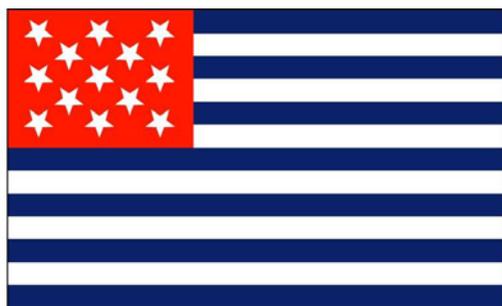


# The Battle of Red Bank



Fort Mercer at Red Bank



Len Lavella  
Paul Ferrante

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# Fort Mercer at Red Bank

## Construction of the Fort

In late fall of 1776 James Whithall is approached by delegates of the Continental Congress with a request to erect a Fort north of his home to help defend the city of Philadelphia. James refuses their request and the Congress proceeds to confiscate James's apple orchard north of his home and orders the Continental Army to build the Fort. Work begins in April of 1777 to construct a Fort that is designed to hold up to 2,000 Continental soldiers.



## The Name of the Fort

### January 3, 1777 – The Battle of Princeton

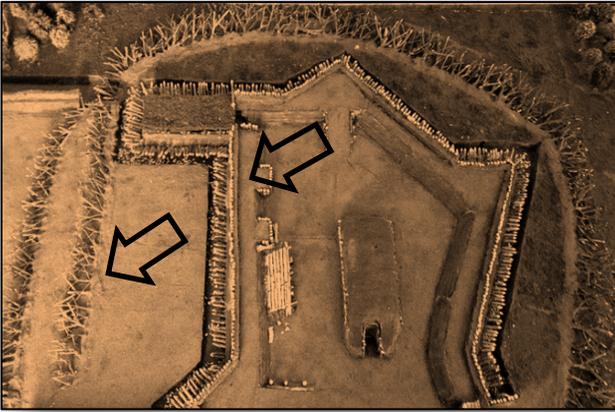


While leading a vanguard of 350 continental soldiers, General Hugh Mercer's brigade encounters two British regiments and a mounted unit. Mercer's horse was shot from under him. Getting to his feet, he is quickly surrounded by British troops who order him to surrender. Outnumbered, he draws his saber and fights back. He is beaten to the ground, bayoneted repeatedly and left for dead. He is discovered later still alive by his troops and is carried to the field hospital in the Thomas Clarke House. Mortally wounded Hugh Mercer dies nine days later on January 12, 1777.

Because of Mercer's courage and sacrifice, the remainder of Washington's army is able to proceed into Princeton and defeat the British forces there.

In the spring of 1777 General George Washington orders that the Fort at Red Bank be named in Honor of his friend General Hugh Mercer.

## Changing the Fort



In late summer and early fall of 1777 with the constant changing of the war it becomes evident that to defend the Fort the Continental army will only be able to muster between 400 and 800 men. Since the Fort is designed to hold 2,000 soldiers it is decided to erect an inner wall and reduce the Fort to a defensible size. To that end the army sets about changing the Fort and erecting a palisaded inner wall surrounded by abatis.

## Historical Background Leading to the Battle

In the summer of 1777, Sir William Howe, the Overall British commander in America sailed from New York with a large land force of 17,000 soldiers (British and Hessian), and with naval armament under his brother Admiral Richard Howe. General Howe believed that if he captured the rebel capital of Philadelphia this colonial conflict would soon end. Landing at the head of Chesapeake Bay on August 25, the British and Hessian forces commenced their march toward Philadelphia.

## September 11, 1777 - The Battle of Brandywine

Generals Howe and Cornwallis with 17,000 troops defeat Washington with 11,000 troops at the battle of Brandywine. Washington is forced to withdrawal to Germantown outside of Philadelphia.



## September 26, 1777 - The British Occupy Philadelphia



Now that the British forces occupy the rebel Capital of Philadelphia it becomes an urgent matter to open the Delaware River. General Howe will be unable to hold the city if he cannot re-supply his army.

## October 4, 1777 - The Battle of Germantown

After General Howe seized Philadelphia he split his army, keeping the bulk of it (over 10,000) near Germantown while occupying Philadelphia with over 4,000 troops. Washington seeing an opportunity to defeat this British force attacks on October 4.



Due to heavy fog, heavy losses and inability to coordinate the attack Washington orders a withdrawal. British forces fail to counterattack and Washington moves his army to Whitemarsh.

## October 12, 1777 - The British Plan of Attack

Now that the British control the city of Philadelphia it becomes necessary to open the Delaware River to supply the army. General Howe issues orders to take the two American forts defending the river. A combined land and naval assault is organized. British shore batteries established on the Pennsylvania side of the river will attack Fort Mifflin, 2000 Hessian soldiers under the command of Colonel Carl Von Donop will land on the

New Jersey side of the river and will attack Fort Mercer, and the British navy will move up river and support Von Donop's attack and bombard Fort Mercer and Fort Mifflin.

The Howes had devised a multi-sided plan aimed simultaneously at the entire Delaware River defense system. The land attack on Fort Mercer was just a part of a larger operation. As von Donop's men assaulted Fort Mercer, Admiral Howe's advanced Delaware River squadron under command of Captain Francis Reynolds aboard *HMS Augusta*, was to proceed up river via the eastern or main channel.



British General William Howe

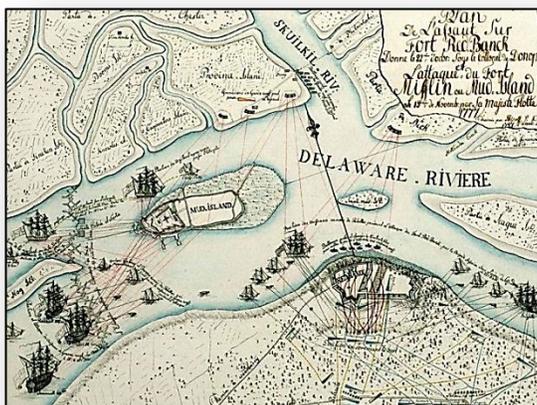


British Admiral Richard Howe



Hessian Colonel Carl von Donop

They were to open a bombardment on Fort Mifflin. At the same time they would engage the American galleys harboring off Red Bank in order to draw them away from supporting the defense of Fort Mercer.



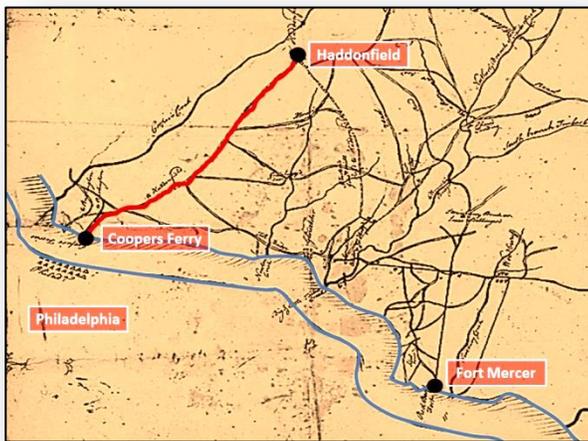
The frigate *HMS Camilla* and sloop *Zebra* would patrol between Tinicum and Billings Islands to prevent surprise night raids by American galleys from the back channel behind those islands. The British batteries on Carpenter's and Province Islands would commence a barrage on Fort Mifflin. A force of 200 British Grenadiers stood by on Province Island to assault Fort Mifflin in boats if it looked as if the fort was about to fall.

