

MONMOUTH: BATTLING THE ELEMENTS

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In the summer of 1778, British General Sir Henry Clinton was forced to evacuate the city of Philadelphia and march nearly 10,000 British and Hessian troops to New York City in an attempt to form a strong link between British forces in the northern and middle colonies.¹ The decision to march instead of sail up the coast was meant to avoid destruction on the seas by the French fleet then aiding the Americans, but what Clinton did not count on was a pitched battle against the Continental Army at Freehold, New Jersey that would result in significant British casualties and a strategic defeat for the British.²

When the Battle of Monmouth started on June 28, 1778, the rear of the British column under Clinton seemed to have the day won, but as the abnormally hot day continued, the British were eventually held and driven back by the once hopeless and floundering American line.³ These weather conditions before and during the Battle of Monmouth, particularly the heat, became the main factor leading to a strategic American victory. The constant movements of fatigued British forces in the extreme conditions, and the lack of British reinforcement throughout the day, allowed an outmaneuvered and retreating American force to stand its ground in the end.

Long before the Battle of Monmouth started on June 28, British and American troops slogged through the New Jersey backcountry in horrid weather conditions for nearly ten days.⁴ General George Washington in particular feared on the day of the engagement that his men would not be in good health for the impending battle. He wrote that, “our advance from the rainy weather and intense heat . . . has been greatly delayed. Several of our

¹ Michael Stephenson, *Patriot Battles: How the War of Independence Was Fought* (New York: Harper Collins Books, 2008), 282.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 283.

⁴ John M. Palmer, *General Von Steuben* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), 185.

men have fallen sick from these causes, and a few unfortunately have fainted and died in a little time after.”⁵

Even though both armies endured harsh weather, the hefty British baggage train met greater difficulty in its movement as the Continentals destroyed many of the main causeways over key river crossings to slow the British advance.⁶ The excruciating labor on these causeways endured by Clinton’s troops is evidenced by his correspondence to Lord Germain in which he wrote that, “as the country is much intersected with marshy rivulets, the obstructions we met with were frequent, and the excessive heat of the season rendered the labour of repairing the bridges severely felt.”⁷ Eventually Washington’s men were able to catch up with Clinton near the town of Freehold. Clinton, despite also having fatigued troops, immediately threw some of his best men, including the 17th Light Dragoons, into battle against General Charles Lee and the Marquis de Lafayette’s force of about 4,000 men.⁸ General Clinton, being supported at that time by the nearby Hessian army of General Wilhelm von Knyphausen, felt his men would be able to fend off General Lee’s relatively small skirmishing force, but he did not anticipate the fatal error that would come from his pursuance of the enemy into the late morning heat.⁹

When General Lee’s troops met with General Clinton’s, the scene that followed was complete and total chaos, but it was a chaos that lured the British into a natural incinerator. Lee’s men at first succeeded in pushing the British Light Dragoons and Simcoe’s Queen’s Rangers back into the baggage train on the outskirts of Freehold, but a constant battering by British cannonade and a lack of communication by Lee with his field commanders resulted in the main elements of the attack rearing back in retreat.¹⁰ It was at that moment that General Clinton received his only fresh reinforcements of the day to protect his rear guard under the command of General Charles Cornwallis. Upon seeing the routed Americans, Clinton immediately made the decision to pursue.¹¹ It was this decision that would result in the true turning point of the battle.

⁵ General George Washington to the President of the Continental Congress, June 28, 1778, *Writings of Washington Volume 12*, John C. Fitzpatrick, ed. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Print Office, 1934), 128.

⁶ General Sir Henry Clinton to Lord George Germain (No.5), July 5, 1778, *Documents of the American Revolution Volume 15*, K.G. Davies, ed. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1972), 160.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 161.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ William S. Stryker, *The Battle of Monmouth*, William S. Myers, ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 154-155.

¹¹ Palmer, *General Von Steuben*, 185.

Around 10 o'clock in the morning, Lee began his retreat, and the thermometer was already "at the astonishing height of ninety-two."¹² General Clinton's diary mentions his concern of the heat in his offensive. He wrote that, "the enemy fell back and took a strong position on the heights above Freehold Courthouse. The heat of the weather was intense and our men already suffered severely from fatigue, but our circumstances obliged us to make a vigorous exertion."¹³

Lee marched his men in a disordered and panicked column back towards a nearby wooded area about 100 yards behind what became known as the east ravine (there were three ravines on the battlefield: east, middle, and west).¹⁴ General Lee attributed his order to retreat itself to the heat of the day in his court martial following the battle in which he asked General Stewart, "did you not conceive, when I ordered you to take your men to some place to save their lives, pointing to an orchard in front, that it was done that you might take them to some place to shade them from the heat of the weather?"¹⁵ Brigadier General Maxwell also noted Lee's concern with the weather being too hot and the men being too fatigued to fight the British on open ground when he said that "you [General Lee] appeared to be disturbed only on account of the situation of the men from the heat of the day."¹⁶ This concern for "the heat of the day" was well-placed as it was coming into effect already in those late hours of the morning, but the loss of momentum and the constant push of Clinton's fast-advancing troops caused the Americans to fall back over nearly five kilometers of land rather than just to the orchard Lee had intended.¹⁷ It was this rapid advance of the British, however, that would ultimately result in their defeat.

