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Rhode Island in Revolution

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RHODE ISLAND IN THE REVOLUTION

BY

ROBERT RICHARD RUDY

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN

HISTORY

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MAP OF NARRAGANSETT BAY, R.I.¹ 1778

SCALE

British Occupied Rhode Island,
December, 1776 to October, 1779

Key for all maps:

- Indicates American positions
- Indicates British positions

¹George W. Cullum, Historical Sketches of the Fortifications of Narragansett Bay (Washington: Printed for the Author, 1884), Plate 8.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author wishes to express his grateful appreciation to Dr. William D. Metz of the University of Rhode Island for his generous assistance and constant encouragement during two and a half years of graduate study. The wife of the author deserves equal praise for her understanding and perseverance during this trying period. To my mentor, Dr. Metz, and to my wife, Evelyn, I dedicate this study.

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

The purpose of this thesis is to trace the economic and military effort put forth by Rhode Island during the period from April, 1775, to September, 1778. Particular emphasis will be placed on the Battle of Rhode Island in August, 1778.

The introductory remarks review briefly the critical pre-war period from 1763 to 1775 and provide a background for the development of the problem. The British imperialistic policy and the reactions of the colonists created an ever widening gap between England and the colonies. The external commerce of Rhode Island was clearly affected and the colony supported the efforts made to repeal the British acts. The turbulent era was concluded with the skirmish at Lexington and the beginning of the period of militant activity.

The Revolutionary period necessitated extraordinary legislative measures to regulate the economic activity of the state and to provide the necessary militia forces for the protection of the inhabitants. The British occupation of Newport intensified the military requirements of the state and fostered two expeditions to deprive the British of this important base in New England.

The primary emphasis of the thesis is on the efforts put forth by the state in 1778 to recapture Newport from the British. The military buildup of men and supplies, the difficulties encountered, the Franco-American plans and disunity, the conduct of the Battle of Rhode Island, and a critique and analysis of the campaign are presented in detail.

Rhode Island's contribution following the Battle of Rhode Island in 1778 was confined to providing men, money, and supplies to the Revolutionary cause. The British withdrawal from Newport in 1779 and the arrival of the French in 1780 were highlights of this period.

Rhode Island's efforts during the war were impressive, particularly when the size of the state and its meager population are considered. The British occupation of Newport and control of the bay brought a major portion of the state's external commerce to a halt. The damage inflicted by the marauding British soldiery was incalculable. The more than 9,000 recorded enlistments in the state (some men enlisted more than once) out of a population of 54,000 in 1774 was an important contribution. Finally, the major effort put forth to relieve the town of Newport in 1778 exhausted much of the financial strength of the state. After 1779, the conflict shifted to the South and the Rhode Island countryside remained peaceful for the duration of the war.

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CHAPTER I

RHODE ISLAND PRIOR TO THE REVOLUTION

The year 1763 climaxed a century of Anglo-French conflict in America. It began an era of intensified British imperialism and colonial reaction that was to culminate in the American Revolution. The basic requirements of mercantilism and the colonial resistance to internal control generated a number of restrictive acts by Parliament. These acts were designed to coerce the colonies into becoming a more integral part of the British colonial system. Colonial insistence on self-government, however, had assumed such proportions that Parliamentary efforts to regulate the economic system of the colonies in the period from 1763 to 1775 were fruitless.

The restrictive acts adversely affected Rhode Island because of the predominantly commercial character of the colony. Both Newport and Providence were mercantile centers deeply involved in the triangular trades with New Foundland, the West Indies, and the Southern colonies. The colony possessed no important agricultural staple and consequently was forced to rely on commerce for its prosperity. The British enactment of the Sugar Act in 1764 with emphatic plans for its enforcement¹ brought immediate action from the General Assembly in January, 1765. Rhode Island's agent in London, Joseph Sherwood, was instructed to join the other colonial agents in a vigorous protest.²

¹Curtis P. Nettels, The Roots of American Civilization (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1938), p. 632ff.

²Edward Field (ed.), The State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations at the Turn of the Century (Boston: Mason Printing Co., 1902), I, 215.

Governor Hopkins pointed out to the Ministry the commercial dependence of the colony on molasses: "Upward of thirty distil houses, for want of molasses, must be shut up to the ruin of many families and to our trade in general. Two-thirds of our vessels will become useless."¹

The colonial efforts to head off the passage of the Sugar Act were unavailing and it became law in April, 1764. To add insult to injury the Ministry proposed the enactment of a stamp tax to raise the funds necessary to support the military garrison in America. The clamor of the colonists in opposition was unanimous. The proposed stamp tax effected every class of the population; more important, it represented the first major attempt at internal taxation. The Assembly reacted to the intended stamp tax by appointing a committee to act in concert with the other colonies to "secure the repeal of the Sugar Act and to hinder the passage of the stamp tax."²

Colonial reactions to the aforementioned acts were not entirely verbal. On two occasions, in 1764 and 1765, Newport mobs attacked British naval vessels and personnel, causing damage and injury. The passage of the Stamp Act in March, 1765, and the appointment of prominent men in the colonies to administer it evoked a storm of protest. In Newport, the mob hanged in effigy the more obnoxious Tories and looted their homes. The colonists' refusal to adhere to the provisions of the act, the additional threat of a boycott of English goods, and the pressure brought to bear by British merchants, forced Parliament

¹Rhode Island Colonial Records, MSS in Rhode Island Archives, VI, 381. Hereafter cited as "Rhode Island Colonial Records."

²Ibid., VI, 403.

to repeal the act in 1766.¹

The repeal of the Stamp Act was greeted riotously in Rhode Island. Cannons were fired, parades made their exuberant way through Providence and Newport, balls and dinners were arranged, flags were flown, bells were rung, and the more intoxicated inhabitants expressed their joy by dancing in the streets.²

Although subsequent taxes were levied against the import trade, the use of an internal tax was quickly abandoned by the Ministry. The effects of the non-importation agreements and the general colonial reaction to the stamp tax forced a reappraisal of the situation by Parliament. The colonists had been aroused and now realized the British intent to control more closely their future prospects. Every effort was made to promote local manufactures and to reduce colonial dependence on British goods.³

The colonists' long standing aversion to revenues paid on imports took on new life. In July, 1769, the British ship Liberty captured two Connecticut vessels suspected of carrying contraband and brought them to Newport. The angry citizens cut the cable of the Liberty and scuttled her off The Point, south of Newport harbor.⁴

After April, 1770, a period of restive calm descended over the colonies. It was of short duration as the incidents provoked by the

¹Nettels, Roots of American Civilization, p. 632.

²Field (ed.), The State of Rhode Island, I, 218.

³Providence Gazette, December 12, 1767.

⁴Ibid., July 22, 1769.

revenue agencies of the Crown continued to build up tensions in the colony. The placid surface gave way to armed hostility in June, 1772, with the result that English blood was spilled for the first time.

The commander of a British sloop, the Gaspee, Lieutenant William Duddingston, had long interrupted the legal commerce of the Bay, detained shipping, used the courts of Massachusetts rather than Rhode Island, and made unwarranted incursions along the coast of the colony on foraging raids. The inhabitants, exasperated beyond control, took matters into their own hands. The Gaspee, grounded during the chase of a small schooner, was boarded during the evening of June 9 by a party of armed men. In the fight which followed, several of the British crew were wounded and the Gaspee burned to the water line. The raiders made good their escape. Colonial refusal to push vigorously for their capture caused additional ill feeling among the British.¹

The growing intensity of the colonial resistance against the British continued into 1773. Parliament's efforts to save the East India Company by passage of the Tea Act instigated new patriotic outbursts of a verbal and physical nature. The Boston Tea Party in December, 1773, gave teeth to the colonial protests against the monopolistic conditions imposed by the act. As a result of the Boston Tea Party, the Ministry caused the enactment of the Boston Port Bill which closed that port until the damages due the East India Company had been paid. This attempt at internal control widened the gulf between England and the colonies. The non-importation agreements of the

¹Charles Carroll, Rhode Island, Three Centuries of Democracy (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1932), I, 252ff.

1760's were invoked again in an attempt to force the repeal of the Port Bill and other enforcement measures.

The most important response to the British imperial measures was the realization that joint rather than individual action by the colonies was necessary. In September, 1774, the delegates gathered in Philadelphia for the First Continental Congress. Rhode Island sent prominent members of the community to present its grievances in this combined effort to dissuade Britain from its policy.

From the beginning, the delegates to the Continental Congress devoted every effort to present to England the just demands of growing and important colonies within the British Empire. Letters were written to influential English men and organizations in which the arguments for the colonies were presented. It was arranged that the non-importation agreement would take effect in June, 1775, if the Ministry failed to heed the colonial demands. The delegates returned to their homes to await the results of their efforts.

The affair at Lexington in April, 1775, made the enforcement of the non-importation agreement unnecessary. The situation had changed so radically that the Second Continental Congress meeting at Philadelphia in May, 1775, was compelled to re-assess carefully the course of action to be taken by the colonies.

The twelve years of British effort to tighten administrative control over the colonies had proved a dismal failure. The inadequacies of colonial administration coupled with general ministerial ignorance of colonial conditions had led to repeated misunderstandings and irritations. England's colonial policy in America could not hope

to cope with or change the dynamic peoples who exuded confidence and independence by virtue of their upward struggle from the wilderness.

CHAPTER II

RHODE ISLAND GOES TO WAR

Throughout the Revolution, Rhode Island contributed men, ships, and supplies to the cause. On one occasion the state became the scene of a major military engagement - the Battle of Rhode Island in 1778. This engagement marked the first active cooperation of the Franco-American Alliance, and was the last major battle fought in New England's history. To appreciate fully the circumstances leading to the Battle of Rhode Island, it is necessary to cover briefly the economic and military efforts put forth by the state during the preceding years.

From the moment the news of the clash at Lexington reached Providence on the evening of April 19, 1775, efforts were made to assist Massachusetts in the common defense. Two riders were hurriedly dispatched to Lexington to verify the accounts of the skirmish. All along their route through Massachusetts they found that the simmering pot of rebellion had boiled over. Armed men were to be seen everywhere and an urgent sense of action permeated the atmosphere. The riders returned to Providence within two days and found over a thousand men under arms anxiously awaiting the orders of the governor to march.¹ Governor Joseph Wanton's sympathies, however, were unmistakably with the Crown and his lack of revolutionary fervor cost him the governorship within a few weeks. The militia continued to wait impatiently until the last week of May for Massachusetts to call for

¹Providence Gazette, April 22, 1775.

assistance.¹

The shocking news of Lexington provoked the most vitriolic newspaper comments throughout the colonies. The Providence Gazette commented:

Thus through the sanguinary measures of a wicked ministry and the readiness of a standing army to execute their mandates, has commenced the American Civil war, which will hereafter fill an important page in history.²

An immediate reaction to Lexington was felt in Newport where a British squadron under the command of Captain James Wallace was stationed. The citizens of the town were informed in no uncertain terms that to take up arms against the King would result in "laying the town in ashes." Despite Wallace's threat, Newport quickly raised a militia company to join the gathering patriot army before Boston.³

These were days of indecision and heated political arguments. Many Loyalists in southern Rhode Island and Newport bent every effort to keep the colony within the British fold, but the swelling demands of the masses for concerted action to protect their rights and liberties could not be denied.

The first special meeting of the General Assembly in the closing days of April showed where the sentiments of the people lay. The Assembly quickly voted to raise an Army of Observation of 1,500 men and, as further proof of their intent, some 20,000 pounds in paper

¹Providence Gazette, June 3, 1775.

²Ibid., April 22, 1775.

³Franklin B. Dexter (ed.), Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles (New York: Charles Slocum Co., 1901), I, 74.

currency was authorized to support this force.¹ Rhode Island had taken the fatal step, committing herself to what would become the eight year struggle for independence.

Although the populace reflected the surge toward Boston, cooler heads began to think about the need for protecting the colony against the dominant British sea power. The many miles of coast line and excellent landing areas made the colony almost impossible to defend. There were just not enough men to go around and still provide for assistance to Massachusetts. It was decided by the Assembly to erect a string of warning beacons from Point Judith to Newport with a particularly high beacon on Prospect Hill in Providence. Additional fortifications were authorized to protect Providence from any incursions by the British and the whole was manned twenty-four hours a day by the militia.²

As in all wars, trade and personal liberties were curtailed from the beginning. The Assembly, realizing the limited resources of the colony, passed the first of its embargo acts in May prohibiting the shipment of any provisions by water to enemy-held areas. At a Providence town meeting on May 15, an ordinance was passed prohibiting any person from entering the city if his beliefs were counter to those held by believers in liberty. The act went on to specify that the law would be utilized to eject all such persons then residing in Providence.³

¹Providence Gazette, May 6, 1775.

²Ibid., May 6, 1775.

³Ibid., May 13, 1775.

The force of the law and anti-loyalist hostility were so compelling that the Tories found great difficulty in carrying on their daily labors. As a result hundreds left the colony during and after the war to resettle in Canada.

The militia was organized into three regiments commanded by able men who were to see long service in the Revolutionary cause. Regiments were raised in Kings and Kent counties, Bristol and Newport counties, and Providence county. They were commanded respectively by Colonels James Varnum, Thomas Church, and Daniel Hitchcock.¹

At the end of May, Massachusetts asked for assistance against the British in Boston. Within hours after receiving this request, militia companies, a well equipped train of artillery, and medical and food supplies were on their way.²

Rhode Island troops sent to aid the besieging forces surrounding Boston were ably commanded by Brigadier General Nathanael Greene. Beginning his military service as a private, Greene was rapidly recognized for his military ability and appointed to command the state militia. His subsequent career as a regular officer under Washington brought him fame and an important role in the Battle of Rhode Island.

By the end of June, Rhode Island had been placed on a firm footing with every man capable of bearing arms ordered to be ready for any emergency. Committees of Safety scoured the countryside for surplus powder and ammunition, forwarding it to Providence for storage against

¹Providence Gazette, May 6, 1775.

