

## The Battle of Yorktown

The **Siege of Yorktown** or **Battle of Yorktown** in 1781 was a decisive victory by combined assault of American forces led by General George Washington and French forces led by General Comte de Rochambeau over a British Army commanded by General Lord Cornwallis. It proved to be the last major land battle of the American Revolutionary War, as the surrender of Cornwallis's army prompted the British government eventually to negotiate an end to the conflict.

In 1780, 5,500 French soldiers landed in Rhode Island to try to help their American allies in assaulting British-occupied New York City. The two armies met North of New York City in 1781. The French Commander, the Comte de Rochambeau, convinced the American Commander, George Washington, that an attack on New York City would be hard pressed to succeed and it would be easier for the French Fleet under the command of the Comte de Grasse to assist in the attack further south, because he was to bring the French Fleet into the Caribbean in October. Thus, they agreed to attack Lord Cornwallis and his smaller army of 9,000 men which was stationed in the port town of Yorktown, Virginia. In the beginning of September, de Grasse defeated a British Fleet that had come to relieve Cornwallis at the Battle of the Chesapeake. As a result of this victory, de Grasse blocked any escape by sea for Cornwallis. Washington had dispatched the French general Marquis de Lafayette to contain Cornwallis in Yorktown until he arrived, and Lafayette did so. By late September the army and naval forces had surrounded Cornwallis by land and by sea.

After initial preparations, the Americans and French built their first parallel and began the bombardment. With the British defense weakened, Washington, on October 14, 1781, sent two columns to attack the last major remaining British outer defenses; redoubts #9 and #10. A French column took #9 and an American column #10. With these defenses gone, the allies were able to finish their 2nd parallel. With the Americans' artillery closer and more intense than ever, the British situation began to deteriorate rapidly and Cornwallis asked for capitulation terms on the 17th. After two days of negotiation, the surrender ceremony took place on the 19th, with Cornwallis being absent since he claimed to be ill. With the capture of over 8,000 British soldiers, negotiations between the United States and Great Britain began, resulting in the Treaty of Paris in 1783.

## March to Virginia

The march to Yorktown led by General George Washington and the Comte de Rochambeau began on August 19, and has become known as the celebrated march. 4,000 French and 3,000 American soldiers began the march in Newport, Rhode Island, while the rest remained behind to protect the Hudson Valley. Washington wanted to keep absolute secrecy as to where they were headed. Washington sent out fake dispatches that reached Clinton, and convinced him that the Franco-American army was going to launch an attack on New York, and that Cornwallis was not in any danger.

The French and American armies paraded through Philadelphia from September 2 to 4, where the soldiers proclaimed that they would not leave Maryland until they received one month's pay, and the Continental Congress complied, giving them the money. On September 5, Washington learned of the arrival of de Grasse's fleet off the Virginia Capes. His French troops departed and joined Lafayette, and de Grasse sent his empty transports to pick up the American troops. Washington made a visit to his home, Mount Vernon, on his way to Yorktown.

In August, Clinton sent a fleet from New York to attack de Grasse's fleet. Clinton did not realize how large the French fleet was, and neither did Cornwallis. The British fleet, under command of Thomas Graves, was defeated by de Grasse's fleet in the Battle of the Chesapeake, and forced to fall back to New York. On September 14, Washington arrived in Williamsburg, Virginia.

## The Siege

### Initial Movements

On September 26, transports with artillery, siege tools, and some French infantry and shock troops from the Head of Elk, the northern end of the Chesapeake Bay, arrived, giving Washington command of an army of 7,800 Frenchmen, 3,100 Militia, and 8,000 Continentals. Early on September 28, Washington led the army out of Williamsburg to surround Yorktown. The French took the positions on the left while the Americans took the position of honor on the right. Cornwallis had a chain of seven redoubts and batteries linked by earthworks along with batteries that covered the narrows of the York River at Gloucester Point. That day, Washington reconnoitered the British defenses and decided that they could be bombarded into submission.

The Americans and the French spent the night of the 28th sleeping out in the open, while working parties built bridges over the marsh. Some of the American soldiers hunted down wild hogs to eat.

On September 29, Washington moved the army closer to Yorktown and British gunners opened up on the infantry. Throughout the day several British cannon fired on the Americans but there were few casualties. Fire from American riflemen and the Hessian Jaegers was exchanged.

Cornwallis pulled back from all of his outer defenses, except for the Fusilier's redoubt on the west side of the town and redoubts 9 and 10 in the east. Cornwallis had his forces occupy the earthworks immediately surrounding the town because he had received a letter from Clinton which promised relief force of 5,000 men within a week and he wished to tighten his lines. The Americans and the French occupied the abandoned defenses and began to establish their own batteries there. With the British outer defenses in their hands, allied engineers began to lay out positions for the artillery. The men improved their works and deepened their trenches. The British also worked on improving their defenses.

