its surrounding regions. The map is oriented with North at the top. The central feature is the Caribbean Sea, labeled 'CARIBBEAN SEA' in large, bold, capital letters. To the north, the map shows the eastern coast of North America, including Florida and the Gulf of Mexico. To the south, it depicts Central America, with labels for 'GUATEMALA', 'EL SALVADOR', 'NICARAGUA', and 'COSTA RICA'. The Caribbean Islands are shown to the east of the mainland, with labels for 'JAMAICA', 'HISPANIOLA OR ST. DOMINGO', 'PORTO RICO', 'VIRGIN ISLES', 'LEeward ISLANDS', 'Windward ISLANDS', 'CARIBBEAN ISLANDS', 'DOMINICA', 'ST. LUCIA', 'ST. VINCENT', 'GRENADA', 'TRINIDAD', and 'TOBAGO'. The map includes a grid of latitude and longitude lines, with degree markings. Various geographical features, such as rivers, bays, and mountains, are also labeled. The map is a black and white reproduction of a historical document, likely a 17th or 18th-century map.

The West Indies (NMM neg B7866)

The Capture of Savannah 1778

In 1778 Georgia seemed a weak point in the rebellion, and it was here that a blow could be struck before the intervention of the French would tip the balance against the Crown's interests. The population of Georgia at this time was around 40,000, half of whom were black slaves, and was concentrated in a fifty-mile wide strip along the coast. Further inland were the Native American Creeks who by 1778, although neutral at the outbreak of war, were prepared to fight for the British.¹ The British base at St Augustine in East Florida provided a safe haven for Tories and a convenient drop-off point for expeditionary forces. The patriot leaders in Georgia were disorganised and divided and the military commander General Richard Howe was from North Carolina and unpopular, not least because of the acrimony engendered as a result of an abortive rebel attack on St Augustine early in 1778.²

While Clinton in New York ruminated on the impact of the entry of France into the war on his command, and the detachment of 5,000 troops for the West Indies and 2,000 for Canada, he nevertheless sent a force of 3,000 Loyalists, regulars and Germans to the garrison at St Augustine who were to open the British campaign in the South.

Lieutenant Archibald Campbell, of the 42nd Highland Regiment 'The Black Watch' acting well outside the scope of his orders anchored off Tybee Island, Georgia at the

¹ C. G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country. Crisis and diversity in Native American communities*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p.45

² J. S. Pancake, *This Destructive War. The British Campaign in the Carolinas, 1780-1782* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992), Chapter 2

mouth of the Savannah River on 23 December, accompanied by Hyde Parker's squadron and 3,500 troops.

In command of rebel forces at Sunbury 30 miles south of Savannah was the unhappy General Robert Howe. In his command there were about 900 regular continental infantry and 150 Georgia militia. General Prevost remained at St Augustine in Florida and was to move north to cooperate with Campbell in the capture of Savannah.

On Christmas night 1778, Captain Sir James Baird of the 71st (Fraser's)³ Highlanders landed in two flatboats to make a reconnaissance with a company of light infantry who gathered 'the most satisfactory intelligence concerning the state of matters at Savannah'.⁴ From these reports of the weakness of the defence Campbell and Parker were convinced that they might assault straight away without waiting for Prevost's command. A landing place was decided upon at Gerridoe's (variously named as Gerardo's or Girardeau's) Plantation some two miles downstream of Savannah. At about noon on the 28 December the *Vigilant*, a shallow draught merchantman with sixteen 24 pounders, specially built for shore bombardment in support of amphibious landings,⁵ the *Comet* (an armed galley), the *Keppel* (a brig) and the *Greenwich* (a sloop) covered 'the transports in three divisions in the order established for a descent' as they proceeded the twelve miles up river with the tide. No mean feat of seamanship in a perilous waterway in hostile territory. There were

³ The 71st had an interesting history; the first regiment recruited for the American war, it was formed in 1775 by Simon Fraser, Master of Lovat, as a gesture of goodwill to George III for the return of his father's estates after the '45. It was the direct descendant of the 78th (Fraser's) formed for the Seven Years War, but disbanded in 1763, and contained many former officers of the old regiment.

