

THE BATTLE OF BUNKER HILL

Lieutenant J. Waller, First Royal Marine Battalion, to His Brother

Camp of Charlestown Heights, 22 June 1775

Amidst the hurry and confusion of a camp hastily pitched in the field of battle, I am sat down to tell you I have escaped unhurt, where many, very many, have fallen. The public papers will inform you of the situation of the ground and the redoubt that we attacked on the heights of Charlestown. I can only say that it was a most desperate and daring attempt, and it was performed with as much gallantry and spirit as was ever shown by any troops in any age.

Two companies of the first battalion of Marines, and part of the 47th Regiment, were the first that mounted the breast-work: and you will not be displeased when I tell you that I was with those two companies, who drove their bayonets into all that opposed them. Nothing could be more shocking than the carnage that followed the storming this work. We tumbled over the dead to get at the living, who were crowding out of the gorge of the redoubt, in order to form under the defences which they had prepared to cover their retreat. In these breast-works they had artillery, which did so much mischief; but these they were obliged to abandon, being followed closely by the Light Infantry, who suffered exceedingly in the pursuit. The rebels had 5000 to 7000 men, covered by a redoubt, breast-works, walls, hedges, trees and the like; and the number of the corps under General Howe, (who performed this gallant business) did not amount to 1500. We gained a complete victory, and entrenched ourselves that night, where we lay under arms, in the front of the field of battle. We lay the next night on the ground, and the following day encamped. The officers have not their marquees, but are obliged to lie in soldier's tents, they being more portable in case of our advancing.

We had of our corps one major, 2 captains, and 3 lieutenants killed; 4 captains and 3 lieutenants wounded; 2 serjeants and 21 rank and file killed, and 3 serjeants and 79 privates wounded; and I suppose, upon the whole, we lost, killed and wounded, from 800 to 1000 men. We killed a number of the rebels, but the cover they fought under made their loss less considerable than it would otherwise have been. The army is in great spirits, and full of rage and ferocity at the rebellious rascals, who both poisoned and chewed the musket balls, in order to make them the more fatal. Many officers have died of their wounds, and others very ill: 'tis astonishing what a number of officers were hit on this occasion; but the officers were particularly aimed at.

I will just give you a short account of the part of the action where I was particularly concerned. We landed close under Charlestown, and formed with the 47th Regiment close under the natural defences of the redoubt, which we drove the enemy from, climbing over rails and hedges. So we closed upon them; but when we came immediately under the work, we were checked by the severe fire of the enemy, but did not retreat an inch. We were now in confusion, after being broke several times in getting over the rails, etc. I did all I could to form the two companies on our right, which at last I effected, losing many of them while it was performing. Major Pitcairne was killed close by me, with a captain and a subaltern, also a serjeant, and many of the privates; and had we stopped there much longer, the enemy would have picked us all off.

I saw this, and begged Colonel Nesbitt of the 47th to form on our left, in order that we might advance with our bayonets to the parapet. I ran from right to left, and stopped our men from firing; while this was doing, and when we had got in tolerable order, we rushed on, leaped the ditch, and climbed the parapet, under a most sore and heavy fire. Colonel Nesbitt spoke very favourably of my conduct, and both our Majors have mentioned me to Lord Sandwich in consequence of it. One captain and one subaltern fell in getting up, and one captain and one subaltern was wounded of our corps; three captains of the 52nd were killed on the parapet, and others that I know nothing of. God bless you! I did not think, at one time, that I should ever have been able to write this, though in the heat of the action I thought nothing of the matter.