²Ibid., May 13, 1775.

a possible invasion by the British. The system of sentry posts ordered by the May session of the Assembly was fast approaching completion, and an additional six militia companies were ordered to Boston to augment the Rhode Island forces already engaged in the siege.¹

The Assembly soon learned that the cost of defense was to be a considerable one and would plague the state consistently for many years. On June 17 the Assembly approved an additional issue of 10,000 pounds in bills of credit for "the common defense." Like the first issue in April of 20,000 pounds, this and subsequent issues disappeared rapidly into the maw of war.²

During these very early days of the Revolution the pressure of continued military demands and of the varied restraints war imposed on the people produced a rapid dissipation of patriotic fervor. It became necessary for the General Assembly to enact a bill for the apprehension and return of deserters from Rhode Island forces. Thirty shillings were offered for information about or return of a deserter, and severe financial penalties were prescribed for harboring deserters or withholding information concerning their whereabouts.³ On June 11 the first of many advertisements for deserters appeared in the Providence Gazette:

The friends of the community are hereby requested to apprehend all that may desert from the Rhode Island camp at Jamaica Plain in Roxbury: and for each soldier hereafter taken, and delivered to the commanding officer or to the Committee of Safety, a reward of five dollars will be given, and all necessary charges paid.

¹Rhode Island Colonial Records, IX, 201.

²Providence Gazette, June 14, 1775.

³Ibid., July 1, 1775.

The official papers of the state record many trials and sentences carried out against these men and those who sought to harbor them or withhold information of their whereabouts.

The military aspects of the Revolution, although playing a dominant role in the everyday existence of the people, did not consume all the energies of the Assembly and the inhabitants. The immediate effects of the war disrupted the economic and political stability of the colony. Governor Wanton's lukewarm attitude toward the Revolution cost him his job in May when the General Assembly deposed him in favor of Lieutenant-Governor Nicholas Cooke. The predominant attitude of the people in favor of the Revolution overrode the opposition of the many Tories in Newport and Kings counties. The idea of independence was still remote from the thoughts of most people. The great majority were concerned with a restatement of their fundamental rights and recognition of them by England, and the eventual peaceful reunion of the colonies and the mother country. Despite the hostility of the people toward England and the Ministry, the acts of the General Assembly continued to close with an expression of fealty toward the king such as: ". . . in the year of our Lord 1775 and the fifteenth in the reign of His Majesty George the Third, by the Grace of God, King of Great Britain, etc."¹

Stagnation in trade and agriculture had immediate repercussions on the economy. As early as June, 1775, merchants began to place advertisements in the Gazette indicating future shortages in various items normally imported from England:

¹Rhode Island Colonial Records, IX, 238.

It is recommended to the public to be careful in saving a sufficiency of garden seeds this present season as no importation of any article from England will take place till the present wicked ministry have dropt their cruel design of enslaving the people of America.¹

This advertiser thus displayed his patriotic fervor as well as his inability to supply the agricultural needs of the public.

By July, the shortage of wool necessitated drastic measures. From July until September, it was against the law in Providence to kill any lambs and sheep under penalty of seizure. The price of meat jumped drastically and the shortage of wool for uniforms caused the price of wool to rise rapidly. Inflation came to Rhode Island within a few weeks after Lexington and remained a constant problem until well into the 1780's.² By September, 1775, the inflation of bills of credit had reached such proportions that legislative action by the General Assembly made it illegal not to accept Continental or state issued money.³

On August 12, 1775, the Providence Gazette reported the completion of the warning beacon on Prospect Hill and outlined the duties of the citizenry: "Whenever you see the said beacon on fire you immediately, and without delay, with the best accoutrements, warlike weapons and stores you have by you, repair to the town of Providence"

The war was not all economic chaos, military effort, and political manipulations; humor was called on to relieve the tensions of the times. A group of gay blades from the American army at Cambridge gathered to

¹Providence Gazette, July 1, 1775.

²Ibid., July 22, 1775.

³Rhode Island Colonial Records, IX, 247.

celebrate the tenth anniversary of the colonial opposition to the Stamp Act. During the evening some fifteen toasts were drunk - each damning the British or praising the stalwart defense of the colonies by the Americans. One considered most appropriate and often repeated called for "Perpetual itching without scratching to the enemies of the British colonies."¹

It is ironic that the fight for liberty should also provoke its restriction. The Tories during the first two years of the war were not molested to any great extent but suffered their expulsion from society in silence, fearing physical harm if they voiced their thoughts. Neighbors who felt pity for their lowered status often sent aid in the dark of night, but as often they were found out. Some Americans disregarded the ideals of the war for a quick profit in trade with the enemy. These, too, were discovered and tried by their neighbors. Committees of Inspection made routine visits to the communities and announced their coming so that all could inform them of failures by their neighbors to be fully loyal to the revolutionary movement. Thus, the Revolution had its own vigilantes to enforce the requirements of patriotism.²

After June the inhabitants attempted to settle down to their normal daily activities but an air of concern and apprehension remained. British ships had been cruising the coasts and it was only a matter of time before they would strike in force. In the meantime petty foraging raids served to keep the colony in a state of suspense, drawing able bodied men from their farms and shops to man the defenses at the first

¹Providence Gazette, June 3, 1775.

²Ibid., September 30, 1775.

sight of a sail. Unfortunately, the frequency of these "false alarms" blunted the edge of the individual's eagerness to respond.

On October 7 the British made their first raid in force on Rhode Island soil. A fleet of fifteen ships commanded by Captain James Wallace anchored off Bristol. Wallace demanded to see several of the town's leading citizens and, when refused, opened fire, causing much damage and confusion in the town. During the height of the bombardment, Colonel Joseph Potter, exposing himself on a pier, hailed the flagship Rose and was taken aboard. Wallace insisted that two hundred sheep and thirty cattle be provided for the fleet but the inhabitants were not able to supply this number. Not satisfied with the forty sheep sent him, Wallace landed some of his men to loot the town of any other livestock and produce they could find.¹

Although this first raid was hardly worth the shot fired against the town, it did shake the complacency of the Rhode Islanders and galvanized them into further action to strengthen the defenses of the colony. By March, 1776, twenty-one militia companies were assigned stations around Narragansett Bay.² Additional warning beacons, guard stations, and batteries were hastily constructed to prevent further depredations by the British. (Fig. 1) The inhabitants along the coast returned to their tours of militia duty with renewed energy, fearfully expecting a repetition of the Bristol raid.

The first few months of the war had taxed the resources of the state in an unprecedented manner. The economic pinch felt earlier in

¹Bristol Phoenix, September 16, 1955.

²Field (ed.), State of Rhode Island, I, 232.

OF
NARRAGANSETT BAY, R.I.

1778

SCALE

Number and Disposition of the Militia
Companies, March, 1776¹

the year grew steadily worse. The multitude of enlistments in the spring bore heavily on the many families whose men left the farms untilled. The long winter caused many to throw themselves on the mercy of their neighbors for sustenance. And the war had just begun.

CHAPTER III
ECONOMIC AND MILITARY PROBLEMS
November, 1775 - April, 1778

As in all wars, the unsuspected assault by the enemy has served to stimulate the efforts of the people in their defense. Wallace's raid on Bristol energized the Assembly to new legislative activity. Indications of secret correspondence and spying for the enemy had existed since the beginning of the war. Now the Assembly ordered the death penalty for those persons caught communicating with the enemy. Only the people of Newport were excluded because the British warships there forced the citizens to provide supplies.¹

A multitude of economic problems passed before the Assembly during the next thirty months that required decisive and unflinching action by the representatives. The shortage of salt and leather made necessary new restrictions in their use and prohibition of their export without a permit.²

The pressing need of salt petre for the manufacture of explosives occasioned numerous articles in the Providence Gazette. These explained in detail the steps in the processing of the material and quoted the high prices available for the superior grades.³

With the ever growing list of prices and regulations on the

¹Providence Gazette, November 11, 1775.

²Ibid., November 25 and December 16, 1775.

³Ibid., January 27 and February 14, 1776.

disposal of food stuffs, it was inevitable that the smuggler should ply his profession. Those caught during the first year of the war were treated lightly, signing a confession and a promise to desist from such activities in the future. By 1777, the penalty for smuggling was death and a number of such sentences are recorded.¹

The price and wage regulations fostered the withholding of scarce items, thus forcing the "black market" prices up. The more affluent were able to "corner the market" on the scarcer products and the resulting dearth of these commodities generated new and stricter anti-monopoly and price control measures.²

The Providence Gazette found it increasingly difficult to manufacture the necessary paper pulp because of the shortage of rags. Advertisements appeared monotonously over the course of these months requesting rags at ever increasing prices as the shortage grew steadily more acute. On several occasions the paper was reduced to one page and even to a half page during the winter of 1777-78.³

Just as smuggling evoked a stiffer penalty as the months went by, so did counterfeiting. The first person convicted of the crime received a mild rebuke in 1776 but his counterpart in 1777 fared far worse.

Jonathan Slocum was tried and found guilty of counterfeiting and sentenced by the court to be set in the Pillory for one hour . . . to have both of his ears cropped, to be branded on each cheek with the letter R, to be imprisoned for one month, to pay double

¹Providence Gazette, December 25, 1775; March 29, 1777.

²Ibid., February 24 and November 30, 1776; June 28, 1777; March 21, 1778.

³Ibid., March 21 and November 21, 1776; April 5, 1777.

indemnity to all persons by him defrauded, to forfeit all his lands, goods, and chattels to the state.

Sarah, his wife, convicted of the same charges, suffered a somewhat milder punishment. She received the same sentence as her husband except that she had to stand in the pillory only a half hour.¹ To refuse acceptance of paper money or bills of credit or to tamper with their value was a serious business in these unsettled times.

Rhode Island was not the only state to feel the effects of the sagging economy and the runaway inflation. In November, 1776, a committee was formed by the General Assembly to meet with the representatives of the other states "to discuss methods of supporting the credit of the public currencies and for regulating the extravagant prices that are demanded (and unhappily given) for various commodities." The fruit of their endeavors was a proclamation admonishing the population against hoarding and raising prices.²

The lottery became a prominent institution in Rhode Island. The Providence Gazette kept a close watch on the rising lottery ticket prices over this period and reported the sellout of each lottery with almost persistent regularity.³

It is interesting to note that the conscience of the state, although suffering in the turbulence of war, did not completely disappear. The General Assembly recognized that innumerable families existed with no adult male members to do the necessary heavy work. In April, 1776,

¹Providence Gazette, February 3, 1776; July 26, 1777.

²Ibid., November 30, 1776.

³Ibid., May 25, 1776; April 26, 1777.

an act was passed which provided that each town was to give assistance to these families on at least one day a week. Neighbors gathered at the farms and cut wood, planted seed, harvested crops and made repairs which the wife, children, or invalid members of the family were unable to do.¹

An unusual degree of conscience expressed itself in regard to slavery. The fight for liberty engaging the colonies seemed paradoxical to many when the very fighters were also owners of slaves. Again the General Assembly came to the fore by legislating freedom for all Negroes or mulattoes brought into the state unless they were servants of someone passing through. The inhabitants of North Providence went one step further by requesting their representatives to press for complete manumission of slaves in Rhode Island. The germ of freedom persisted and subsequent acts gave freedom to those that enlisted to fight against the British in 1778 and finally freedom for all slaves during the transition period from 1784 to 1820.²

While the economic problems of the state were very real and offered a tangible business challenge, the problem of defining the rights of its citizens while protecting the state's security became increasingly difficult. In the June, 1776, session, the Assembly passed an act that all persons over fifteen years of age would be required to take a loyalty oath under penalty of being placed under the jurisdiction of the military commander of the local militia. It was further strengthened in

¹Providence Gazette, April 3, 1776.

²Irving H. Bartlett, From Slave to Citizen (Providence: The Urban League of Greater Providence, 1954), p. 21.

July by disenfranchising any man over twenty-one who had not attested his loyalty by the required oath. In Johnston, those not taking the oath or lacking proof that they had were denied their rations of salt until they complied.¹ In many cases town officials were relieved of their duties and new ones elected because they had not subscribed to the requirements of the act. In 1778 the oath was revised to require that all persons over twenty-one take it under the penalty of confiscation of their property and goods and banishment from the state. If the banished person returned he would be subject to the penalty of death.²

The aggressiveness of the state in the pursuit of its independence was spectacularly evidenced on May 4, 1776. Almost two months before the Continental Congress presented its Declaration of Independence, Rhode Island's General Assembly wrote and declared hers from England.³ To celebrate the occasion, the Providence Gazette changed the heading of its next issue, dropping the once proud lions holding the royal shield for a plain standard.⁴ In July, 1776, the receipt of the Declaration of Independence from the Second Continental Congress was speedily approved by the Assembly and a subsequent act dropped the word colony and substituted state in its stead for all future legislation.⁵

With its approval of the Articles of Confederation in 1778, Rhode

¹Providence Gazette, September 21, 1776.

²Ibid., February 21, June 22, July 27, September 9, and September 21, 1776.

³Rhode Island Colonial Records, VII, 204.

⁴Providence Gazette, May 18, 1776.

⁵Ibid., July 27, 1776.

Island fully committed herself to a union with the other colonies. In modern times such a commitment is accepted with knowledge that a national effort can be made to support its action. In 1775 such an unprecedented challenge toward a powerful nation by one that had only begun to realize its potential appeared to be folly. Yet, the remarkable series of events that was to unfold seemed to indicate that this fledgling nation was indeed predestined to greatness.

For many months after June, 1775, the military situation in Rhode Island was quite routine. The British naval forces continued their small scale hit-and-run raids along the coast, never landing in great force or penetrating too deeply into the countryside. The corresponding efforts by the Assembly involved the raising of new militia forces and the shifting of defensive alignments to cope best with the British incursions.¹

In 1776, General Washington's critical situation in New York and his urgent need for as many troops as could be spared caused the Assembly to send the militia brigade to his relief. Their departure left the state virtually defenseless during the summer and only the arrival of a relief regiment from Massachusetts eased the tension caused by the anticipation of a strong English attack.²

The first major military action affecting the state was the British investment of Newport on December 8, 1776. A fleet of eighty-one ships landed 5,000 men under the command of Sir Peter Parker at Newport and

¹Providence Gazette, January 20, February 17, June 13, and November 30, 1776.

