

American Revolutionary War: Opening of Hostilities, 1775-76

In spring of 1775, it was the opinion of British leaders that decisive action around Boston might like a sudden gust of wind snuff out flames of rebellion before they conjoined in an inferno throughout the colonies. Since the worst rabble-rousers among the Sons of Liberty—Hancock, Sam Adams, and Dr. Joseph Warren, head of the Massachusetts Committee of Public Safety—were stockpiling arms in the surrounding countryside with which to oppose British authority, it was decided by military commander in Boston Major General Thomas Gage to stage a pre-dawn raid to arrest those men and confiscate the weapons caches. On April 18, he sent Lieutenant Colonel Francis Smith with 800 grenadiers and light infantry only to fail of the first objective when Warren sent a warning by express rider Paul Revere. Adams and Hancock escaped to Philadelphia to join the Continental Congress. Smith did not abate his fateful course. Rather, he ordered an advance column to deprive the rebels of the means to fight. It never occurred to Gage that this thrust into the Massachusetts countryside would rouse not merely the 20,000 inhabitants of Boston but the majority of the 2.5 million Americans living in the 13 colonies. The war for independence had begun.

Smith's advance column routed 70 quick-mobilizing minutemen on the Lexington Common and killed eight, including Captain Jonas Parker, who was bayoneted when the others fled. Then at Concord, Smith's men confiscated supplies only to be attacked by hundreds of aroused militiamen firing muskets from behind stone walls and trees and coming close enough for hand-to-hand combat. All the way back to Boston, British soldiers made easy targets in their red tunics and white breeches so that despite reinforcement at Lexington by a thousand redcoats, 99 were killed and 174 wounded while only 49 Americans died and 41 were wounded out of 4,000 engaged. As militia companies converged from all over New England, Gage muttered that if every encounter with upstart rebels carried such high cost the empire in North America would collapse before the rebellion was crushed.

The British suffered another setback on May 10 when Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain boys, aided by a brilliant, personally ambitious son of a Connecticut merchant family Benedict Arnold, surprised the garrison of Fort Ticonderoga and captured 59 artillery pieces. Alarmed, officials in London

backed up Gage's 5,000 man army of grenadiers and light infantry with 150 warships and transports. To further buck up his courage, they sent out three veteran major generals—William Howe, Henry Clinton, and John Burgoyne. Howe advised Gage that he must break the siege of Boston before rebel strength became too great with an attack on the militia headquarters at Cambridge. Anticipating the move, Major General Israel Putnam of the Connecticut militia persuaded dubious colleagues to fortify positions on the Charlestown peninsula. The resulting battle on June 17 left the British in control of the battlefield. But the blood of over a thousand dead and wounded redcoats as well as 500 American casualties soaked the ground. After such great losses, Gage dared not risk a second frontal assault to drive off the enemy.

On June 15, 1775, the Continental Congress appointed George Washington of Virginia to lead all forces in the Revolution. When he arrived at Cambridge in July, he found a disorganized collection of 15,000 militiamen, some short-term enlistees, coming and going as they pleased. Ascertaining that he did not yet possess the means to retake Boston, he dispatched Henry Knox, a burly street-brawler and bookseller who

had run off with the daughter of the royal secretary of Massachusetts, to transport the captured artillery of Fort Ticonderoga. Knox accomplished the feat over the winter by using flat boats, sledges, and oxen-pulls.