On the western or inner channel, the armed galley *HMS Vigilant's* mission was to support the land batteries' barrage and the Grenadiers' amphibious assault if attempted.

# The Battle at Red Bank

## October 21, 1777 - The Hessians March

In Philadelphia Colonel Carl Von Donop's Hessian brigade formed up on Arch Street before dawn then headed for the ferry crossing. **British Captain Francis Downman** recorded in his diary, "...with ten Hessian 3 pounder guns, and myself with the howitzers, began to embark in the flat-bottomed boats and other craft from the wharf at the upper end of the town, and crossed over to the Jersey side, landing without the least opposition... We began our march as soon as the last artillery were over."



In early afternoon Colonel von Donop headed to Haddonfield, five miles inland, under brilliant autumn weather. About a half-hour after beginning the march in Newton Township the column came under fire from a party of militia. Captain Johann Ewald was ordered to engage them with sixty jaegers, driving the Americans northward, back across the bridge over the Cooper River at Spicer's Mill.

**Captain Ewald** wrote of the fight, "I pursued it [the militia] up to the end of a wood, where I discovered several hundred men on both sides of Cooper's Creek with who I skirmished until about four o'clock in the afternoon, after which time they withdrew. The Colonel (von Donop) who continued his march with corps, had ordered me to occupy myself with the enemy until nightfall and then to follow the corps to Haddonfield. He wanted to mislead the enemy and conceal his march. At eight o'clock I arrived in Haddonfield, where I found the corps encamped in a quadrangle on the heights."

The Hessians occupied Haddonfield where they encamped until next morning near Hopkins millpond. Many residents harbored Hessian officers as insurance against looting by their soldiers.

Local Tories pointed out Rebel sympathizers who were rounded up and made to spend the night under guard by a campfire in the street to keep them from bringing any intelligence to the Americans. Among them was Jonas Cattell who made a run for Red Bank as soon as the Hessians released him when they marched off in the morning.



**Jonas Cattell**

At Fort Mercer, Lt. Col. Greene and his garrison were aware that an enemy corps had crossed from Philadelphia into New Jersey. **Sergeant John Smith** wrote, *"...we were Informed that a party of regulars had landed at [Cooper's] ferry to attack our fort -- we removed all our tents & baggage into the Citadel & every man was employed at work on the fort to fortify the same -- between 3 & 4 o Clock 300 more troops [the militia] came here to reinforce us -- we cut down an orchard by the fort & hauled trees round the fort to keep off the enemy -- we had no disturbance from the enemy this day..."*

Although **Job Whitall's** diary entry of October 21<sup>st</sup> may have continued to ignore the war at his doorstep it was apparent from the family activities that day that the war was no longer ignoring them.



**Whitall House**

*"A flurry of wind and rain before day. A cool, windy day. I husked some corn with John and Mart before noon. In ye afternoon, J. Murdock brought our wagon home and we loaded it with goods, a barrel with Sugar, a cask of cider, a case of bottles with wine, a mahogany tea table, one arm chair, half a dozen of other chairs & our John went with them to Uncle David Coopers. Brother John Whitall brought our sorrel horse home & rode him away again & took my stallion colt with him to Peter Crim's to pasture."*

There was no doubt that the neighborhood was alerted to the Hessians crossing and was getting out of the way of the coming fight as best as they could. Ann Whitall received word from John Gill, a relative in Haddonfield, that the Hessians were coming. Colonel von Donop had quartered the night of the 21<sup>st</sup> in Gill's house and had made no secret of the fact that he was on his way to capture Red Bank.

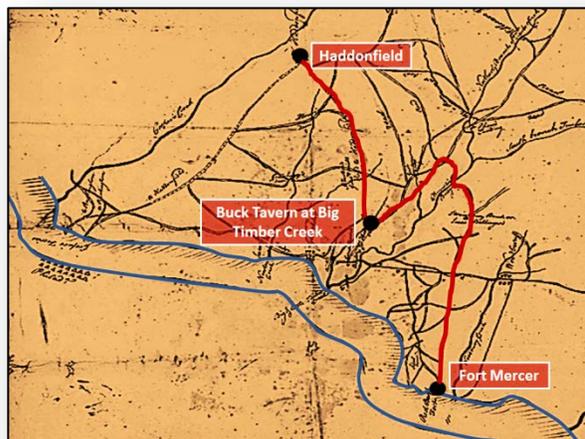


John Gill House 343 Kings Highway East Haddonfield

## October 22, 1777 - The Hessians Attack

Before dawn as reported by British Captain Francis Downman as 4 am, the Hessians set off from Haddonfield with Tory guides. En-route they took precaution to apprehend known patriots who were forced to stay with the column until it reached Fort Mercer.

The Hessians are believed to have followed a route paralleling today's King's Highway toward the bridge over Timber Creek near present day Westville. But a guard detachment of Gloucester County militia under Captain Felix Fidler reacted in time to dismantle the bridge at Buck Tavern on Timber Creek.



This forced Colonel von Donop to divert his column eastward about four miles to the Clements Bridge, at the head of the Big Timber Creek. The bridge was about five miles southwest of Haddonfield and six miles northeast of Red Bank.

According to Captain Ewald the column crossed Clements Bridge about 9 A.M. He described the pass as having very marshy banks with a dam of several hundred paces extending across the creek on which were two wooden bridges. **Captain Ewald** also wrote, "... I was surprised that we did not leave here at least one jaeger company to retain mastery of this pass, since after all the success of our expedition was not yet assured. To be sure, there were two battalions of [British] light infantry ready for the Jersey post at Cooper's Ferry, but they could not help much if Washington had gotten wind of this expedition, passed a strong corps across the Delaware, and stationed it at Timber Creek."

**Job Whitall** began the day of October 22<sup>nd</sup> peacefully enough with his father and boys hanging a fence in a meadow and piling stacks of hay in the field not far distant from the fort when the work routine was disturbed.



"...our women blowed ye horn & we went home, got our horses and wagon & loaded it with goods & ye reason was because ye English troops was close by ... my wife, Children, & my Self went off in our wagon. Father, Mother, & ye boys stayed. We got to Uncle David Coopers & stayed awhile & I went back again on horseback. Uncle David & James Cooper sent each a boy down to fathers to help me away with some Cattle..."