²Field (ed.), State of Rhode Island, I, 234.

Middletown. After a night of depredation the entire army paraded through Newport and took up winter quarters in the town.¹

The activity of Rhode Island and adjoining states now became feverish. The Council of War hurriedly petitioned Massachusetts and Connecticut for troops and supplies. A convention of committees from the New England states met at Providence and agreed that a force of 6,000 men should be stationed in Rhode Island. The arrival of large bodies of men from Massachusetts and Connecticut turned the state into an armed camp. Troops were posted around the entire bay area to guard against further attacks by the British.² General Benjamin Lincoln arrived to assume command of the Rhode Island Department. Efforts to fortify the coastline facing Rhode Island continued, but as the weeks went by without enemy action eagerness diminished.³

A period of lightning Patriot raids against Portsmouth and Middletown began and continued for almost three years before the English finally withdrew. One such raid has gone down in the annals of Rhode Island history for its audacity and success. On the evening of July 9, 1777, Lt. Colonel William Barton and forty men of Colonel Joseph Stanton's militia regiment boarded long boats and headed toward Middletown. With muffled oarlocks the boats skirted several British warships and made their way to a point on the west coast of Rhode Island near the Overing House. (Fig. 2) Barton had learned from patriot sources

¹Dexter (ed.), Diary of Ezra Stiles, p. 95.

²Rhode Island Colonial Records, IX, 518ff.

³Providence Gazette, December 21, 1776.

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Route of the Barton Raid,
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that Major General William Prescott, the British commander, spent the summer nights at Overings to escape the Newport heat. At approximately ten minutes to twelve, Barton and a majority of his force overwhelmed the sentry and forced their way into Prescott's quarters. Barton ordered a quick withdrawal, allowing Prescott only time enough to put on his shoes and to gather up his clothes. The alarm was raised within minutes of the raiders' departure, bringing the entire British force on the island out to search for them. With remarkable luck the Americans were able to slip through the cordon of British soldiers and make good their escape.¹ The demoralizing effect of the raid can best be discerned from the entry of a British officer, Lieutenant Frederick Mackensie, in his diary:

It is certainly a most extraordinary circumstance that a general commanding 4,000 troops encamped on an island surrounded by a squadron of ships of war, should be carried from his quarters by the enemy in the night, without a shot being fired.²

Prescott was later exchanged for the American General Horatio Gates and returned to Newport to assume a command under General Robert Pigot. The morale factor of Prescott's capture was incalculable for the approaching military activity against the British on the island. The news of the daring raid spread throughout the colonies and gave a momentary brightness to the consistently dark news of defeat sustained by the American forces.

Before Barton's raid on Rhode Island, Congress had proposed an

¹Rhode Island Historical Society MSS, III, 13.

²Diary of Frederick Mackensie (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), p. 148.

attack against Newport to "relieve that stricken town" and to open the bay to commerce. Washington appointed General John Spencer in April, 1777, to conduct the campaign. Upon his arrival in Providence, Spencer immediately set to work marshalling the necessary troops and supplies for the undertaking. The willingness of all concerned was not to be denied, but the lack of firm decision by Spencer took the edge off the eagerness of the army.

The commissary department had great difficulties in acquiring the necessary food and clothing. The resulting shortages produced a near mutiny by some members of the army. Several gathered together and wrote an exceedingly derogatory paper to the General Assembly, airing the unsavory conditions facing the troops and hinting that graft and embezzlement were the causes. The offended legislators forwarded the manuscript to the commander of the troops and ordered the court-martial of its authors. Dissatisfaction with their lot, their commanders, and the slowness of preparations caused many of the militia to desert and affected the working relationships of the officers and their men.¹

The preparations dragged on into October. By this time half of the Rhode Island militia had been committed to the invasion.² The date for the attack was set for October 19, but even at that time the forces were not adequately prepared. The army had become impatient and an event occurred which served to disrupt even further their uneasy

¹Journal of the House of Deputies, MSS in Rhode Island Archives, August 23, 1777.

²John Howland, Notices of the Military Services Rendered by the Militia during the Revolutionary War (Providence: Private Printing, 1832), p. 8.

readiness for the campaign. The chaplains raised "scruples of conscience" in some of the general officers against making the invasion on Sunday. Spencer denied being inhibited by this condition and was prepared to proceed. Wild imaginations caused further discussion, and as the day was a particularly fine one, many of the soldiers became disgusted with the delay. The result was to postpone the assault for one day.¹

The twentieth dawned menacingly dark and the subsequent storm lasted several days. The temper of the militia had been aroused and desertions occurred by the hundreds. Of the 8,300 men mustered for roll on the nineteenth, only 5,000 remained on the twenty-second. The Council of War decided to call off the expedition and prepared to conduct an investigation into its failure.²

The subsequent investigation and court-martial of General Spencer absolved him and instead laid the blame on the weather and General William Parker for his failure to prepare enough boats. However, it is clear that General Spencer's lack of decisiveness and aggressiveness fore-doomed the expedition. In any event it may have been for the best. The night before the invasion was scheduled a traitor crossed over to Rhode Island and informed the British. They were waiting in force to surprise Spencer and undoubtedly would have done great damage if the attack had been made on schedule.³

¹Dexter (ed.), Diary of Ezra Stiles, II, 167.

²Ezra Stiles to Henry Marchant, October 19, 1777, Peck MSS, Rhode Island Historical Society.

³Howland, Notices of the Military Services, p. 9.

The winter of 1777-78 proved to be a difficult one for the state. Few men enlisted because of the poor pay and equipment. The tax load was very heavy and most people were hard put to pay their share. Finally, the ever present British force wintering in Newport kept the inhabitants tense and anxious for the safety of their homes and families. The times were difficult and even the most ardent patriot must have felt a twinge of regret that the fateful skirmish at Lexington had occurred so many months before.

CHAPTER IV

NEW HOPES AND ALLIANCES

April to August, 1778

Spencer's fiasco in October, 1777, left the state in a precarious position. The strong British forces in Newport posed a dangerous threat to the inhabitants as well as choked off all seaborne commerce in the bay. Spring brought revived hope, however. Information of the appointment of General John Sullivan to the command of the Rhode Island department aroused fresh enthusiasm for continued action against the enemy. Sullivan was known as a determined officer, an excellent planner, and a vigorous, if somewhat impetuous leader. These qualities plus his excellent military record gave Rhode Islanders a new feeling of confidence.¹

By April, 1778, the state had established a variety of military units scattered from Point Judith to Scituate. Two regiments were in service with the Continental Army while three regiments and a number of "minutemen" companies were on active duty in the state. In addition, militia companies such as the Kingston Reds, the Kentish Guards, the Pawtucket Rangers, the Captain-General Cavaliers, the Providence Cadets, the Scituate Hunters, and others with less flamboyant titles were ready to "spring to action."²

With a majority of the men in the Continental service or the state

¹Providence Gazette, April 4, 1778.

²Benjamin Cowell, Spirit of '76 in Rhode Island (Boston: A.J. Wright Co., 1850), p. 153.

militia, the spring militia call for obligated tours of duty was answered very slowly. It was not uncommon for men to report hours and days late, creating a difficult logistical problem for the quartermaster officers.¹

Although the military unit rolls were very long, actually each company contained only a handful of men. In April, 1778, the state was depending on a bare minimum to protect its coast line. Letters written by prominent Rhode Islanders all bemoaned the loss of so many troops from the state and urged the return of those in the Continental Army.² Upon his arrival in Providence on April 18, General Sullivan assumed the command of the Rhode Island department.³ His bustling energy stirred up the military activities in the state and letters were immediately dispatched to the neighboring states requesting that they fulfill the promised troop quotas. Sullivan made a complete tour of the bay area, examining the terrain and availability of equipment for the militia.⁴ He directed the refurbishing of all the coastal batteries, initiated longer militia drills, ordered more active contact with patriots in Newport, and encouraged the desertion of British and Hessian soldiers.

The difficult winter was partly forgotten in the good news of the

¹Joseph Taylor to Asa Waterman, April 7, 1778, Moulton MSS, Rhode Island Archives.

²Nicholas Cooke to Nathanael Greene, April 19, 1778, Peck MSS, Rhode Island Historical Society.

³Providence Gazette, April 25, 1778.

⁴Asa Waterman to Andrew Huntington, April 19, 1778, Papers of Captain Asa Waterman, Moulton MSS, Rhode Island Archives.

spring of 1778. The energetic work of Sullivan, the defeat of Burgoyne at Saratoga, and the entry of the French into the war did much to lift the flagging spirit of the patriots.¹ Unfortunately, this optimistic feeling was to be short lived.

Major General Sir Robert Pigot, commanding the British on Rhode Island, received continuous and accurate reports of Sullivan's activities. Determined to forestall another invasion attempt, Pigot planned a destructive raid on the mainland to burn as much of the military supplies and shipping as possible. Lieutenant Colonel Campbell of the 22nd Regiment and Major Eyre of the 54th were designated to lead 500 British and Hessian soldiers on the raid.²

Before dawn on Sunday, May 25, the British force landed on the neck between Bristol and Warren. (Fig. 3) Splitting into two groups, they proceeded to burn military stores, shipping, and a number of buildings in the towns. A small party crossed over to the Kickemuit River and burned fifty to sixty boats assembled there for the Spencer expedition and captured twenty carpenters.³ The small Bristol garrison under the command of General West made a futile attempt to stop the enemy. After several unsuccessful volleys the militia fled.⁴

A messenger reached Colonel Barton in Providence at noon. He immediately set out for Warren with the mounted militiamen he could

¹Providence Gazette, April 25, 1778.

²Charles Stedman, History of the American War (London: Printed for the Author, 1794), II, 28.

³Samuel Ward to Nathanael Greene, May 25, 1778, Ward MSS, Rhode Island Historical Society.

⁴Bristol Phoenix, September 16, 1955.

find and gather enroute. The small force reached Warren after the British had departed, so continued on to Bristol. Barton and his men arrived just as the last of the British force was embarking and a short but sharp skirmish followed in which a number of men on both sides were wounded.¹

The state was aroused by this hostile action. The General Assembly immediately authorized Sullivan to call a sixth of the militia and independent companies to duty for fifteen days. A new flurry of letters was directed to the delegates of the state in the Continental Congress in an effort to obtain some action against the British at Newport.² More disturbing was the accuracy of the enemy information on the location and quantity of military supplies. The General Assembly ordered the arrest and trial of all persons suspected of spying or who were unfriendly toward the state.³

The panic of the inhabitants was demonstrated by the harshness of their actions toward the Tories and deserters. One such deserter was tried and executed for enlisting, accepting bounties, and deserting on several occasions.⁴

General Sullivan continued to write to Connecticut and Massachusetts for troops promised at the Springfield Convention. Connecticut in turn pointed out the closeness of her shores to New York and demurred on her commitments. Congress at the same time ordered the

¹Providence Gazette, May 30, 1778.

²Council of War, June, 1778, MSS, Rhode Island Archives.

³Broadside, May, 1778, Rhode Island Historical Society.

⁴Providence Gazette, May 30, 1778.

return of the Continental Battalion raised in Rhode Island if Washington was able to release them.¹ This battalion did return in late July, 1778, to take part in the Battle of Rhode Island. But the shortage of manpower continued to keep the state in a precarious position.

During the first week of July, General Sullivan received orders to prepare for an attack on Newport. With the recent Bristol-Warren raid still fresh in their minds, Rhode Islanders set about the task of raising a force large enough to cope with the British in their entrenched positions. To provide the multitude of supplies necessary to feed, clothe, and equip an army of 10,000 men was a prodigious task. The transportation requirements alone would utilize every available carpenter in Rhode Island to build flatboats.

While Sullivan poured all his energies into the preparations, the French fleet arrived off Sandy Hook on July 12. In a letter to Sullivan, Washington suggested several courses of action to utilize the fleet and its 4,000 marines. To throw the enemy off guard, Sullivan was urged to redouble his efforts and attempt to delude the British into believing an attack was imminent. If such an attack was decided on officially, additional troops would be sent from the Continental Army.² Washington's intent to deceive the enemy as to the next point of attack worked quite well. Even the members of the Continental Congress were unaware of the strategy to be employed and could only

¹Worthington Ford (ed.), Journals of the Continental Congress (Washington: Library of Congress, 1908), XI, 645ff.

²Jared Sparks (ed.), Writings of George Washington (Boston: Russell, Odione and Metcalf Co., 1834), VI, 6.

guess as to the next course of military action.¹

Sullivan did as Washington requested. He indicated to General William Heath in Boston that by the middle of July the Rhode Island forces numbered 7,500 men who were scattered over one hundred and twenty miles of coast line. He urged that the Massachusetts militia be sent forward "with all speed" and with the necessary supplies to sustain the expedition.²

Letters from the governors of the other New England states indicated that substantial forces were on their way to join Sullivan. The Reverend Ezra Stiles wrote in his diary: "There is an amazing spirit for rushing toward Rhode Island spread 100 miles around. Militia have gone thither from beyond New Haven."³ All through the month of July men marched into the camps at Swansea, Bristol, Tiverton, and Providence. Sullivan reviewed the troops and was well pleased with their general appearance, morale, and equipment. The Providence Gazette reported: "The men performed their maneuverings and firings with great alertness and military order."⁴

On July 22 Varnum and Glover's brigades of Continentals left the camp at White Plains, New York, for Rhode Island. Washington directed that General Lafayette command these brigades and that he march with all "convenient expedition and by the best routes" to

¹James C. Ballagh (ed.), Letters of Richard Henry Lee (New York: Macmillan Co., 1912), II, 426.

²Amos A. Lawrence (ed.), Letters of William Heath (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, undated), X, 275.

