

# The Battle of Bunker (Breeds) Hill

## Overview:

On June 17, 1775 the Battle of Bunker Hill took place. It is one of the most important colonial victories in the U.S. War for Independence. Fought during the Siege of Boston, it lent considerable encouragement to the revolutionary cause. This battle made both sides realize that this was not going to be a matter decided on by one quick and decisive battle. When the British planned to occupy Dorchester Heights on the Boston Peninsula, the colonists became alarmed at the build up of British troops off of the coast. The colonists decided that action had to be taken so as to stop the threatening British movement in this territory to protect themselves from an attack. The Battle of Bunker Hill started when the colonists learned about the British plan to occupy Dorchester Heights. The colonists were understandably shaken by this news. They thought of this as the last straw, and they had to protect their land and freedom.

## Synopsis:

On June 15, 1775 the American colonists heard news that the British planned to control the Charlestown peninsula between the Charles and Mystic Rivers. Bunker's and Breed's Hill on this peninsula overlooked both Boston and its harbor, thus making the hills critical vantage points. In order to beat the British to the high ground, General Prescott took 1,200 of his often times undisciplined, disobedient, and sometimes intoxicated soldiers to dig into and fortify Bunker Hill with the cover of night on June 16.

When dawn broke, the British were stunned to see Breed's Hill fortified overnight with a 160-by-30-foot earthen structure. The British General, Gage, dispatched 2,300 troops under the command of Major General Howe to take control of the hill. So it came to be that General Prescott did not actually fortify Bunker's Hill, but Breed's Hill instead. How did this happen? One proposed idea is that Colonel William Prescott, since fortifying the hill in the middle of the night, chose the wrong hill. Another theory is that the map the Colonel used was incorrect, since many maps during this period had commonly misidentified the hills. Another suggestion, and probably the most practical, is that Breed's Hill is closer to where the British ships were positioned allowing the colonists a better attacking position than at Bunker Hill. Regardless of the reason, the Battle of Bunker Hill actually took place on Breed's Hill.

The fighting began as soon as the day did. As soon as the men on British frigate awoke they opened fire on the colonial fortifications. Carol McCabe states that one soldier wrote there would be firing for about twenty minutes, then a lull, then the ships would start firing again. At about 3:00 PM Thomas Gage, the British commander, ordered men to try and take control of the hill. It took Gage this long to issue a command due to a shortage of boats and an unfavorable tide. Peter Brown, an American soldier, would later write about this, "There was a matter of 40 barges full of Regulars coming over to us; it is supposed there were about 3,000 of them and about 700 of us left not deserted, besides 500 reinforcements. . . the enemy landed and fronted before us and formed themselves in an oblong square. . . and after they were well formed they advanced towards us, but they found a choakly [sic] mouthful of us."

When the British forces were firmly established on the ground at the base of the hill they proceeded to charge. The British just expected to march up the hill and just scare the colonists away. The British Regulars advanced with bayonets fixed; many of their muskets were not even loaded. The British troops, wearing their bright red wool jackets and weighed down by heavy equipment, marched up hill over farm fields and low stone walls hidden in the tall grass.

As the colonists saw this massive red line approach slowly and steadily, they remained calm and did not open fire. The fact they waited so long to commence an attack was that General Prescott has been assumed to have given the famous order, "Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes." If this command was given it would have been to either help preserve their already low ammunition supplies, and to help keep the men from shooting out of their capable ranges. Once the British came within range, the colonists began firing, and the British soldiers started to fall rapidly. The British forces were driven back twice, but on their third and final thrust forward the British were able to break through the colonists' line, overrunning the tentative American fortifications, thus taking the hill. The colonists had run out of ammunition and supplies. The colonists fled back up the peninsula since it was their only escape route. This battle, which lasted for approximately three hours, was one of the deadliest of the Revolutionary War.

Although the British technically won the battle because they took control of the hill, they suffered too many losses to fully benefit from it. The British had suffered more than one thousand casualties out of the 2,300 or so who fought. While the colonists only suffered 400 to 600 casualties from an estimated 2,500 to 4,000 men. Besides having fewer deaths than the British, the colonists believe they had won in other ways as well.

## Effects:

The Americans had proved to themselves, and the rest of the world that they could stand up to the British army in traditional warfare. And only a few days later, George Washington would lead a group of men up to Dorchester Heights, aiming their cannons at the British, and then watched the Red Coats retreat from the hill. So even though the British had won the battle, it was a short lived victory since the colonists took control of the hill again, but this time with more soldiers to defend it. The Battle of Bunker Hill was important for a variety of reasons. The first one being that it was the first battle of the Revolutionary War, and because of the fierce fighting that defined the battle it foreshadowed that it was going to be a long, close war. Another important event that came from the battle was that it allowed the American troops to know that the British army was not invincible, and that they could defeat the British in traditional warfare. The losses experienced on the British side also helped to bolster the colonists confidence. So it came to be that the Battle of Bunker Hill would be the foundation that the colonists would look back to for the many battles that occurred during the American Revolution. The first being that the British suffered heavy losses and would no longer be convinced of a victory when they went to battle the colonists.