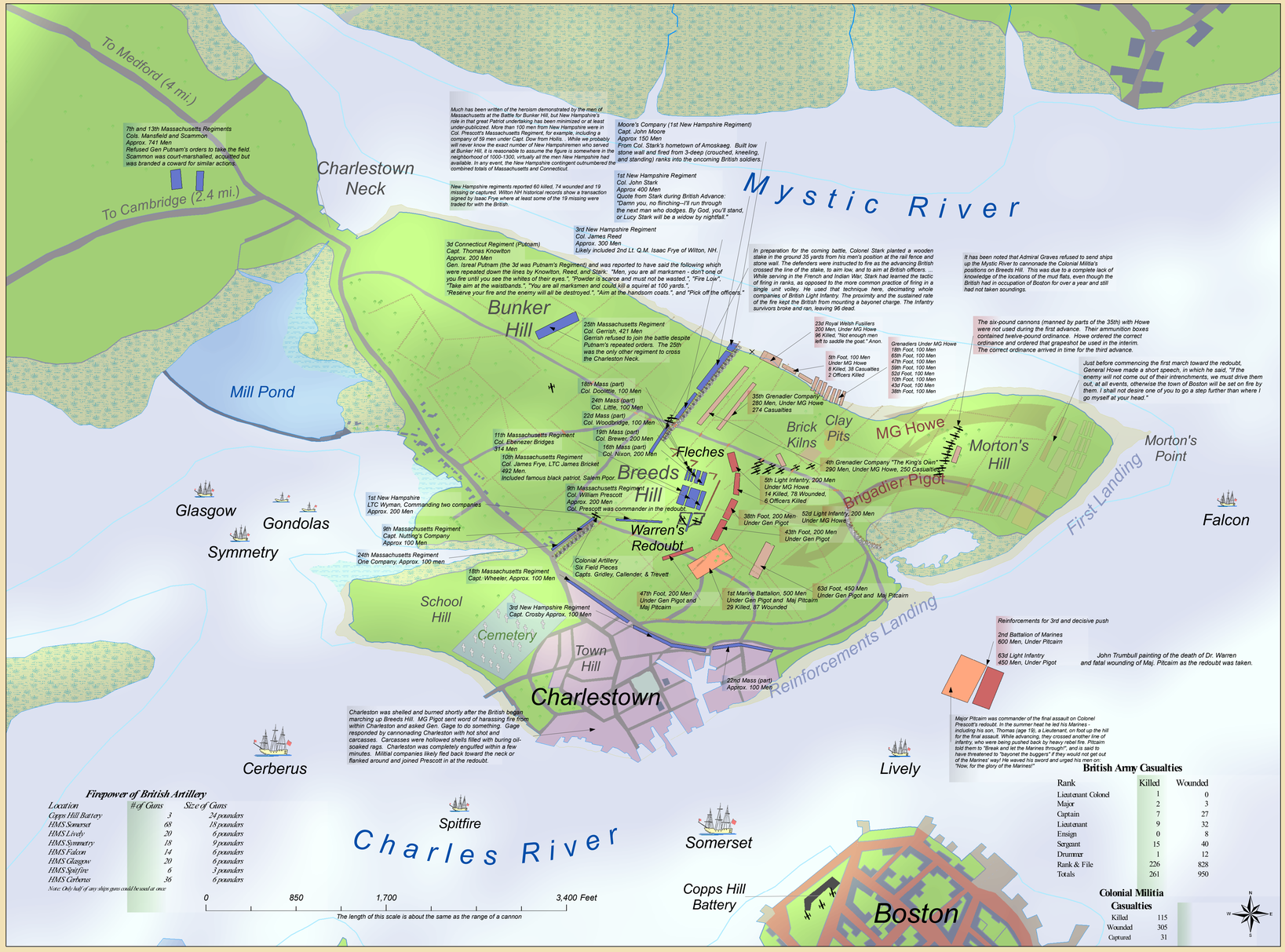
The Battle of Bunker Hill, June 17th, 1775



Firepower of British Artillery

Location	# of Guns	Size of Guns
Copps Hill Battery	3	24 pounders
HMS Somerset	68	18 pounders
HMS Lively	20	6 pounders
HMS Symmetry	18	9 pounders
HMS Falcon	14	6 pounders
HMS Glasgow	20	6 pounders
HMS Spitfire	6	3 pounders
HMS Cerberus	36	6 pounders

Note: Only half of any ships guns could be used at one

British Army Casualties

Rank	Killed	Wounded
Lieutenant Colonel	1	0
Major	2	3
Captain	7	27
Lieutenant	9	32
Ensign	0	8
Sergeant	15	40
Drummer	1	12
Rank & File	226	828
Totals	261	950

Colonial Militia Casualties

Killed	115
Wounded	305
Captured	31

The Battle

Starting Locations of Forces

For reasons unknown, the rebels costructed their redoubt on Breed's Hill and not on Bunker's Hill, as originally planned. Breed's Hill measured only 60 feet in height, as compared to Bunker's 110 feet, and was closer to the eastern and southern shorelines, making it a target for artillery both offshore and in Boston. Breed's proximity to Boston also posed a more substantive threat to the British encamped in the town, ensuring their immediate retaliation.