³Dexter (ed.), Diary of Ezra Stiles, I, 294.

⁴Providence Gazette, July 18, 1778.

Providence.¹

The problem of transporting the troops to the British held island had been a critical one during the Spencer expedition and Sullivan was determined not to make the same errors. Major Talbot was assigned the mission of building eighty-five flatboats each capable of holding 100 men. Other flatboats were to be brought down the Taunton River at night to Tiverton and the whole massed in Wanton's Pond near Howland's Ferry.² (Fig. 4)

A hint of the politics played in Washington's headquarters was revealed in a letter to Sullivan from General Nathanael Greene. Several attempts were made by General Horatio Gates to obtain the appointment to command the expedition, but he was unsuccessful. Greene urged Sullivan to be victorious. He must prove to the French that the Americans were able to defend their land and were willing to work in close concert with their new allies.³

The strength of the opposing armies grew steadily after Washington had determined that a major effort would be made to recapture Newport. A British deserter reported the arrival of 3,000 reinforcements on July 22 with an expected 4,000 more due by the end of the month.⁴ Sullivan, continuing his letter writing campaign to raise additional

¹Sparks (ed.), writings of George Washington, VI, 8f.

²Lawrence (ed.), Letters of William Heath, X, 305.

³Nathanael Greene to John Sullivan, July 26, 1778, Sullivan MSS, Massachusetts Historical Society.

⁴Lawrence (ed.), Letters of William Heath, X 295.

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British and American Positions,
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forces, expected his army to number 12,000 by the time the invasion began.¹ Although the American army grew steadily, the troops were well concealed from the British. The coast appeared quiet and no large number of troops was seen. A lack of intelligence about the enemy left the British very much in the dark. They were unable to determine the extent and purpose of the preparations being made for the attack.²

A shortage of men and supplies continued to delay the setting of a date for the descent on Newport. Sullivan was forced to send a large part of his needed supplies to Washington at White Plains, and fish had to be substituted for the normal meat ration.³ The meager diet apparently did not effect the morale of the men as they were all eager to "give the enemy a cursed flogging."⁴

News of the departure of Admiral D'Estaing's fleet from Sandy Hook on July 22 was received at Sullivan's headquarters on the 25th and at Pigot's on the 26th. The destination was unknown, but both parties concerned rightly guessed that it would be Rhode Island. Pigot ordered the return of the Leyreuth and Prince of Wales Regiments from Conanicut (Jamestown) to keep those forces from becoming isolated.⁵ Defensive works were thrown up near Newport and the batteries at The

¹Asa Waterman to Henry Champlin, July 23, 1778, Moulton MSS, Rhode Island Archives.

²Diary of Frederick Mackensie, p. 311ff.

³Lawrence (ed.), Letters of William Heath, X, 310.

⁴George W. Greene, The Life of Major General Nathanael Greene (New York: Hurd and Houghton Co., 1871), II, 111.

⁵Max Von Eeliking, "German Soldiers in Newport 1776-9 and the Siege of 1778," Rhode Island Historical Magazine, VII (October, 1886), 86.

Dumplings, Fox Hill, and Goat Island, and the North battery were placed on a twenty-four hour double watch.¹

Lafayette continued to hurry his 2,000 Continentals forward, passing through New Haven on July 26.² From Massachusetts, one-half of that state's artillery regiment, armed with light artillery and an eight inch mortar, started for Tiverton.³ With the continued influx of men the supply situation remained critical and Sullivan was forced to appeal to the Navy Board for all available pork and beef it could spare.⁴

Although short on rations and fighting men, the army was abundantly supplied with general officers. Major General Friedrich Von Steuben asked to be relieved of his Inspector-General's duties to assist Sullivan in the coming battle. His request was granted but too late for him to participate in the attack.⁵ Rhode Islander's were cheered by the news of General Greene's assignment to the department. With some of the finest general officers available, the future of the expedition seemed assured.

Upon orders from General Washington, Sullivan divided the command of his first line between Greene and Lafayette. The 2,000 Continentals fast approaching Providence with the Marquis were also to be shared

¹Diary of Frederick Mackensie, p. 315

²Dexter (ed.), Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles, I, 289.

³Lawrence (ed.), Letters of William Heath, X, 339.

⁴Asa Waterman to Captain John Deshon, July 27, 1778, Moulton MSS, Rhode Island Archives.

⁵Ford (ed.), Journals of the Continental Congress, XI, 64f.

with Greene to provide both divisions of the line with seasoned veterans to help sustain the untried and untrained militia. Washington concluded a letter to Sullivan with a warning note. Knowing Sullivan's temperament, he cautioned him in his use of the French troops because D'Estaing, in addition to his rank of Admiral, was primarily a general officer in the French army. Most important was Washington's request that "harmony and the best understanding be a capital and first object."¹

En route to Providence, Lafayette received the letter from Washington indicating the division of the Continental force under his command. The Marquis' reply evidenced his sincerity in the Revolution and in particular his regard for Washington: "Anything, my dear General, which you shall order or can wish, will always be infinitely agreeable to me."² Although Lafayette's boyish enthusiasm did create some antagonism amongst his American counterparts, his desire to assist in winning the Revolution has never been doubted. His attitude was consistently one of friendship toward America and an unswerving devotion to Washington.

The last days of July were filled with important events. The Council of War, at the request of Sullivan, called out one-half of the militia, alarm, and independent companies of the state for twenty days duty beginning August 1. The remainder of the militia was put on a ready status to be called if needed.³

¹George Washington to John Sullivan, July 27, 1778, Pease MSS, Rhode Island Archives.

²Sparks (ed.), Writings of George Washington, VI, 22.

³Council of War, Rhode Island Archives, p. 111.

Calling half of the militia caused a reshuffle in the organization of the state's forces. Regiments were combined, militia companies disbanded, and independent companies integrated into the militia regiments of the state. The regiments were formed into eight companies and the various artillery units in the state united into a single train of artillery. Once the reorganization was completed, a half of each unit went on active duty for twenty days. A muster was held and lots drawn to determine those that would go first. If a man found himself in the first draft, he could be excused by getting another to go in his stead.¹ Particular care was taken to account for every able bodied man in the state. Even the draft calls of later conflicts were no more thorough in their accounting.²

After leaving New York, D'Estaing bore southward to deceive the British of his intentions, but with the coming of nightfall, he steered for Rhode Island. By 9:00 A.M. on July 29 the French fleet dropped anchor off Point Judith. The presence of the French near Newport caused the British in New York to re-evaluate their strategy and to gather additional reinforcements from the army at White Plains for Newport.³

Upon his arrival, D'Estaing dispatched two ships of the line to block the entrance of the bay south of Conanicut Island and two frigates

¹Providence Town Papers, Number 1492, August 1, 1778, Rhode Island Historical Society.

²Broadside, July 29, 1778, Rhode Island Historical Society.

³Stedman, History of the American War, II, 27.

and a brig to patrol the east passage. The presence of the French ships in the east passage caused some concern and forced the British naval commanders to sink a sloop and several of their galleys.¹ On Conanicut, the small garrison that remained broke camp with all possible speed, spiked their cannon, blew the magazines, and destroyed the defensive works before hurriedly withdrawing to Newport.² A small garrison remained on Goat Island (between Newport and Conanicut) where their guns held a commanding sweep of the passage and the harbor. To guard against a direct attack on Newport itself, Pigot ordered several ships sunk at the entrance to the harbor between Goat Island and Newport.³

On July 30 the French fired on Conanicut before landing troops to secure the island. General Pigot, reviewing the situation, decided to withdraw all the heavy baggage and equipment from the northern end of Rhode Island between the Bristol and Howland Ferries. The troops remaining to defend the landing sites were reduced to a minimum and the bulk of the British force concentrated around Newport. The defensive line had already been started, ranging from Tomini Hill on the left, east to Green Hill, and then south to Easton's Pond on the right.

The British command had a difficult problem deciding where the French and Americans would land. The overwhelming French sea power

¹W.M. James, The British Navy in Adversity (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1926), p. 102.

²J.B. Rosengarten (ed.), The Diary of Stephen Popp (Private Printing, 1953), p. 29.

³James, The British Navy in Adversity, p. 102.

provided unlimited opportunities for rapid movement of troops from one part of the island to another. There were several suitable landing places, all of which were fortified but feebly garrisoned. The three main ferry landings, Bristol and Howland at the north end of the island, and Fogland on the east shore midway up the island were all potential invasion points. Numerous beaches on both sides of the island added to the complexity of the problem. The lack of enemy intelligence seriously hampered Pigot's decision and left him with only one logical course of action. He would have to assume that a joint attack would be made against the island, a landing by the French on one side and by the Americans on the other. The decision to withdraw to the Tomini Hill line offered the best solution and arrangements were made to complete this plan the moment it appeared an invasion was imminent.¹

The month ended on a note of expectancy. The Americans continued their buildup while the British deepened and strengthened their main line of resistance around Newport. The prospects for success hastened the American preparations and the final plans for Franco-American cooperation were laid. All was fast approaching readiness; the hour of action was at hand.

¹Diary of Frederick Mackensie, p. 317.

CHAPTER V
FRANCO-AMERICAN PLANS

August 1-8, 1778

With the arrival of the French fleet the water barrier to the invasion of Rhode Island had been minimized; the success of the expedition seemed assured. The presence of the French to assist the American army served to offset the inadequate training of the militia as well as to provide a tremendous boost to their morale. Sullivan immediately conferred with D'Estaing aboard the flagship Languedoc and preliminary plans were made for the joint attack. Lafayette's arrival on August 2 established an excellent liaison between the French and American commanders. As his special envoy to D'Estaing, Sullivan appointed Lafayette to complete the arrangements for the invasion.¹

The basic plan for the attack was simplicity itself. The Americans were to cross to the island at Howland's Ferry during the night of August 9. The French marines were to land opposite Dyer's Island on the west shore of Rhode Island on the morning of August 10. (Fig. 5) The Americans were to secure the batteries and fortifications in the vicinity of Butts and Quaker Hills and then move rapidly southward to join the French.² It was anticipated that a large body of English troops

¹Louis Gottschalk, Lafayette Joins the American Army (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), p. 244.

²Greene, Life of Major General Nathanael Greene, II, 113.

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Franco-American Plan of Attack,
August 10, 1778¹

and their supplies would be caught between the two forces.¹ With the union of the two attacking groups at the center of the island, the entire army would then wheel south to assault the town and its defenders.

The plan provided a workable solution for the use of all the forces available. Unfortunately, the details of the plan brought personalities into play and thus sowed the seeds of discontent between the French and Americans. It had been Lafayette's dream to command a combined force against the British. His letters to D'Estaing initiated the idea by requesting the Admiral to recommend such a joint task force to Sullivan with Lafayette as the commander. The Admiral, pursuing the suggestion, proposed that the Americans send a force of 1,200 men under the command of Lafayette to join the French troops in the attack. D'Estaing further reasoned that if it were necessary for him to withdraw, Lafayette could carry on by assuming the command of the entire force, thus maintaining liaison with Sullivan.²

With high hopes, Lafayette returned to the headquarters in Providence and presented the plan to Sullivan and his staff. From the first there was a general disagreement by the Americans. Sullivan questioned the sagacity of reducing the main force which he felt was not strong enough anyway. It was only after a lengthy discussion that Sullivan reluctantly agreed to the plan and ordered Lafayette and Colonel William Jackson's veteran regiment to join the French fleet. But these orders were countermanded at the last moment for reasons not now clear.³

¹Lynn Montross, Rag, Tag and Bobtail (New York: Harpers, Inc., 1952), p. 292ff.

²Greene, Life of Major General Nathanael Greene, II, 113.

³Gottschalk, Lafayette Joins the American Army, p. 246.

The unpleasantness over the D'Estaing-Lafayette plan for a joint force was quickly smoothed over but not entirely forgotten. Sullivan, following Washington's advice, made every effort to continue the cordial relations. His letters to D'Estaing were informative and suggestive rather than imperious and commanding.¹

Development of the Franco-American plans for the attack continued unabated through the first week of August. Major Talbot reported from Tiverton that eighty-six flatboats were ready and gathered in Wanton's Cove. The roads from all the surrounding states were heavy with traffic bearing supplies for the expedition. Even though the "spirit of Rhode Island" had affected many, the numbers of the militia increased slowly. Sullivan, in a letter to Washington, expressed great dissatisfaction with the militia for being "exceedingly tardy" in their arrival.²

While Sullivan and his staff continued to press for additional troops and supplies, General Pigot was experiencing some difficulties of his own. The problem of desertion continued to plague the British general as increasing numbers of British and Hessian soldiers managed to make their way to the American camps. They accurately reported the disposition, strength, and critical needs of the British on Rhode Island.³ For the most part General Pigot seemed adequately supplied and felt that his major requirement was additional reinforcements and

¹John Sullivan to Admiral D'Estaing, August 2, 1778, Sullivan MSS, Massachusetts Historical Society.

²John Sullivan to George Washington, August 6, 1778, Peck MSS, Rhode Island Historical Society.

³Providence Gazette, August 1, 1778.

naval support.¹ The Tories in Newport appeared to be Pigot's greatest problem. They were in such a state of panic that they refused to "lift a hand" in the defense of the town.²

By the end of July, Pigot had withdrawn the bulk of his troops from their exposed positions on the northern and central portions of Rhode Island and from Conanicut Island. On August 4 the Dunau and Anspach Regiments were at Black Point opposite Fogland Ferry and the 22nd and 38th British regiments were encamped on Quaker and Windmill Hills.³ On the same day the British took down all their tents on the northern end of the island and returned to Newport. The Americans, believing that the British had withdrawn, sent over a reconnaissance party which was driven off by artillery and small arms fire.⁴

On August 5 another party of American troops landed on the west side of the island near Fogland Ferry and burned the homes of several Tories. The action was so brief and well executed that the raiders made their escape before the British forces could be directed to the scene.⁵ Coupled with this activity, the French moved a small fleet up the west passage to the north end of Conanicut Island. This move so alarmed the British naval units operating in this area that they promptly

¹William B. Wilcox (ed.), The American Rebellion, Sir Henry Clinton (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), p. 321.

