



THE DEFENSE OF SULLIVAN'S ISLAND, 28 June 1776.

*As found in Gen. William Moultrie's Memoirs of the American Revolution:
So Far as it Related to the States of North and South Carolina, and Georgia (1802)*

Less than a week before the United Colonies voted to declare their Independence, the comparatively green American forces in South Carolina, hugely out-manned and out-gunned, secured an astounding, upset victory against combined British naval and land forces, under Commodore (in 1777 made Rear Admiral) Sir Peter Parker and Maj. Gen. Sir Henry Clinton respectively, in defense of Charleston¹ harbor. Most of the principal details concerning that battle are probably as familiar as those of any other Revolutionary War engagement; such as, for example, how the spongy and resilient wood of the Palmetto tree logs (used to help wall the fortifications) absorbed or else sent bouncing back British cannon balls; or how the waters of Breach inlet, that British amphibious forces were to wade through on their way to Sullivan's shore, proved too deep for their height; or how Sgt. William Jasper saved the flag. Yet it is, even so, still possible to mention a few isolated facts which, more or less, will escape general notice.

* Fort Moultrie was still under construction at the time it was assailed.

* Black slaves acted a vital part in erecting the same. As South Carolina historian Edward C. Bearss states "Every male Negro in the area had been pressed into service by the 6th [of June]." *The Battle of Sullivan's Island*, etc. (1968), p. 32; for purposes of such duty.

* The fight was Francis Marion's first of the Revolutionary War.

* Also among the garrison were Captain William Lushington's "Jews Company;" comprised of 26 soldiers recruited from Jewish male residents living in Charleston.

* In charge of the overall American forces around Charleston in 1776 was Maj. Gen. Charles Lee, but who later scarcely received much credit for his involvement there – even before his stepping down in disgrace following his controversial actions at Monmouth in 1778. In one sense, this may have been just as Lee might have spoiled things had he been able to replace (then) Col. Moultrie in command of the fort, as he well had intended to, with Col. Francis Nash of the 1st North Carolina Regt.² Only the suddenness of the British attack prevented his orders from being carried out. On the other hand, and as Moultrie himself

¹ Then called "Charlestown" or "Charles-town."

² Though no criticism implied toward Nash in this; himself, as he later proved, a more than capable and valiant officer. He was mortally wounded at Germantown; with Nashville, Tenn. being subsequently named after him.

attests, Lee *did* play a decisive part in the victory by instilling in the untried Americans sore needed confidence in themselves to take on the customarily invincible Britons.

Lastly, no less winning than his victory itself is Moultrie's own plain-styled, yet perspicuous and (with respect to himself) modest, narrative of the battle, and that is here reproduced.

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May 31. [1776] Expresses were sent to the president from Christ-church parish, informing him that a large fleet of British vessels were seen off Dewee's Island, about twenty miles to the northward of the bar [of Charlestown Harbor]; and on the first of June they displayed about fifty sail before the town, on the out side of our bar. The sight of these vessels alarmed us very much, all was hurry and confusion, the president with his council busy in sending expresses to every part of the country, to hasten down the militia: men running about the town looking for horses, carriages, and boats to send their families into the country; and as they were going out through the town gates to go into the country, they met the militia from the country marching into town; traverses were made in the principal streets; fleches thrown up at every place where troops could land; military works going on every where, the lead taking from the windows of the churches and dwelling houses, to cast into musket bails, and every preparation to receive an attack, which was expected in a few days.

