

to sail on to Boston, leaving no aid to Sullivan's army. In the end it seems d'Estaing couldn't help but agree with his men. The French felt it was their first duty to preserve the fleet to fight another day.¹¹⁸ They also felt victory was not a mere few days away as Sullivan insisted.¹¹⁹

The Americans' high hopes had grown higher at the sight of the French, only to be dashed. This abandonment hit the troops' morale exceedingly hard. The French had "...left us in a most Rascally manner..." wrote Colonel Israel Angell of the Continental Army.¹²⁰ Several days later, in a letter to Washington, Greene recounted "...it struck such a panic among the Militia and Volunteers that they began to desert by shoals. The fleet no sooner set sail than they began to be alarm'd for their safety. This misfortune damp'd the hopes of our Army and gave new Spirits to that of the Enemy."¹²¹ Additionally, d'Estaing's decision revived old prejudices against their former enemy turned ally.¹²² The anti-French sentiments went all the way to the top. Sullivan was furious and insinuated the French were traitors, nearly coming to blows with Lafayette, who bore the brunt of the army's bitterness.¹²³ Sullivan went on to write a strongly worded letter of protest to d'Estaing detailing why he should not quit the campaign, which further fueled tensions between the allies.¹²⁴ America's new alliance was now turning into a diplomatic disaster.

Under the circumstances at hand, and after calming down, Sullivan did his best to assure the army to put their trust in him. An August 24 entry in the orders book shows that he attempted to address the concerns of his men, acknowledging and sharing in their disappointment

¹¹⁸ McBurney, 150.

¹¹⁹ McBurney, 151.

¹²⁰ Israel Angell, *Diary of Colonel Israel Angell, 1778-1781*, ed. Edward Field (Providence: Preston and Rounds, 1899).

¹²¹ Greene, 2: 500, Greene to Washington, 28-31 August 1778.

¹²² During the previous decade, many colonists had fought under the British crown against the French during the French and Indian War.

¹²³ McBurney, 153.

¹²⁴ Abbass 1: 397.

but also reminding them not to be discouraged and to stay the course. “The Superiority we Shall maintain so long as the Spirit and desire of the Americans continues to be the Same that it was at the Commencement of the Enterprise.”¹²⁵ The orders went on to explain that the arrival of British reinforcements was the only situation that would cause them to abandon the Siege, and that in the event of this unfortunate circumstance they would still have plenty of time to execute a safe retreat. It also emphasized that “...no Rash Steps should make a Sacrifice of them” and that “he [Sullivan] wishes them to place a proper confidence in him as their Commander-In-Chief whose business it is to attend to their Safety.”¹²⁶ Finally, Sullivan addressed the desertions and ongoing plans, “it is with great grief and Astonishment the General finds a great number of Volunteers are about to leave the Island at this time and to give to America lasting proof of their wanting a firmness and bravery.”¹²⁷

A few days later, thinking better of his intemperate remarks and the importance of the alliance, Sullivan attempted to calm his troops’ animosity toward the French, by reminding them not to forget the significance and value of their aid.¹²⁸ D’Estaing appreciated the retraction and even offered troops, to join the Americans by land but the damage was done.¹²⁹ While the British were thrilled with the infighting, the episode had shaken the Americans. Although it would still go on for several more days, this spelled the end for the Siege. Now instead of trying to reclaim Newport, which Sullivan still held out hope for, the American sought to damage Pigot’s forces as best they could before making a safe retreat.

¹²⁵ Fletcher, 54, 24 August 1778.

¹²⁶ Fletcher, 54, 24 August 1778.

¹²⁷ Fletcher, 54, 24 August 1778.

¹²⁸ Fletcher, 58, 26 August 1778.

¹²⁹ McBurney, 154.

3.1.2 Preparations for the Retreat

Before the battle even began, the Continental Army had laid the groundwork in Portsmouth for a secure supply line and avenue of withdrawal. Although most of the French fleet had left in pursuit of Admiral Howe, three French frigates had been stationed in the Sakonnet River to protect this route, by way of Howland's Ferry. They also adapted the former British defense works at Fort Butts in Portsmouth, to oversee and protect these lines (Figure 3.1).