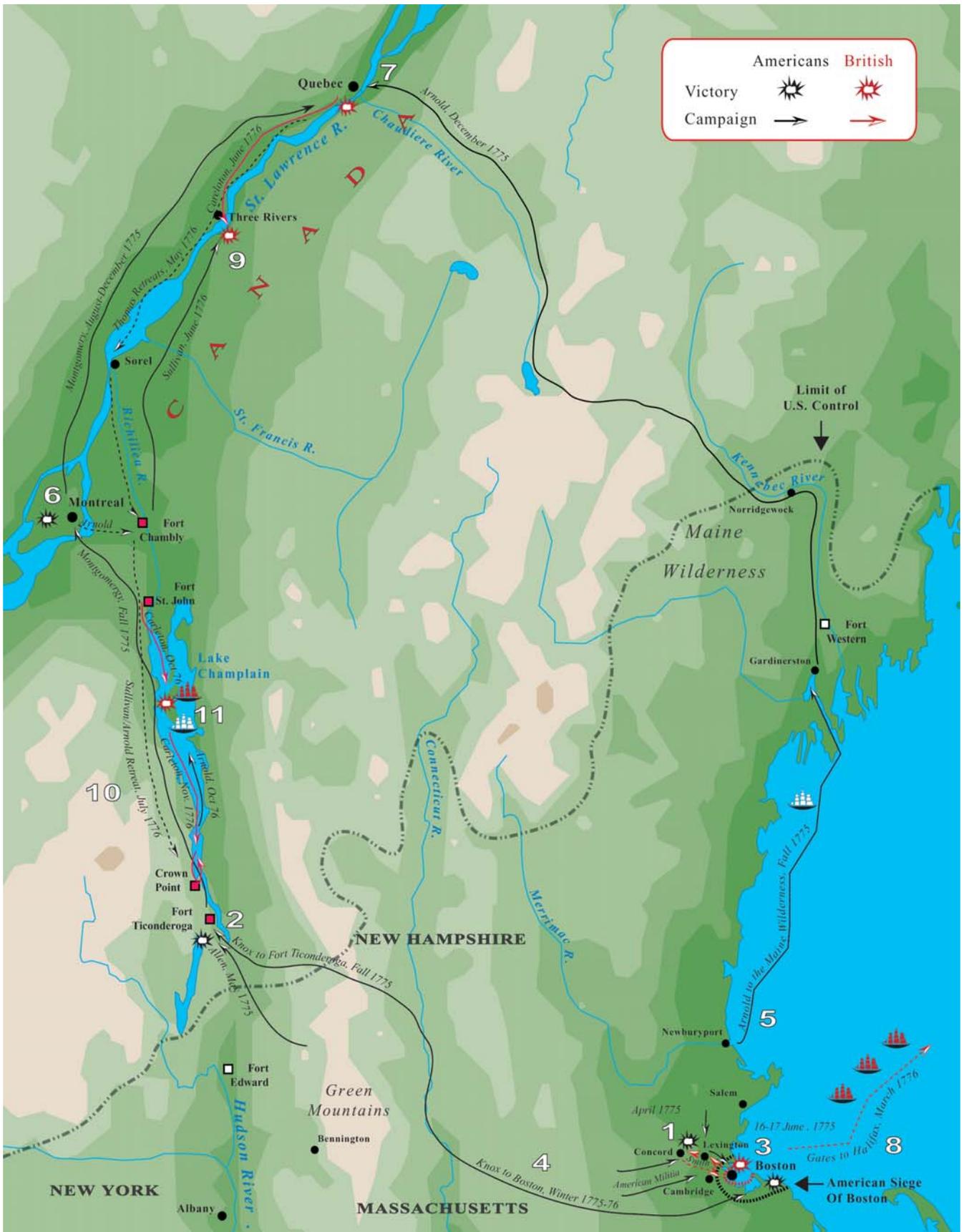
Meanwhile, the restless Arnold caught the imagination of the Congress with a scheme to invade Canada, cut British lines of communication with Fort Detroit, and cause other western posts to fall. But when control of the venture went to wealthy New Yorker and Commander of the Northern Department Philip Schuyler, Arnold was furious. Traveling to Washington's headquarters, he talked the commander-in-chief into letting him borrow 1,000 men for a march on Canada through the Maine wilderness.

In August, 1775, Schuyler advanced from Fort Ticonderoga to besiege Fort St. John but took sick and was replaced by Brigadier General Richard Montgomery, who captured the fort on November 2, then occupied undefended Montreal eleven days later.

Although Arnold's expedition, setting out in September, was conducted with fortitude, 450 men turned back. Rein-



Henry Knox



forced at Quebec by Montgomery and 300 men from Montreal, he had less than 1,000 to besiege a larger garrison. Nevertheless, he attacked the night before New Year's Eve in a snow storm and was repulsed with loss of 60 dead, including Montgomery, and 400 captured. Badly wounded in the leg, he yet maintained the siege throughout the winter.