²Diary of Frederick Mackensie, p. 321.

³Ibid., p. 328.

⁴Ibid., p. 330.

⁵Von Elking (ed.), Rhode Island Historical Magazine, VII, 86.

sank the three frigates stationed there.¹

Events were now rapidly coming to a head. The operation gathered impetus as the final troop movements to the embarkation points got under way. On August 6 and 7, Lafayette with Glover's and Varnum's brigades and Sullivan with his staff left Providence for the rendezvous point at Tiverton.²

The period of enforced waiting required to gather men and supplies was difficult for both the French and Americans to endure. The news of the departure of Lord Howe's fleet from New York did not arrive at Sullivan's headquarters until the fleet itself had anchored off Newport on August 9. If the American militia had gathered more punctually, the entire attack could have gone off with success prior to the British arrival.³ The British on Rhode Island had, in the meantime, used every moment of the delay to obstruct the French and American operation, to build up their main defensive line around Newport, and to gather all the foodstuffs and livestock available on the island.⁴

The tense pre-invasion period was not entirely devoid of humor. When two French frigates fired on some British officers bathing at Seacommet, the British found this action "quite inconsistent with French politeness."⁵

¹James, The British Navy in Adversity, p. 102.

²Edwin M. Stone, Our French Allies (Providence: the Providence Press, 1884), p. 65.

³Sparks (ed.), Writings of George Washington, VI, 26.

⁴Diary of Frederick Mackensie, p. 331.

⁵Ibid.

On August 8 Admiral D'Estaing ran the bulk of his fleet through a gauntlet of fire from the British shore batteries around Newport and took up a position between Goat and Conanicut Islands. General Pigot was now in a critical position with a strong army bearing down on him from the north and a superior naval force at his rear cutting off any possibility of retreat or reinforcement.¹

Between July 29, the date of the arrival of the French fleet, and August 8, the British had burned or sunk ten vessels formerly utilized to patrol the bay. The loss of these ships was a critical one for the British as well as for the Americans who had hoped to capture them and the 218 guns which they carried.² Because of the reports of growing troop concentrations in the vicinity of Howland's Ferry and the activity of the French on August 8, General Pigot on the same day ordered the withdrawal of all the British forces to Newport.³ That evening, under the cover of darkness, the British and Hessian troops guarding the Bristol and Howland's Ferry landings began their withdrawal. By midnight the entire island north of the Tomini Hill - Easton Beach line was left unguarded. The coming of dawn revealed the enemy's departure and paved the way for an immediate American landing.

¹James, The British Navy in Adversity, p. 102.

²Stone, Our French Allies, p. 67.

³Stedman, History of the American War, II, 35.

CHAPTER VI
INVASION AND DELAY

August 9-20, 1778

On Sunday morning, August 9, reports reaching Sullivan indicated that the northern end of Rhode Island was strangely quiet. As it grew lighter, it became obvious to the Americans that the British had abandoned their positions on Butts Hill and the Quaker-Turkey Hill area to the south. Without hesitation, Sullivan ordered an immediate crossing of the east passage at Howland's Ferry. By 6:00 A.M. a small group of light infantry had landed on Rhode Island to be followed three hours later by the first line of infantry.¹ The advanced corps of light infantry moved toward Newport, stopping only after covering some five miles.

On Conanicut Admiral D'Estaing went ashore to review the French troops formed in parade. It was at this moment that word arrived from Sullivan of his invasion of the island. The effect was explosive. D'Estaing and his staff were enraged to think that the carefully devised plan should have been so rudely set aside without proper notification.² On sober reflection, D'Estaing saw the wisdom of the move and acted to support it by dispatching three frigates to assist Sullivan in the transport of heavy guns and ammunition. Although fearing that the results might be disastrous, and disappointed at not having an oppor-

¹Lawrence (ed.), Letters of William Heath, IX, 53, 61.

²Gottschalk, Lafayette Joins the American Army, p. 248.

tunity to come to grips with the enemy and thus display their fighting qualities, the Admiral realized that it was an opportunity that could not be overlooked.¹

It was late afternoon before D'Estaing was able to prepare his troops for reembarking and crossing to Rhode Island. As these preparations were getting under way Lord Howe's fleet hove to off Point Judith blocking the southern approaches to the bay.² The French were now caught in a precarious position between the British fleet and the shore batteries on the island.

D'Estaing determined to force a battle outside the harbor before the smaller British ships got into the bay where their size would give them the advantage of maneuverability. On August 10, the remaining French troops having embarked, the fleet put to sea despite the hail of shot from the shore batteries. In Newport, hundreds of the inhabitants gathered to watch the impending battle. Both fleets vainly maneuvered for the weather gage throughout the day. With nightfall, they were lost to view and not seen again for ten days.³

Sullivan, although disappointed at the departure of the fleet, decided to continue the attack and ordered accordingly: "The whole strength of the army will hold themselves in readiness to march to Newport tomorrow morning (August 11) at six o'clock."⁴ An air of

¹Henry Carrington, Battles of the American Revolution (New York: A.S. Barnes Co., 1876), p. 449.

²Stedman, History of the American War, II, 29.

³Gottschalk, Lafayette Joins the American Army, p. 249.

⁴Military Book of Henry Sherburn, August 11, 1778, Newport Historical Society MSS.

excitement prevailed. The French were chasing the British fleet, the landing at Howland's Ferry had been successful beyond all expectations, and the morale of the men was at an all time high. Paul Revere wrote to his wife: "I am in high health and spirits and so is our army. The enemy dare not show their heads"1

It was during this moment of high hopes for a quick victory that a disastrous storm struck both land and sea forces alike. It scattered the fleets during the night of August 10 and the driving wind and rain played havoc with the men and supplies of both armies. Lieutenant Mackensie recorded in his diary the plight of the British: "The storm greatly affected the troops, tentage and fields of Indian corn. Hardly a tent is left standing and the troops are much soaked to the skin."2

The storm continued until the afternoon of August 13, leaving the armies in a miserable state. Execution of Sullivan's plan to march on Newport the morning of August 11 was postponed to the twelfth. Again the decision was made to delay another twenty-four hours as the storm continued to rage.³ On August 14 Sullivan inspected his wet and bedraggled army and described the pitiful condition of his men in a letter to Governor Cooke: ". . . the condition of my militia is beyond description as everything is wet and wind blown."⁴ Although the army could move against the enemy, little could be accomplished without

¹Paul Revere to his wife, August 10, 1778, Proctor MSS, Massachusetts Historical Society, XIII, 251f.

²Diary of Frederick Mackensie, p. 350.

³Lawrence (ed.), Letters of William Heath, XI, 55.

⁴Greene, Life of Major General Nathanael Greene, II, 114.

gunpowder. Sullivan set aside the fourteenth for the men to dry their powder and clothing.¹ His letter to Governor Cooke urged the movement of all the heavy cannon in the forts at Fox Point, Pautuxet, and the citadel near Providence to Rhode Island.² The need for rum, soap, and candles to provide some physical comfort for the troops was critical, and orders were dispatched to the Quartermaster in Providence for their immediate purchase.³

This day was the most perilous one for the Americans during the entire campaign. General Pigot had considered the feasibility of an attack on the fourteenth, using his entire force less one Hessian regiment. At the last moment it was decided that the imminent arrival of Lord Howe with reinforcements made this course of action unnecessary. There is little doubt that an attack at this time would have been overwhelmingly successful, for the British were superior in the use of the bayonet, the only weapon available after the storm subsided. The Rhode Island expedition came close to ending this day.⁴

Sullivan had received word on August 12 that Admiral John Byron, with eleven ships of the line, was heading for an unknown destination, presumably Newport or New York.⁵ This apparently did not throw fear

¹John Sullivan to Governor Nicholas Cooke, August 15, 1778, Rhode Island Archives.

²Ibid., August 14, 1778.

³John Sullivan to Asa Waterman, August 14, 1778, Moulton MSS, Rhode Island Archives.

⁴Diary of Frederick Mackensie, p. 250.

⁵Governor Nicholas Cooke to John Sullivan, August 11, 1778, Rhode Island Archives.

into Sullivan, as his letter to Governor Cooke on August 14 indicated that he would attack with or without the French as soon as it was physically possible.¹

During the second week of August the American force numbered 10,835 and the British 5,876.² Although the Americans outnumbered the British two to one, the superior training and discipline of the British and Hessian soldiers more than offset this numerical disadvantage. (See Fig. 6) In addition to their superior training, the British army had dug an extensive defense position that made the maximum use of the terrain. To dislodge well entrenched troops of this caliber would have required a minimum of 15,000 trained men. Without the French fleet and marines, the operation would become a dismal failure. (To attack without their support would be suicide.)

The British were drawn up in two lines. The first extended from Coddington's Cove west beyond the junction of the East and West roads, then south to the head of Easton's Pond. The second line began opposite Coasters Harbor Island and continued almost south-east to the strip of land that separated Easton's Pond from the Bay.³ Their cannon were mounted in strongly fortified redoubts located at strategic points along the entire main line of resistance. General Pigot continued to deepen the defensive lines and began the construction of an abattis

¹John Sullivan to Jabez Bowen, August 13, 1778, Sullivan MSS, Rhode Island Historical Society.

²Field Return of Troops on Rhode Island, August 16, 1778, in Sullivan MSS, Rhode Island Historical Society.

³John Marshall, The Life of George Washington (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1860), Atlas, Plate 7.

1
ORDER OF BATTLE
August 10, 1778

AMERICAN ARMY

Cornell's Brigade	Noye's Brigade
Crane's Brigade	Titcomb's Brigade
Glover's Brigade (Continentalists)	Tyler's Brigade
Greene's Brigade	Varnum's Brigade (Continentalists)
Livingstone's Brigade	West's Brigade
Lovell's Brigade	Whipple's Brigade

DIVISION COMMANDERS

Left Wing: Major General Marquis de Lafayette
 Right Wing: Major General Nathanael Greene
 Second Line: Major General John Hancock
 Reserve: Major General Henry West

BRITISH ARMY

British Regiments

4th Regiment
 10th Regiment
 20th Regiment
 22nd Regiment
 38th Regiment
 43rd Regiment
 46th Regiment
 54th Regiment
 56th Regiment
 71st Highlanders
 Queens Regiment of Rangers
 Regiment of Grenadiers
 Regiment of Light Infantry
 Regiment of Light Dragoons

Hessian Regiments

Regiment Langraf
 Regiment Prinz Carl
 Regiment Von Dittfurth
 Regiment Von Huyn
 Regiment Von Eunan
 Regiment Anspach
 Regiment Beyreuth
 Feld Jager Corps

American Loyalist Regiments

Queens Regiment of American Rangers
 Prince of Wales Regiment of
 Americans

COMMANDING OFFICERS

American Army: Major General John Sullivan
 British Army: Major General Sir Robert Pigot
 French Forces: Admiral Comte D'Estaing

¹Field (ed.), The State of Rhode Island, I, 493.

along the entire length of the fortifications. (Fig. 7)

On August 14 Sullivan issued the general order for the advance of the army at 6:00 A.M. on the fifteenth. The general plan of advance was to move toward Newport astride the East and West roads with two brigades marching down the island equidistant between the main roads. Varnum's brigade was to take the West road, Glover's the East road, with Cornell and Greene in the center. The remainder of the complicated order divided the other brigades into flanking units, a main body, and a reserve force, and designated the signals to be used during the march.¹

Although no mention can be found of prior orders, Mackensie reports that approximately two battalions had pushed south to Windmill Hill on August 14 and had encamped there. This would place the closest American troops some four and a half miles from the British lines the day before the main body moved on Newport.²

The bulk of the army began to move by 7:00 A.M. on August 15 and arrived at a position approximately three miles from Newport by nine o'clock. (Fig. 8) The troops were in high spirits and set about the duties of establishing defensive positions with "uncommon energy."³ The light infantry pushed forward to establish advanced posts on Honeyman's Hill, three-quarters of a mile north-east of Easton's Pond.⁴

¹Edwin Stone, "Report of the Northern Department," in Proceedings of the Rhode Island Historical Society, 1879, p. 74.

²Diary of Frederick Mackensie, p. 352.

³Samuel Ward to his wife, August 15, 1778, in Ward MSS, Rhode Island Historical Society.

⁴Diary of Frederick Mackensie, p. 353.

OF
NARRAGANSETT BAY, R.I.

1778

SCALE

British and American Positions on
Rhode Island, August 14, 1778¹

ORDER OF MARCH¹

¹Edwin M. Stone, Our French Allies (Providence: The Providence Press, 1884), p. 70.

Although the troops were in "high spirits" as they moved against the British, certain incidents create the impression that all was not well with the militia called up for the campaign. Sullivan complained bitterly in his letters to the Governor of Rhode Island that a majority of the fifteen day volunteers left the moment their tour of duty had been completed.¹ His request that the other half of the state militia be called to duty was not greeted with enthusiasm by the Council of War.² The loss of militiamen who had been engaged for short periods and could not be persuaded to remain for the "honor of establishing American independence" was critical at this time. Those that remained could not be fully relied on to stay if the fighting became severe.³ The problem of desertion became so acute that Sullivan was forced to issue a proclamation on August 16:

The General having been informed that many of the troops under his command are so base as to desert the army, calls on the good people of the neighboring towns to apprehend, secure and return to his camp all persons . . . not having a proper pass⁴

After some prodding, the Council of War, meeting on August 17, finally consented to call the remainder of the militia to duty for twenty days.⁵ Rhode Island cannot be blamed entirely for her reluctance

¹D.H. Russell to Governor Nicholas Cooke, August 15, 1778, Rhode Island Archives.

²Jabez Bowen to Governor Cooke, August 16, 1778, Rhode Island Archives.

³John Sullivan to Governor Cooke, August 16, 1778, Rhode Island Archives.

⁴Carl Lyman to Governor Cooke, August 16, 1778, Rhode Island Archives.