At Fort Mercer that morning **Sergeant John Smith** awoke to rising excitement in the garrison at the Hessians approach. "...we turned out early in the morning & struck tents & cleared away for an attack & every man at work to strengthen ourselves -- we sent party's out to fetch in all the stock & horses into the fort which was done & every person in the fort by 2 O'clock & about 3 or 4 O'clock the enemy advanced to the woods adjoining the fort..."

An advanced guard of Hessian Jaegers (Hunters) under Captain Wreedon were the first to reach Red Bank remaining under cover of the woods. They saw the American garrison to be in a relaxed mood with men walking around outside the fort and wash hung out on the ramparts. The gate was open. The wash hanging on the rampart may have been part of a ruse aimed at convincing the Hessians that the Americans were at a low state of preparedness or it might have been part of the natural state of affairs.

Lt. Col. Greene started the morning without part of Israel Angell's 2<sup>nd</sup> Rhode Island Regiment previously sent to help defend Fort Mifflin. Greene ordered all his Rhode Island Continentals to return to Fort Mercer, being in imminent danger and now the higher priority.



**Lt. Col. Christopher Greene**

**Major Simeon Thayer** was placed in charge of the detachment from Angell's Regiment. *"...I was detached the morning after my arrival at Fort Mercer on October 19<sup>th</sup>, with 150 men to join Col. Smith on Mud Island when the enemies batteries were playing, where I continued three days, when the Hessians appeared as if they intended an attack on Red Bank, I then received an express from Col. Greene to return with my troops to Red Bank about 12 O'clock, which I immediately complied with and reached the Fort just as the Hessians appeared in sight..."*

**Jeremiah Greenman** who was also with the detachment wrote in his diary, *"...this morning are informed that a party of the enemy crossed Cooper ferry last evening and was on their way through Haddonfield for this Fort. Came across this morning from Fort Mifflin..."* In all, Greene's 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Rhode Island regiments along with a handful of artillerymen totaled just under 500 men to repel the attack. The recently arrived militia camped outside the fort were ordered away to Woodbury for their own safety. But they were encouraged to harass the Hessians if they could.

The Americans had fourteen cannon installed of various sizes. A double line of abatis surrounded the outside ditch of the southern third of the fort. On the berm was a row of sharpened stakes, or fraises. The slope of the walls were steep enough to require scaling ladders – yet the Hessians had brought none.

Near where Red Bank Avenue intersects Hessian Avenue, Colonel von Donop divided his force for the attack. The larger force of the von Minnigerode and von Lengerke battalions with the Jaegers and artillery proceeded into the woods about 400 yards from the fort's northeast wall. The von Lengerke battalion would serve as a reserve and to protect the artillery if any American landing party should attempt to come ashore from the boats. The guns were installed behind hastily thrown up earthworks. Von Donop planned for the regiment von Mirbach to attack the south wall, the longest section of the fort. The von Linsing battalion was to go round to attack the southwest side closest to the Whitall house.

In early afternoon around 1 pm a Hessian drum beat out a parley across the Whitall's field. Von Donop issued the first of two summonses under a white flag through British Major Charles Stuart who'd voluntarily accompanied the Hessian expedition. He met with Lt. Col. Jeremiah Olney of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Rhode Island, representing Colonel Greene in the fort. Stuart's message demanded the American garrison surrender; threatening "no quarter" would be given if they did not. **Jeremiah Greenman** recorded, "...had scarce an opportunity to get into the Fort, before a Flag came to Colo. Green, who commanded the Fort threatening to put the Garrison to death if he did not surrender it immediately ...". Colonel Greene declined the opportunity to surrender and prepared his men to repel the attack.



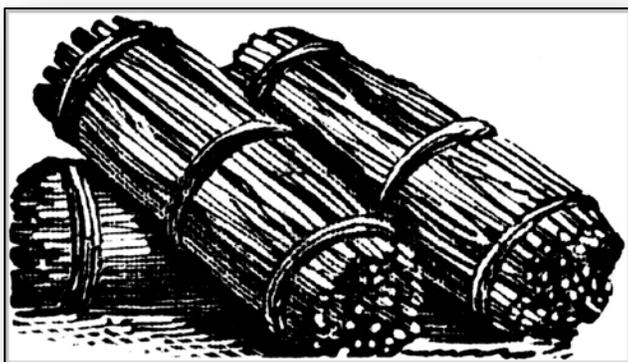
**Captain Johann Ewald**

According to Hessian **Captain Ewald**, Major Stuart carried back the message to von Donop, "*Colonel Greene, who commands the fort, sends his compliments and he shall await Colonel Donop.*" Von Donop underestimated the American's determination and preparedness to hold the works. He pondered the situation and beat a second parley at about 4:00 PM with the same result as before.

**Captain Ewald**, returning from a reconnaissance of the fort encountered a party of officers who were contemplating the coming assault. He recalled that one among them made a particularly prophetic assessment. "...I met Major Stuart with a drummer who was to summon the fort, and right behind them I met Major Pauli and Captain Krug, and both adjutants of the colonel. All these gentlemen regarded the affair with levity. The only man who had any real knowledge, and looked upon the business as serious, was worthy old Captain Krug. I took this man aside and asked him what he thought of the undertaking, whereupon he answered: He who has seen forts or fortified places captured with sword in hand will not regard this affair as a small matter, if the garrison puts up a fight and has a resolute commandant. We have let luck slip through our fingers. We should not have summoned the fort, but immediately taken it by surprise, for no one knew of our arrival. But now they will make themselves ready, and if our preparations are not being made better than I hear, we will get a good beating."

British **Captain Downman** was of a similar opinion. He reported arriving at the fort at mid-day. *"...at noon we examined it, and the saw the rebels at work which showed that the fort was not finished, or that they were adding something to it on hearing we were near them. I think therefore, we should have stormed it directly without the least loss of time as it was to be done in daylight, but instead of an immediate attack, we did not begin till 5 o'clock in the afternoon."*

At about 4:30 PM the Hessians formed into line to advance from out of the woods. Col. von Donop accompanied the von Mirbach regiment in the center assault. The von Linsing attack was led by Captain Ludwig von Stamford because Lt. Col. von Linsing had taken ill.



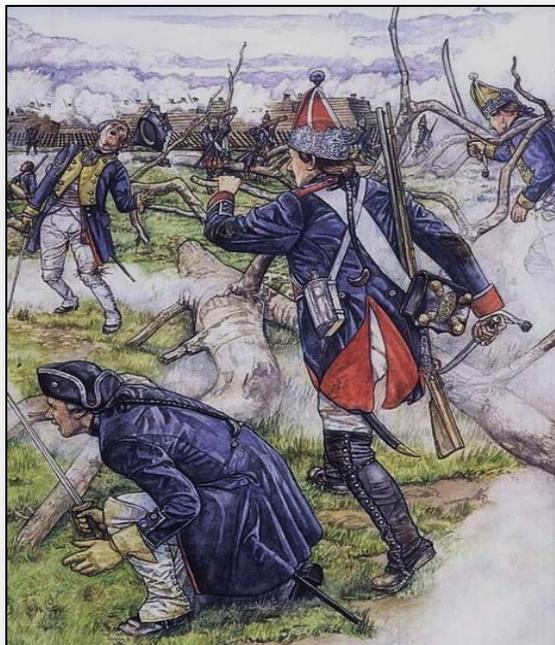
The three attacking Hessian units made fascines, large bundles of branches that were carried to the ditch before the walls and thrown in, creating a make-shift bridge to assist the attackers in crossing the ditch.