On September 30, the French attacked the British Fusiliers redoubt. The skirmish lasted two hours, in which the French were repulsed suffering several casualties. On October 1, the allies learned from British deserters that, in order to preserve their food, the British had had hundreds of horses slaughtered and thrown on the beach. In the American camp, thousands of trees were cut down so that the wood could be used for their earthworks. Preparations for the parallel also began.

As the allies began to put their artillery into place, the British kept up a steady fire to disrupt them. British fire increased on the 2nd and the allies suffered moderate casualties. General Washington continued to make visits to the front, despite concern shown by several of his officers over the increasing enemy fire. On the night of October 2, the British opened a storm of fire to cover up the movement of the British cavalry to Gloucester where they were to escort infantrymen on a foraging party. On the 3rd, the foraging party, led by Banastre Tarleton, went out but collided with Lauzun's Legion, and John Mercer's Virginia militia, led by the Marquis de Choisy. The British cavalry quickly retreated back behind their defensive lines, losing 50 men.

By October 5, Washington was almost ready to open the first parallel. That night the sappers and miners worked, putting strips of pine on the wet sand to mark the path of the trenches.

## Bombardment

After nightfall on October 6, troops moved out in stormy weather to dig the first parallel: the heavily overcast sky negated the waning full moon and shielded the massive digging operation from the eyes of British sentries. Washington ceremoniously struck several blows with his pick axe to begin the trench. The trench was to be 2,000 yards (1,800 m) long, running from the head of Yorktown to the York River. Half of the trench was to be commanded by the French, the other half by the Americans. On the northernmost end of the French line, a support trench was dug so that they could bombard the British ships in the river. The French were ordered to distract the British with a false attack, but the British were told of the plan by a French deserter and the British artillery fire turned on the French from the Fusiliers redoubt.

On October 7, the British saw the new allied trench just out of musket-range. Over the next two days the allies completed the gun placements and dragged the artillery into line. The British fire began to weaken when they saw the amount of guns the allies had.

By October 9, all of the French and American guns were in place. Among the American guns there were three twenty-four pounders, three eighteen pounders, two eight-inch (203 mm) howitzers and six mortars. At 3:00 pm, the French guns opened the barrage and drove the British frigate, HMS Guadeloupe across the York River, where she was scuttled to prevent capture. At 5:00 pm the Americans opened fire. Washington fired the first gun and legend has it that it smashed into a table where British officers were eating. The allied guns began to tear apart the British defenses. Washington ordered that the guns fire all night so that the British could not make repairs. All of the British guns on the left were soon silenced. The British soldiers began to pitch their tents in their trenches and soldiers began to desert in large numbers. British ships in the harbor were also damaged because some of the cannon balls flew across the town into the harbor.

On October 10, the Americans spotted a large house in Yorktown. Believing that Cornwallis might be stationed there, they aimed at it and quickly destroyed it. Cornwallis sank more than a dozen of his ships in the harbor. The French began to fire at the British ships and scored a hit on the British HMS Charon which caught on fire and in turn set two or three other ships on fire. Cornwallis received word from Clinton that the British fleet was to depart on October 12, however Cornwallis responded by saying that he would not be able to hold out for long.

On the night of October 11, Washington ordered that the Americans dig a second parallel. It was 400 yards (370 m) closer to the British lines, but could not be extended to the river because there were two British redoubts in the way; redoubts #9 and #10. During the night, the British fire continued to land in the old line; Cornwallis did not suspect that a new parallel was being dug. By morning of the 12th, the allied troops were in position on the new line.

By October 14, the trenches were within 150 yards (140 m) of redoubts #9 and #10. Washington ordered that all guns within range begin blasting the redoubts in order to weaken them for an assault that evening. Washington would use the cover of a moonless night to lend the element of surprise to the enterprise. To reinforce the darkness, he added silence, ordering that no soldier should load his musket until reaching the fortifications- the advance would be made with only "cold steel." Redoubt 10 was near the river and held only 70 men, while redoubt 9 was a quarter of a mile inland, and was held by 120 British and Germans. Both redoubts were heavily fortified with rows of abatis surrounding them along with muddy ditches which surrounded the redoubts at a distance of about 25 yards. Washington devised a plan in which the French would launch a diversionary attack on the Fusiliers redoubt, and then a half an hour later, the French would assault redoubt 9 and the Americans redoubt 10. Redoubt 9 would be assaulted by 400 French Regular soldiers under the command of the German Lieutenant Colonel Wilhelm von Zweibrücken and redoubt 10 would be assaulted by 400 light infantry troops under the command of Alexander Hamilton. There was briefly a dispute as to who should lead the attack on redoubt #10, Lafayette named his aide, the Chevalier de Gimat, to lead the attack, but Hamilton protested, saying that he was the senior officer. Washington concurred with Hamilton and gave him command of the attack.