⁴ *Lieut. Colonel Archibald Campbell to Lord George Germain*, 16 January 1779. C.O. 5/182, fo. 31

⁵ R. Gardiner (ed.), *Navies and the American Revolution 1775-1783* (London: Chatham Publishing, 1996), p. 63

two American gunboats guarding the entrance to the river, but they had fled at the first salvo from the escorts. At four in the afternoon the flotilla arrived opposite the plantation, but by this time it was low tide and many of the transports had grounded and it was decided to postpone the landing until the morning.

First ashore at dawn the next day were the light infantry, New York Volunteers, and the 71st Highlanders. They took a path along an embankment in a rice field to the plantation house that was raised on a slight hill some thirty feet high, where a body of about fifty militia were drawn up who opened fire at once, but the Highlanders rushed on with ‘their usual impetuosity’⁶ and the pickets were driven off and the beachhead secured for the cost of one officer and two soldiers killed and five wounded.

General R. Howe’s army was drawn up behind a defensive barricade about half a mile east of Savannah, supported by ‘several pieces of cannon in their front’,⁷ their flanks covered by rice paddies and wooded swamps. In front ‘at a critical spot’⁸ was a trench and a marshy stream, the bridge over which had been demolished. Even though outnumbered four to one, the Americans held a formidable defensive position and it seemed as if the British would be obliged to make a costly frontal assault.

However, Campbell had ‘accidentally fallen in with a Negro’⁹ (one Quamino Dolly) who indicated that there was a hidden track around the American right flank through the swamps and woods. Campbell accordingly feinted on the left while the light infantry and

⁶ Campbell, *op. cit.*

⁷ Campbell, *ibid.*

⁸ Campbell, *ibid.*

⁹ Campbell, *ibid.*

New York Volunteers circled around the American position out of view of the defenders. Howe's defenders were encircled and had to fight their way out of the trap, losing 83 killed, or drowned in the flight across the Musgrove Swamp, and 453 prisoners. British losses were five wounded. With the arrival of Prevost and 2,000 more troops to reinforce Campbell, the town of Augusta was taken on 29 January 1779. Royal government and legislature was re-established in Georgia, and Sir James Wright arrived from England to resume the governorship, supported by local Loyalists. Savannah and most of Georgia was held for the crown until the Peace of Versailles.

The capture of Savannah again showed what could be achieved by decisive use of the strategic mobility and operational surprise offered by joint operations. Clinton had opened the campaigns in the South with a 'strategic and tactical masterpiece',¹⁰ but it was a venture not without risk. The assault on Charleston split British forces in two leaving a much reduced garrison at New York, the distance between the two armies was great and it was not sure where D'Estaing and his expeditionary force might land. The divided command made it difficult to coordinate strategy across the continent and intervention by the French Navy could quite easily prevent the army in the South being resupplied.

Nevertheless, the securing of Savannah gave the British an excellent base for the rest of the Southern campaigns. Most of the population of the surrounding area of lower Georgia swore the oath of allegiance to the King.¹¹ Campbell rapidly began to form Loyalist companies for the defence of the colony and further expeditions inland, effectively

¹⁰ Seymour, *op cit.*, p.165

¹¹ *Lieut. Col. Archibald Campbell to Lord George Germain*, 16 January, 1779. TNA, C.O. 5/182, fo.31

making South Carolina now the front line of the war. Campbell's approach to the business of running the colony was fair and business like. Lumpkin asserts that 'if he had remained in command, the war in the South might have had different and far more serious results for the American cause'.¹² As it turned out, his successors were far less able and intelligent officers.

¹² Lumpkin, *op cit.*, p. 29

Charleston 1780

Following the disastrous and abortive attack on Charleston in 1776 Sir Henry Clinton seems to have learned much about combined operations. His second successful attempt has been called ‘a superb example of a beautifully coordinated eighteenth century joint operation’.¹

Ironically, the stately and measured progress Clinton made toward the capitulation and capture of the town only compounded the scale and magnitude of the American defeat. The whole of the defending army was captured, along with the squadron of ships sent by the Continental Congress to aid in the defence.