The assault was preceded by a ten minute artillery barrage starting with the howitzers which opened upon the fort about 4:45 PM that kept the Continentals heads down. Sharpshooting Jaegers also made raising ones head above the parapet a risky proposition. American defenders were picked off by effectively aimed fire.



**Jeremiah Greenman** wrote, *"...as soon as the Flag had returned they opened up with 7 field pieces & 2 Howitzers on the fort and played very smartly for about ten minutes then rushed on very rash that even success could not justify its temerity..."* **Captain Stephen Olney** recalled, *"The enemy had placed their field pieces or artillery (said to be twelve) on the edge of the woods, within point-blank shot, and their first general discharge was tremendous. It made the gravel and dust fly from the top of our fort, and took off all the heads that happened to be in the way. They then instantly advanced in two solid columns..."*

Hessian grenadiers, their brass caps gleaming, moved forward to the sound of fife and drums. At the same time the Hessian regimental 3 pounders began to fire in between the lines of marching infantry at their assigned sections of the fort.



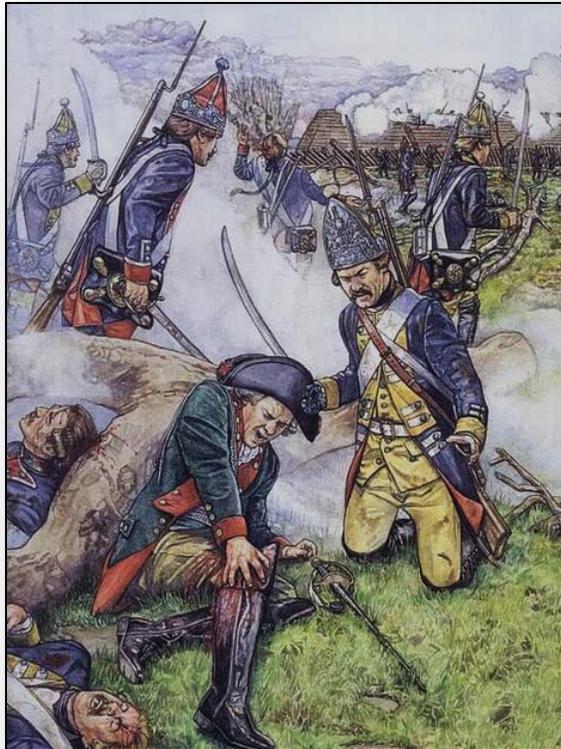
The fascine carriers, about one hundred men from each of the three groups, went in first. The von Mirbach and von Minnegerode attacks did not have to contend with the abatis. But the von Linsing battalion did, attacking the most heavily defended part of the fort. There was some disorder in the Hessian ranks but they advanced steadily, firing as they went.

The Americans held fire until the Hessians were within a distance of 50 to 60 paces of the fort. **Captain Stephen Olney** recalled that the fire of Captain Downman's Howitzers, the Hessian field pieces, not to mention the accurate sniping of the jaegers, had some effect. *"...The first line of the enemy's artillery, intimidated some of the men so much they were afraid to show their heads above the breastworks, raised their guns and fired by guess work, notwithstanding Colonel Jeremiah Olney was busily employed trashing them with his hanger [sword]..."* But, the Hessian and British barrage was too short to have been of much effect.

The von Linsing regiment reached the center of the south fort wall first. From inside the redoubt Rhode Island **Captain Stephen Olney** remembered the scene. *"Their left came first within musket shot, when we gave them a serious and well directed fire, which rather disordered their column. Still they continued to advance, and one or two officers were killed or wounded on the brim of the breastwork, but the column became so broken that they were obliged to retreat..."* Leadership by the American officers inside the fort, sometimes harshly and expediently applied, was critical in stiffening the defenders resolve. **Captain Stephen Olney** remembered, *"...My company was stationed in a salient angle, connected within the curtain of the breast work, to rake the ditches on each side. When fighting, I thought my company quite secure, as the enemy looking to the bastions on each side; therefore my men were deliberate, except one little Irishman, who was frightened out of his senses, but a few strokes with the but-end of my gun brought him to his duty."*

Using the fascines to cross the ditch and scale the sharpened fraises, the Hessians of the von Mirbach Regiment stood on each other's shoulders to climb over the wall and took heavy casualties.

Colonel Von Donop advanced with these men. The von Mirbach men were soon joined by the von Minnigerode battalion which had thrown down its fascines and begun scaling the northeast wall.



**Colonel von Donop is wounded**

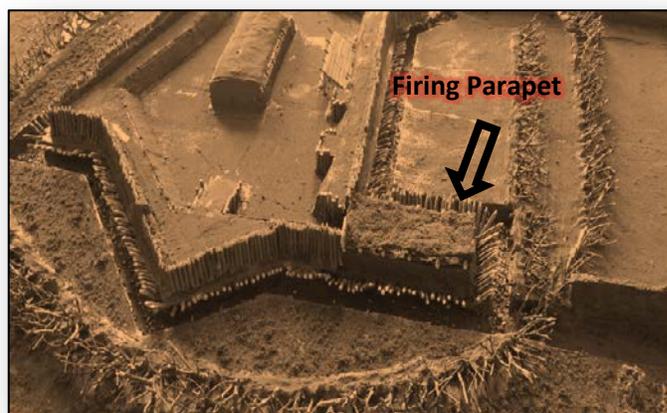
Meanwhile at the southwest side of the fort, the von Linsing battalion was being pummeled by the Americans. Without the needed axes and saws to cut through the abatis, the soldiers were forced to hack at it with swords, all the while fully exposed to fire from the Rhode Islanders in the fort. Bodies, especially of the officers who had to continually rally their men, fell in a heap. Two holes were cut through the abatis. The fascine men advanced but merely threw their fascines into the ditch and ran away, so intense was the American fire. As a result the needed bridge was poorly formed, more of a pile without design than a usable crossing. Lt. Col. Olney directed the fire of his men into the Hessians trying to scale the angle of the south and west walls. None got over the American breastworks, largely stopped by the sharpened stakes. When Captain von Stamford was shot through the chest, the von Linsing battalion broke off the fight and fell back to regroup.

Inside the 200 yard long unmanned section of the fort, the von Minnegerode battalion and von Mirbach regiment were convinced they had gained a victory. **Captain Stephen Olney** recalled the assault of the Hessian right wing. "...By this time the other column had made its way into that part of the fort which we had evacuated, and supposing they were masters of the fort, huzzaed and came on, perhaps, to cut up their prisoners..."