June 4. General [Charles] Lee arrived from the northward, and took the command of the troops; his presence gave us great spirits, as he was known to be an able, brave, and experienced officer, though hasty and rough in his manners, which the officers could not reconcile themselves to at first: it was thought by many that his coming among us was equal to a reinforcement of 1000 men, and I believe it was, because he taught us to think lightly of the enemy, and gave a spur to ail our actions. After Gen. Lee had waited upon the president, and talked with him upon his plan of defence, he hurried about to view the different works, and give orders for such things to be done as he thought necessary; he was every day and every hour of the day on horse back, or in boats viewing our situation and directing small works to be thrown up at different places; when he came to Sullivan's Island, he did not like that post at all, he said there was no way to retreat, that the garrison would be sacrificed; nay, he called it a "slaughter pen," and wished to withdraw the garrison and give up the post, but president [i.e., governor under the then recently drawn up state Constitution of South Carolina, John] Rutledge insisted that it should not be given up. Then Gen. Lee "absolutely necessary to have a bridge of boats for a retreat;" but boats enough could not be had, the distance over being at least a mile. Then a bridge was constructed of empty hogsheads buoyed at certain distances, and two planks from hogshead to hogshead; but this would not answer, because when Col. [Thomas] Clark was coming over from Haddrell's [Point; on Mount Pleasant], with a detachment of 200 men; before they were half on, it sunk so low, that they were obliged to return: Gen. Lee's whole thoughts were taken up with the post on Sullivan's Island; all his letters to me shew how anxious he was at not having a bridge for a retreat; for my part, I never was uneasy on not having a retreat because I never imagined that the enemy could force me to that necessity; I always considered myself as able to defend that post against the enemy. I had upwards of 300 riflemen, under Col. [William] Thompson, of his regiment, Col. Clark, with 200 North-Carolina regulars, Col. [Daniel] Horry, with 200 South-Carolina, and the Rac[c]oon company of riflemen, 50 militia at the point of the island behind the sand hills and myrtle bushes; I had also a small battery with one 18 pounder, and one brass field-piece, 6 pounder, at the same place, which entirely commanded the landing and could begin to fire upon them at 7 or 800 yards before they could attempt to land, this would have disconcerted them very much, besides had they made their landing good, the riflemen would have hung upon their flanks for three miles as they marched along the beach, and not above fifty yards from them.

Col. Thompson had orders that if they could not stand the enemy they were to throw themselves into the fort, by which I should have had upwards of 1000 men in a large strong fort, and Gen. [John] Armstrong [Sr.]<sup>3</sup> in my rear with 1500 men, not more that one mile and an half off, with a small arm of the

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<sup>3</sup> John Armstrong, Sr. (1717-1795), 58 years old at the time, started as a brigadier in the Pennsylvania militia, and later led Continental troops at Brandywine and Germantown; retiring from active service shortly afterward due to health and old wounds. His son of the

sea between us, that he could have crossed a body of men in boats to my assistance, this was exactly my situation; I therefore felt myself perfectly easy because I never calculated upon Sir. Henry Clinton's numbers to be more than 3000 men; as to the men-of-war, we should have taken every little notice of them if the army had attacked us.

Gen. Lee, one day on a visit to the fort, took me aside and said, "Col. Moultrie, do you think you can maintain this post." I answered him "Yes I think I can," that was all that passed on the subject between us: another time Capt. Lamperer, a brave and experienced seaman, who had been master of a man-of-war, and captain of a very respectable privateer many years ago visited me at the fort after the British ships came over our bar; while we were walking on the platform looking at the fleet, he said to me: "well Colonel what do you think of it now;" I replied that "we should beat them." "Sir" said he "when those ships (pointing to the men-of-war) come to lay along side of your fort, they will knock it down in half an hour," (and that was the opinion of all the sailors,) then I said, "we will lay behind the ruins and prevent their men from landing."

Gen. Lee, I was informed, did not like my having the command of that important post, he did not doubt my courage, but said "I was too easy in command,"<sup>4</sup> as his letters shew; but after the 28<sup>th</sup> June he made me his bosom friend: our fort at this time was not nearly finished; the mechanics and negro laborers were taken from all the works about the town, and sent down to the Island to complete our fort, we worked very hard, but could not get it nearly finished before the action...

[At this point, Moultrie's account is paused to include an extensive collection of original letters that document the American commanders preparing the defense of Sullivan's Island and Charleston's harbor.]

June, 1776, On the morning of the 28th of June, I paid a visit to our advance-guard (on horse-back three miles to the eastward of our fort) while I was there, I saw a number of the enemy's boats in motion, at the back of Long-Island, as if they intended a descent upon our advanced post; at the same time, I saw the men-of-war loose their top-sails; I hurried back to the fort as fast as possible; when I got there the ships were already under sail; I immediately ordered the long roll to beat, and officers and men to their posts: We had scarcely manned our guns, when the following ships of war came sailing up, as if in confidence of victory; as soon as they came within the reach of our guns, we began to fire; they were soon a-breast of the fort...<sup>5</sup> let go their anchors, with springs upon their cables, and begun their attack most furiously about 10 o'clock, A. M. and continued a brisk fire, till about 8 o'clock, P. M.

The ships were, the Bristol, of 50 guns, Commodore Sir Peter Parker: The captain had his arm shot off, 44 men killed and 30 wounded.

The Experiment, 50 guns: the captain lost his arm, 57 men killed and 30 wounded.

The Active, 28 guns: 1 lieutenant killed, 1 man wounded.