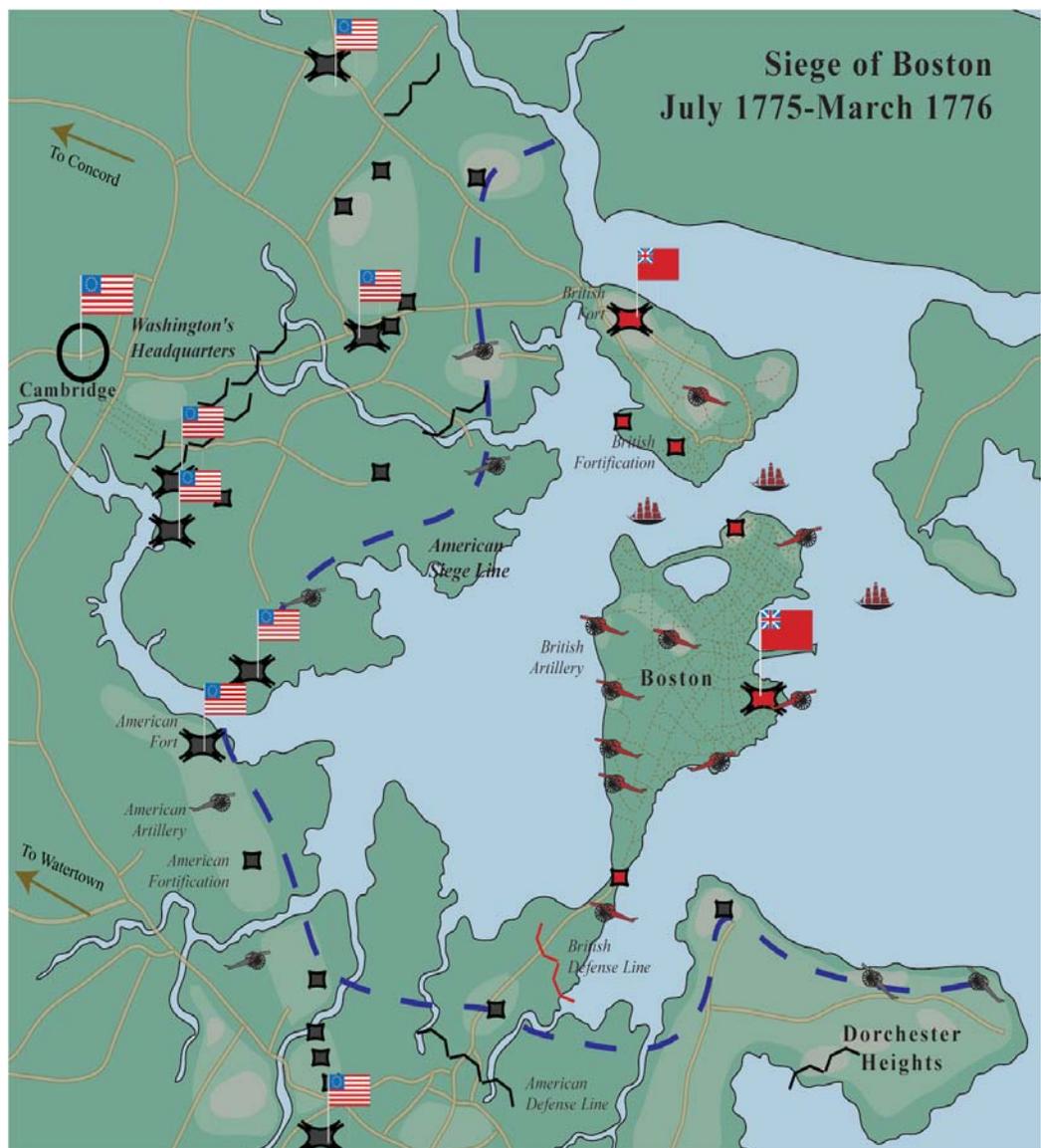
On the morning of March 3, 1776, the British woke to find the guns of Fort Ticonderoga looking down on Boston from Dorchester Heights. Astonished that artillery could appear as if from thin air, amazed that the Americans could again dig out over night deep entrenchments and raise formidable defensive works, unaware that Washington possessed gunpowder for only a limited barrage, Gage ordered an evacuation by sea. British troops were withdrawn to Halifax where Howe replaced Gage and received reinforcements from across the Atlantic. Americans felt emboldened to abuse Tories loyal to the mother country, one-third the population and half in New York and New Jersey.

