

Remembering Bunker Hill

The patriots constructing the redoubt on Breed's Hill near Charlestown, Massachusetts during the night of June 17, 1775 had plenty of time to think of family, home — and the coming battle with the British. So, too, did the patriots to their east, who were busily constructing a rail fence and extending a stone wall along the Mystic River Road to protect the left flank. Chief among the thoughts of those who labored through the night must have been the chain of events which led to armed resistance against the British Crown. It had begun as a simple movement to protest taxes laid without consent on the colonists by the English Parliament. Now the farmers and artisans would test their mettle in battle against the tyrannical usurpations of their day.

By 1775, Britain had amassed a global colonial empire that was unparalleled in the world since the Roman Empire. And having just defeated its chief rival — France — in a world war, England had earned the title of uncontested master of the seas. Yet even on the eve of the Charlestown battle, itself in the aftermath of Lexington and Concord, most colonists still held some hope for a peaceful resolution to stop the injustices of Parliament. The King, most colonists still thought at that time, may yet stand up for the colonies. But beginning in 1769, a small group of activists from the Boston area had been protesting the unjust taxes laid by the British Parliament. By 1774, most of these activists had decided that independence for the colonies should be the goal.

As the Sons of Liberty organized passive resistance to the British military occupation of Boston, colonial leaders began to organize militias for a possible conflict with the British. Such militias bore little resemblance to today's federalized National Guard or private "militias." The Massachusetts militias were authorized and organized by the Provincial Congress's Committee of Safety, headed by John Hancock. These militias were not private armies, but were essentially exten-



The Battle of Bunker Hill demonstrated America's resolve in its War for Independence.

sions of the state government.

Boston native Samuel Adams had organized his Sons of Liberty years before that June morning in Charlestown, and the "Mob of Gentlemen" — as they were called by critics — had gained enormous influence throughout the colonies. Adams himself had great personal influence during his tenure in the town meetings at Fanueil Hall. Among the "mob" could be counted a number of notables — including shipping merchant John Hancock, who added wealth as well as influence to the patriot cause; Paul Revere, a reliable circuit rider for the Committees of Correspondence; and Dr. Joseph Warren, who arguably had the most impressive vita of all.

"Mob of Gentlemen"

A Harvard-educated medical doctor and skilled orator, Dr. Warren arrived at Bunker Hill with fresh news of his commission as Major-General in the militia. When Warren asked the militia commander where he might be of service in combat, General Israel Putnam replied much the same as Elbridge Gerry had implored the evening before. The new Major-General was too valuable to be risked at the front lines and would be

of great assistance in fortifying Bunker Hill to the rear of the American line. As president pro tempore of the Provincial Congress, Warren was indeed a valuable man to risk in combat. But he would have none of it.

Where, he asked General Putnam, would the most fierce fighting likely take place? Putnam pointed to nearby Breed's Hill, where Colonel William Prescott and his men were finishing construction of a redoubt at the top of the hill. The Breed's Hill redoubt was much closer to the likely landing point for any British attack, and the view offered by the hill would make it useful to the British in taking Bunker Hill afterward. Putnam reluctantly allowed Warren to go up to the redoubt, and soon Warren was among those inspiring the rank and file to hold fast when the British attacked. As Warren arrived on the scene at Breed's Hill, Colonel Prescott offered General Warren command of the redoubt. But Warren deferred to Prescott who had the greater military experience.

Warren must have felt largely responsible for the chain of events that had taken his country to the brink of war with England. The doctor's critical role in almost every aspect of the Sons of Liberty and

the Committees of Correspondence had fed the growing discontent to British rule in America. Although personally opposed to independence from England until shortly before Lexington and Concord, Warren set the stage for those skirmishes by sending Paul Revere, William Dawes, and Samuel Prescott on their midnight rides to warn Samuel Adams and John Hancock of the British moves to seize the store of arms at Concord.