The Sole-Bay, 28 guns: 2 killed, 3 or 4 wounded.

The Syren, 28 guns.

The Acteon, 28 guns: burnt; 1 lieutenant killed.

The Sphinx, 28 guns: lost her bowsprit.

The Friendship, 26 guns; an armed vessel taken into service.\*<sup>6</sup>

The Thunder-Bomb had the beds of her mortar soon disabled; she threw her shells in a very good direction; most of them fell within the fort, but we had a morass in the middle, that swallowed them up instantly, and those that fell in the sand in and about the fort, were immediately buried, so that very few of them bursted amongst us: At one time, the Commodore's ship swung round with her stern to the fort, which drew the fire of all the guns that could bear upon her: we supposed he had had the springs of her cables cut away: The words that passed along the plat-form by officers and men, were, "mind the Commodore, mind the two fifty gun ships:" most all the attention was paid to the two fifty gun ships, especially the

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same name, also an officer in the Revolutionary War, later became James Madison's, and to some controversial, Secretary of War during the War of 1812.

<sup>4</sup> [Edit. i.e., Lee perhaps meant that the amiable Moultrie permitted himself to be too readily swayed by his subordinates.]

<sup>5</sup> [Edit. Lacuna inserted in original text, and isn't mine.]

<sup>6</sup> [Footnote in original] \* The killed and wounded on board of the men-of-war, was from their own account.

Commodore, who, I dare say, was not at all obliged to us for our particular attention to him; the killed and wounded on board those two fifty gun ships confirms what I say. During the action, Gen. Lee paid us a visit through a heavy line of fire, and pointed two or three guns himself; then said to me, "Colonel, I see you are doing very well here, you have no occasion for me, I will go up to town again," and then left us.

When I received information of Gen. Lee's approach to the fort, I sent Lieut. [Francis] Marion, from off the plat-form, with 8 or 10 men, to unbar the gate-way, (our gate not being finished) the gate-way was barricaded with pieces of timber 8 or 10 inches square, which required 3 or 4 men to remove each piece; the men in the ships tops, seeing those men run from the plat-form concluded "we were quitting the fort," as some author mentions: Another says, "we hung up a man in the fort, at the time of the action;" that idea was taken from this circumstance; when the action begun, (it being a warm day) some of the men took off their coats and threw them upon the top of the merlons,<sup>7</sup> I saw a shot take one of them and throw it into a small tree behind the plat-form, it was noticed by our men and they cried out "look at the coat." Never did men fight more bravely, and never were men more cool;<sup>8</sup> their only distress was the want of powder; we had not more than 28 rounds, for 26 guns, 18 and 26 pounders, when we begun the action; and a little after, 500 pounds from town, and 200 pounds from Captain Tufft's schooner lying at the back of the fort.

There cannot be a doubt, but that if we had had as much powder as we could have expended in the time, that the men-of-war must have struck their colors, or they would certainly have been sunk, because they could not retreat, as the wind and tide were against them; and if they had proceeded up to town, they would have been in a much worse situation: They could not make any impression on our fort, built of palmetto logs and filled in with earth, our merlons were 16 feet thick, and high enough to cover the men from the fire of the tops: The men that we had killed and wounded received their shots mostly through the embrasures.\*<sup>9</sup>

An author, who published in 1779, says "the guns were at one time so long silenced, that it was thought the fort was abandoned; it seems extraordinary that a detachment of land forces were not in readiness on board of the transports, or boats, to profit of such an occasion."

The guns being so long silent, was owing to the scarcity of powder which we had in the fort, and to a report that was brought me, "that the British troops were landed between the advance-guard and the fort;"\*<sup>10</sup> it was upon this information, that I ordered the guns to cease firing, or to fire very slow upon the shipping; that we should reserve our powder for the musketry to defend ourselves against the land forces, there being a great scarcity of powder at this time.

At one time, 3 or 4 of the men-of-war's broadsides struck the fort at the same instant, which gave the merlons such a tremor, that I was apprehensive that a few more such would tumble them down. During the action, three of the men-of-war, in going round to our west curtain, got entangled together, by which the Acteon frigate went on shore on the middle ground; the Sphinx lost her bow-sprit; and the Syren cleared herself without any damage; had these three ships effected their purpose, they would have enfiladed us in such a manner, as to have driven us from our guns: It being a very hot day, were served along the plat-form with grog in fire-buckets, which we partook of very heartily: I never had a more agreeable draught than that which I took out of one of those buckets at the time; it may be very easily conceived what heat and thirst a man must feel in this climate, to be upon a plat-form on the 28th June, amidst 20 or 30 heavy pieces of cannon,\*<sup>11</sup> in one continual blaze and roar; and clouds of smoke curling over his head for hours together; it was a very honorable situation, but a very unpleasant one.