⁵Council of War, August 17, 1778, Rhode Island Archives.

to call forth the rest of the militia. Sullivan reported that of the 1,500 men promised by Connecticut, only 412 had actually arrived.¹ When informed of this fact, Governor Cooke promptly complained to the Governor of Connecticut about the tardiness of the promised militia and pointed out that as of August 19 two-thirds of Rhode Island's militia were on active service.²

Between August 16 and 20 the Americans continued to establish their parallel lines, working under the enemy's artillery and small arms fire.³ Sharp skirmishes between the two antagonists were short but effective, the British having been driven from several of their outposts. Deserters in small numbers continued to enter the American lines. They reported growing shortages of bread and, more important, a weariness from being under arms for twenty consecutive days.⁴ To raise the morale of his exhausted command, Pigot fabricated good news which was published in the orders.⁵

Sullivan did everything in his power short of a full scale attack to provoke the British into action but in vain.⁶ General Pigot was

¹John Sullivan to Governor Cooke, August 18, 1778, Rhode Island Archives.

²Governor Cooke to Governor Joseph Powell of Connecticut, August 19, 1778, Rhode Island Archives.

³Samuel Ward to his wife, August 18, 1778, Ward MSS, Rhode Island Historical Society.

⁴Ibid., August 19, 1778.

⁵Von Helking (ed.), Rhode Island Historical Magazine, VII, 52.

⁶John Sullivan to Governor Cooke, August 19, 1778, Rhode Island Archives.

content to wait behind the constantly growing defensive line that girdled Newport for reinforcements from New York. Both armies maintained a constant watch seaward waiting impatiently for the return of their vital naval support. Late in the afternoon of August 19, a sail was sighted off Point Judith. The British rejoiced when they recognized the frigate Senegal, not realizing that it had been captured by the French. On her arrival off Rhode Island, the Senegal discharged a cargo of bad news for the Americans. The French fleet was in desperate straits as a result of the fierce gale of August 11 to 13. The Admiral believed it would be necessary to return to Boston for refitting after arrangements had been made to cover the withdrawal from the island.¹ D'Estaing wrote: "I should be culpable in my duty to America herself if I could for a moment think not of preserving a squadron destined for her defense"²

The American command was thunderstruck at this turn of events. The arrival of the battered French fleet on the evening of August 20 was viewed with mixed emotions. Sullivan waited impatiently for the flagship to anchor before sending Generals Greene and Lafayette to confer with the Admiral.³

¹Greene, Life of Major General Nathanael Greene, II, 116.

²Admiral D'Estaing to John Sullivan, August 20, 1778, Sullivan MSS, Massachusetts Historical Society.

³Jabez Bowen to Governor Cooke, August 21, 1778, Rhode Island Archives.

CHAPTER VII

FRANCO-AMERICAN DISUNITY

The French fleet returned to Rhode Island on the evening of August 20 after a vicious bout with the storm and running engagements with the British. The flagship, Languedoc, had been rendered so unman-ageable that the British ship Renown was able to fire several broad-sides into her stern before darkness broke off the engagement. Other actions fought by individual members of both fleets were also incon-clusive. Thus, scattered to the winds and damaged extensively, the British fleet retired to New York to refit and the French returned to Narragansett Bay.¹

When the Languedoc came to anchor, Generals Greene and Lafayette boarded the flagship for a disappointing conference with D'Estaing. The Admiral was under specific orders to return to Boston in the event of an emergency and the captains in council had decided that this action was now necessary.² D'Estaing was unable to convince his cap-tains of the feasibility of refitting in Providence and continuing to support the attack with the French troops at their disposal.

It is important to explain the unusual nature of this situation where the commander is subject to the whims of his captains. D'Estaing was primarily a land officer, a lieutenant general in the French army, and had been commissioned an admiral only to command this first squad-ron to America. Because of his unfamiliarity with naval procedure, he

¹James, The British Navy in Adversity, p. 106.

²Gottschalk, Lafayette Joins the American Army, p. 250.

had to rely on the captains to guide him. Their jealousy led them to seize every opportunity to make D'Estaing look like a fool, and thus he was forced to accept their decisions or take the very serious consequences if he failed.¹

Greene apparently perceived the difficulty of D'Estaing's position and prepared a protest outlining a number of reasons why the French should not leave. He argued eloquently through Lafayette that D'Estaing had agreed to assist in the attack and could not leave the troops on Rhode Island without naval support; proceeding to Boston was dangerous in damaged ships and particularly so around the hazardous Nantucket shoals; refitting could be accomplished at Providence; the orders of the king could not possibly apply in this situation where French aid was so desperately needed for the success of the expedition; and, finally, the effect of their departure on the morale of the American troops as well as on the general opinion of the people in the colonies would do irreparable damage.²

The efforts of Greene and Lafayette were fruitless. Even the American pilots seemed to be against them as their recommendation was to return to Boston also.³ Greene wrote to Charles Pettit:

I have only time to tell you the Devil has got into the French fleet: they are about to desert us and go around to Boston. The garrison would be all our own within a few days if the fleet would but only cooperate with us; but alas they will not . . . I am afraid our expedition is now at an end . . . to evacuate this

¹Edwin Stone, "Report of the Northern Department" in Proceedings of the Rhode Island Historical Society, 1878, p. 101.

²Ibid., p. 99.

³Greene, Life of Major General Nathanael Greene, II, 117.

island may be death; to stay may be ruin¹

The departure of the French fleet on August 21 left the army in a state of consternation. Without the necessary naval support, the expedition appeared hopeless. But Sullivan remained undaunted in his plan to continue the attack. If the militia of the neighboring states would turn out as they were expected to, there still remained a glimmer of hope for the reduction of the Newport garrison.²

The American generals were not satisfied to shrug off the French departure and dispatched a joint letter to Congress condemning D'Estaing for his failure to remain and support them. Lafayette was particularly chagrined by the attack on his countryman and sought to explain the genuine concern of the Americans to D'Estaing. Naturally, he did not sign the letter to Congress but he tried to point out to D'Estaing that the American arguments were logical and reasonable. In effect, Lafayette sided with the Americans even though he did not aggressively condemn D'Estaing.³

The entire outlook and plan of attack for the campaign had changed. Sullivan sought another way of ending the expedition quickly and victoriously but few opportunities remained. The end was in sight.

¹Greene, Life of Major General Nathanael Greene, II, 120.

²Jabez Bowen to Governor Cooke, August 22, 1778, Rhode Island Archives.

³Gottschalk, Lafayette Joins the American Army, p. 254.

CHAPTER VIII
THE BATTLE OF RHODE ISLAND

August 23-30, 1778

The withdrawal of the French fleet caused near panic among the American troops and some two thousand militia left the army during the next twenty-four hours. By August 23, the strength of the army had dropped to 8,174.¹

Sullivan, seeking to remain on the island, sought Greene's advice for a plan of attack. The three possibilities that existed offered slim chance for a victorious reduction of the Newport garrison. The first was to continue the siege by regular approaches; the second was a direct assault on the defensive line; and the third was to effect a landing on Easton's Beach.² In all instances, General Pigot had so well constructed his defenses that such attempts would have been useless and suicidal. To approach from the sea would have required the presence of strong naval support which, with the absence of the French fleet, was lacking.³

The only alternative that remained was a withdrawal to the northern end of the island. On August 23 the council of generals concluded that the army should occupy the Butts Hill area and wait for the

¹Asa Gardener, "The Battle of Rhode Island" in General Society of the Cincinnati, III (January, 1911), 6.

²Greene, Life of Major General Nathanael Greene, II, 120.

³W. Winterbotham, Historical View of the American United States (London: Ridgway, Symonds and Holt Co., 1795), I, 537.

return of the French fleet and land forces.¹

The loss of the French support and the necessity of withdrawing to the north end of the island had so inflamed Sullivan that, in an order on August 24, he wrote: "He [Sullivan] yet hopes the event [the Rhode Island campaign] will prove America able to procure with her own arms that which her allies refused to assist her in obtaining."² This condemnation of the French withdrawal drew the approval of the army but caused added friction between the allies. Lafayette, in particular, was quite angered at the order and persuaded Sullivan to issue a clarification. In substance, the order of August 26 read:

The general (Sullivan) . . . could not possibly be acquainted with the orders of the French Admiral, he could not determine whether the removal of the fleet was absolutely necessary or not, and therefore did not mean to censure an act which those orders might render absolutely necessary.³

The departure of the French fleet left Rhode Island in a state of anxiety. Governor Cooke wrote to Sullivan that it might be better to withdraw from the island than lose so many able bodied men as well as the state itself.⁴ Action continued on the island while these developments occurred. During August 24 and 25 the artillery of both armies subjected each other to heavy cannonades. The losses were minor but the roar of the cannons kept friend and foe alike in constant tension.⁵

¹Gottschalk, Lafayette Joins the American Army, p. 254.

²Greene, Life of Major General Nathanael Greene, II, 118.

³Ibid.

⁴John Sullivan to Governor Cooke, August 24, 1778, Rhode Island Archives.

⁵Field (ed.), The Diary of Israel Angell (Providence: Preston and Rounds Co., 1899), p. 4ff.

On August 25 the preparations for the withdrawal began. The bulk of the provisions were moved to the Butts Hill area while the supplies already at the north end of the island were returned to Tiverton.¹ During the evening of August 25 the heavy artillery pieces were withdrawn from the redoubts and moved back toward Butts Hill.² The cessation of artillery fire did not escape the British as Mackensie noted in his diary that "before night [of August 26] we were well convinced that the greatest part of the enemies artillery have been withdrawn for they have not fired more than six pieces all day."³ By the evening of August 28, the army had been reduced to 5,400 men.⁴ All the heavy cannon on garrison carriages and most of the unnecessary stores had been removed to the Butts Hill area or to the mainland.⁵

With all the preparations completed, Sullivan issued the order for the withdrawal on August 28. By evacuating the defensive positions at night he was able to retire to Butts Hill without loss of men or supplies.⁶ The last elements of the army slipped away unnoticed at midnight and it was not until early morning that the British realized the Americans had withdrawn.⁷

¹James Wallace to Asa Waterman, August 26, 1778, Moulton MSS, Rhode Island Archives.

²Field (ed.), The Diary of Israel Angell, p. 5.

³Diary of Frederick Mackensie, p. 374.

⁴Gardener, General Society of the Cincinnati, p. 6.

⁵Greene, Life of Major General Nathanael Greene, II, 126.

⁶Stedman, History of the American War, II, 36.

⁷Field (ed.), Diary of Israel Angell, p. 8.

The morning of August 29 dawned clear and cool. Sullivan had placed the light corps of infantry under Livingston and Laurens on the East and West roads respectively in the vicinity of Redwood's farm just north of the Overing house of Barton fame.¹ The remainder of the army was drawn up before Butts Hill with the second line just to the rear of the hill and the reserve some five hundred yards beyond.²

At 6:00 A.M. the British moved out in force³ led by 2,000 men of the Anspach and Beyreuth regiments.⁴ (Fig. 9) The advance units of the British moved rapidly northward to the Redwood farm where they were stopped abruptly by Livingston and Laurens.⁵ After several volleys had been fired, the light corps withdrew. This action repeated itself at Windmill and Quaker Hills where two regiments from the main line joined the light infantry corps. The weight of the British advance was too much for this small force and Sullivan ordered its withdrawal to the main body before Butts Hill.⁶

The British continued their move along the height of land leading to Quaker Hill while the Hessian forces under General Losberg occupied Turkey Hill. Losberg's attempt to move forward against the right flank of the American Army was repulsed and Pigot ordered reinforcements

¹S.S. Rider, "The Battle of Rhode Island" in Rhode Island Historical Tract, VI (January, 1878), 21.

²Greene, Life of Major General Nathanael Greene, II, 130.

³John Sullivan to Governor Cooke, August 29, 1778, Rhode Island Archives.

⁴Von Belking, Rhode Island Historical Magazine, VII, 86.

⁵John Sullivan to Governor Cooke, August 29, 1778, Rhode Island Archives.

⁶Greene, Life of Major General Nathanael Greene, II, 131.

OF
NARRAGANSETT BAY, R.I.

1778

SCALE

British and American Positions,
7:00 A.M., August 29, 1778¹

¹Greene, *The Life of Major General Greene*, II, 131.

forward to support him. The British right, after the brisk fight at Quaker Hill, took up positions there and waited for artillery support before attempting an advance.¹

By 9:00 A.M. the opposing forces had taken up strong positions within a mile of each other.² The British force extended from Quaker Hill northwest along a line of small hills to Turkey Hill. Flank companies were posted between Turkey and Quaker Hills to the East and West passages completing the defensive line across the island.³ The Americans were assigned in a similar manner before Butts Hill with a strong redoubt in front of their lines as well as entrenchments to their rear.⁴ (Fig. 10)

For an hour heavy firing of both artillery and small arms was kept up between the two antagonists. By ten o'clock two British frigates had succeeded in working their way into position opposite the American right and began to shell the exposed artillery and personnel positions.⁵ At the same instant the British left began to advance under the cover of the fire from the ships and their own artillery on Turkey Hill. American artillery drove off the ships while the British troops were met by the American right wing under Greene and repulsed.⁶

¹Carrington, Battles of the American Revolution, p. 454.

²Greene, Life of Major General Nathanael Greene, II, 130.

³Gardner, General Society of the Cincinnati, p. 7.

⁴Greene, Life of Major General Nathanael Greene, II, 131.

⁵Providence Gazette, September 5, 1778.

⁶John Sullivan to Governor Cooke, August 29, 1778, Rhode Island Archives.

OF

NARRAGANSETT BAY, R.I.

1778

SCALE

British and American Positions,
9:00 A.M., August 29, 1778

John Sullivan to Governor Nicholas Cooke, August 29, 1778,
Rhode Island Archives.