After construction of the redoubt, COL Prescot extended the defenses to the north by almost three hundred feet with the construction of breastworks. Colonels Knowlton and Stark were given the task of securing the American left flank, along the Mystic River. Knowlton added to a pre-existing stone wall which ran north to the beach. Stark extended the wall with wooden rails to the edge of the water. As the edges of the breastworks and stone wall did not meet, other men built fleches to plug the gap. With the addition of snipers in abandoned buildings in Charlestown, the Americans had created a line of defenders from 2500 - 4000 strong, depending on accounts.

The British started in Boston, delayed in their attack by both the tide and a shortage of boats. General Gage's senior officer, General Howe, planned to move westward from Moulton's point, flank the redoubt on Breed's Hill, capture Bunker Hill and Charlestown Neck, and encircle the colonials.

Action

Seeing the newly constructed redoubt on Breed's Hill, the British began their advance by landing their infantry on the Charlestown Peninsula. The 5th and 38th Light Infantry proceeded from Long Wharf in Boston, the 43rd, 57th and 47th Light Infantry moved in from North Battery. During this time, the British Navy supplied artillery fire from gunboats and ships offshore.

GEN Howe landed at Morton's Point, north east of Breed's Hill, and advanced his columns along Mystic River beach, hoping to encircle the fortification and cut it off from reinforcements from the Cambridge area. The British advance was hampered by stone walls, which were difficult to see in the tall grass. Picking their way forward, Howe then saw Stark's newly constructed fence continuing the line of an existing stone wall to the edge of the Mystic River, effectively blocking Howe's proposed route.

Howe also found difficulty moving his artillery through the marshy terrain. In addition to mobility problems, the cannon were found to be supplied with wrong sized shot. These events kept the effectiveness of the superior British artillery to a minimum.

In preparation for the coming battle, Colonel Stark planted a wooden stake in the ground 35 yards from his men's position at the rail fence and stone wall. The defenders were instructed to fire as the advancing British crossed the line of the stake, to aim low, and to aim at British officers. In spite of some premature shots, as Howe's columns advanced to 35 yds from the stone fence, the majority of the rebels opened fire. While serving in the French and Indian War, Stark had learned the tactic of firing in ranks, as opposed to the more common practice of firing in a single unit volley. He used that technique here, decimating whole companies of British Light Infantry. The proximity and the sustained rate of the fire kept the British from mounting a bayonet charge. The Infantry survivors broke and ran, leaving 96 dead.

The Grenadiers, delayed by broken terrain and stone fences hidden in the tall grass, then attacked, suffering the same fate as the Infantry. They fell back in disarray, leaving the beach soaked in blood.

Regrouping quickly, Howe planned his second assault to use the same avenue of approach, turning left at the last moment to attack the fleches constructed north of the redoubt. Coordinated with Howe's attack was Pigot's assault directly on the redoubt.

Howe was again repulsed hard, suffering horrible casualties. Understrength to begin with, regiments of 400 or so men were reduced to less than ten men each.

Meanwhile, Pigot led the 38th and 43rd Light Infantry Regiments up the east side of the redoubt, while elements of the 47th Light Infantry, the Marines and six flank companies assailed the south. The fire from the fortification, similar in execution to the fire at the fence, halted the charge cold and sent the British back in disarray.

Watching the battle from Boston, GEN Clinton, on his own initiative, led the last British reserves to Charlestown Peninsula. Howe then regrouped his shattered formations and planned his next move. He began to regard the rebels as an enemy army, not just a band of rabble.

Having been repulsed twice in the same manner, Howe changed his tactics to counter the colonists' advantage. He ordered his men to drop their heavy packs and use only bayonets in the final charge. Thus, they could close more quickly, and would not waste time firing at the entrenched rebels. Howe was also able to employ his cannon, having been moved into position. The artillery fired grapeshot, to solve the problem of wrong sized shot, to both pin Stark's men at the rail fence to prevent them moving out, and to rake the breastworks of the redoubt.

In the redoubt, many of Prescott's men had panicked and fled by this time. He had only 150 remaining, and was low on powder, shot and water. His men found themselves firing bits of stone and bent nails at the redcoats.

Howe feinted the remnants of the 5th, the 52nd and the grenadiers toward the fence, and wheeled south to the north side of the redoubt. Pigot attacked the east side, and Pitcairn took the Marines and the rest of the 47th against the south.