General John Thomas, who had occupied the Dorchester Heights for Washington, arrived in Quebec in May to take command of Arnold's forces for a retreat toward Montreal. However, British commander Sir Guy Carleton received replacements as well and decided to attack. Fleeing to Fort Chambly by June, Thomas died of smallpox and was replaced by Brigadier General John Sullivan. Sullivan's counterattack at Three Rivers was repulsed with loss. Joined by Arnold in July with the American garrison from Montreal, Sullivan abandoned Fort St. John and retreated to Fort Ticonderoga. Arnold began building ships to counter a fleet being constructed by Carleton at the north end of Lake Champlain.

With better ships, Carleton sailed down Lake Champlain, defeated Arnold's flotilla at Valcour Island on October 11, then wiped out the remaining U.S. vessels two days later. Although he captured Crown Point, with winter coming on he withdrew. His victory foreshadowed a more serious thrust the next summer.

Battle for the Charlestown Peninsula 16-17 June 1775

Provoking fist-fights with British soldiers in the streets of Boston gave the Sons of Liberty confidence that they were man-to-man the measure of their counterparts from across the Atlantic. Chasing British companies back into the city after Lexington and Concord provoked an over-confidence that American militias were a match for British regiments. However ludicrous the notion that unruly minutemen could stand up to British grenadiers and other elite units such as the Welsh Fusilliers in regular battle, Major General Israel Putnam of the Connecticut militia convinced himself that what Americans lacked in drill and discipline they could make up for with pluck and daring. Besides, he had a plan to keep British bayonets from ever reaching American



breasts.

When Putnam learned the evening of June 16, 1775 that the British planned to attack his headquarters at Cambridge by means of the Charlestown Peninsula, he dispatched 1,200 Massachusetts farmer soldiers under Colonel William Prescott to build a redoubt atop Breed's hill. He himself remained further back on Bunker Hill to bring up more troops as well as powder and shot as needed. Dogged pick and shovel work produced by first light an earthen stronghold with man-high walls as well as a breastwork to the left front of the redoubt. The timely reinforcement of Colonel John Stark and 1,200 New Hampshire militia enabled Prescott to extend his line leftward

