

THE BRITISH CAMPAIGN FOR PHILADELPHIA AND THE OCCUPATION OF VALLEY FORGE IN 1777

In July 1777, Major General Sir William Howe and approximately 25,000 troops, including a Hessian division, were encamped in and around New York City. The city had fallen to the British in November 1776. New York provided the British troops under Howe with Loyalist support, a central location and access to valuable seaport. During the encampment, Howe communicated two plans for the 1777 campaign to Lord George Germain, the British Secretary of State for the Colonies. Major General John Burgoyne, encamped in Canada, submitted one plan to Germain.

Howe's first plan, dated November 30, 1776, was to have one force of 10,000 men invade Massachusetts by going through Rhode Island while a second force of 10,000 men captured the upper section of New York through the Hudson River Valley. At the same time a force of 7,000 men would hold the occupied sections of New York and Rhode Island and a final force of 8,000 men would hold occupied New Jersey and keep Washington's troops tied down. All of these objectives were scheduled for the spring and summer, with Pennsylvania and Virginia as targets for the autumn and South Carolina and Georgia the objectives for the winter.

Howe's plans, however, were based on receiving 15,000 rank and file reinforcements and Germain could promise only 4,000 Germans, 800 Hessian chausers, 1,800 recruits and 100 horses, for a total of 6,600 troops. With less than half the requested reinforcements available, Howe drafted a second plan which he sent to Germain on December 20, 1776. This plan was to take Philadelphia and the province of Pennsylvania using 10,000 men. The remainder of his troops would be divided; 2,000 men at Rhode Island supported by a suitable naval force, 4,000 men on and around New York Island to guard New York and part of New Jersey, and 3,000 men on the Hudson River. On April 2, 1777, Howe sent Germain a variation of the second plan replacing a predominantly land operation with an amphibious approach to Philadelphia using the Chesapeake Bay.

Burgoyne presented a plan for a Northern campaign to Germain on February 28, 1777 while on winter holiday to England. The Northern campaign called for a three-pronged assault with the main force of about 8,000 troops commanded by Burgoyne coming down from Lake Champlain from Montreal into the Hudson, a second force commanded by Colonel Barry St. Leger coming down from Montreal through the Mohawk Valley, and a third force under Howe coming up the Hudson River Valley to isolate New England from the other colonies.

Germain approved Burgoyne's plan, but on March 3, 1777 he also approved Howe's second plan. Germain believed Howe's plan could be completed in time for him to aid Burgoyne. In the amphibious version of the second plan Howe sent to Germain on April 2, 1777, he also:

... enclosed a copy of a letter which he was sending to Canada warning Carleton (Major General Guy Carleton, The Governor of Quebec) that he would be unable to support the advance; but he hoped to provide a force to break through the fortified Highlands (Hudson Highlands, held by American troops under General Israel Putnam) when Burgoyne reached Albany.

At this point Howe apparently had not received instructions from Burgoyne regarding his part in the Northern campaign. Howe did not see the Philadelphia campaign as a threat to the Northern campaign unless Washington withdrew from Philadelphia to try to stop Burgoyne. Howe felt defending Philadelphia would fully occupy Washington and “*It was incumbent upon him (Washington) to risk a battle to preserve that capital.*” There were other reasons for Howe’s decision to attack Philadelphia. It was the largest city in English North America, the seat of Congress, populated by numerous Loyalists, part of a fertile region, and could be supplied from the sea using the Delaware River. The alternative of attacking New England or more specifically Connecticut meant campaigning in a more densely populated province and facing the New England militia which Howe thought was the best militia in North America. Howe also felt Connecticut, with the exception of one or two coastal locations, would be too hard to hold in the winter.

On May 28, 1777 Washington had opened his campaign with a march toward Bound Brook, New Jersey which was about seven miles from the British outpost at New Brunswick, New Jersey. Howe moved into a defensive position and attempted to draw Washington into a full scale engagement. Washington declined the engagement and Howe kept trying to force a clash until retiring to Staten Island, New York. This spring maneuvering around Bound Brook prevented Howe from repairing the damage done to relations with the civilian population of British held New Jersey. During the previous winter, British troops, including Hessians, garrisoned in New Jersey indiscriminately raided loyalist, patriot and neutral property. However, the maneuvering probably had little effect on Howe’s delay. He explained the delay as waiting for “...green forage on the ground.”

Howe finally opened the Philadelphia campaign on July 16, 1777 when he loaded 17,000 men on a fleet of 211 ships commanded by Vice Admiral Lord Viscount Richard Howe. On the 25th of July the fleet sailed. The fleet was plagued with problems from the start. Collisions between ships, storms and shortages of food, water and fodder decreased the effectiveness of Howe’s forces. After 28 days at sea, shortages were so acute some of the horses were destroyed by dropping them overboard to end their suffering. Howe’s supplies were seriously low when the fleet landed at the Head of Elk, Maryland on the 25th of August. A full week was spent foraging for “...an issue of two days’ fresh provision.”