Figure 3.1 The Americans' defensive fallback position in Portsmouth, put in place at the beginning of the Siege to ensure a safe retreat, if needed.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ *Plan de Rhode Island et les differentes operations de la flotte-françoise et des troupes americaines commandées par le Major General Sullivan contre les forces de terre et de mer des Anglois depuis le 9 aoust jusqu'à la nuit du 30 au 31 du meme mois 1778 que les Americains ont fait leur retraite, 1778.* Library of Congress.

By August 23, the Siege was already winding down and Sullivan began making preparations for a safe retreat, sending all useless and heavy baggage to the north end of the Island.¹³¹ Four batteries (16 cannon) had fired all day with no serious damage to the British artillery. Two days later, shells for their mortars were found to be too short and therefore defective, so the mortars had to be sent back to Tiverton as well.¹³² On August 27, all the militia and non-essential troops were ordered to the north end of the island (Figure 3.2, dark blue).¹³³ The Americans waited until nightfall to remove the cannon from batteries #3 and #4, which were taken over Honeyman Hill to Portsmouth, via Green End Avenue and East Main Road.

3.2 The Withdrawal

3.2.1 Action in Portsmouth

On August 28, fearing that British reinforcements could be nearing Rhode Island waters, the decision was made to pull back to the north end of the island. There they could await whichever would come first, assistance from the French or the need to retreat. After dark, the campfires were kept burning all night. The remaining troops on Honeyman Hill left camp in the early morning and departed for Portsmouth (Figure 3.2). Later that morning as the mist dissipated, the British observed an empty Honeyman Hill. General Pigot dispatched troops to assess the situation and pursue the Americans. General Richard Prescott led the 38th and 54th Regiments to Honeyman Hill via Easton's Beach and found that it had indeed been completely deserted.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Fletcher, 53.

¹³² Fletcher, 57.

¹³³ Fletcher, 58.

¹³⁴ *DFM*, 2: 381.

With the abandonment of Honeyman Hill, the British snapped into action, immediately sending men up the island in pursuit of Sullivan's army. The British troops marched up East Main Road and the Hessians up West Main, where they were ambushed *en route*, ultimately engaging in fierce fighting with American forces in prepared positions throughout the north end of the island.¹³⁵ Colonel Angell recounted the day's events in his diary,

...the enemy finding that we had left our ground pursued with all possible speed Come up with our piquet about sunrise and a smart firing begun, the piquet repulsed the British troops 2 or 3 times but was finily obliged to retreat as the Enemy brought a number of field pieces against them[.] the Enemy was soon check't by our Cannon in coming up to our main body and they formed on Quaker Hill and we took possession of Buttses Hill the left wing of the brittish army was Compossed of hessians who Attackt our right wing and a Sevear engagement Ensued in which the hessians was put to flight and beat of the ground with a Considerable loss[.] our loss was not very great but I cannot ascertain the number.¹³⁶

As the two sides continued firing on and eventually cannonading one another, Lafayette set out for Boston on horseback to secure French aid. He made the trip in seven hours, and returned in six-and-a-half (a distance of 70 miles) with news that d'Estaing would send troops by land.¹³⁷ Unfortunately it was too late. Earlier that morning word had come from Washington that the British fleet was on the move.¹³⁸ It was time to retreat.

¹³⁵ Abbass, 1: 10-11.

¹³⁶ Angell, 8.

¹³⁷ Abbass, 1, 418.

¹³⁸ Abbass, 1: 417.