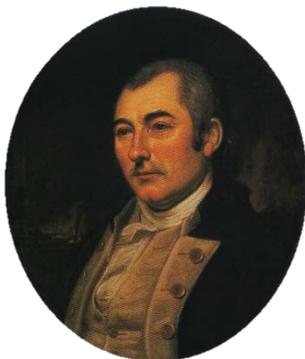
Unmanned section of the Fort

In reality the Hessians had gotten themselves into a trap, scaling the wall to enter a designed kill box. Noticing their error the Hessians rushed the inner redoubt at the far end of the works. About 20 yards from the inner wall was another thick abatis. A rectangular firing parapet jutted out from the wall about ten yards on the southeast or longest wall side.



**Jeremiah Greenman** described it as, "...a small place big enough for eight men to fight in which overlooked all the ground round the Fort..." As the Hessians advanced and became entangled within the inner abatis a handful of American defenders were able to rake their flank from the parapet. Worse was to come. The Rhode Islanders's rose as one over the berm, swung their musket barrels into view, and pointed down into the mass of men tangled in the abatis. The Americans cut loose with a vicious volley right into the Hessians. **Captain Stephen Olney** continued, "...When within 50 or 60 paces, we began a fire upon them. They were put in disorder by getting over the fort. The officers persisted in pushing forward the men, until within about two paces of our breastwork, when our fire proved so destructive that they gave it up and retreated, leaving their dead and wounded. ..."

The Hessians were not the only ones suffering under the confusion of battle. Captain Olney believed that one man of his company, Asa Potter, was killed by the fire of his own men. **Captain Olney** stated, *"...We fired at the column that came first. Our men partly on my left and rear fired across my station. When that column retreated and the other came up, I fired and fired upon it, and our men on the other side of the works, also fired across my station. Next day, Lieutenant Samuel Wipple told me he counted 13 musket balls lodged within the breastwork, where it was impossible the enemy could have lodged them..."*



Commodore John Hazelwood

About this time Commodore John Hazelwood's galleys arrived on the scene from their safe harbor up river at Ladd's Cove. The Americans heavier ships stood off because of the threat from the British howitzers, but the smaller more agile row galleys came so close to shore that they could communicate with the fort by speaking tube.

The galleys, reaching a position to pour grapeshot directly into the Hessian infantry caught them from the back and flank by fire from the river. Though some Hessians continued to struggle through the abatis to the base of the inner wall, the majority tumbled backward into the open section of the fort. There they were raked further by the grapeshot from the boats.

As the Rhode Islanders poured fire down upon their enemies. **Jeremiah Greenman** remembered, *"...the artillery & musketry of the fort great slaughter they advanced as far as the abatis, but they could not remove it (though sum few got over) being repulsed with great loss..."* Von Donop now inside the abatis himself was hit in the upper thigh, the bone shattered. Von Minnegerode went down hit in both legs. Some men tried to escape the musketry by climbing out by the river side, only to come face to face with the Pennsylvania Navy who fired on them point blank from just off shore.

## The British Navy Attempts to Engage

Down river on *HMS Augusta*, Captain Reynolds, shortly after anchoring above the Billingsport cheveaux at 4:00 P.M., heard the reports of the cannon mixed with the sound of musketry. Minutes later within the growing gunsmoke drifting on the river he observed the American galleys off Fort Mercer engaging in a heavy fire landward. This he assessed as flanking fire on the Hessian assault. Realizing von Donop's attack was underway, Reynolds ordered his ships' commanders to get up river as quickly as possible.

**Captain John Linzee** commanding *HMS Pearl* wrote, *"At 5pm perceived a heavy fire of musketry at Red Bank, and a cannonading from the rebels vessels and floating batteries that were drawn up to it. Supposed it to be our troops who had attacked it, therefore got underway with Augusta, Roebuck. Liverpool, Merlin & Cornwallis Galley & worked up the river in order to engage the rebels vessels and prevent their firing on our troops who appeared to be much galled from the enemies shipping..."*

Record of any preparation for coordination of the land attack with naval support between von Donop and Reynolds is sketchy. There was no way for the two commanders to communicate directly with one another during the operation. It seems that Reynolds was unsure at the outset what the time was that von Donop would begin his assault. With nightfall coming on it would have been logical for Reynolds to assume that the attack might not go that afternoon. At his court-martial a month later, **Captain Reynolds** testified, *"...I thought it my duty to comply with Lord [Admiral Richard] Howe's instructions in giving every Assistance to the Hessians: I immediately hoisted the Topsails and sent an Officer to each of the other ships acquainting the Captains that my intention was to go as near the upper Cheveaux de frize as possible, in order to draw the fire of the Galleys from the Hessians, and I desired they would do the same, which they complied with..."* Given the still caught the squadron a bit flat-footed. Its timing was the start of the undoing of *HMS Merlin*.

*Merlin* was moving up from slightly down river of *Augusta* at the time. The squadron was bunched closely together. The *Merlin's* Captain, Commander Samuel Reeve, was in the process of pulling into his assigned station to anchor off *Augusta's* starboard quarter facing the Jersey shore when he heard firing up river at the fort and noticed the other ships in the squadron to be loosening their topsails. Reeve soon after received the new order from Reynolds to proceed up river to, *"... assist in disturbing the Rebel Vessels in the movement which they were then making..."*

As *Merlin* set its sails, it suddenly had to bear up in order to avoid being run over by *HMS Roebuck* which at that time had begun firing at the American galleys in the distance. Reeve successfully avoided *Roebuck* and was preparing to put about to join the fight. A month later **Commander Reeve** would testify at his court-martial, "...I directed the two nine pounders on the forecastle to be prepared to fire, as soon as the ship came head to wind, and the other guns to be brought into use, as they should be found serviceable, but finding the ship did not come too, and there was two fathom water under the main channels, I directed them to sound forward. And found the ship was on the ground..." Before the maneuver Reeves had consulted with the pilot, Mathew Croell, employed since May to see the *Merlin* through the Delaware's treacherous channels and currents. Croell would later testify that he did not apprise Reeves of the danger because as he claimed, the sandbar had shifted since he had last been there. He also claimed poor visibility from the growing dark and gun smoke.

At about 5:30 PM, their brutal work on the Hessian soldiers ashore being through, Commodore Hazelwood shifted the attention of the shallow draft American galleys to the approaching British warships. They dropped down river across the sand flats to fire on them.

The *Merlin* was aground at her forward end at a position not far above the mouth of Mantua Creek. Commander Reeves sent to Captain Reynolds for help while at the same time sending out a longboat to lay an anchor at *Merlin's* stern in hopes of dragging the ship off.



H.M.S. Merlin

Unfortunately Reynolds could not assist at the time as he was then engaged in the fight with Hazelwood's boats. Captain Linzee aboard *HMS Pearl* recorded the squadron's engagement by the American galleys and the grounding of *HMS Merlin*, "...half past 5pm the rebels galleys began firing on us, which was returned by the *Roebuck Augusta & Cornwallis Galley*. At the same time the firing on Red Bank discontinued, & his Majesty's sloop *Merlin* got ashore on the Jersey side..." Soon after, the *Augusta* was beset by her own difficulties.