It was the terrain of South Carolina itself that made this such an opportune theatre for amphibious operations. The coast line was, and is, criss-crossed by numerous navigable waterways allowing the swift movement of troops, supported by the Royal Navy. Clinton himself praised the ‘essential assistance of the officers and seamen of the Royal Navy for my operations’ and the ‘good service of the officers and sailors of the fleet’.²

Thus far the French intervention had proved indecisive; D’Estaing had vacillated prior to attacking Savannah and received a bloody nose for his pains, and withdrew wounded to the West Indies, with the French fleet and expeditionary force. He was never to set foot in North America again. There was then a window of opportunity in 1779 for the British to

¹ H. Lumpkin, *From Savannah to Yorktown. The American Revolution in the South* (New York: Paragon House, 1981), p. 41

² General Sir Henry Clinton to Lord George Germain, 13 May 1780. C.O. 5/99, fo. 181

make a bold stroke and to attempt a decisive victory in order to secure a favourable peace. The arrival of 3,000 fresh troops at New York seemed to allow the freedom of action that Clinton needed to be able to strike south, linking up with Loyalist sympathisers known to be active in the Carolinas, while still maintaining a credible garrison in New York, in the event of another French incursion.

Total British strength across the whole of the thirteen colonies was by then around 39,000 men. Clinton assembled an expeditionary force of between 7,600 and 8,500 troops, leaving Wilhelm von Knyphausen in charge at New York, while he and Admiral Arbuthnot formulated their southern strategy for the coming campaign. However, no sooner had they left port on 26 December 1779, than a seasonal gale blew up and scattered the expeditionary flotilla far and wide, one ship reputedly ending up off the coast of Cornwall!³ It was an inauspicious start. The heavy guns were lost, two or three ships were captured by privateers and almost all the horses on the transports died. At the end of January 1780 the remaining transports arrived piecemeal at Tybee, Georgia.

Meanwhile, General Lincoln lost no time in strengthening the defences around Charleston that had fallen into disrepair since the British attack of 1776. Reinforcements from the Continental Army and locally raised militia brought the strength of the defenders to around 7,000 all told.

Admiral Mariott Arbuthnot's original plan was to land on Johns Island on the Stono River, about six miles south of Charleston, but Captain George Keith Elphinstone (later

³ *Lord George Germain to General Sir Henry Clinton*, 15 March 1780. C.O. 5/99, fo. 31

Lord Keith) commanding the flagship, advised him that the landing might well be opposed here, and a safer beach was agreed upon, twelve miles to the south and west at the North Edisto inlet. The transports anchored off Simmons (now Seabrook) Island. The landing, on a particularly treacherous coast was carried out without a hitch on 11 February, a tribute to the extraordinary seamanship of the ship and boat crews of the Royal Navy.

The first wave ashore was made up of the British grenadiers and light infantry under General Leslie, accompanied by Clinton and Cornwallis. This wave was followed by the Hessian grenadiers and jägers, and the 33rd Foot acting as light infantry. In the third wave were the 7th, 23rd, 63rd and 64th Foot and the Hessian Garrison Regiment Huyn. The lightly equipped troops spread out into the marshy wooded terrain, quickly occupying key creek crossings and road junctions, completely unimpeded by the American forces who had not anticipated an attack from this quarter. The shore and terrain was exceptionally hazardous, but offered good cover, and the landing was a near-perfect coup de main.

There was still no opposition despite rumours of American privateers being in the area, and by 10 o'clock on the 12 February the whole force was ashore and moving inland. Johns Island and James Island were quickly secured, the British used flat-bottomed boats to manoeuvre through the marshy creeks and seize Fort Johnson, Perroneau's landing and Wappoo Cut on the southern shore of the harbour. At the same time the fleet blockaded the entrance to the harbour and a battery was established on the shore facing Charleston. The noose was tightening.