Howe’s supply problems were increased because Washington’s orders called for wagons, draft animals and supplies to be removed from the Head of Elk area. The Americans removed most of the supplies from the area in compliance with Washington’s orders. Some supplies, however, including 7,000 bushels of grain, were left behind

because of time shortages and means to remove them from Howe's path. On the third of September the British army began to move, foraging for supplies along the line of their march.

As Howe moved northward he divided his force into two columns. One, under the command of Lieutenant General Baron Wilhelm von Knyphausen, consisted of 8,000 men including Stirn's infantry and some English troops. The second column, under Lieutenant General Charles Cornwallis, consisted of 9,000 men, including Hessian Jagers, Anspach Jagers, and three Hessian Grenadier Battalions. The only mounted unit, the 16th Queen's Own Light Dragoons, was divided between the two columns, Knyphausen having one squadron and Cornwallis two. Light skirmishing and constant foraging continued as the British columns moved towards Washington's troops located on the eastern bank of the Brandywine Creek near Chadd's Ford, Pennsylvania.

Howe used his split force effectively at the Battle of Brandywine on the 11th of September. While Knyphausen attacked the center of the American line and occupied its attention, Howe and Cornwallis crossed the Brandywine seven miles north of Chadd's Ford, passing above the forks of the Brandywine Creek using fords Washington was unaware of, and attacked General John Sullivan's troops on the American right. The British pushed in the American right flank and Knyphausen broke through at the center. The American line reformed and held briefly at Battle Hill, Sandy Hollow, and finally on the road to Dilworth, before retreating to Chester. The Americans lost an estimated 200 killed, 500 wounded, and 400 prisoners, including many of the wounded. The British lost 90 killed, 448 wounded and 6 missing.

After the engagement at Brandywine, Howe did not move immediately. Captain Friedrich von Munschausen, one of Howe's aides, wrote in defense of Howe's delay explaining the British could not chase Washington because:

...the General first has to send away the (sick) and wounded on the Wagons, which carry our provisions and baggage. It is not possible to procure enough wagons here to do both at the same time, and neither of the two could be left behind.

Again Howe was faced by shortages of supplies and foraging continued. On the 13th of September, Cornwallis' column began moving toward Chester. On the sixteenth, Knyphausen's column began moving closer to the Middle Lancaster Road, now Swede's Ford Road. Later that day a brief clash, the Battle of the Clouds, took place between a portion of Washington's army and Cornwallis's column. Shortly after the troops made contact, while they were still maneuvering for position, a heavy rain began which limited visibility and dampened arms and ammunition. As a result the two sides broke off the engagement and moved apart. Washington's troops moved off toward Warwick, Pennsylvania and Cornwallis's column resumed its march. At dawn of the eighteenth they joined Knyphausen's column at White Horse. According to Captain John Montesor, the Chief Engineer with Howe's force, the columns "...Halted an hour, and then the whole army moved toward Philadelphia..."

At this point Howe was approaching Valley Forge and planning to ford the Schuylkill River at either Fatland Ford or Gordon's Ford near Valley Forge. Of his approach to the Schuylkill, Howe wrote:

...and I must be allowed to insist there was no delay in the approach To Philadelphia by Valley Forge, the Schuylkill, by the nearer route through Derby, being impassible...

The main body of Washington's troops had moved from White Horse to Reading Furnace and had crossed the Schuylkill at Parker's Ford, located west of Valley Forge. The Americans were now on the north side of the Schuylkill River and were maintaining a position between the British and Philadelphia. They were also recovering from the effects of the Battle of the Clouds which had damaged and destroyed ammunition and equipment.

On the 18th of September the British army moved through Great Valley to Tredyffrin. They set up their camp and according to Montresor writing in his journal:

A man sent out discovered upwards of 3,800 barrels of Flour, Soap and Candles, 25 barrels of Horse Shoes, several thousand tomahawks and kettles, and Intrenching Tools and 20 Hogsheads of resin in a Barn, 3 miles from hence at Valley Forge.

In response to this information, von Munschausen noted that Lieutenant Colonel William Harcourt, senior officer of the 16th Light Dragoons "... left with two squadrons of dragoons, three companies of light infantry, and 200 dismounted dragoons. His destination is Valley Forge ... to seize a deserted magazine there." Howe noted the detachment sent to Valley Forge but mentions only light infantry. Captain Johann Ewald also mentions only light infantry.