H.M.S. Augusta

*HMS Augusta ran aground just past high tide opposite a position near the mouth of Little Mantua Creek. **Captain Reynolds** testified, "...in turning up river, and just as we were about coming to an anchor, the ship took the ground; before we could get an anchor out to heave her off, the flood tide was done..."*

**Captain Linzee** of the *Pearl* wrote, "...at 6 was hailed from the *Augusta* & informed of her being aground and ordered immediately to anchor ..." Reynold's hoped the *Pearl* might pull him off. As it grew dark, Linzee ordered the *Pearl's* crew to begin assisting *Augusta* with cable and anchor to assist in heaving her off the sandbar. This operation would continue through the night and into the next morning.

The rest of the British squadron proceeded up river wary of the proximity to the upper cheveaux and sandbars. **Colonel D'Arendt** wrote of the British Navy's approach from his perspective at Fort Mifflin. "...At the same time that the enemy began the attack, their vessels advanced to the Cheveaux de frize and kept up a pretty smart fire upon my Fort [Mifflin], and their batteries began to play. As their vessels remained in this position, I expected an attack in the night ..."

A night bombardment of Fort Mifflin by the warships might have materialized had not the British soon become occupied with other problems.

As darkness closed in (sunset was 5:11 PM) the Hessian soldiers were beaten. After about twenty minutes under the parapets, their leaders falling all around, the remaining Hessian officers decided they must withdraw. The soldiers began to run for their lives, stepping on the bodies of fallen comrades to get away. Many of the Hessian wounded were left behind crying for help where they'd fallen. Once out of the fort, the Grenadiers stumbled across the open ground for the woods where they took cover in the shadows and paused to catch their breath amid the growing chaos. Men lay bleeding and moaning on the ground or propped against the trees. Horses roughly handled, neighed in protest as they were hurriedly hitched to their carriages. Orders in German were shouted to try to instill some order, while the last exchanges of musketry receded between the covering Jaegers and the Rhode Islanders behind their works.

According to Captain Ewald, Colonel Ludwig von Wurmb of the Jaegers took command of the shattered Hessian brigade to organize a retreat around the von Lengerke Battalion, the last intact formation held in reserve. There was not a single wagon to carry the wounded away, another result of von Donop's limited planning. **Captain Johann Ewald** explained, *"Since we had flattered ourselves in advance with a successful [American] surrender, no retreat then was thought of..."* **Captain Downman** wrote of the experience, *"...we were obliged to retire, and that in much confusion, for by this time it was quite dark. We retired about a mile all in bustle and disorder, then stopped about an hour to get the troops disposed into some order, and to collect the wounded and carry them in the best way we could, for not a wagon was thought of, and had it not been for the ammunition wagons a number must have been left behind..."* The German and British soldiers, more resembling a hastily assembled mob than a military column, straggled down the sandy road into the cold autumn night. They used the artillery carriages and horses to transport the wounded officers. Wounded enlisted soldiers who were able did their best to walk out on their own. The Hessians retired along the route of what is today called Hessian Run Road.

From inside the fort **Sergeant John Smith** observed, *"...We Killed Dead of the Hessians on the spot one Lt. Col. & several Officers 70 or 80 Non-commissioned Officers & Privates Included -- one Col. who was Chief Commander [von Donop] & a brigade Major who was the officer who came with the flag before the battle was wounded & taken prisoners & about 70 or 80 wounded Privates taken prisoners -- the rest of the army made the best of their way off taking with them 3 or 4 wagons Loaded with the wounded Hessians & impressed all the wagons on the road to carry their wounded off -- they Left 20 at a house on the road as they went back..."* This was probably the old 'Candor Hall' farm, known as "Ladd's Castle" where the grenadiers, without water throughout the long afternoon, wandered across the property to quench their thirsts at the small stream behind the house. A number of the wounded fell out there, unable to continue.

On reaching King's Highway in Woodbury, the Hessians took over the Friend's Meeting House where the more seriously wounded were abandoned to the clemency of local citizens and the American soldiers who came the next day. Von Wurmb sent a detachment from the von Lengerke battalion ahead to secure the Clements Bridge on Timber Creek which they defended until the remainder of the column arrived after midnight. A two hour halt was ordered while some soldiers went off to confiscate needed wagons and horses to better carry the injured.

On the river by 6:00 PM the cannonade was general and severe between the British warships and American galleys. It continued for two hours.

**Commander John Henry** of *H.M. Armed Ship Vigilant* was at that time in the channel between Hog and Province Islands. He had that morning gone aground himself on the Hog Island sandbar, but was able to get off to continue toward a position where he might fire on Fort Mifflin.



H.M.S. Vigilant

He recorded in the *Vigilant's* journal that the *Merlin* and the *Augusta* were aground and noted, "...the enemy firing on them very hot. We fired some shot at the Galleys over Hog Island..."

By 7:00 PM the fight was still underway between the American galleys and the British squadron. **Captain Linzee** aboard the H.M.S. *Pearl* wrote,



H.M.S. Pearl

"... warped up in company with the *Liverpool* abreast of the *Augusta* to cover her, at half past 7pm the rebels discontinued the firing. Dropped down and anchored near us the *Roebuck* & *Cornwallis* Galley. The Ships sent their Boats ahead which were reinforced by the ships below."

*Augusta* was a large ship. Her keel was 130 feet with a beam of 44 feet. She weighed 1381 tons and carried 500 men. She was not easy to get off the sand bar. Seeing that the *Pearl* was not large enough to move *Augusta*, Captain Hammond tried to apply the greater weight of his ship to pull her off. **Captain Linzee** on the *Pearl* wrote, "At half past 1 AM was ordered by Captain Hammond to move the ship that he might take our place & assist the *Augusta*..." **Captain Hammond** aboard *Roebuck* wrote, "...AM sent the stream cable on board the *Augusta*, employed in heaving on the stream cable, to get the *Augusta* off which we did not effect..."

Once again the wind worked against the British. **Captain Reynolds** testified, *"...at high water we began to heave in order to get the ship off, but unfortunately the wind being northerly in the night, which had checked the flood, we hove without any effect..."* Despite all efforts they were unable to refloat *Augusta* before daylight.