By 20 March, Clinton had secured his lines of communication with the Stone and North Edisto landings, and crossed the Ashley River north of Charleston, sealing Charleston off from the landward side. The arrival of such a substantial British besieging force and Clinton's offer of a general pardon to those who ceased resistance weakened resolve among the garrison, and in panic governor Rutledge sent a French volunteer officer Colonel Ternant to Havana to request help from the new found Spanish allies, proposing a joint attack on St Augustine. However, the Spanish, recognising that Charleston's fate was sealed, declined the invitation, although they did later attack Mobile, without any material effect on the outcome of the siege.

The patriot flotilla of frigates and gunboats found it impossible to defend the mouth of the harbour and the bar in the face of the tide and wind, and withdrew into the channel supported by the shore batteries at Fort Moultrie. The *Renown* (50), *Roebuck* (44) and *Romulus* (44), stripped out to minimum weight so that they floated as high as possible in the water, negotiated the sand bar at the entrance to the harbour, brushing aside resistance from a handful of gunboats. Outgunned and outnumbered, the American flotilla withdrew to the town and sunk seven vessels to form a boom to protect the entrance to the Cooper River and the naval defence of Charleston ceased.

By now it was apparent that surrender was inevitable – there was no chance of relief or escape by land or sea. On 29 March the British crossed the Ashley at Bee's Ferry in seventy five flat bottomed boats under the able direction of Captain Elphinstone and the

protection of armed galleys – another textbook assault river crossing by surprise. By now Royal Navy and army were working together very smoothly and on 30 March Clinton sent out patrols to probe Charleston's defences. Clinton's army had been reinforced on 25 March with 1,500 men from Savannah and 250 cavalry of Banastre Tarleton's British Legion, who performed sterling service in sealing off the town from outside help. By contrast, the British established contact with the navy, and supplies and munitions were landed for the forthcoming siege, under the direction Major Moncrieff, the chief engineer. The first parallel was opened on 1 April at a distance of 800 yards from the American lines, which were anchored on the Cooper and Ashley Rivers on either side, protected by the marshy ground and a wet ditch, and reinforced by a masonry and earth redoubt in the centre of the lines. The whole system contained some 66 pieces of artillery, excluding mortars.

On 9 April Admiral Arbuthnot had run past the guns of Fort Moultrie on Sullivan's Island that had proved so troublesome in '76, with HMS *Roebuck*, HMS *Romulus* and four frigates plus other supporting vessels. The transport HMS *Eolus* ran aground and was fired by its crew, but otherwise casualties were minimal and the flotilla anchored off Fort Johnson, out of range of the shore batteries. As noted, the Cooper River was blocked by a boom of sunken vessels, so the navy spent the next weeks clearing out the fortifications of the northern shore by a series of highly efficient amphibious assaults to sever any remaining link with Charleston and the outside world. Ewald describes the capture of Fort Sullivan thus:

Admiral Arbuthnot ordered Captain Hudson and three hundred seamen to land on Sullivan's Island and seize the fort with sword in hand. But as soon as the

*garrison saw that the situation was serious, they beat a parley and surrendered the fort. Forty-three heavy pieces were captured and a major and one hundred and fifty men taken prisoner.*⁴

It seems that the Americans were distracted by another landing by Ferguson at the rebel works at Mount Pleasant that effectively cut them off from Charleston, and 200 marines and sailors had rushed ashore and seized Fort Moultrie from the undefended rearward side.⁵

Subsequently, Clinton offered Charleston the chance to surrender according to the conventions of warfare at the time, but Lincoln considered it his duty to defend the town to the last, and urged Rutledge and other members of the governing council to make their escape. By 20 April Clinton commanded well over 13,000 men at the siege and the second parallel was duly opened and the bombardment of the town commenced at close range supported by naval gunfire. Under the cover of this fire a third parallel within musket range (about 75 yards) was dug on 6 May and it was apparent, with the loss of several major outworks into the bargain, that Charleston could no longer hold out. The British had drained the wet ditch, and threatened to bombard the town with flaming ammunition.

