

18 The War of the Hills



A Pennsylvania infantryman in a spiffy uniform (looking handsome for the portrait painter).

England's Major John Pitcairn to the Earl of Sandwich (Boston, March 4, 1775):

I am satisfied that one active campaign, a smart action, and burning two or three of their towns, will set everything to rights. Nothing now, I am afraid, but this will ever convince those foolish bad people that England is in earnest.

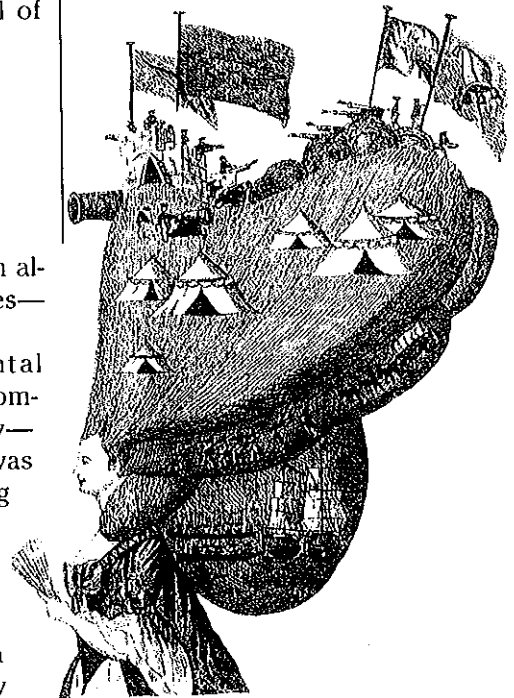
And so there was war. It seemed to begin almost by itself. Some people—on both sides—wanted to fight, and that was enough.

Two days after the Second Continental Congress appointed George Washington commander in chief of the Continental army—before anyone in Boston even knew there was a general—redcoats and Patriots were killing each other. They were fighting the first major battle of the Revolutionary War.

Two hills, Breed's and Bunker, lie just across the Charles River from Boston. Like Boston itself, they are on a peninsula connected to the mainland by a narrow neck: the Charlestown peninsula.

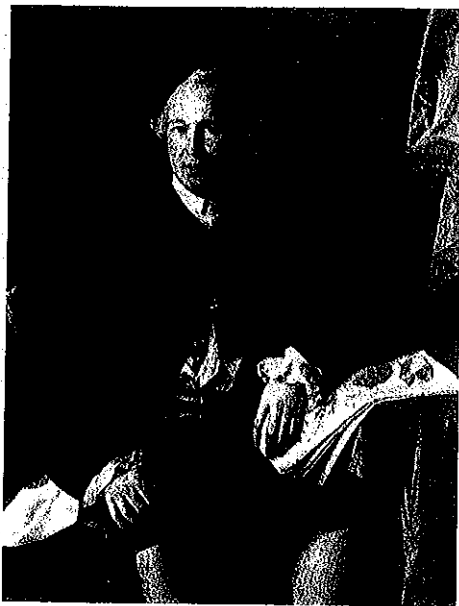
The British were asleep on that June night in 1775 when the Massachusetts soldiers began to dig fortifications on Breed's Hill. The Americans worked all night. They must have worked with great speed and ability, because by morning it was done. Those hills that looked out on Boston were filled with troops and trenches.

The British couldn't believe it. For months they had tried to get



A British cartoon called "Noddle Island" (a real island outside Boston) made a double joke about women's fashions and the mistakes of Bunker Hill. (*Noddle* is an old English word for head.)

Right: British naval forces in Boston harbor fire on Charlestown to back up the troops attacking the Patriots on foot.



Dr. Joseph Warren died on Breed's Hill. A Loyalist on-looker had this to say about him: "Since Adams went to Philadelphia, one Warren, a rascally patriot and apothecary of this town, has had the lead in the Provincial Congress....This fellow was happily killed, in coming out of the trenches the other day....You may judge what the herd must be like when such a one is their leader."

the colonists to work for them. They needed barracks, and there were other construction jobs to be done. But nothing got finished. Americans are lazy, the British thought. And then they saw this amazing feat, accomplished overnight. Breed's Hill was swarming with men and covered with impressive earthworks. Bunker Hill was dark with men. The British—especially the four British generals in Boston—were dumbfounded.

