

BATTLE DIGEST™

Lessons for Today's Leaders

Volume 3 ★ Issue 3

Early American Wars:

Bunker Hill

DATE:

June 17, 1775

LOCATION:

Charlestown, Massachusetts

OPPOSING FORCES

British Army: Around 2,500 troops, under the command of Maj. Gen. William Howe. Howe was subordinate to Lt. Gen. Thomas Gage, the senior British commander in America. Several ships of the British Navy provided fire support.

Colonial Militia and Volunteers: Around 1,800 militia and volunteers fought in the battle under a loose command structure led primarily by Col. William Prescott. Other notable contributors were Maj. Gen. Israel Putnam and Capt. Thomas Knowlton from Connecticut, along with Cols. John Stark and James Reed from New Hampshire. Gen. Artemas Ward, as the senior New England militia commander, sent Prescott on the mission.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

In the weeks following the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord, Colonial militia and volunteers rallied around Boston to besiege Lt. Gen. Thomas Gage's British garrison. But when reinforcements arrived from England, Gage devised a plan to regain the initiative by occupying Dorchester Heights south of town. When the Colonials heard of Gage's plan, however, they preempted him by occupying different high ground - the heights of Bunker Hill near Charlestown. When Gage awoke on 17 June to the sight of rebel positions on Breed's Hill, he quickly attacked in what would be the first pitched battle of the American Revolution. The misnamed Battle of Bunker Hill would prove a costly and shocking victory for the British, while giving the Colonials faith in their militias and an important boost of confidence for the long struggle ahead.

STRATEGY & MANEUVER

Actions by the Colonials - As the loosely organized New England Army besieged Boston, the Massachusetts Committee of Safety and the Provincial Congress remained busy. On 22 May, with

John Hancock's departure for the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress elected Dr. Joseph Warren its new president. Warren faced numerous challenges, not the least of which were cobbling together supplies and trying to knit together a coalition of provincial leaders with strong personalities. He also spent a great deal of time

While Warren scrambled around Boston, the Continental Congress was dealing with the prospect of Massachusetts hurling the colonies into war. There were still no provisions for a national army, a system of supply, or even command. After Congress agreed to New England's request to adopt their army as the core of a new national army, the Continental Army was created on 14 June. They appointed George Washington as commander in chief on 15 June.

Back in Boston, things changed that same day when the Committee of Safety learned about Gage's plan to break out and fortify Gloucester Heights. Maj. Gen. Israel Putnam, a respected veteran of the French and Indian Wars, put forth an earlier proposal to fortify Bunker Hill to draw Gage out of the city. Both Warren and Gen. Artemas Ward, the commander of the New England Army, were initially reluctant, fearing it would allow the British to cut off and isolate any force on the small peninsula. But preemption, and a persuasive Putnam, led the Committee to implement Putnam's plan. Ward then directed Col. William Prescott to lead the mission.



Maj. Gen. Israel Putnam



Col. William Prescott

The next evening, 16 June, Prescott assembled around 1,000 men in Cambridge and moved toward Bunker Hill. Along the way, he was joined by Capt. Thomas Knowlton and his 200 New Hampshire men, along with Putnam and Lt. Col. Richard Gridley, an experienced engineer and artilleryman. Initially, Prescott, Putnam, and Gridley disagreed on which hill they should fortify. Although Bunker Hill was the expectation in the initial order, they ultimately decided on Breed's Hill.

It was close to midnight when Gridley laid out the outline, and Prescott gave the order to dig. Remarkably, in less than six hours - using pickaxes and shovels - the men built a redoubt with six-foot-high walls and a dry moat. But with dawn came trouble. A British warship spotted the earthworks and fired. A while later, when a cannonball decapitated one of their own, the men stopped working. Prescott averted disaster by jumping up on the wall, waving his hat, and yelling, "Hit me if you can!" - daring the British to fire. Although work resumed, the morning light revealed another problem. Prescott's left flank was vulnerable down to the Mystic River.