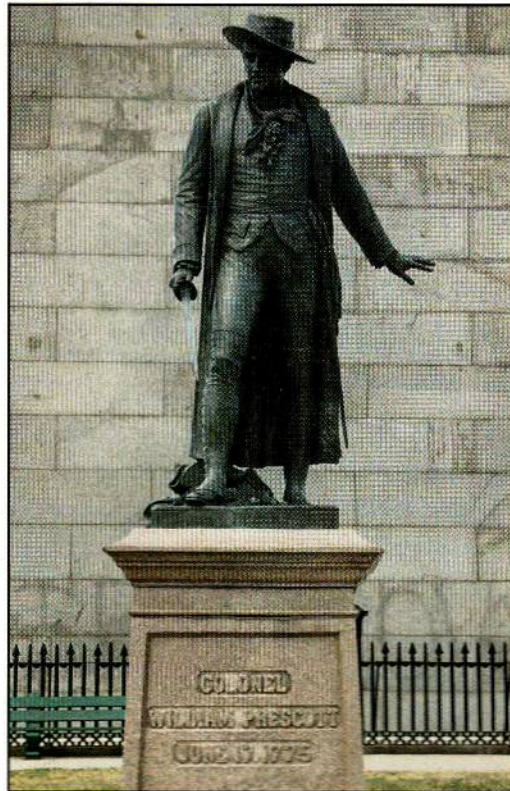
Lexington and Concord were different, however, from Breed's Hill. Local farmers coming out of the woods to snipe at a British column was one thing, but an open battle against the might of the British Empire was quite another. In addition to the Massachusetts troops commanded by General Ward, Nathaniel Greene had brought men up from Rhode Island, Colonel John Stark led volunteers from New Hampshire, and General Putnam commanded the troops from Connecticut. Bunker Hill was the first place where American units from various states would join forces and openly battle the British. About 1,000 patriots were initially sent to Charlestown to seize Bunker Hill before the British could fortify it. They were reinforced by 500 men from John Stark's New Hampshire volunteers.

Bloody Battle

Most military historians regard the Battle of Bunker Hill as a textbook case of bad tactics on the part of the British. Bunker and Breed's Hills are part of a peninsula with a narrow neck that could have been closed with British sea power and a small landing force. Why the British commander, General Thomas Gage, instead chose to land at the end of the peninsula and meet the militia head-on is an issue still debated today. Perhaps he was convinced that a group of farmers and shopkeepers could not possibly equal the world's premier soldiers in combat; perhaps he thought that a head-on defeat of the untested militia forces would break the growing spirit of revolt in the colonies; perhaps he was worried about his own landing force being pinned down by the rest of the massing colonial militia, numbering about 10,000 in nearby Cambridge and Roxbury.

The reasons for the British tactics are less important than the results of Bunker Hill, the bloodiest battle during the en-

tire seven-year War for Independence. The 1,500 patriots defending the peninsula not only stood up to the British regulars, but twice forced the crumpled ranks of redcoats to retreat down the sloping hill. Colonel Prescott and General Putnam ordered the militias, "Don't one of you fire until you see the whites



Col. William Prescott commanded American troops at Breed's Hill.

of their eyes." And they held their fire until the appointed time, retreating in an orderly fashion only after cutting down more than 1,000 of the British regulars and depleting their limited supply of ammunition.

The royal commander, General Gage, is said to have echoed Pyrrhus' lament, upon winning the field that day, "It was a dear bought victory. Another such victory will be the end of us." Even if the statement is apocryphal, the sentiment must have been on Gage's mind as he looked over a blood-drenched field littered with two British corpses for every colonist killed. The colonists emerged with renewed confidence in their abilities, certain that they could have held the peninsula if supplied sufficient ammunition. Dr. Warren was among the last of the patriots cut down during the third and final British charge up Breed's Hill; he had stayed behind with a few other vol-

unteers to give the main force time to withdraw.

After the Battle of Bunker Hill, the British knew they had a full-blown war on their hands. One week earlier Ethan Allen had taken Fort Ticonderoga in New York by surprise, and with it, its precious store of British cannons. Several months later these cannons would be transported overland and used on Dorchester Heights to force the British evacuation of Boston. The British would never again occupy Boston, the city that would soon become widely known as the cradle of American liberty.

Nameless Soldiers

The British soldiers who bled and died in front of the Breed's Hill redoubt offer an important lesson for contemporary Americans who are witnessing the transformation of their free republic into a global military empire. Like those slain British soldiers, American soldiers are now asked to fight — and often die — on foreign lands for causes unrelated to protecting the nation's soil or citizens. Somalia, Iraq, Kuwait, Haiti, Bosnia, etc. — the list is limited only by the whims of the President and the malfeasance of Congress. The patriots at Bunker and Breed's Hills will always be remembered and honored; but what of the British soldiers who died there? They are almost entirely forgotten and nameless. Their efforts, though loyal to the wishes of their imperial master, did not outlast their earthly bodies. There are no great monuments at Bunker Hill or elsewhere for mercenary soldiers who invaded foreign lands.

Admittedly, there is a marker at Concord Bridge for the graves of the British soldiers who died there two months before Bunker Hill. But the marker is unimpressive and easy to overlook. The verse on the tiny plaque above the grave of the British soldiers is fittingly melancholy, and eerily appropriate for casualties of recent American military misadventures:

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