If they had thought a minute, they might have sent troops to capture the neck of the Charlestown peninsula—and perhaps trap the colonial soldiers. But they didn't think. They reacted.

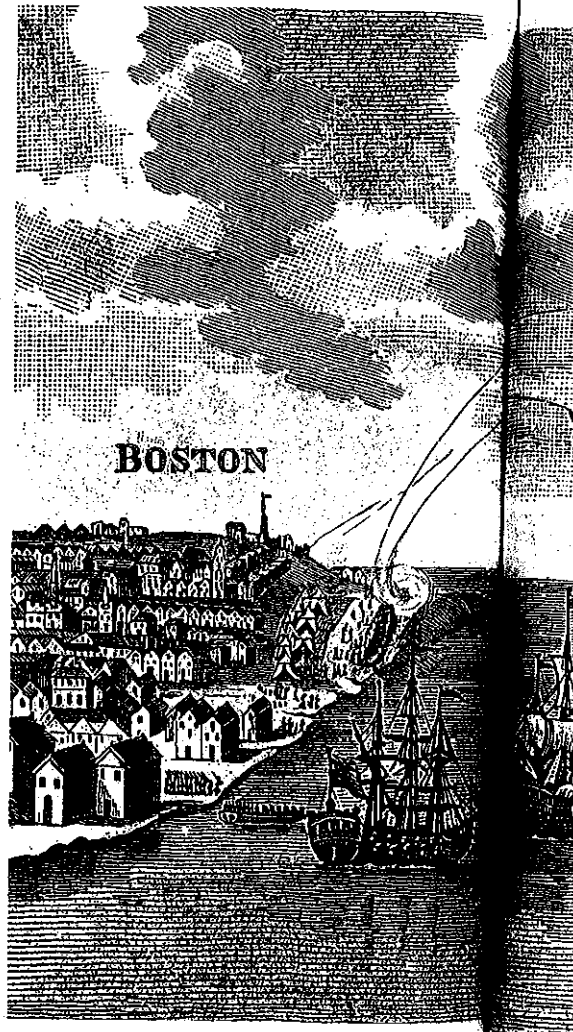
Before long, barges filled with English soldiers were splashing their way from Boston, across the Charles River to Charlestown. Fifers played, drums pounded, and cannon blasted.

The British troops made ready to attack—head on. The Massachusetts men, dug in at the top of the hill, must have been scared—

really scared. They had no training for this; they were fighting Europe's best soldiers; and they had very little gunpowder. They knew they had to use that gunpowder carefully. They had few bayonets; the British soldiers all had bayonets. The American officers told the volunteer soldiers to wait until the British soldiers were almost on top of them before they fired. "Wait until you see the whites of their eyes," they said.

And that is what the Massachusetts men did. Can you imagine the strain? It is said that those who saw the Battle of Bunker Hill never forgot the sounds, the smells, the ferocity, and the fear of that day. Pretend you are up there with them on the top of Breed's Hill. Watch the redcoats advance toward you, bayonets pointed. Don't panic, and don't fire until you hear the order to do so.

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The Little Drummer Boy

Robert Steel, a drummer boy in Ephraim Doolittle's regiment from Cambridge, told of his part in the battle:

I beat to "Yankee Doodle" when we mustered for Bunker Hill that morning...the British... marched with rather a slow step nearly up to our entrenchment, and the battle began. The conflict was sharp, but the British soon retreated with a quicker step than they came up, leaving some of their

killed and wounded in sight of us.... I was standing by the side of Benjamin Ballard, a Boston boy about my age...when one of our sergeants came up to us and said, "You are young and spry, run in a moment to some of the stores and bring some rum. Major Moore is badly wounded."... We went into a store, but see no one....a man answered us from the cellar below.... I asked him why he

stayed down in the cellar. He answered, "To keep out of the way of the shot," and then said, "...take what you please."...I seized a brown, two quart earthen pitcher and filled [it] with rum...Ben took a pail and filled with water, and we hastened back to the entrenchment on the hill.... Our rum and water went very quick. It was very hot, but I saved my pitcher and kept it for some time afterwards.