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<sup>7</sup> [Edit. Solid, block intervals (as opposed to empty intervals); commonly found in castle ramparts and battlements.]

<sup>8</sup> [Footnote in original] \* Several of the officers, as well as myself, were smoking our pipes and giving orders at the time of the action; but we laid them down when Gen. Lee came into the fort.

<sup>9</sup> [Footnote in original] \* Twelve men were killed and 24 wounded. When Sergeant M'Donald received his mortal wound, he, addressing his brother soldiers who were carrying him to the doctor, desired them not to give up, that they were fighting for liberty and their country.

<sup>10</sup> [Footnote in original] \* The advance, is about 3 miles from the fort at the east end of Sullivan's Island.

<sup>11</sup> [Footnote in original] \* 18 and 26 French pounders

During the action, thousands of our fellow-citizens were looking on with anxious hopes and fears,\*<sup>12</sup> some of whom had their fathers, brothers, and husbands in the battle; whose hearts must have been pierced at every broad-side. After some time our flag [i.e., South Carolina's de facto banner; a white crescent placed in the top left corner over a dark blue field] was shot away; their hopes were then gone, and they gave up all for lost! supposing [sic] that we had struck our flag, and had given up the fort: Sergeant [William] Jasper perceiving that the flag was shot away, and had fallen without the fort, jumped from one of the embrasures, and brought it up through a heavy fire, fixed it upon a sponge-staff, and planted it upon the ramparts again: Our flag once more waving in the air, revived the drooping spirits of our friends; and they continued looking on, till night had closed the scene, and hid us from their view; only the appearance of a heavy storm, with continual flashes and peals like thunder; at night when we came to our slow firing (the ammunition being nearly quite gone) we could hear the shot very distinctly strike the ships: At length the British gave up the conflict: The ships slipt their cables, and dropped down with the tide, and out of the reach of our guns. When the firing had ceased, our friends for a time, were again in an unhappy suspense, not knowing our fate; till they received an account by a dispatch boat, which I sent up to town, to acquaint them, that the British ships had retired, and that we were victorious.

Early the next morning was presented to our view, the Acteon frigate, hard, and fast aground; at about 400 yards distance; we gave her a few shot, which she returned, but they soon set fire to her, and quitted her: Capt. Jacob Milligan and others, went in some of our boats, boarded her while she was on fire, and pointed 2 or 3 guns at the Commodore, and fired them; then brought off the ship's bell, and other articles, and had scarcely left her, when she blew up, and from the explosion issued a grand pillar of smoke, which soon expanded itself at the top, and to appearance, formed the figure of a palmetto tree; the ship immediately burst into a great blaze that continued till she burnt down to the water's edge.

The other ships lay at the north point of Morris's Island\*<sup>13</sup> we could plainly see they had been pretty roughly handled, especially the Commodore.

The same day, a number of our friends and fellow citizens, came to congratulate us on our victory and Governor Rutledge presented Sergeant Jasper with a sword, for his gallant behavior; and Mr. William Logan, a hogshead of rum to the garrison, with the following card. "Mr. William Logan, presents his compliments to Col. Moultrie, and the officers and soldiers on Sullivan's Island, and beg their acceptance of a hogshead of old Antigua rum, which being scarce in town at this time, will be acceptable." Mr. Logan's present was thankfully received. A few days after the action, we picked up, in and about the fort, 1200 shot of different calibers that was fired at us, and a great number of 13 inch shells.<sup>14</sup>

[*Memoirs*, vol. 1, pp. 140-181]

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*For Lee's Legion on Face Book:*

<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=121637007849696>

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<sup>12</sup> [Footnote in original] \* At about 6 miles distance, [sic]

<sup>13</sup> [Footnote in original] \* About two miles.

<sup>14</sup> The reason Fort Moultrie fell to the British in early May 1780, as it had not in late June 1776, was because in 1780, Sir Henry Clinton and Adm. Arbuthnot were content to merely sail their ships past Sullivan's Island's guns into the inner harbor (with some, though relatively little, damage done to the vessels in the process), and finally compelling the famous fort to capitulate after *patiently* encircling the city with British land, as well as naval, forces.