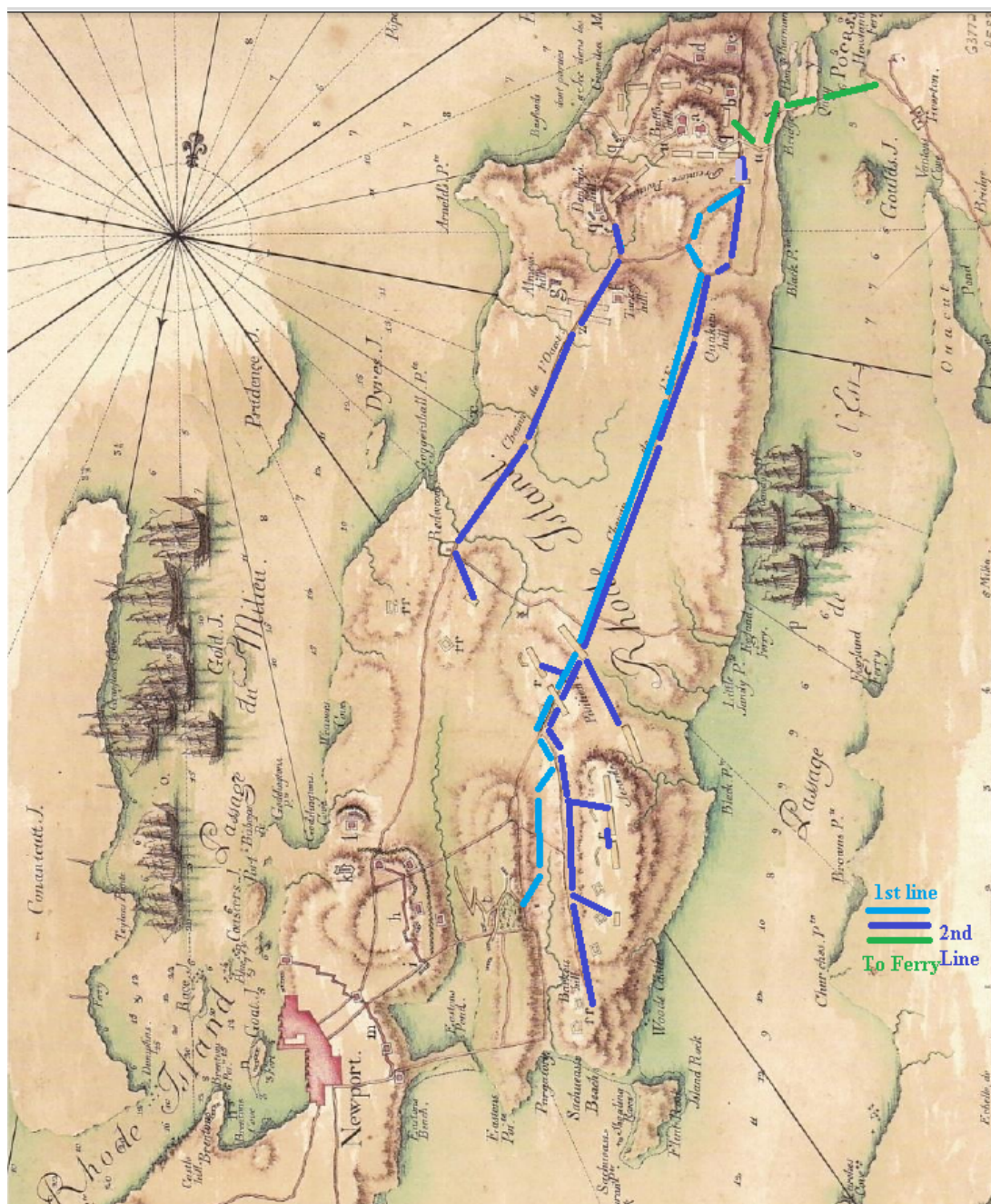


Figure 3.2 Routes taken by the Americans up the island to Portsmouth and eventually across the Sakonnet River to Tiverton during their evacuation of the island. Note that the path to the north end cannot be observed from the British lines.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Plan de Rhode Island et les differentes operations de la flotte-françoise et des troupes americaines commandées par le Major General Sullivan contre les forces de terre et de mer des Anglois depuis le 9 aoust jusqu'à la nuit du 30 au 31 du meme mois 1778 que les Americains ont fait leur retraits, 1778. Library of Congress.