As the Continental and British armies crossed this large expanse of land, fully exposed to the sun in most places, soldiers from both sides felt the intense effects of the scorching temperatures. A number of the troops marching with the British were composed of small detachments of Hessian soldiers who, when adorned for battle, often wore uniforms that were far from conducive to the high temperatures present that afternoon.¹⁸ According to New York colonial inhabitant William Dunlap, the Hessian soldier often wore a "towering brass-fronted cap, his hair plastered with tallow and

¹² Continental Soldier to Family Member, June 29, 1778, *Eyewitness Accounts of the American Revolution*, Frank Moore, ed. (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 67.

¹³ Sir Henry Clinton, July 4, 1778, *Documents of the American Revolution Volume 15*, 160.

¹⁴ Stryker, *The Battle of Monmouth*, 157.

¹⁵ *Proceedings of a General Court Marital, Held at Brunswick, in the State of New Jersey by the Order of His Excellency General George Washington, Commander in Chief of the Army of the United States of America, for the Trial of Major General Lee*, July 4, 1778 (New York: 1864), 153.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

¹⁷ Stryker, *The Battle of Monmouth*, 157-60.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

flour...his blue uniform almost covered by the broad belts sustaining his cartridge-box, his brass hilted sword, and his bayonet; a yellow waistcoat with flaps, and yellow breeches were met at the knee by black gaiters.”¹⁹ This heavy-set uniform became so much of a factor that it actually reduced the combat-effectiveness of the Hessian troops. According to Dr. Samuel Forman, the county physician, many Hessian soldiers “swore that they would not fight in such fervid heat.”²⁰ This statement was also confirmed by an anonymous Continental soldier who said that, “we are well assured the Hessians absolutely refused to engage, declaring it was too hot.”²¹

The Continentals fared about as well as the British during the retreat, with their men also dying of heat stroke and “two or three dropping down at the time by the side of the pieces” as they moved artillery and equipment across the marshy rivulets back to the west ravine.²² At that moment, the situation for Lee’s element seemed hopeless until it received something the British were unable to get the rest of that unbearable day: reinforcements.

Washington and his regulars had finally arrived on the battlefield near the west ravine at around 11:30, as Lee and his men convened in that location falling left and right from the heat and fatigue of marching for miles.²³ Washington, furious with Lee for losing so much ground, sent Lee and his men far behind the lines to rest from the heat while freshened troops under General Wayne and Lord Stirling were sent up to engage the already exhausted British forces.²⁴ On a nearby fence line under the shade of an orchard, the Continentals held their ground against nearly three battalions of British regulars.²⁵ The fighting went on for hours with the British attempting three desperate charges on the American positions “until the last of their [soldiers’] eighty-cartridges-per-man had been expended.”²⁶

The temperature during the afternoon encounter had risen to nearly ninety-seven degrees and by that time, according to Dr. Forman, “the tongues of many of the men were so swollen by thirst that it rendered them almost incapable of articulation.”²⁷ Some even maintained that “many, without a wound, crawled along the stream at the west ravine to drink and to

¹⁹ William Dunlap, *History of the American Theatre Volume 1* (London: Richard Bently, 1833), 85-86.

²⁰ Stryker, *The Battle of Monmouth*, 202.

²¹ Continental Soldier to Family Member, June 29, 1778, *Documents of the American Revolution Volume 15*, 68.

²² Proceedings of a General Court Marital, Held at Brunswick, in the State of New Jersey by the Order of His Excellency General George Washington, Commander in Chief of the Army of the United States of America, for the Trial of Major General Lee, *Documents of the American Revolution Volume 15*, 155.

²³ Alfred Hoyt Bill, *New Jersey and the Revolutionary War* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1964).

²⁴ Stryker, *The Battle of Monmouth*, 208.