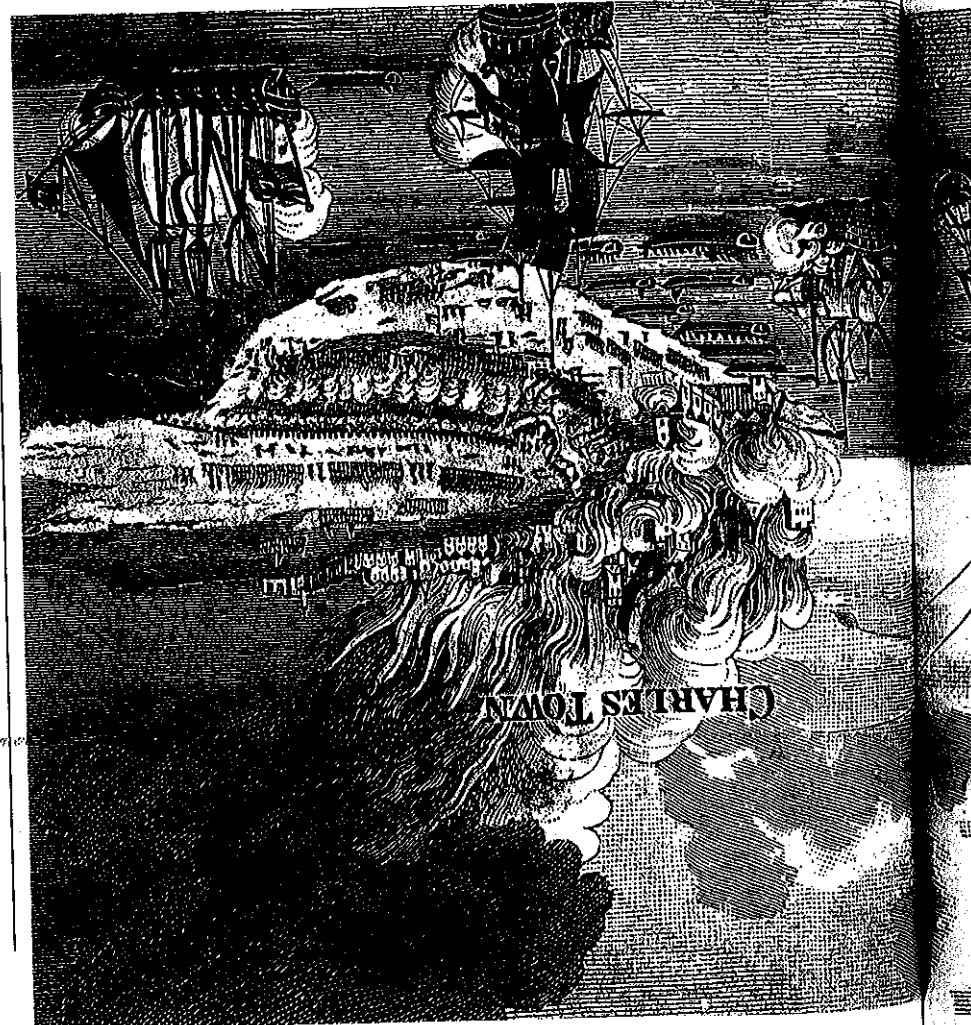
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John Harrower also said in his letter that many British officers had been killed "owing to the Americans taking sight when they fire." Taking sight when they fire? Yes—instead of just shooting, they were aiming their rifles and hitting their targets. That was new in warfare.

Nose Blowing
 Col. Washington of this colony [Virginia] being appointed Generalissimo of all the American forces raised... made a demand of 500 Riflemen from the frontiers," wrote schoolmaster John Harrower in a letter to his family in Scotland. "So many men volunteered that Washington had to find a way to choose between them. He took a board of a foot square and with Chalk drew the shape of a moderate nose in the center and nailed it up to a tree at 150 yds. distance and those who came nearest [nearest] the mark with a single ball was to go. But by the first 40 or 50 the nose was all blown out of the board."