By September 18, 1777 Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Hamilton, and aide to Washington, and Captain "Lighthorse Harry" Lee had received orders from Washington to remove or destroy the supplies store at Valley Forge. He recalled the orders and the circumstances around them writing:

Contiguous to the enemy's route lay some miles stored with flour, for the use of the American army. Their destruction was deemed necessary by the Commander-in-Chief; and his aide-de-camp Lieutenant-Colonel Hamilton, attended by Captain Lee, with a small party of his troop of horse, were dispatched in front of the enemy with the order of execution.

Hamilton, Lee and approximately six dragoons arrived at Valley Forge on the morning of the eighteenth and according to Lee, their first action was to take "... possession of a flat bottomed boat ..." as an escape route for the detachment "... should the sudden approach of the enemy render such a retreat necessary." They also posted

two of vedettes, or sentries, on a hill overlooking Valley Creek. Both precautions proved sound, as warning shots were fired by the vedettes and alerted the others to the approaching British troops.

As the British approached, Hamilton and the four dragoons with him boarded the flat-bottomed boat and pushed off. Lee decided not to try to reach the boat because he would detain Hamilton's group and he thought he and the two sentries could escape on horseback. Lee and the sentries did escape even though the British did fire on the three horsemen from "...ten or twelve paces." Lee was close enough to note that the British were armed with carbines and pistols. This observation would support von Munschausen's inclusion of the 16th Light Dragoons in the detachment sent to Valley Forge. Generally, only light dragoons would be armed with carbines and pistols.

The British also fired on the boat carrying Hamilton, the four dragoons and some civilian boatmen. In a letter written on the eighteenth to John Hancock, President of Congress, warning that Congress should abandon Philadelphia because of the proximity of the British, Hamilton also wrote:

I just now passed Valley Forge ... in doing which a party of the enemy came Down and fired upon the boat by which means I lost my horse...one man killed, and another wounded.

Lee also wrote a dispatch shortly after his escape. It was directed to Washington apprising him of the events at Valley Forge and expressing concern over Hamilton's fate. The dispatch reached Washington about the same time as Hamilton arrived at Washington's Headquarters at Pottsgrove, Pennsylvania.

The British now held Valley Forge, but their hold seems to have been somewhat tenuous. At dusk on the eighteenth, at the British camp about three miles from Valley Forge, "...the American Colonel Heratea Vero, a native Italian, was captured by the Jaeger picket. He had lost his way." The Colonel refused to give any information, other than saying "...that we should have patience, we would soon see the Americans again." According to Ewald, at 2:00 a.m. on the nineteenth, the British Army was ordered to march in a particular order, then new orders came down "...since the enemy threatened to recross the Schuylkill at Yellow Springs to destroy the magazine at Valley Forge." The new orders sent the 2nd Battalion of Light Infantry and the English Grenadiers to guard the supplies at Valley Forge. Montrossor makes no mention of any troop movement on the nineteenth. Captain von Munschausen's account is different. He writes:

At noon news arrived that our detachment at Valley Forge was Being attacked. Two English regiments were sent off at once; they arrived in an incredibly short time, whereupon the enemy retreated. In the afternoon the English grenadiers and the 1st battalion of light infantry left for Valley Forge, and the detachment under Colonel Harcourt, as well as the two English regiments sent there today came back here.

Howe also notes the movement of two units to Valley Forge, but names them as “*The 1st battalion light infantry and British grenadiers.*” Howe does not mention what time these units moved or why they moved. The movement of British troops to Valley Forge on the nineteenth seems definite, even though the details remain clouded.

While some historians feel the movement of reinforcement troops to Valley Forge on the nineteenth was a result of Howe’s concern that the Americans would try to retake the supplies at Valley Forge, there are several other possibilities. There may have been an exchange of fire across the Schuylkill River with small arms or artillery. Captain von Munschausen’s reference to an attack could mean a direct attack or firing from the American held side of the river. There are no casualty reports for the nineteenth of September at Valley Forge. The lack of reports could mean the casualties, if any, were not reported or that there were no casualties. Engagements without casualties did occur as do errors in reporting and recording. Although Hamilton and Lee both mention casualties in their accounts, Howard Peckham lists no casualties at Valley Forge on the eighteenth. Some casualties may have been mis-recorded because of confusion over their status, as in the case of the man Hamilton mentions as killed on the eighteenth, who was actually a civilian boatman and not a military man.

It is also possible that a party of Americans did attack Valley Forge directly on the nineteenth. This would be in keeping with von Munschausen’s account and also with Ewald’s diary entry:

...the Quartermaster General, Sir Erskine, took twenty mounted and twenty Dismounted jaegers under Captain Lorey to reconnoiter the hilly area on the left of Valley Creek, but found it was not occupied by the enemy.