While the British struggled to recover *Augusta* from her predicament, the traumatized Hessian column was in full retreat, trudging through the cold gloomy New Jersey woods. For them it was a dreadful night of exhaustion, fear of counterattack, and the pain of the wounded. **British Captain Downman** wrote, *"...This nights march was as melancholy and as disagreeable a one as ever I experienced; it was dark and excessively cold; the roads were deep and narrow and enclosed with wood; we lost our way twice and had to turn about the guns and wagons in the narrow road; the very worst of maneuvers. The horses were very bad and almost tired out, the drivers were a set of scoundrels. Add to this the groans of the wounded; the idea of being attacked in the rear by a sally from the fort while pent up in a road where we could not possibly make use of our cannon, and the probability of an encounter in front or flanks, for until day appeared we had no flanking parties out. We were lucky in meeting with no molestation except a few shots that did no harm..."*

Colonel Greene chose not to pursue the retreating Hessians. Fearing ambush in the dark themselves, the Americans remained behind their works in the cold. Inside the fort the Rhode Islanders listened throughout the night to cries of the Hessian wounded who were mixed in among the piles of the dead.

**Major Simeon Thayer** of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Rhode Island Regiment recorded, *"I commanded according to my rank during the action and was detached after the enemy had departed, about the dusk of the evening with a Small Party to bring in the wounded. As I was employed in the human service, two Hessian Grenadiers came and told me that their Commanding Officer Count Donop was lying wounded in the edge of the wood near where their artillery had played, as it was near dark I suspected they might mean to decoy me into an ambush I therefore ordered them under guard, telling them if they deceived me they should be immediately put to death, to which they readily consented, and conducted me to the place where I found the Count lying under a tree mortally wounded, he asked me if I was an Officer and of what rank, of which being satisfied he surrendered himself as a prisoner to me when I ordered six of my guard to take one of the Hessian blankets from his pack and carry him with all possible care to the Fort where he was received By Col. Greene."*

Donop's reception inside the fort was less cordial than Thayer described. He was tormented by the Rhode Island troops who chided the wounded man, reminding him that he had bid them no quarter. Du Plessis-Mauduit came to the Hessian Colonel's rescue, silencing the men and seeing to von Donop's care.

**Sergeant John Smith** of the 1<sup>st</sup> Rhode Island wrote, *"...the whole garrison were up all night dressing the wounded & taking care of them ... in the morning we began to strip & bury the dead of our men & hessians -- we buried 75 hessians in one grave in the intrenchment & covered them over and 8 or 10 more below the bank by the river -- it took us all day to bury the Dead..."*

## Fort Mifflin & the Pennsylvania Navy Attack

On the river at dawn on the 23rd, Commodore John Hazelwood saw *HMS Augusta*, heeling badly to its side. He ordered another attack upon *Roebuck* and the stricken *Augusta*.

Commodore Hazelwood realized there was confusion around *Augusta* and that some of the British ships had begun to cluster near her. He launched four fire rafts at the British on the outgoing tide. The British had time enough to launch long boats to intercept and tow the rafts through the squadron.



The shore fortifications including Fort Mifflin entered into the general melee, forcing *Roebuck* to move to a safer position. **Major Robert Ballard** described the action from the perspective of the garrison at Fort Mifflin. *"...This Morning at half after Six O'clock the enemy from Province Island began a very heavy fire from their bomb batteries and about an hour after was Joined by their fleet which kept up on us incessantly 'till after 12 O'clock, Our battery in consort with the Commodores fleet playing on them the whole time, in short we plied them with 18 & 32 lb. shot so closely that they I believe began to give ground..."*

At sunrise on the 23rd, the Rhode Islanders witnessed the battle's last chapter. A cluster of British ships including *HMS Roebuck* hovered around *Augusta*.

**Jeremiah Greenman** recorded, *"...One of the most solemnest actions commenced, that may be seen by a soldiers eye, the spectacle was magnificent, to see at once, the river covered with ships, four great fire ships, in a blaze, floating on the water..."*

**Sergeant John Smith** observed, *"...this morning the [British] ships began to come towards us & our fire ships began to move down -- they were set on fire but did the fleet no Damage -- the galleys & floating batteries kept a continual fire ... the river seemed all on fire the whole day..."*

British transports were sent up river to off-load and lighten *Augusta* in another effort to refloat her.

**Commander John Henry** of *H.M. Armed Ship Vigilant* recorded the scene. Henry witnessed, *"...a Smart firing commenced between the Fort, galley, & our ships, the Augusta & Merlin being still aground, the rebels directed their fire at them, between 8 & 10 AM the rebels sent down 4 fire ships to burn the Augusta, but they were all towed clear of her by our boats..."*



**Captain Reynolds** gave his deposition of what he experienced on the deck of *Augusta* that morning. *"...soon after daylight the rebel galleys and floating battery's began to fire on us, which we returned occasionally – about eleven O'clock, as I was on the quarter deck with the Master & his nephew Mr. Reid, I thought I heard an odd kind of crackling kind of noise, I sent Mr. Reid into the cabin to see what it was, he returned and told me, the ship was on fire, I found the sides, after part of the ship, and above the cabin all in flames..."*

The blaze spread rapidly into a general conflagration. It was reported that *Augusta* was laying broadside to aground and the flames issuing through every port she had. **Captain Reynolds** said, *"... every means were then used to put it out but without any effect; the fire becoming more general, my attention was then to save the people."* The order was given to abandon the *Augusta*.

There were varied accounts of the cause for the *Augusta's* demise. Of the officers and crew who gave testimony, none could say what caused the fire. None remembered having seen or heard the explosion of any powder on the decks. Only Midshipman Reid ventured to suppose that the fire originated from the wads. **Admiral Lord Howe** seemed to accept this explanation when he wrote, *"...by some Accident, no other way connected with the circumstances of the action but as it was probably caused by the Wads from her guns, the ship took fire abaft..."* Another explanation of events came from **Ambrose Serle**, who as Lord Howe's personal secretary enjoyed a close proximity to the Admiral, giving him access to the information reaching His Lordship. *"great firing these two days, in the last of which the Augusta of 64 Guns, in approaching the rebel Fort [Mercer], caught fire from the Poop deck by a marine [accidentally] firing into a hammock, which, being unperceived, communicated to the shrouds, & from thence to other parts past all prevention. In this unhappy event, a Lieutenant and 40 sick & wounded seamen perished in the flames..."*

In his autobiography Captain Andrew Hammond, who would have observed *Augusta* from close aboard, having gone to the ship's assistance, wrote that the flames spread in a devilishly short period across the ship. This could have been the cause of so many of the infirm being trapped below decks. *"...She [Augusta] took fire, and in ten minutes the flames reached the mast head. All firing then ceased on my part our whole attention being taken up to save the Augusta's people by our boats, which except such of the sick as could not help themselves I was fortunate enough to effect although under the heavy fire of 15 galleys the whole time. The Cap<sup>t</sup> Reynolds, afterwards L<sup>d</sup> Ducie was in the act of sinking when my Barge saved him, as more than half the ships company were taken out of the water so rapid were the flames."* Captain Hammond signaled the other ships to assist in saving *Augusta's* crew. Captain Phipps on the *Camilla* responded. The *Pearl's* boats also assisted.