The Americans fired as the British entered close range, again inflicting withering losses. Their ammunition ran out, however, and the British closed with bayonets. The Americans, not supplied with close fighting weapons, fell back, taking most of their casualties at this time.

Stark's men, retreating from the rail fence, prevented Prescott's men from being encircled. The retreat was carried out in good order preventing a rout.

Outcome

The Americans were forced to withdraw, but not before inflicting upon the British surprisingly heavy casualties. The revolution became a real war in the minds of Americans and British alike. Never again would the American rebels be treated as a third rate mob.

The colonials had their first real taste of warfare in defense of their freedom. They found that the effectiveness of their fighting ability had been compromised by, among other factors, supply shortages, lack of discipline, and inter-colony rivalries.

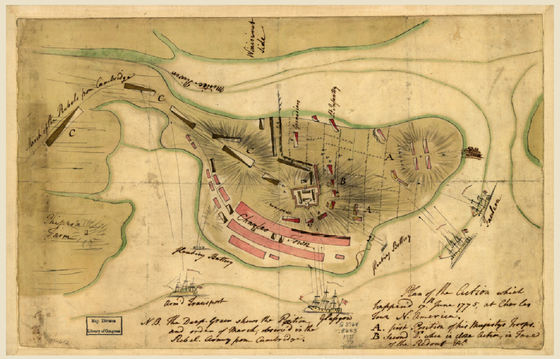
Lessons Learned

Both armies had fought courageously and learned much. For the Redcoats, the lesson was painful. Although they had captured the hill, out of 2200 soldiers engaged, 1034 were casualties. The British attempted no further actions outside Boston for the next nine months. When Howe replaced Gage as military commander in America, the events of that day would continue to haunt him, and he would time and again fail to follow up a victory over the Americans.

The Americans had shown they could stand up to the British in traditional open field combat. But where they had succeeded, it had been through individual gallantry rather than tactical planning or discipline. Some regiments had fought well, others not at all. Of an estimated 2500 to 4000 men engaged, 400 to 600 were casualties. Stronger leadership would be critical to success in further battles.

Source: Worcester Polytechnic Institute
Department of Military Science:
http://www.wpi.edu/Academics/Depts/MilSci/WPI/

Lt. Thomas Hyde Page 1:24,000 scale map (size reduced here)



Lt. Thomas Hyde Page Sketch Map

Isaac Frye's Story

Allow me to introduce myself, I am Major Isaac Frye. My great-great-great-great grandson Henry Frye has asked me to talk about the battle of Bunker Hill during the Revolutionary War since I was there as a volunteer member of the New Hampshire militia.

At the end of April of 1775, I was 28 years old, working in my field in Wilton, New Hampshire when I received word of the Battle of Lexington and Concord. I told my wife Elizabeth and my children, "The war has begun and I must be going." Within five minutes I was on my horse and heading to muster with the rest of the 3d Regiment from New Hampshire. At the time I was a 2nd Lieutenant and the quartermaster for my regiment. In fact, I was one of the first quartermasters in the Continental Army. Quartermasters were responsible for equipping their unit's soldiers with tents, shovels, spades, transportation; well anything to do with traveling and setting up camp. Being a quartermaster was tough then as Congress didn't have the funds to properly equip an army.

We mustered at Medford, Massachusetts, which is about four miles north by northeast of Boston. We were tired of the British King taxing us and telling us what to do without any representation in Parliament. When we got word that the British were planning to occupy Dorchester Heights just to the south of Boston, it was determined that the British had to be stopped in order to protect our land and freedom. And so the siege of Boston began.

I was under the command of Lieutenant Colonel James Reed. We were expecting to meet up with the militias from Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

At that time there was no Continental Army, just militias from each colony. In fact, on the day of the battle of Bunker Hill General George Washington was elected Commander in Chief by the Continental Congress. He arrived in Cambridge two weeks later.

On June 16th, we received word that our regiment would be called up and deployed on Bunker Hill. We had 446 fit men in our unit. Colonel Prescott of the Massachusetts militia was going to take 1,200 men and fortify Bunker Hill that night. When day broke at 4:00 AM on the morning of the 17th of June, the British were very surprised to see that the colonists had fortified the Charleston Peninsula. More surprising was that instead of Bunker Hill, the rebels, as the loyalists called us, had fortified Breeds Hill. The British ships immediately began to cannonade the new fortification. But Prescott's men kept working, building a breastwork to the north of the redoubt they had constructed in the night.