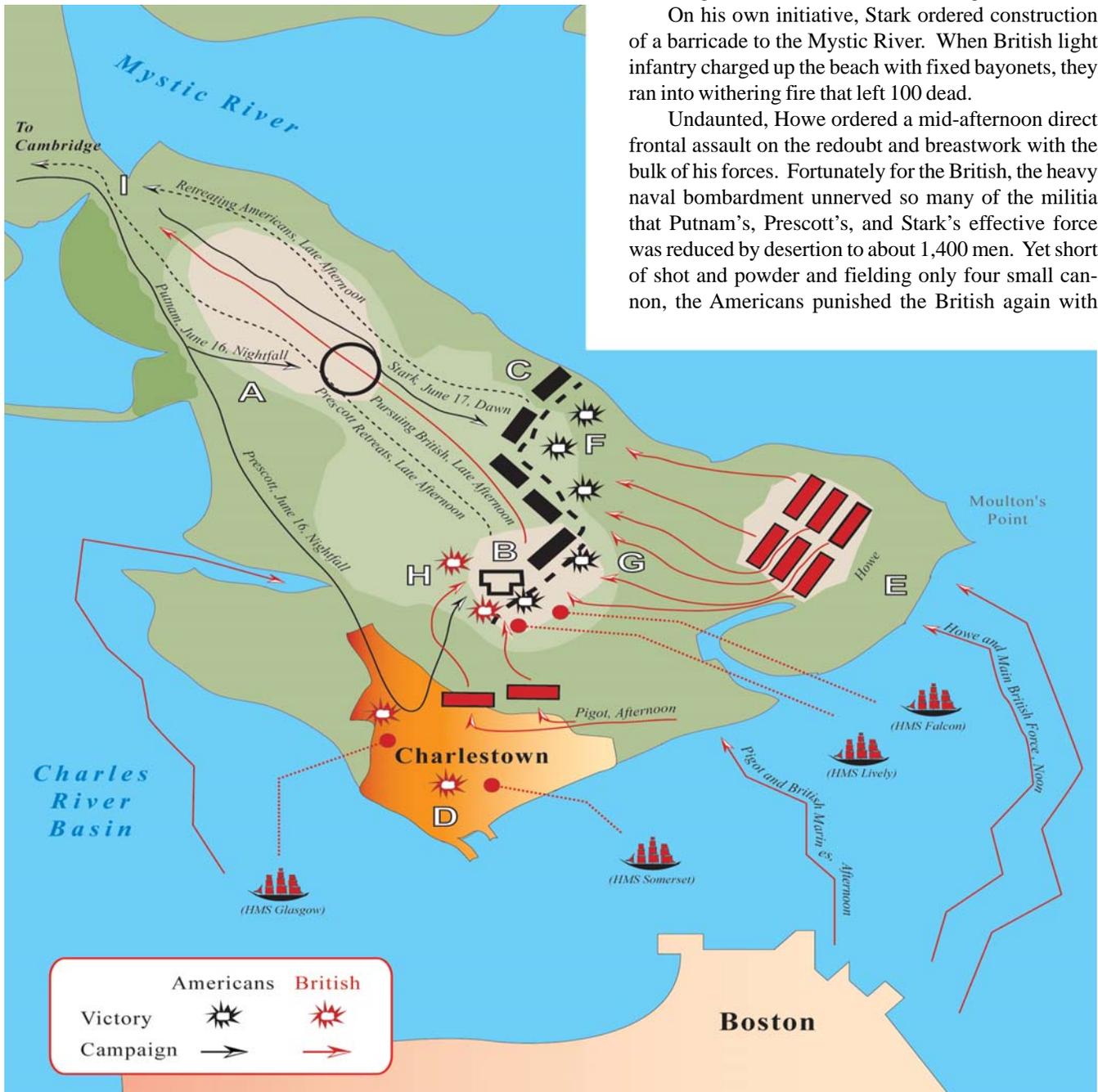
along a rail and stone fence toward the Mystic River.

Amazed at what the rebels had accomplished overnight, British naval officers had their ships open a bombardment on the redoubt. Believing that Americans might be holding Charlestown too, they shelled the town and set it on fire.

The timetable for striking at Cambridge hopelessly disrupted by Putnam's deployment, Gage yet agreed to an attack by Howe on American positions in the hope of destroying rebel manpower and morale. The first of 2,500 British soldiers came ashore at Moulton's Point intending to outflank the colonials along the beach.

On his own initiative, Stark ordered construction of a barricade to the Mystic River. When British light infantry charged up the beach with fixed bayonets, they ran into withering fire that left 100 dead.

Undaunted, Howe ordered a mid-afternoon direct frontal assault on the redoubt and breastwork with the bulk of his forces. Fortunately for the British, the heavy naval bombardment unnerved so many of the militia that Putnam's, Prescott's, and Stark's effective force was reduced by desertion to about 1,400 men. Yet short of shot and powder and fielding only four small cannon, the Americans punished the British again with



volley after volley of musket fire. Eventually, the dead and wounded amounted to an incredible 40% of the attacking force.

With mulish courage, British officers drove soldiers to press on. The turning point came when reinforcements under Major Charles Pigot landed to strike hard at American defenses facing Charlestown. At last the British fought their way into the redoubt and bayoneted those of the colonials who would not flee. Holding a major general's rank but fighting as a common soldier, Warren fell too in the redoubt.

Severely wounded, Prescott ordered a general retreat. Because the British failed to cut off the narrow neck of the

peninsula, most Americans escape. But out of fury at the river of blood left on the battlefield by their 226 dead and 828 wounded fellows, the vengeful redcoats bayoneted many rebels who might otherwise have surrendered. In addition to 310 Americans who fled the peninsula with wounds, they counted 140 dead bodies mingled with their own. Gage, who already had a reputation for excessive caution, did not dare follow up his advantage with an assault upon the surrounding hills nor attempt to occupy and hold the strategic Dorchester Heights. Because too many of his best soldiers were gone, he hunkered down to wait out the siege.