Aboard *HMS Merlin* Commander Reeve, had received little help in freeing his small ship. He had been hopeful throughout the night that a rising tide would assist him in the morning. But he also was disappointed by the contrary north wind that thwarted the flood. *Merlin* remained stuck on the fatal bar, without the resources that further attention from the ships helping *Augusta* might have afforded it. Being a lighter ship, it was possible that they might have managed to pull *Merlin* off. Reeve waited with his crew in hope of saving the ship, but events aboard *Augusta* doomed her. Commander Reeve said, *"...Soon after daylight, the rebel vessels having advanced and fired upon our Ships, an engagement continued between them, until near 11 O'clock, at which time Augusta appeared to be on fire, on which occasion the boats were all ordered to her Assistance..."*

After he realized *Augusta* was ablaze, Admiral Howe, decided *HMS Merlin* was lost too.

**Admiral Howe** would later write of his decision, *"In this state of the proceeding it was necessary to withdraw the frigates, for securing them from the effect of the blast. And as the Merlin could not be protected from the same Injury, I judged it requisite to give order for the sloop to be evacuated and destroyed..."*



Howe ordered Captain Hammond, now in charge of the squadron, to scuttle her and the remaining warships withdrawn.

Captain Hammond sent orders to set fire to the *Merlin*, and instructed the other Captains to send boats to bring off the crew. According to **Captain Reeve**, "...sometime after the signal was made on board the *Roebuck* for the other ships to weigh, and about half an hour after 11 O'clock, I received by Lieutenant Applin of *Roebuck*, an order from Lord Howe to remove the people from *Merlin* and destroy her, which order was executed accordingly."

**Commander John Henry** on the *Vigilant* recorded, "...the Ships dropped down to keep clear of the *Augusta's* and *Merlin's* Guns, who both burned with great Fury..."

When the fire reached *Augusta's* magazine she blew up catastrophically. A shock wave would have rippled across the surface of the Delaware. A column of black smoke shot skyward from the hold that could be seen for miles. The blast broke windows in Philadelphia. Many reports of the day likened the detonation to an earthquake. **Hugh Smyth**, postmaster with the Continental Army wrote, "*The shock was felt at camp ... Headquarters are 16 miles above Philadelphia on the old York Road.*"



Thomas Paine

**Thomas Paine** was on the road between Germantown and Whitemarsh with General Nathanael Greene's Division at the time, and had been listening since daybreak to what he termed, "*A cannonade, by far the most furious I ever heard...*" He reported in a letter to Benjamin Franklin that after the passing of some hours, "*...we were stunned with a report as loud as a peal of a hundred cannon at once, and turning round I saw a thick smoke rising like a pillar and spreading from the top like a tree...*"

The exact time that *Augusta* exploded was variously recorded, but occurred past noon. Heard miles away in Germantown, John Miller who'd been listening to the cannon fire of the battle throughout the morning precisely reported the explosion was 10 minutes past 12 and Captain Phipps on *HMS Camilla* recorded that *Augusta* blew up at noon.

## The Aftermath of Battle

*Augusta* continued to burn for several days. Commodore Hazelwood sent salvage parties to the two hulks that carried off a number of items, not the least of which were two of *Augusta*'s 24-pound guns. Similar success was had with the smaller guns from *Merlin*.

The haggard Hessian brigade retreated through Haddonfield about daylight on October 23. Their return to the town was in stark contrast to their proud and disciplined arrival two afternoons before. The men had not been fed. Local citizens described the Hessians as behaving like a wild rabble fighting for food. The Hessian column did not stay long and soon hurried down the road along the Cooper River back to the ferry. By late morning they were clustered by the riverside, climbing into boats to bring them to safety. In early afternoon the destruction of the British warships *HMS Augusta* and *Merlin* played out down river. Like an exclamation mark for their own bad fortune, the Hessians heard a tremendous explosion as the *Augusta*, their intended naval support, blew up shooting columns of black smoke skyward.

Taken in its entirety from Mantua Creek to Red Bank, the carnage for the soldiers ashore and the sailors on the river resembled a scene from hell in a small place. In retrospect, the events of 22 and 23 October signified the lowest point of the Philadelphia campaign for the British.

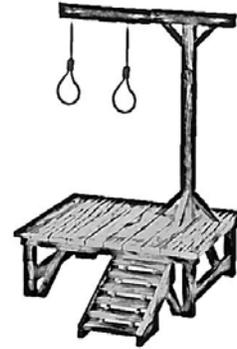
The total losses at Red Bank including killed, wounded, and missing or captured officially reported by the Hessians was 382 men in total, or about twenty percent of their force. Other eye witness accounts placed the number as high as 514. Whatever the actual count the total lost was an astounding figure for so brief a battle. This figure was made all the worse when the casualties of the Royal Navy were added in. The *Augusta* supposedly lost sixty men. The Americans reported total losses of 14 killed and 23 wounded; a remarkable disparity.

Many of the curious went to view the remains of the battle scene. **Pastor Nicholas Collin** was one of them who traveled with what he called "a few friends of the ruling faction." *Here his reputation as a Swedish neutral who lent his ear to Loyalist associates, followed him yet again. "Some rascals accused me before the Commander and made him believe that I was a spy, especially as I was clever enough to make drawings of the fort, etc., whereupon he arrested me and threatened to hang me within 5 minutes..."* Collin protested his innocence as a subject of a neutral country and his traveling companions, known to be good patriots, vouched for his trustworthiness and he was released.

According to Pastor Collin, Lt. Col. Greene had arrested two men earlier, John McIlvaine and Dick Ellis, who were destined for the gallows. They were accused of guiding the Hessian column to Red Bank. At their court-martial a few days later Lt. Cols. Greene and Olney found them to be traitors, McIlvaine having been paid in coin.

The regiment's carpenters constructed a gallows between the fort and the Whitall house where the two were hung on November 1. According to

**Sergeant John Smith**, "...they hanged until almost night then they were cut down & buried under the gallows..."



Pastor Collin saw much more which shocked him that day after the battle. The Rhode Islanders commandeered the Whitall house as a hospital where the Hessian wounded were taken. **Pastor Collin** observed the carnage. "...I went in to the wounded Hessians, prayed with them and comforted them as much as I could, using the German language, especially as they asked for my assistance, when they heard that a clergyman was at hand. Here was a pitiable sight. About two hundred were lying in two large rooms, some without arms or legs, and others again with their limbs crushed like mush, some floated in blood, and they told me that some had died for lack of something to bandage their wounds with. While I was there several men died in great agony and convulsions..." Collin recalled seeing two piles of arms and legs outside.

**Job Whitall**, a victim of the battle as well, attempted to make some order of his disrupted farm. But the disarray was unremitting, particularly now that the fighting on the river threatened to intensify. Everywhere between Red Bank and Woodbury were soldiers, of whom Whitall only wished to get out of their way. "... I went down to fathers & their American's had filled ye kitchen shop, big room in ye house, ye long room up & two other rooms down stairs, which forced us to move out." The Whitall's did what they could to secure their property.

In Later years the Whithall family would petition the United States Government for reparations for damages to their plantation during the battle. Their petition would be ignored.

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