A second attempt to turn the right wing of the American line began at 2:00 P.M. Greene advanced four regiments to meet the assault of the strong British forces. The Americans slowly gave ground until reinforced by two more regiments of regular troops and a brigade of militia. At the same moment Sullivan ordered Colonel Livingston and his light corps to advance to Greene's aid. With the concentrated fire of the reinforced right wing, the British were driven back on two occasions and the third attack ended in their disorderly withdrawal to Turkey Hill.¹

At the moment the British ceased their attempt to dislodge Greene's command, an attack was made on the American left. Glover, commanding in the absence of Lafayette who had gone to D'Estaing for assistance, repulsed the attack after a sharp skirmish.² The British returned to their defensive positions at 4:00 P.M. and the remainder of the day was spent in constant artillery duels and infantry skirmishes.³ Sullivan judged it inadvisable to attack the enemy in their strong positions and ordered his own army to strengthen their fortifications.⁴ (Fig. 11)

On August 30 the armies pitched tents and a sporadic artillery fire continued throughout most of the day. The day was spent in resting the troops as most had not slept for thirty-six hours.⁵

¹Greene, Life of Major General Nathanael Greene, II, 131.

²John Sullivan to Governor Cooke, August 29, 1778, Rhode Island Archives.

³Greene, Life of Major General Nathanael Greene, II, 131.

⁴Providence Gazette, September 5, 1778.

⁵Ibid.

CONDUCT OF THE BATTLE

Key:

- American Positions
- British Positions
- 1st British Assault
- 2nd British Assault

The decision to hold the northern end of the island was abruptly discarded on August 29 when Sullivan received information from Washington of Howe's departure from New York.¹ The large naval force and 4,000 troops² under Howe's command, when united with those already in Newport, would overwhelm Sullivan if he remained entrenched before Butts Hill.

Orders were issued on August 30 for the evacuation of the island during that evening. Lafayette, who had made a fruitless trip to request D'Estaing's return, arrived in time to assume command of the rear guard. The entire army with all its weapons and supplies was withdrawn by midnight.³ On the morning of August 31, a British fleet of 100 ships anchored off Newport.⁴ Sullivan had withdrawn with only a few hours to spare. Washington expected that such a withdrawal would cause bitterness toward the French and in his letter to Sullivan wrote:

. . . should the expedition fail because of the abandonment of the French fleet, the officers concerned are apt to complain loudly. But prudence dictates that we should put the best face upon the matter and to the world attribute the move to Boston of necessity.⁵

A great deal of effort was put forth in Boston by General William Heath, John Hancock, and others to repair the break caused by the protestations of Sullivan and his generals. Later Greene reported that

¹Sparks, Writings of George Washington, VI, 40.

²Wilcox (ed.), The American Rebellion, Sir Henry Clinton, p. 102.

³Providence Gazette, September 5, 1778.

⁴John Sullivan to Governor Cooke, August 31, 1778, Rhode Island Archives.

⁵Sparks, Writings of George Washington, VI, 40.

"the fermentation seems to be subsiding and all things appear as if they would go smoothly on."¹

The army took up positions from Tiverton to Providence, waiting for an expected assault by the British. Fortunately, such an attack never materialized as the British were content to remain on Rhode Island and control the commerce of the bay. Their regiments reoccupied the positions at Butts Hill and proceeded to reinforce them in anticipation of another American assault.²

Rhode Island's hour of glory had ignominiously faded into history. This was to be the last major engagement ever fought in New England.

¹Greene, Life of Major General Nathanael Greene, II, 127.

²Von Esling, Rhode Island Historical Magazine, VII, 86.

CHAPTER IX

APPRAISAL AND CRITIQUE

Before the results of the campaign can be accurately appraised, it is necessary to review the objectives of the American effort. The first objective, elimination of the British garrison at Newport, if achieved, would have relieved the military situation in New England. The presence of a large army, supported by ample naval transport, made it a constant threat to the New England colonies. A force of this magnitude could be landed at any point along the coast to act on its own or to coordinate its movements with another army striking from the interior, notably up the Hudson or from Canada. If successful, and it might well be, such an effort would have split the colonies and deprived the Revolutionary Army of effective aid from New England.

A second objective was to deprive the British of an excellent port for their roving naval forces. Without Newport, English ships would have to go to New York for refitting or resupply, adding several days to their absence from assigned stations.

The third objective was to prevent the use of Newport as a winter headquarters for the British Army. In addition to the strategic nature of the location, its island situation provided additional security for the wintering forces.

A fourth objective was the freeing of the commerce of Rhode Island. Depending upon external trade for her livelihood, the state had built up a formidable commercial, shipping, and privateering

traffic with the other colonies and the West Indies. British control of Newport choked off that trade and immobilized commerce on the bay. Thus motives for the capture of Newport were many and important and made the effort to seize it from the British a necessity.

The timing of the campaign made it most difficult to support it adequately. Washington required every supply effort possible to sustain the beleaguered grand army at White Plains. The arrival of the French fleet seemed to offer an excellent opportunity for an attack on the massed British navy off Sandy Hook but the clever positioning of those ships and the presence of a sand bar precluded D'Estaing's projected assault.¹

To draw off some of the English army at White Plains and to accomplish the aforementioned objectives, the descent on Rhode Island was decided upon. There is no question of the political pressure applied from New England quarters as the letters to Congress indicate. Thus, Washington had an opportunity to accomplish three missions at once: reduction of Newport, relief of the pressure at White Plains, and satisfaction of the demands of the New England delegates.

Washington's first orders to Sullivan were to start preparations for an attack with the assurance that in the event additional forces became available they would be assigned to Rhode Island. The initial order was designed to deceive the enemy and as a result the plans for the attack were not pushed with the fervor necessary to stimulate the energies of the New Englanders. When it was realized that the attack would actually take place, it was late in July and only a week before

¹Ballagh, Letters of Richard Henry Lee, II, 426.

the arrival of D'Estaing's fleet off Point Judith. The tardiness of the militia from the several states coupled with the difficulty in procuring supplies caused an unwarranted delay. It was at this point that the element of poor timing played an important role. The ten day delay after the arrival of D'Estaing gave the British time to warn New York of their danger and to improve the defenses established around Newport.

The uncontrollable train of circumstances that befell the expedition culminated in the fortunate withdrawal from the island just hours prior to the arrival of the British reinforcements. The events seemed to compound Sullivan's difficulties: the British fleet drew D'Estaing from his main purpose of supporting the Americans; the uncommon storm which played havoc with his army; the ruin and departure of the French fleet; and finally, the poor behavior of the "patriots" who came to assist him in the attack on Newport. All of these factors thrown together in one campaign would have tried the patience of any commander let alone the explosive Sullivan.

Although the tactics and events of the invasion caused its failure, some major strategic success was gained. The gathering of large forces for the attack on Newport forced the British to cancel an aggressive Southern campaign until 1779. The invasion of the island caused a withdrawal of military units and naval support from the White Plains battleground and relieved the pressure on General Washington. The effort to reduce the garrison at Newport, although ineffective, did leave a large army intact in New England capable of sustained

offensive action and therefore a hazard to British plans.¹

The tactical aspects of the campaign and the fallacies in the plan of attack warrant a close analysis. The general plan of action required a coordinated landing by the Americans at Howland's Ferry and by the French on the west shore opposite Dyer's Island. This was an ill-conceived plan because of its failure to recognize that General Pigot would not leave his forces isolated at the northern end of the island and subject to annihilation from a two-pronged attack. The British intention to abandon the north end of the island and concentrate their forces between Coddington Bay and Easton's Pond should have been expected. The accurate intelligence Sullivan had about the construction of this defensive line should have spoken for itself.

Adequate naval units were available to perform reconnaissance duties and to choose a more advantageous location for the French to land. Such a location existed between Ochre Point and Easton's Beach. A landing anywhere along this one mile stretch of beach would have given the French an opportunity to form their units and attack Newport from the rear. (Fig. 12) At the same moment, the crossing at Howland's Ferry as carried out on August 9 would have provided Sullivan with an excellent approach to Newport down the East and West roads. A careful study of a terrain map reveals several other landing places that would have facilitated the attack on Newport. The use of a diversionary landing to deceive the British of the true intentions of the Americans was never attempted. Such an effort would have created

¹Sir Winston Churchill, A History of the English Speaking Peoples (New York: Dodd, Mead Co., 1957), III, 197.

OF
NARRAGANSETT BAY, R.I.
1778

SCALE

Possible French Landing Sites

a great deal of concern in the British headquarters and caused a shift of troops to meet the threat. A feint was recommended by both Lafayette and D'Estaing but never agreed to by Sullivan.¹

It is important at this point to examine the physical properties of the expedition; the militia, the logistical support, and the artillery. Without doubt, a majority of the militia force was composed of patriotic but untrained men who, with proper leadership and planning, would have followed all the orders necessary to accomplish the objective. The letters from the various commanders, officers, and soldiers reveal that most were intent on doing what they could to sustain the Revolution. Unfortunately, many were not so eager and let personal considerations deter them from an adequate performance of duty. These, probably a third at most, deserted the army during the most critical hour and forestalled the chance of a victory, making the withdrawal a necessity. Their loss of heart and departure from the army naturally affected the morale of those that remained.

The logistical support of the invasion was as good as could be expected during an era when transportation and manufacture were just beginning in this country. The availability of such necessities as arms and ammunition, clothing, and foodstuffs continued to be critical until the supplies from France made them more plentiful by 1779-80. During the summer of 1778 a major support had to be provided to both Sullivan in Rhode Island and Washington at White Plains. The two forces drew heavily on the New England and Middle Atlantic States for supplies while the South was unable to offer much assistance because of the

¹Gottschalk, Lafayette Joins the American Army, p. 245.

distance involved.

The presence of various types of artillery in sufficient quantities for the army undoubtedly cheered Sullivan. Unfortunately, the lack of training and experience on the part of the artillerymen and officers in positioning the guns led to flagrant misuses. Israel Angell noted the inept use of the thirteen inch mortars^{by} gunners who consistently cut the fuses too short.¹ This weapon had a range of over 1,500 yards² and if used properly, the high trajectory would have allowed an accurate bombardment of the English defensive positions. An eight inch howitzer from the Massachusetts Train of Artillery, if properly employed, had a range of 2,300 yards and a powerful penetrating effect against fortifications.³ Four, six, twelve and eighteen pounders were available and apparently were well served. The eighteen pounders, in particular, offered tremendous fire support to the advancing infantry and were able to do a great damage at ranges up to 1,500 yards. A number of the heavier artillery pieces at the siege were of the sled type while others were equipped with carriages allowing greater mobility.

Although little mention is made of transportation in the accounts of the battle, it is known that horse and ox teams were drawn from all surrounding states. It must be assumed that they were used extensively to haul the sled type mortars and artillery pieces up and down the

¹Field (ed.), Diary of Israel Angell, p. 5.

²Albert Marucy, Artillery Through the Ages (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1949), p. 61.

³Ibid., p. 57.

island. Angell mentions the evacuation of all the heavy pieces during the course of one evening.¹ Under normal conditions, the weight of these wheelless weapons would have caused considerable difficulty if not enough horses were available.

A critique of the tactics employed offers unlimited opportunities to decry the methods and procedures the commanders followed. After the initial landings were made by Colonel Livingston's corps of light infantry, the advance continued for approximately five miles before a halt was ordered. This advance force had not even seen the enemy nor had they been fired on. If an effort had been made to push forward as rapidly as possible with the maximum force, the strength of the attack might conceivably have carried into the main defensive works. This is not likely, to be sure, but the fortunes of war are such that a slight miscalculation by the British could have resulted in a decisive penetration. In any case, the advancing light infantry should have been pushed to a point close to the English defensive line as possible.

By 9:00 A.M. the bulk of the American army had crossed from Tiverton and taken up positions in the vicinity of the Butts Hill area. No reason was given for not pushing forward, at least to the landing point opposite Dyer's Island, where a junction could be made with the French the following morning. Several possibilities exist but documented proof is not available. For instance, Sullivan may have thought it necessary to bring up supplies and his artillery before advancing. Only a supposition can be made at this time.

A critical point of the battle occurred when the British fleet

¹Field (ed.), Diary of Israel Angell, p. 5.

arrived on the afternoon of August 9. D'Estaing's failure to ignore the smaller, undergunned opponent in favor of continuing to support the land attack is inexcusable. By shifting several of his ships to block the English approach to the Main Channel and the west Passage, the bulk of the Fleet could have continued to assist Sullivan and put ashore the 4,000 French troops. D'Estaing waited outside the entrance of the bay for ten days making little effort to harass the British. His superior firepower would have caused considerable damage to the fortifications at Fortini Hill and have further prevented the British from working as industriously on that portion of the defensive works.

D'Estaing's departure on August 10 made Sullivan's position a most difficult one. Without the fleet to provide the necessary supporting French infantry and firepower, the attack would have to be delayed until their return. The untrained militia were not capable of assaulting strongly fortified positions and the small number of Continental troops available could not be expected to do so by themselves. Thus, Sullivan was forced to play a waiting game until the French returned.

Little can be said in regard to the inopportune storm that swept the fleets out to sea and so thoroughly dampened the spirits and the gunpowder of the army. The thought of a full scale bayonet attack had occurred to General Pigot on the fourteenth but only the expected return of Howe and reinforcements dissuaded him. The British soldier, superior with the bayonet, would in all likelihood have caused panic and grievous losses in the untrained militia ranks.¹

Sullivan continued to advance down the island on the morning of

¹Diary of Frederick Mackensie, p. 350.

August 15, camping some two miles from the British lines. The first approaches were begun, facing the right flank of the British lines, on the following day. Closer inspection of the terrain from Easton's Pond north to Green Hill, the point where the fortifications turn westward, shows a deep ravine with a stream running down to the pond. On the west side of the stream, the British had established their main positions adequately buttressed by artillery redoubts at regular intervals. The American approaches on the east side were begun by digging trenches zig-zagging their way toward the British lines. These "parallels" were pushed forward with great energy from August 16 to 20. The departure of the French took the spark of enthusiasm from the militia and little was done on them after that.¹ It is difficult to understand Sullivan's logic in expending his energies on a position that could only be used defensively. If a line had been completed parallel to the British from Easton's Pond to Green Hill, an attack against the British would have to go down hill into the valley, across the stream, and then up hill again in the face of entrenched infantry and artillery redoubts which held commanding fields of fire. The effort would have been suicidal even for the most experienced troops.