Guns and Swords
 Revolutionary soldiers were issued big, clumsy muskets with bayonets attached. The bayonets were not very accurate, and they weren't very accurate, and they took time to reload. The bayonet was a sharp sword, but the grooving inside the barrel of a rifle makes a bullet fly straight as aimed. It took a long time for the officers to catch on. Muskets were still being used in the Civil War, nearly a century later. Many American farmers and could be used at close quarters. One was ready and deadly and they took time to reload. The bayonet was a sharp sword, but the grooving inside the barrel of a rifle makes a bullet fly straight as aimed. It took a long time for the officers to catch on. Muskets were still being used in the Civil War, nearly a century later. Many American farmers and



FROM COLONIES TO COUNTRY

It was eerie, they say. All those soldiers climbing and no one firing. Then, all at once, the hills seemed to explode. Bullets tore through the redcoats and left the ground covered with bodies and blood. The British would not consider defeat or retreat. They landed more troops, and again the American fighters held their fire until it could hurt the most. The English soldiers kept coming, and falling, until "some had only eight or nine men a company left; some only three, four or five."

Suddenly it was quiet. This time the British made it to the top of the hill. The Americans were gone. They had run out of gunpowder. The British captured Breed's Hill and Bunker Hill, too. But what a price for two unimportant hills! More than 1,000 British soldiers were killed or wounded that day. The Americans lost 441 men.

Dr. Joseph Warren was one of those who died. He was a leader of the Boston Patriots. They say he was cool and brave under fire and that he inspired those around him. The same kinds of things are said of the handsome Major John Pitcairn, who fought for the Royal British Marines at Bunker Hill and didn't live to tell of it.

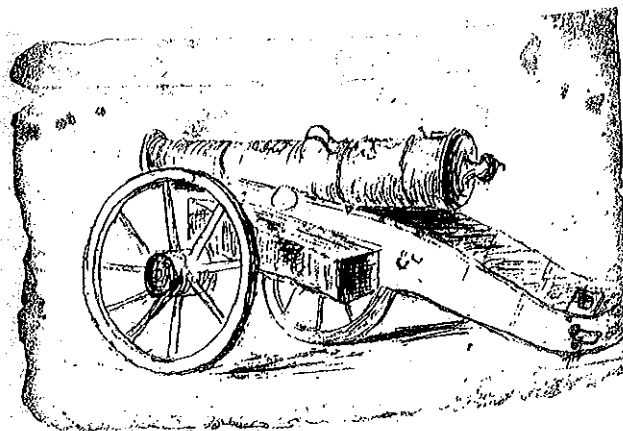
Opposite, below: an artist's impression of Bunker Hill: "a battle that should never have been fought on a hill that should never have been defended."

A *company* is a group of soldiers usually led by a captain and made up of at least two platoons.

A *platoon* is a subdivision of a company, commanded by a lieutenant.

Firing a Revolutionary Cannon

Firing a Revolutionary War cannon isn't easy; six or seven men are needed to do the job. And it is dangerous: sometimes the monsters explode. Firing begins when the officer in charge shouts, "*Worm!*" A wormer—a soldier with a long, corkscrew-shaped iron worm—twists the worm and cleans out the barrel. Next comes the call "*Sponge!*" and a sponger sticks a wet sheepskin into the gun barrel. That cools it down and puts out sparks. "*Load!*" says the officer, and a bag of powder is stuffed into the barrel, followed by a big iron ball, or grapeshot (clusters of small balls that scatter with great force, killing or wounding men over a broad area). "*Ram!*" Now a rammer, holding a pole with a wooden disk on its end, pushes and packs the ammunition. "*Pick and prime!*" A gunner sticks a pick into the barrel and breaks open the ammunition sack. He adds powder in a vent hole, and puts a pinch of powder on top of the cannon barrel. "*Give!*" shouts the officer, and the gunner lights a slow fuse.



"Fire!" The gunner uses the fuse to light the powder on top of the barrel. The flame skips through the vent and sets off the powder inside the cannon. The ball explodes out of the gun's mouth at a speed of about 1,000 feet a second. *Watch out!*