Nonetheless, Lincoln still prevaricated, and it was not until 11 May that the town surrendered with the honours of war - a remarkable concession to 'rebels' who had obstinately held out for so long, and a testament to the humane spirit of the age. Yet for

⁴ Ewald, *op cit*, p.236

⁵ W. B. Willcox, ed., *The American Rebellion: Sir Henry Clinton's Narrative of His Campaigns, 1775-1782, with an Appendix of Original Documents* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), p. 169

all the formal courtesies this was the worst patriot defeat of the war and the largest surrender of American troops to a foreign power until Bataan in 1942. Some 6,000 regulars, militia and sailors were captured, along with 400 guns and seven generals – a far greater defeat than Saratoga had been for the Crown.

Fortescue⁶ maintains that the operation was not quite the foregone conclusion that some authors have maintained. For one thing casualties were hard to replace at such a distance from his base at New York, and the metropole. The storm had caused the loss of ordnance, supplies and crucially horses that slowed the pace of operations. Nevertheless, Clinton remained sanguine:

*... I had not the smallest doubt of my becoming master of the town without much loss. This consideration alone would have been a sufficient incitement for me to prefer the mode of regular approaches to any other, less certain though more expeditious, which might have sacrificed a greater number of lives on both sides.*⁷

In the event, an indirect approach was forced upon Clinton by circumstance, but this worked to his advantage as Lincoln called in reserves for the defence of what was essentially an indefensible position. Charleston was and is almost surrounded by water, and given British naval superiority, could not be relieved. It resulted in ‘the most complete British victory of the war’,⁸ and while Clinton’s plan was entirely within the generally understood conception of eighteenth century warfare, in this case it was entirely appropriate.

⁶ J. W. Fortescue, *A History of the British Army*. Volume III. (Uckfield, East Sussex: Naval and Military Press, 2004 reprint), p.307

⁷ Willcox (ed.), *The American Rebellion*, p.164

⁸ W.B. Willcox (ed.), *The American Rebellion: Sir Henry Clinton’s Narrative of his Campaigns, 1775-1782* (Newhaven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1954), p. xxxiv

Clinton's campaign was a well-executed combined operation, exploiting the naval supremacy enjoyed by the British that offered him freedom of manoeuvre and the opportunity to approach from the least expected quarter. Equally, the indirect approach through the creeks and swamps, as well as offering the advantage of surprise, allowed Clinton to conduct the operation with minimal casualties (256 in fact). Repeatedly the British were able to exploit amphibious mobility to achieve total surprise, preventing the necessity for a costly assault on Forts Johnson or Moultrie and Charleston itself.

Certainly, the American flotilla was not used effectively, except as a sunken obstacle. Once Charleston Harbour was blockaded and the sea islands captured, Lincoln may well have been advised to evacuate the town. Nevertheless, his small force of around 2,000 poorly equipped continental regulars would have been very vulnerable in the open country, withdrawing north to join Washington's main force in New Jersey in the face of Clinton's superior force and Tarleton's enthusiastic cavalry. Hobson's choice indeed.

However, the rivalry and disharmony between the various commanders did not augur well for the British war effort. Clinton found it hard to work with Admiral Marriott Arbuthnot, constantly berating him for a lack of co-operation,⁹ and while the Admiral was certainly curmudgeonly, the passage of the ships across the bar of the harbour was a vital component of the victory, none of which would have been possible without the aid of the Royal Navy.