At 6:30 pm, gunfire announced the diversionary attack on the Fusiliers redoubt. At other places in the line, movements were made as if preparing for an assault on Yorktown itself, which caused the British to panic. With bayonets fixed, the Americans marched towards redoubt #10. Hamilton sent John Laurens around to the rear of the redoubt to prevent the British from escaping. The Americans reached the redoubt and began chopping through the British wooden defenses with their axes. A British sentry called a challenge, and then fired at the Americans. The Americans responded by charging with their bayonets towards the redoubt. They hacked through the abatis, crossed a ditch and climbed the parapet into the redoubt. The Americans forced their way into the redoubt falling into giant shell holes from the bombardment of the redoubts. The British fire was heavy, but the Americans overwhelmed them. Someone in the front shouted "Rush on boys! The

fort's ours!" The British threw hand grenades at the Americans with little effect. Men in the trench stood on the shoulders of their comrades to climb into the redoubt. The bayonet fight cleared the British out of the redoubt and almost the entire garrison was captured, including the commander of the redoubt, Major Campbell. In the assault, the Americans lost 9 dead and 25 wounded.

The French assault began at the same time, but they were halted by the abatis which was undamaged by the artillery fire. The French began to hack at the abatis and a Hessian sentry came out and asked who was there. When there was no response, the sentry opened fire as did other Hessians on the parapet. The French soldiers fired back, and then charged the redoubt. The Germans charged the Frenchmen climbing over the walls but the French fired a volley, driving them back. The Germans then took a defensive position behind some barrels, but when the French prepared a bayonet charge, the Hessians threw down their arms and surrendered.

With the capture of redoubts 9 and 10, Washington was able to have his artillery shell the town from three directions and the allies moved some of their artillery into the redoubts. On the October 15, Cornwallis turned all of his guns onto the nearest allied position. He then ordered a storming party of 350 British troops under the command of Colonel Robert Abercromby to attack the allied lines in order to spike the American and French cannons. The allies were sleeping and unprepared. As the British charged, Abercromby shouted "Push on my brave boys, and skin the bastards!" The British party spiked several cannons in the parallel and then spiked the guns on an unfinished redoubt. However, a French party came and drove them out of the allied lines and back to Yorktown. The British had been able to spike six guns, but by the morning they were all repaired. The bombardment resumed, with the American and French troops engaged in friendly competition to see who could do the most damage to the enemy defenses.

On the morning of October 16, more allied guns were in line and the fire intensified. In desperation, Cornwallis attempted to evacuate his troops across the York River to Gloucester Point. At Gloucester point the troops could break through the allied lines and escape into Virginia and then march to New York. One wave of boats made it across, but when they returned to take more soldiers across, a squall hit, making the evacuation impossible.

The fire on Yorktown from the allies was heavier than ever as new artillery pieces joined the line. Cornwallis talked with his officers that day and they agreed that their situation was hopeless.

On the morning of October 17, a drummer appeared followed by an officer waving a white handkerchief. The bombardment ceased, and the officer was blindfolded and led behind the Allied lines. Negotiations began on October 18, between two British officers, lieutenant Colonel Thomas Dundas and Major Alexander Ross and Colonel John Laurens, who represented the Americans, and the Marquis de Noailles, who represented the French. In order to make sure that nothing fell apart between the allies at the last minute, Washington ordered that the French be given an equal share in every step of the surrender process.

The Articles of Capitulation were signed on October 19, 1781. Cornwallis' British men were declared prisoners of war, promised good treatment in American camps, and officers were permitted to return home after taking their parole. At 2:00 pm the allied army entered the British positions, with the French on the left and the Americans on the right. The British and Hessian troops marched between them, while according to legend the British drummers and fifers played to the tune of "The World Turn'd Upside Down". The British soldiers had been issued with new uniforms hours before the surrender and until prevented by General O'Hara some threw down their muskets with the apparent intention of smashing them. Others wept or appeared to be drunk. 8,000 troops, 214 artillery pieces, thousands of muskets, 24 transport ships, wagons and horses were captured.

Cornwallis refused to meet formally with Washington, and also refused to come to the ceremony of surrender, claiming illness. Instead, Brigadier General Charles O'Hara presented the sword of surrender to Rochambeau. Rochambeau shook his head and pointed to Washington.<sup>[60]</sup> O'Hara offered it to Washington, but he refused to accept it, and motioned to his second in command, Benjamin Lincoln, who had been humiliated by the British at Charleston, to accept it. The British soldiers marched out and laid down their arms in between the French and American armies, while many civilians watched. At this time, the troops on the other side of the river in Gloucester also surrendered.