No apparent attempt was made against the northern approaches of the English lines. The ground here is rather flat, and loamy soil offered excellent opportunities for digging trenches.² The British

¹Greene, Life of Major General Nathanael Greene, II, 128.

²U.S. Department of Agriculture, Soil Map, Newport and Bristol Counties, compiled by Basil E. Gilbert (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1936).

fortifications were as strong as those along the stream leading to Easton's Pond, but in an attack upon them no water obstacle or uphill approach would have been met.

On August 23 Sullivan asked Greene's advice on how to end the fighting quickly and victoriously. Greene's plan sounds rash on the first reading but, with proper control and artillery support, it might have succeeded. His recommendation was to have three hundred picked men, with artillery and small arms fire support, attack across the narrow strip of land that separated Easton's Pond and the bay. To cover the attack, the entire line would fire as if an assault was to be made thus drawing the attention of the British from the primary attack area. Pigot had prepared for such an emergency by placing a redoubt to cover this approach supported by an infantry company. Greene's optimistic plan received due consideration from Sullivan, but the strength of the army dwindled so rapidly after the French departure that the attempt would have been futile.

The decision to withdraw to the north end of the island, fortify it, and wait for D'Estaing's return seemed a logical step. The withdrawal was accomplished in an excellent manner without loss of men or equipment. The rapidity of the British advance on August 29 was startling, considering the offensive inactivity of that army during the preceding month. When the American rearguard engaged the advancing British, they were stopped momentarily. It is unfortunate that Sullivan did not leave a stronger force to deceive and delay the British longer. As it was, the light infantry corps was forced back within minutes. The failure to have successive delaying positions halting

the British advance cost Sullivan the opportunity of tiring the British and depleting their supply of ammunition before they reached the main line of resistance at Butts Hill.

From the American point of view the conduct of the battle at Butts Hill was as well fought as could be expected under the existing conditions. The bulk of the heavy artillery had been well emplaced, the maximum use of terrain had been made, and the tactical arrangements had been completed by the time the British reached Quaker and Turkey Hills. The judicious use of units from the second line to thwart the British attack on the American right merits praise. Their commitment was timed perfectly to overwhelm the British attack. The subsequent withdrawal from the island during the night of August 30 was exceedingly well done. The transport of untrained troops, heavy artillery, and abundant supplies provided a tremendous problem to solve. A withdrawal at night often produces confusion and disorder but no such instance is recorded. Lafayette wrote several years later that he considered this battle to be "the best fought battle of the war."¹ The best withdrawal of the war might be a better term.

Naturally, the war looked entirely different from the British point of view. From the beginning of July, when knowledge of the invasion had been gained, General Pigot began to formulate plans for the defense of the island. The lack of military training, which was characteristic of the commanders and staff of the American army, was not true of their British counterparts. The officers and soldiers were all professionals, experienced in battle, who understood the problems

¹Gottschalk, Lafayette Joins the American Army, p. 266.

of terrain and its proper utilization.

Pigot's position on July 28 was an extended one. Hessian troops occupied Conanicut Island, a battery at Bonnet Point, a battery on Goat Island, and fortifications at the northern and southern ends of Rhode Island. To leave his force scattered in such a manner would have spelled defeat. He therefore decided to abandon the positions on the adjacent islands with the exception of Goat Island and to concentrate his forces on Rhode Island. By August 4 two-thirds of the British army had taken up positions from Newport to Butts Hill. The extended lines to these various units offered excellent opportunities for the Americans to cut them off and defeat them in detail. To prevent this possibility, Pigot on August 4 withdrew the bulk of his troops to the defensive line being dug between Coddington's Cove and Easton's Pond. A screening force was left to hold the Butts Hill area. The action of the French fleet on August 8, moving into the bay in force, so alarmed Pigot that he ordered the complete withdrawal of all the remaining units from the north end of the island.¹

During the preceding week, the British and Hessian troops worked vigorously at deepening and strengthening the defensive line. An abattis was constructed extending the entire length, some two miles, of the fortifications. A second line was begun and rapidly pushed to completion during the second week of August. This line ran diagonally from a point opposite Coaster's Harbor Island southeast to the lowest point of Easton's Pond. Plans were made for the displacement of artillery and infantry to specific places in the event of a break-

¹Stedman, History of the American War, II, 35.

through against the first line.

General Pigot's situation was serious but not critical. He had the advantage of holding a well defended and fortified position, adequate housing for his supplies and wounded, a well knit military staff and trained soldiery. His disadvantages lay in the shortness of some supplies, the crowded condition of his frontline units, the unreliable morale of the Hessian troops, the near panic of the Loyalists within the city, and the necessity of feeding a large civilian population.

The British failure to actively harass the Americans prior to the landing at Howland's Ferry is unusual. Several ships were available to fire on the concentration of flatboats in Wanton's Cove. Since the British plan was to sink all their vessels to prevent capture, turning them into fire ships and sailing them into Wanton's Cove would have wrought havoc on the accumulated flatboats and more than likely delayed or stopped the invasion altogether. Lack of aggressive action by the British prior to the campaign follows the normal conduct exhibited during their previous campaigns.

A second major British error was the complete withdrawal from Butts Hill on August 8. If a small detachment of infantry and heavy artillery had been left to hold the neck leading to Howland's Ferry, the Americans would have had to fight for a beachhead. With untrained troops and no artillery for support, their situation would have been a difficult one.

During the course of the campaign about Newport, the British made several raids in force against the American lines but were for the most part unsuccessful in their efforts. The American pickets were alert, -- jumpy would be a more properly descriptive word,-- and beside inter-

cepting the British raids they shot at each other as well.¹

The British showed unusual aggressiveness on August 29. Immediately upon perceiving the abandoned American positions, some two thousand Hessian and British soldiers moved rapidly north to overtake the American rear guard at Redwood's farm. The Hessians, under General Losberg, moved quickly to flank the small rearguard delaying their advance. By 9:00 A.M., the British left had taken Turkey Hill and the right had succeeded in driving the Americans from Quaker Hill. The rapidity with which the artillery was brought up suggests that the guns were of the carriage type and their fire was soon felt by the retreating Americans.

Pigot took up positions along the forward slopes of the chain of hills that begins at Quaker and runs northwest to Turkey. At this point the two armies were within a mile of each other. The British attempts to turn the American right flank with the assistance of two warships was a well conceived plan. Unfortunately for the royal troops, fortifications along this sector of the American line were particularly good and withstood the onslaught of artillery, ship's cannon, and infantry attacks. Three such efforts were made and all were turned back.

As the sound of the last attack on the American right died away, another was made against its left. This British assault was feeble in comparison and soon bogged down under the withering fire of Glover's command. A strong attack by the British at this point could have been disastrous for Sullivan. If successful, it would have cut off the

¹Field (ed.), Diary of Israel Angell, p. 6f.

American retreat over the Howland Ferry, exposed the whole rear of the army, and left it open for a decisive defeat. But such a penetration did not occur and both armies settled down for the remainder of the day to a constant artillery cannonade and indecisive infantry skirmishes.

The events of August 30 were little different. Nuisance firing from both sides kept antagonists alert, but no aggressive action was planned. Pigot apparently was satisfied to let the Americans remain in their positions while he waited for the expected arrival of reinforcements from New York.

The American withdrawal during the night of August 30 has been mentioned for its efficiency of planning and conduct. The British must have been completely asleep and very much surprised the following morning. Pigot let a victory slip through his fingers by not aggressively patrolling the American lines. One can imagine the consternation if the British had pressed their attack as the Americans were embarking for the mainland.

Summing up the campaign, several notable factors present themselves. The American plan of attack against the British lines around Newport was not properly thought out. The French failure to appreciate the major reason for their presence, and their subsequent withdrawal from the campaign foredoomed the expedition. The British lack of aggressiveness prior to the landing and on August 30 cost them an important victory.

The result of the campaign was to leave the British in possession of Newport and the Americans on the mainland with an army intact and

ready for another campaign. Considering the numbers involved, the casualties were quite light. The Americans reported 211 killed, wounded and missing¹ while the British suffered 1,023 casualties in all categories.²

¹Carroll, Rhode Island, Three Centuries of Democracy, I, 330.

²Providence Gazette, September 12, 1778.

CHAPTER X

CONCLUSIONS ON RHODE ISLAND IN THE REVOLUTION

The failure of the campaign on Rhode Island was bitterly disappointing to the Americans. In some quarters outright criticism and abuse were heaped on Sullivan, but in Congress his actions were entirely vindicated.¹ A most vehement attack came from the Providence merchant John Brown who condemned Sullivan for not provoking a general action to defeat the British. Greene championed Sullivan's cause in a letter to Brown on September 7. He pointed out the situation of the army and the possibilities that might have stemmed from failure to retreat successfully. Offering more than a defense of Sullivan, Greene turned to attack the merchant class for its condemnation of the campaign. The conclusion of the letter might well fit any war:

I cannot help feeling mortified that those that have been at home, making their fortune, and living in the lap of luxury, and enjoying all the pleasures of domestic life, should be the first to sport with the feelings of officers who have stood as a barrier between them and ruin.²

Congress felt the necessity of smoothing over the turbulent Franco-American relations and resolved that Admiral D'Estaing and his officers and men had "rendered every benefit . . . and are fully entitled to the regards of the friends of America."³

The end of the expedition signalled the resumption of normal

¹Ford (ed.), Journals of the Continental Congress, IX, 278.

²Greene, Life of Major Nathanael Greene, p. 139f.

³Ford (ed.), Journals of the Continental Congress, IX, 279.

activities within the state. So many men had been called for militia service that most of the administrative functions of the towns and the state had virtually ceased.¹

The army was assigned the task of protecting the vulnerable Rhode Island coastline. General Greene assumed command of the western shore, Lafayette of the eastern shore with headquarters at Bristol, and Glover of the Providence area. Cornell's brigade remained at Tiverton, Var-num's at Bristol and Warren, Colonel Greene's at East Greenwich, Lovell's and Titcomb's at Pautuxet, and Glover's brigade and Jackson's regiment at Providence.²

Although Sullivan's army had been reduced to 4,000 men, its aggressive spirit had not been destroyed. Between October, 1778, and July, 1779, four British vessels which had been disturbing the commerce of the bay were boarded and captured by smaller ships carrying adventurous militiamen. Privateers, fitted out in Providence and manned by Rhode Islanders, took many prizes in the New England and New York waters.³ The small craft and warning boats in the state's service are too numerous to mention, but their services were invaluable.

The economic situation in the state continued to deteriorate as prices climbed steadily. Efforts of the assembly in 1779 to halt the upward spiral provided only momentary relief. The necessity of raising 100,000 dollars in new taxes as Rhode Island's share to the

¹Providence Gazette, September 12, 1778.

²Carroll, Rhode Island, Three Centuries of Democracy, I, 330.

³Ibid., 333.

Continental Congress created additional financial burdens.¹ The influx of refugees from Newport grew as the British took over more homes for quartering their troops. The condition of these people was pitiful and evoked new editorial comment on the "beastiality of the enemy."²

The most important event of 1779 was the concentration of the British forces in New York and their withdrawal from Newport on October 25.³ The Patriot reoccupation of Newport the following day was attended by many of the inhabitants of the town as well as by people from other places in Rhode Island. Their grief can well be imagined when they viewed the destruction wrought by the British prior to their departure. More than 500 buildings had been destroyed; three-fourths of the inhabitants had fled; the commerce of the town was at a standstill; and the British had taken everything of value, including the manuscripts of the town.⁴

The winter of 1779-80 was a difficult one. The prices of all foodstuffs and other necessities were higher than ever. The near-famine experienced by many inhabitants was not relieved until the following summer. To add to these difficulties the state had to provide for the quartering of one thousand Continental troops that remained to guard against another British incursion.⁵

¹Providence Gazette, August 14, 1779.

²Ibid., September 5, 1779.

³Field (ed.), Diary of Israel Angell, p. 86f.

⁴Field (ed.), State of Rhode Island, I, 246.

⁵Carroll, Rhode Island, Three Centuries of Democracy, I, 335.

The arrival of the French in July, 1780, was an occasion of great rejoicing. The French force of fifteen hundred remained at Newport for the winter, turning the island once again into an armed, but this time, a friendly, camp.¹

Renewed military activity in Virginia during the Spring of 1781 witnessed the withdrawal of most of the French troops and ships from Newport. The need for raising taxes, supplies, and men for the combined military effort of 1781 took up much of the Assembly's time while the remainder was devoted to efforts to relieve the inflation and monetary problems of the state.²

The subsequent victory of the Franco-American forces at Yorktown in October, 1781, was a cause of great rejoicing in Rhode Island. However, the sustained military and economic effort of the previous six and a half years had sadly depleted the resources of the state. The destruction of property amounted to over \$500,000; 9,000 men served in the militia at various times (some completing two and three short enlistments); the stagnation of commerce for almost seven years cannot be valued; the depletion of livestock would be felt for many years; and the chaotic condition of the state's finances and currency would not fully right itself until well into the nineteenth century.

The most important loss to the state was that of its population. In the Census of 1774, 59,707 inhabitants were reported in Rhode Island. By 1782, the population had dropped to 51,913, a grievous loss

¹Douglas S. Freeman, George Washington (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1952), V, 292f.

²Carroll, Rhode Island, Three Centuries of Democracy, I, 345.

for so small a state.¹

With the war over, the state began the difficult task of rebuilding its shattered economy. It is impossible to place a monetary value on the countless sacrifices of the inhabitants or on the lost man hours required to carry on their economic pursuits properly. The efforts of the state in behalf of the Revolution cannot be underestimated. No state contributed more of itself to the cause than Rhode Island.

¹Carroll, Rhode Island, Three Centuries of Democracy, I, 345.

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