⁹ Letter of Henry Clinton to Lord George Germain, 25th August 1780, in W.B. Willcox (ed.), *The American Rebellion: Sir Henry Clinton's Narrative of his Campaigns, 1775- 1782* (Newhaven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1954), p.455

Worse still was the relationship between Clinton and Cornwallis. Cornwallis was Clinton's named successor, and had already left America once rather than serve under Clinton. For his part Clinton must have felt quite uncomfortable with Cornwallis, who was ambitious and pushy and had the 'dormant commission' in his pocket. Clinton had asked to resign in favour of Cornwallis on his appointment as second in command. 'Throughout the planning and execution of the attack on Charleston, consequently, the two men were in an anomalous relationship,' says Willcox, while Clinton and Arbuthnot were '...eyeing each other askance.'¹⁰

Clinton was uneasy about leaving his second in command in charge of operations in the South with a virtually independent command when he returned to New York in early June 1780. He was convinced that the Earl was intriguing against him, which only added to his well developed persecution complex. Germain continued to interfere directly, with strategic and operational advice and instructions to Cornwallis, ignoring the chain of command and bypassing Clinton. Prior to this the British had adhered to the principle of concentration of force, but now their forces in North America had been effectively split in two, rendering them vulnerable to defeat in detail. It was this confusion that was to lead to the debacle at Yorktown some seventeen months later.

¹⁰ Willcox, *Ibid.*, p. xxxii - xxxiii

The Tobacco Raids 1779 – 1781

On 5 May 1779 Major General Sir Edward Matthew and Commodore John Collier sailed from New York with 28 ships and 1,800 men, arriving at Hampton Roads four days later. By 11 May they had occupied the Norfolk Peninsula, capturing Portsmouth, Gosport and Suffolk capturing supplies and tobacco. The Americans were forced to destroy a half built warship and two French merchant vessels. The expedition had caused over £2,000,000 worth of damage without the loss of a single man.

After this signal success Clinton was convinced that raiding was an effective way to pursue the war with the limited resources at his disposal, and Cornwallis for his part was encouraged to launch his later invasion of Virginia.

In October 1780 Major General Alexander Leslie occupied Hampton Roads, but this force was ordered south to join Clinton after the disastrous defeat at King's Mountain. Faced by war in the Carolinas and an expanding war in the west Thomas Jefferson, the state governor simply had no answer, and this was to cost him his job.

By 1 January 1781 Benedict Arnold now a major-general in the provincial service had landed at the Chesapeake with 1,500 men and orders from Clinton to draw Greene into Virginia and away from Cornwallis' army in the Carolinas. Arnold sailed up the James River with the sloop of war *Swift* and the transport *Hope* arriving at Richmond on 5 January, firing the town shortly afterwards. Simcoe was ordered upriver to Westham to

destroy a patriot arsenal at Chesterfield after which he repaired to Portsmouth, pursued by two armies under Lafayette and von Steuben.

However help was on the way. On the 26 March 1781, Maj. Gen. Phillips arrived at Portsmouth with a further 2,000 reinforcements and on 18 April the combined force moved up the James River to Williamsburg, destroying the Chickahominy River shipyard. Reaching the Appomattox River on 25 April and routing von Steuben at Blandford the expedition destroyed supplies at Petersburg and then attacked Osborne's Wharf on the James on 27 April, destroying or capturing 20 Virginia Navy ships, gathering for an attack on Portsmouth. Chesterfield Courthouse was burned on the 28 and tobacco warehouses at Manchester two days later. The arrival of Lafayette with more than a thousand regular continental infantry encouraged Arnold and Phillips to return to Portsmouth, but hearing that Cornwallis was en route to join them they headed to Petersburg to await his arrival. Their juncture was to have far reaching consequences.

This campaign was an effective way to use amphibious forces and it struck at the heart of American resistance in the South. It had the added advantage of removing Benedict Arnold from New York, where he was something of an embarrassment and where he was the object of a number of plots to assassinate or kidnap him.¹

The fundamental problem was that the aims of the war in Virginia were expanded to include Cornwallis' war in the South. Having campaigned in the interior of the country with mixed results and dwindling supplies Cornwallis felt that he could be of more use on

¹ E. Wright, 'A Patriot for whom? Benedict Arnold and the Loyalists', *History Today*, (October 1986) p. 29

the Virginia coast, where reinforcements and stores could be landed with ease.