This indicates the British thought the Americans could be close to their position. The fact that they found nothing does not necessarily mean the Americans were never there, only that they were not found during the British search. That the Americans attacked in any large numbers is unlikely but, there is a possibility of a small unit of light infantry, cavalry, riflemen or a combination approaching the British position to scout the situation or harass them. American riflemen or Hessian Jagers would have been capable of harassing fire across the river because of the greater range of their weapons, while riflemen, light infantry and cavalry were all used in scouting type details.

On the evening of September 20, 1777 Howe received reports that General Anthony Wayne, commander of the Pennsylvania Line, and about 2,000 troops had recrossed the Schuylkill and were now camped about three miles from Valley Forge at Paoli. General Charles Grey was ordered to take five English battalions and launch a surprise attack against Wayne using only bayonets. Grey began his attack about 1:00 a.m. on the twenty-first. The engagement, which became known as the Paoli Massacre, cost the Americans an estimated 200 killed, 100 wounded and 71 captured. The British lost 6 killed and 22 wounded. Wayne was charged with negligence for his part in the engagement, but cleared of any wrong doing in a military court.

Also on September 20, 1777 the Guards moved up to Valley Forge and according to Howe:

On the 21st the army moved by Valley Forge and encamped upon the Schuylkill extending from Fat Land Ford to French Creek. The Enemy upon this movement quitted their position and marched toward Pottsgrove in the evening of the day.

The British advance by Valley Forge was guarded by the English grenadiers and four 12 pounder cannons posted on the heights overlooking the American held north bank of the Schuylkill. According to von Munchausen, the American troops were visible on the north bank.

On the twenty-second the British sent 100 grenadiers and 60 jagers across the Schuylkill at Gordon's Ford as a feint and to test the American strength. The British also made a feint up the Reading Road toward the major American supply magazine at Reading, a move which may have helped draw the Americans out of their defensive position between Philadelphia and the British. The British also sent grenadiers and light infantry across the Schuylkill at Fatland Ford, six miles below Gordon's Ford.

On the twenty-third the remainder of the British army forded the Schuylkill at Fatland Ford. By 10:00 a.m. the entire force under Howe was across and positioned between Washington and Philadelphia. Sometime between the twenty-first and the twenty-third, the British finished removing the supplies they could use from Valley Forge and set about destroying or disabling the industrial buildings that could be of use to the American army. According to papers filed by William Dewees the British had destroyed "a forge, saw mill, two large stone dwelling houses, two coal houses and 400 loads of coal, and 2,200 bushels of wheat and rye in the sheaf" that belonged to him. In addition, the British damaged the grist mill belonging to Issac Potts and may have done other damage as well.

By September 26, 1777 Howe had reached Philadelphia and began taking possession of the city. On the Delaware River, Forts Mercer and Mifflin fell by November 21, 1777 giving Howe control of the city and the river. The final major action of the Philadelphia campaign occurred on October 4, 1777, when Washington launched approximately 11,000 troops in an elaborate four pronged attack designed to retake Philadelphia. Aimed at Germantown, the initial American advance was delayed at the Benjamin Chew House, known as Cliveden, on Germantown Pike. The Americans were pushed back with estimated losses of 152 killed, 500 wounded and 438 captured. These heavy casualties may have been the result of confusion among the Americans, lack of familiarity with the area, and heavy fog on the morning of the attack. The British casualties were 401 killed and wounded.

The Americans retreated to Whitemarsh, Pennsylvania and spent about a month camped there. Washington may have debated a second attack on Philadelphia as well as considered possible locations for his winter quarters. On the 5th of December the British

came out of Philadelphia intending to surprise Washington at Whitemarsh. Washington having been warned of the British action confronted Howe with prepared lines. The British simply tested the American lines and then withdrew to Philadelphia.

After some additional maneuvering outside Philadelphia, Washington moved his army to Gulph Mills. On the 19th of December he moved his army to Valley Forge. Defended by its terrain which forms a natural triangular fort, Valley Forge was eighteen miles from Philadelphia. This distance placed the Americans close enough to hamper British foraging activities yet far enough to be out of reach of a surprise attack.

Washington's situation at Valley Forge was difficult because of problems with disease and breakdowns in the supply system. But Howe had not achieved what he had hoped by taking Philadelphia. The city was the capitol, but it was no longer the seat of Congress. Instead, Congress was holding business as usual in York, Pennsylvania. Most of the military supplies in Philadelphia had been removed and the anticipated heavy Loyalist support had not appeared. Also, Howe did not have control of western Pennsylvania and could not count on local forage.

The loss of Philadelphia was a blow to American morale, but its impact was lessened by Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga in October and the fact that the American army remained intact in Pennsylvania. Howe had failed at the very thing he felt would end the war. As he explained "*...as my opinion has always been, that the defeat of the rebel regular army is the surest road to peace....*"