3.2.2 The Evacuation and Deception Methods

Similar to their withdrawal from Honeyman Hill, deception methods were used to safely move Sullivan's force off the island. With tents pitched to mislead the enemy, all non-essential material and militia personnel were transported first. Meanwhile, in Portsmouth, Continentals were positioned to provide a rear guard for the remaining militia as it departed via the boatlift at Howland's Ferry. The mobility corridor consisted of the same 100 rowboats that had transported them to Portsmouth in the first place. The final withdrawal happened under cover of darkness, when the remaining rear guard left camp for Tiverton by the boatlift. Initially, when the British heard the boats crossing at Howland's Ferry, they worried the Americans were going down river to attack from the rear and trap them at the north end of the island, but General Pigot determined they were actually retreating to Tiverton. By the early morning on August 31, all American troops and equipment were off the island; the battle was over.

3.2.3 Aftermath

As it turns out, the retreat was just in time. Early the following morning, General Clinton arrived off Narragansett Bay with a fleet of seventy ships to reinforce the British.¹⁴⁰ Meanwhile, at his headquarters in Tiverton, Sullivan wrote a lengthy report to the President of Congress, detailing the events of the last week and explaining his actions. "Upon the Count d'Estaing's finding himself under a necessity of going to Boston to repair the loss he sustained in the late gale of wind, I thought it best to carry on my approaches with as much vigor as possible against Newport..." he explained.¹⁴¹ He went on to describe the army's movements and intentions

¹⁴⁰ McBurney, 203.

¹⁴¹ General John Sullivan to the President of Congress, August 31, 1778, printed in the *Providence Gazette*, September 26, 1778; See Appendix C to read additional articles on the Battle of Rhode Island from historic newspapers.

throughout the days of the Siege, their retreat up the island, and the battle that followed. “I have the pleasure to inform Congress, that no troops could possibly show more spirit than those of ours which were engaged,” he wrote of his men.¹⁴² He also sought to justify the retreat by explaining how it was so thoughtfully planned and carefully executed.

To make a retreat in the face of an enemy, equal, if not superior in number, and cross a river without loss, I knew was an arduous task, and seldom accomplished, if attempted; As our [sentries] were within 200 yards of each other, I knew it would require the greatest care and attention. To cover my design from the enemy, I ordered a number of tents to be brought forward and pitched in sight of the enemy, and almost the whole army to employ themselves in fortifying the camp. The heavy baggage and stores were falling back and crossing through the day; at dark, the tents were struck, the light baggage and troops passed dawn, and before twelve o'clock the main army had crossed with the stores and baggage....not a man was left behind not the smallest article lost.¹⁴³

Despite Sullivan's successful retreat, it was clear that his earlier outburst had endangered America's new alliance, as many blamed the French for the outcome. D'Estaing too thought Sullivan and the Continental Army were an unprofessional lot and complained to Congress of his treatment. On September 1, seeking to calm lingering tensions and salvage the relationship, Washington wrote to the commanding officers involved. A diplomatic voice of reason, in three separate letters, Washington reminded his generals of the greater cause. He encouraged Greene to promote good relations with the French, sympathized with and lifted up the rightfully miffed Lafayette, and reminded Sullivan of the high stakes, impact of his words, and importance of the alliance. In a fourth letter he smoothed things over with d'Estaing, focusing on the the unfortunate and unforeseen circumstances caused by the storm.¹⁴⁴ Although Washington was

¹⁴² General John Sullivan to the President of Congress, August 31, 1778, printed in the *Providence Gazette*, September 26, 1778.

¹⁴³ General John Sullivan to the President of Congress, August 31, 1778, printed in the *Providence Gazette*, September 26, 1778.

¹⁴⁴ McBurney, 154; See Appendix D for more on Washington's correspondence during the campaign.

privately disappointed in the outcome (and alarmed by the strain it put on the alliance) he joined Congress in publicly commending Sullivan and his army for a valiant effort. Any errors made by d'Estaing were downplayed and blamed on the weather. The British, expecting praise from the newly arrived Clinton, were instead berated. Frustrated by the missed opportunity for glory, he took his anger out on Pigot and Prescott, nit picking their actions. Ultimately, a campaign where neither side had been overwhelmingly successful, ended in both parties pointing fingers and claiming victory.