Consequently, he was ordered by Clinton to find a suitable naval base and fortify it. This then was the genesis of the Yorktown Campaign.

CONCLUSION

The war was a major defeat for British arms and led to the fall of Lord North's ministry. Despite the loss of the thirteen North American colonies, Britain retained substantial bases in Canada and the West Indies and had developed the naval infrastructure at home. After the financial crisis of 1782, the exchequer recovered and was able to support a substantial naval force in peacetime. The Royal Navy's officer corps emerged from the war as an aggressive fighting unit prepared to carry the action to the enemy. The technical and organizational changes, particularly in signalling¹ and ship borne artillery, ensured that the Royal Navy would remain the most advanced maritime force in the world until well into the next century.

The fleet could intercept and engage enemy ships and fleets, but it remained a defensive tool. For offensive operations a strong amphibious component was required in order to project power ashore. The shift of focus to maritime operations after the entry of France in 1778 had two major implications. It greatly circumscribed the war on trade, the province of vessels too small for the traditional line of battle, that could have forced negotiations on the rebellious colonists, and it made large scale amphibious operations fraught with danger. The capacity for strategic manoeuvre in North America after 1778 was therefore very limited, especially when forces were diverted to the defence of the West Indies and Canada. Amphibious operations were dependent on the battlefleet to escort the large concentrations of shipping and provide assistance once the troops were

¹ *Kempenfelt to Middleton*, 9 March, 1781. (N.R.S. XXXII, p. 340)

ashore. Sailors were used to bring up supplies and man batteries in sieges, often dismounting the guns from their own ship for use ashore.

The line of battle was an important aspect of seapower, and the one that Mahan concentrated on almost exclusively, to draw his various lessons on naval strategy.

However, Mahan's view of the War of American Independence as a classic maritime war, where the resulting strategic and tactical failures were analysed and resolved in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic War, now seems rather out of date; it says more about his own time than the late eighteenth century. For Britain, the conflict had started as a civil war and there was initially no desire to engage in significant combat at sea with the navies of France and Spain, the fleet had more value as a deterrent. Rather, ideas about the role of the fleet and force projection ashore were ambiguous and disjointed. Neither were there any clear strategic objectives after 1778, rather a series of competing strategic imperatives, largely forced on Germain and Sandwich by circumstance.

It is against this backdrop then that the use of amphibious operations in the American War of Independence should be considered. Why did the time-honoured 'British Way of War' fail to bring about a successful conclusion, either in the initial war of the legislature or the wider war after 1778? Ultimately, expeditionary warfare could only target coastal towns, or centres linked to the sea by major navigable waterways. Where the army was forced to campaign away from the sea and the support of the navy results were mixed. It can be seen that the capture of New York in 1776 and Philadelphia in 1777, while well executed, had no effect on Washington's ability to continue to prosecute the war. General

Howe entirely failed to grasp the fact that the rebellion's centre of gravity was its armed forces and to a certain extent, its commander in chief. British land operations in the interior of the continent met with uniform failure. Burgoyne's expedition in the wilds of the Hudson Valley ended in disaster with the capitulation at Saratoga, and encouraged the participation of the Bourbon powers. It was a lesson entirely lost on Germain and Cornwallis, and the latter's peregrinations in the Carolinas proved entirely fruitless. Cornwallis was quite capable of inflicting stinging reverses on his opponents, but lacked a co-ordinated plan for turning these tactical victories into a lasting pacification of the rebellion. Johann Ewald, ever a sharp and perspicacious observer of the British war effort, puts it quite succinctly:

What use to us are the victories and the defeats of the enemy at Camden and Guilford? We now occupy nothing more in the two Carolina provinces than Charlestown, Wilmington, and Ninety-Six. In these areas, we hold no more ground than our cannon can reach - Why not operate out of one point and use all our force there to be the master of at least one province? What good are our victories which have been so dearly bought with our blood? We have made people miserable by our presence. So, too, have we constantly deceived the loyally-disposed subjects by our freebooting expeditions, and yet we still want to find friends in this country!²