We left Medford and arrived at the Charleston Neck around noon on June 17th. There was a lot of confusion there. The British ships were firing their cannons onto the Charleston Neck, and that was keeping a lot of militia from crossing. I crossed with Colonel John Stark, who lead the 1st New Hampshire Regiment. Short of General Israel Putnam (of Connecticut), Colonel Stark was the toughest and bravest man I knew. Stark and Putnam had fought together as part of the elite Rodger's Rangers with the British in the French and Indian War. My father Capt. Abiel Frye along with our distant cousin, Colonel James Frye also fought in the French and Indian war. Colonel Frye was commanding the Massachusetts 10th Regiment from Andover, Massachusetts where I was born. They were one of the three regiments who built the fortifications on Breeds Hill. Our family was used to fighting.

My regiment took up a position along a low stone topped with a rail fence between Colonel Stark's regiment on our left and Capt. Knowlton of Connecticut on our right. General Putnam was commander of Capt. Knowlton's regiment and picked Capt. Knowlton's men as being the bravest and most dependable from his regiment. Colonel Stark noticed that the beach to our left was not defended and he sent Capt. Moore to fortify it with a rock wall, and to take up positions there. Colonel Stark walked out front of Capt. Moore's wall and pounded a stake in the ground, He came back and said, "There, don't a man fire till the Redcoats come up to that stake. If he does, I'll knock him down."

We didn't have much powder or ammunition, so we had to make every shot count. General Putnam rode up and down the fence line encouraging us. He said, "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes!"

At about 3:00 on that hot afternoon the British assault began. We were ready for them. Standing three deep, one on his knees, one crouching, and one standing, two lines reloading while one line was firing. Row after row after row of the British infantry and grenadiers fell before us. We soundly defeated the best the British could throw at us that day. Not one man in twenty from the King's own 4th Foot Regiment, who charged us left the field under his own power that day. Stark's men treated the 23rd Royal Welsh Fusiliers even worse, and they got a lot of the 5th Foot Regiment too. Twice the British charged into our musket fire and twice they were beaten.

The 3rd British charge would be different. More than an hour had passed since the 2nd charge. They had had enough of us on that rail fence that day. The British soldiers had thrown off their heavy packs and coats and now pushed up the hill in their shirtsleeves. In the redoubt, there were fewer than 200 men. Many of the men had thought the battle over, they had nothing to eat and little to drink since the previous day, or had had enough of the killing and had left; the rest, well they were nearly out of ammunition. The British marines finally stormed the redoubt and the fighting was fierce. General Warren was killed there and the British Marine commander, Maj Pitcairn was fatally wounded. It was so smoky that the British couldn't see many of the militiamen escaping. About that time we began to fall back and cover the retreat of those men escaping the redoubt. The British had called in reinforcements and with fresh men finally returned a little of the punishment their units had suffered as the militiamen retreated.

Another of my distant cousins, Ralph Farnum, said of how such slaughter affect us, "The screaming was louder than firearms". Ralph said he was so sick couldn't stand to fire his musket any more after seeing and hearing such a horrific scene. Ralph would turn nineteen in July that year. He lived to the age of 105 and in 1860 would be the last survivor of the battle to die.

We fell back to Winter Hill, and even though we were in range of the British cannons, they clearly had lost the will to fight. I can see why, of the 2,200 who had engaged against us, almost half were killed or wounded. It was a major psychological win for the patriots and for the New Hampshire troops. It has long been said that the New Hampshire troops "Held the line at Bunker Hill".

As for me, I went on to fight in many of the northern campaign battles, including Ticonderoga, Saratoga, I was with Washington at Valley Forge, the 3rd led the attack on Clinton at Monmouth, and were finally disbanded in 1781. Then I served in the 1st New Hampshire regiment for two more years, mostly guarding the north. For most of the war I was company commander and many brave men from New Hampshire served in my company. "Live Free or Die" became our state motto, we believed every bit of that.

Colonel James Frye, Commander 10th Massachusetts Regiment

If he were still alive, Col. James Frye, who lived at 169 Chestnut St., in North Andover, Massachusetts. Until his death in 1776, Frye was a farmer, tavern keeper, and respected leader in the community and military.

Known for his brash speech, Frye fought alongside George Washington in the Battle of Louisburg during the French and Indian War. In 1775, he commanded 400 Andover militia men at the Battle of Bunker Hill.

Historical records from that battle say Frye was responsible for rallying troops who had begun to retreat from the British.

"This day 30 years I was at the taking of Louisburg," Frye shouted from his horse. "This is a fortunate day for America, we shall certainly beat the enemy!"

Minutes later, a musket ball tore through Frye's thigh and the horse's saddle, before lodging in its back. Frye got off the horse, pulled out the bullet, and taunted the British for their aim, yelling, "The regulars fire damned careless!"

He continued to fight, in spite of an injury that would kill him a year later when infection set in.

Lt. Thomas Hyde Page 1:4,800 scale map (size reduced here)

Credits & Source Text

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Map and Spatial Data Compilation

Elevation: National Park Service Map depicting colonial troop deployments.