²⁵ Bill, *New Jersey and the Revolutionary War*, 83.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Stryker, *The Battle of Monmouth*, 201.

die from the heat and fatigue.”²⁸ In a last-ditch effort, the British decided to try one more charge and they attacked the Americans, who were still dug in within the confines of the fence and a shady orchard.²⁹ During this final charge, a prominent British officer, Lieutenant Colonel Henry Monckton fell dead on the field of battle and the Americans, “coatless and with shirt sleeves rolled up,” quickly rushed out to retrieve his body showing clearly how the Americans were able to concern themselves with keeping their bodies cool from their formidable positions as the British were forced to charge fully-clothed with no respite for hours on end.³⁰ The British dead were often found at the end of the day “without any wound, but being heavily clothed.”³¹ This final attempt to overcome the Americans failed and Clinton, who had finally called for reinforcements at nearly five in the afternoon and never received them in time, was forced to retreat.³²

As the British retreated, they were not chased by Washington and his men. Colonel Joseph Cilley, who had been commanding the men who repulsed the final British advance in Washington’s center, did not pursue as his soldiers “were so overcome with the heat that the General [Washington] thought it not advisable to pursue.”³³ Washington, attempting to avoid the mistake that Clinton had made earlier in the day, justified his failure to counter-attack in his letter to his brother John when he wrote that, “it [a counter attack] was found impracticable with our men fainting with fatigue, heat, and want of water.”³⁴

Under cover of darkness, Clinton withdrew his troops away from Monmouth Court House and marched them northward to link back up with their original baggage train.³⁵ Clinton remarked on his decision to retreat when he said that “By this time [following the last charge] our men were so overpowered with fatigue that I could press the affair no farther.”³⁶ He went on to remark about his men who “did it [held together] under such disadvantages of heat and fatigue that a great part of those we lost fell dead as they advanced without a wound.”³⁷ Clinton’s observation was correct as it is estimated that nearly 59 of Britain’s 358 casualties were from heat stroke

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Colonel Henry B. Carrington, *Battles of the American Revolution* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1876), 444.

³⁰ Stryker, *The Battle of Monmouth*, 217.

³¹ Ibid., 68.

³² Clinton, July 4, 1778, *Documents of the American Revolution Volume 15*, 163.

³³ Colonel Joseph Cilley to Mr. Thomas Bartlett, July 22, 1778, in *A Salute to Courage*, Dennis P. Ryan, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 133.

³⁴ General George Washington to John Augustine Washington, July 4, 1778, *Writings of Washington, Volume 12*, 157.

³⁵ Bill, *New Jersey and the Revolutionary War*, 82.

³⁶ Clinton, July 4, 1778, *Documents of the American Revolution Volume 15*, 162.

³⁷ Ibid.

or extreme fatigue, and this number could have been significantly higher had Clinton continued to attack as he had done throughout the day.³⁸

The Battle of Monmouth was not a tactical victory for either the Americans or the British, but its strategic value was paramount to victory in the Middle Colonies for the Continental Army. The battle, according to the late politician Henry Cabot Lodge, “ended all effective military operations to recover English supremacy in the Middle States” by hemming Sir Henry Clinton and his subordinates into New York City.³⁹ As one colonist put it, “Clinton gained no advantage except to reach New York with the wreck of his army.”⁴⁰ But when the Battle of Monmouth began, Clinton commanded some of the strongest troops he had to muster against a detachment of fearful and retreating Americans and yet still managed to lose the day and his strategic advantage along with it.⁴¹ The weakness in Clinton’s strategy was not his army or even his strategy but, rather, his inability to conceive the effects of harsh weather on his men.

The temperatures during the Battle of Monmouth stayed above 92 degrees (closer to 100 for most of the day) and this heat caused a normally well-functioning and disciplined British army to collapse.⁴² The Americans also suffered from the heat, but the fact that the Americans were able to provide fresh reinforcements during the hottest part of the day put them at a great advantage. Clinton’s reinforcements had been committed long before their five kilometer charge across the tough terrain near Freehold, and this charge would ultimately bring about their downfall. The Americans, well- shaded and able to take off their uniforms almost at their leisure, were able to fight back the rapidly-advancing and heavily-dressed foe during those brutal hours of elemental exposure.

Had Clinton given his men time to rest before committing them to charge again and again, it is wholly possible that he could have won the day. But unfortunately for Clinton, his aggressive tactics on June 28 failed him as he ultimately neglected to fully identify the enemy that had silently chipped away at his men for nearly ten days prior. The Americans were wary of this silent enemy and the decision of Washington to call off the counter-attack at the end of the day clearly shows it. Had Clinton had the same foresight, Britain could have had another major victory under its belt and the Americans’ renewed sense of fortitude following Valley Forge could have wavered under the mounting British victories.⁴³

³⁸ Stryker, *The Battle of Monmouth*, 261.

³⁹ Henry Cabot Lodge, *The Story of the Revolution* (Oakland: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1903), 234.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁴¹ Stephenson, *Patriot Battles*, 287.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 286.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 284.