Moreover, the American forces could always withdraw deeper into the interior of North America, away from vulnerable coastal areas in order to train and regroup. To keep the rebellion alive the patriot army merely had to survive, it was far harder for the British firstly to bring them to decisive engagement and then exploit that victory with a vigorous pursuit, given that the size of the country into which the Americans could withdraw was almost limitless. The British way of war depended on exploitation of the Royal Navy and against a continental opponent this advantage was nullified. It had functioned perfectly

² Ewald, *op cit.*, pp.301-2

well against another European colonial power whose centres of government were conveniently placed to be accessible from the sea, and for whom the hinterland of their province was viewed as a wilderness. In the Seven Years War Britain had enjoyed great success against France and Spain in this way, capturing both Quebec, capital of French Canada in 1759 and Havana in 1763, Spanish headquarters in the Caribbean.

The American War of Independence was to be no rerun of the Seven Years War, the opposition cared greatly about their homes and the land they defended, not simply viewing them as bargaining chips for a forthcoming peace conference. Lord North was no Pitt and William Howe, no Wolfe. There was no European land war to distract the French and Spanish allies of the colonists from their war effort in the Americas. Even if the Spanish navy proved to be something of a paper tiger, the French army and navy had undergone rigorous reform in the wake of the humiliating defeats of 1756-63 and were now a very real match for Britain's soldiers and sailors. Although French intervention under D'Estaing was disappointing for the allied cause, given a decisive and resolute commander like Rochambeau, the tables could be turned definitively.

Yet the balance sheet is not all negative. Tactically and operationally there were examples of excellent combined operations where the army and navy showed remarkable ability to plan, organise and execute complex sea-land manoeuvres. The capture of Savannah and St Lucia are text book models of this kind of warfare and it is hard, even in the age of technological marvels in the twentieth century, to find better led or smoother run amphibious landings. The army and Royal Navy reached the pinnacle of what it was

possible to achieve in military terms, using only the power of muscle, wind and tide. The technical and tactical lessons learned in this war of how to properly conduct amphibious assaults gave Great Britain the ability in war to strike wherever and whenever it chose to. It was this offensive capability that allowed Britain to carry on the war against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, often single handed, with hardly an interruption for over twenty two years.

FURTHER RESEARCH

As is invariably the case, research of this kind reveals more of what one does not know rather than what one actually knows. While academic studies and popular histories of the American story of the Revolutionary war abound, there are relatively few secondary works on the British part in the conflict. Most of that select group of publications are listed in the bibliography below.

It would be quite possible to plough through an entire shelf of secondary works on the American Revolutionary War without coming across any reference to the war beyond the Thirteen North American Colonies, excepting perhaps the forays of the renegade Scottish pirate Jones into British waters. The Battle of the Saintes, where discussed, is mostly treated as a coda to the Franco-American victory at Yorktown, along with the defence of Gibraltar – a sort of consolation prize for coming second. This paucity of both original research and secondary writing is especially acute with regard to the dealings of the British Army and Royal Navy in India and the West Indies, and much useful work remains to be done on these fascinating campaigns, that were both to have such far-reaching repercussions.

The war remains obscure and little studied today in French military historiography, coming as it does so close before the *déluge* of the Revolution and the dramatic career of Napoleon, it has tended to be somewhat eclipsed. This is a great pity. French arms did themselves much credit, fighting with honour and distinction, and it is high time that a

historian with the French language skills made use of the excellent *Service Historique de la Défense* to shed light on the part played by France's army and navy in the cause of liberty. If anything, the case is worse in Spain, lacking a strong tradition of military history, and whose oft derided armed forces played an important role in both the American and Mediterranean theatres.

At home, much material on the American War of Independence remains to be properly exploited by scholars at the National Maritime Museum and the National Archives, as well as at various regimental museums in the UK. At a time when the transatlantic 'special relationship' is much debated, it is to be hoped that the origins of the firm friendship of the 'English speaking peoples', born in war and rebellion, will continue to be studied by both American and British scholars.

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