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As a result of the Bicentennial, there is hardly a patriot victory in the Revolution that has not been written about or reenacted. Yet in all that hoopla did anyone remember the ones we lost? One such was the battle of Penobscot Bay, a combined sea and land operation, that next to Pearl Harbor was the greatest naval defeat in American history.

DISASTER IN PENOBSCOT BAY

by

William Fowler

On a direct line, Penobscot Bay lies about 150 miles northeast of Boston, midway along the coast of Maine. At its entrance it stretches about 30 miles across and is about the same distance from the sea to its head, where the Penobscot River empties. The river is wide and deep enough to be navigable for almost 60 miles, all the way to the present city of Bangor. Along the northeast shore of the Bay, 10 miles from the river, there is a small (1½ miles long by 3/4 mile wide) rocky finger of land that juts out into the water. It was then called Bagaduce (today it is known as Castine) and was the key to control of the entire Bay.

British interest in the area was first aroused early in the war by William Knox, the Colonial Under Secretary. Knox thought a naval base at Bagaduce would help secure the line of communication between British Forces in Halifax and New York. Those in New York were being harassed by Yankee privateers out of Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Furthermore, the Secretary argued, a base there would help protect the outlying fringes of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia from American attack. It was an interesting idea, but when Knox suggested it, the government had other plans and Penobscot would have to wait. As the war dragged on and predicted quick victory failed to materialize, the Ministry took a second look at Knox's scheme and saw in it benefits other than those mentioned by the Under Secretary.

The area could be taken over for the Loyalists. Thousands of them had been displaced and the prospects of their ever returning home grew dimmer with each passing day. If the area was secured they could be settled in the Penobscot region. That would be helpful in

fulfilling a debt the British Government owed to those who had gambled and lost for the Crown while at the same time providing an occupied buffer zone between the Americans and Canada. This proposal received strong support from exiled Loyalists in England and they lobbied vigorously in its support.[1]

A second reason had to do with supply requirements of the Royal Navy. For some time the naval base at Halifax had been sending ships to Penobscot to bring back timber needed to repair and refit ships. Without firm control of the area this was a risky proposition and the ships were subject to constant harassment and attack by the Americans. As the need for timber at Halifax grew, this became an increasing concern. In 1779 the British decided to occupy Penobscot.

The expedition was organized from Halifax. With a small naval escort under the command of Capt. Henry Mowatt, about 700 Highland troops boarded transports in early June. On the 17th they arrived at Bagaduce and, despite the presence of several hundred American civilians in the area, they landed with no opposition. The commander of the force, Gen. Francis MacLean, immediately ordered his men to dig in and prepare fortifications.

In Boston the news was received with great alarm. For the first time in more than 3 years part of Massachusetts was in enemy hands. Newport, Rhode Island to the south had been in British possession since late 1776 and now, with the enemy pressing in from the north, the people of Boston felt trapped in a tightening vise and feared that they might well be the next target. That was the worst possibility, but even short of actual attack there were other distressing possibilities. With bases barely 300 miles apart, the Royal Navy could easily sweep along the New England coast, raiding and pillaging and closing down the very lucrative Yankee privateering operations.

The real and potential danger was too great to be ignored and too immediate to wait for congressional action. On 26 June the General Court ordered the Massachusetts Board of War to lay plans for dislodging the enemy and:[2]

> To engage or employ such armed vessels, State or National, as could be prepared and procured to sail in 6 days, to charter, or if necessary, to impress in the harbors of Boston, Salem, Beverly and Newburyport, a number of private armed vessels, belonging to individuals competent, when joined with the others, for the enterprise; to promise the owners a fair compensation for all losses and damages they might sustain; to give seamen the pay and rations of those in the continental service; and to procure the necessary outfits and provisions as quickly as possible.

Speed was essential. They had to attack before the British had enough time to strengthen and reinforce their position. Boston came alive as preparations for the biggest naval operation since the days of the Louisburg expedition got underway. The narrow isthmus across the neck into the town was clogged with wagons and carts bringing in supplies. Down on the docks teamsters yelled and cursed as they skillfully threaded their way through the piles of equipment being loaded aboard vessels. Everywhere the creak of block and tackle could be heard as seamen strained to hoist cannon and ammunition on board. The harbor was thick with ships making up the largest American Fleet ever assembled during the war.

The Massachusetts state navy sent their entire fleet, which then consisted of two brigantines, *Active* and *Tyrannicide*, while New Hampshire lent her state ship *Hampden*. The Massachusetts Council asked the Continental Navy Board what it would contribute. The Board offered, on their own authority,

to attach three vessels, Dudley Saltonstall's frigate *Warren* along with two smaller vessels, the sloop *Providence* under Hoysted Hacker and a newly captured prize, the fast brig *Diligent*.[3] Augmenting the state and Continental ships were about 16 privateers mounting 16 to 20 guns each. This fleet of 23 armed vessels was placed under Saltonstall's command, but as was usually the case whenever privateers teamed up with public ships, there was serious question of how amenable the former would be to the orders of the Continental officers. The Marine Committee always looked askance at such joint ventures and the events at Penobscot fully justified their misgivings. Saltonstall's orders were to take them and escort 20 transports loaded with militia safely to Bagaduce. After landing his cargo he was to remain at Penobscot and assist in taking the place from the British.

This was not only the biggest American naval undertaking of the war, it was also the largest American amphibious operation until Gen. Winfield Scott went ashore at Vera Cruz during the Mexican War. The whole business turned out to be a classic example of how not to conduct a joint Army-Navy attack. Such operations require the utmost in cooperation, experience and precise planning, but the Americans neglected every one of these requirements. Saltonstall seems not to have had the vaguest notion of how to support a land operation. His counterpart on land, Brig. Gen. Solomon Lovell, was a well meaning and relatively competent militia commander, but his experience did not go much beyond the local common on muster day. As usual, lines of authority and responsibility between commanders were fuzzy, resulting in squabbles over picayune issues that made joint planning an unpleasant and unproductive chore.

On 19 July, after less than a month of preparation, Commodore Saltonstall gave the signal and his fleet got under way for Penobscot. It was a pleasant summer sail down east with a short stop at Townsend (Boothbay) to pick up additional militia.

No operation of this size could be kept under wraps for very long, and from Loyalist informants the British at Bagaduce knew well in advance that the Americans were coming. They worked day and night digging in and improving their positions and artillery was shifted to take advantage of greater fields of fire. In the harbor Captain Mowatt ordered his three sloops, *North*, *Nautilus*, and *Albany* brought up to cover the mouth of the harbor. Behind them he placed four small transports that, if necessity required, he was prepared to set afire and send into the American Fleet.

Six days after leaving Boston the American Fleet came to off the Bagaduce Peninsula well out of reach of British guns. After surveying the situation Saltonstall ordered nine of his ships ahead in three divisions to engage Mowatt's sloops. With *Warren* in the van the Americans advanced towards the British but Saltonstall, cautious and not anxious to get too close, kept his ships at a respectful distance. At that range there was little danger and for a couple of hours the two sides exchanged shots with only slight damage inflicted. Despite their overwhelming advantages the Americans had not begun well. Ashore the British watched the confused evolutions and poor gunnery of the American Fleet and rightly concluded that their attackers were not nearly so formidable as they first appeared. Lovell ordered his troops ashore. They hit the beach and came under heavy fire from an enemy who was well concealed in thick brush. The Americans were driven back. The next day Lovell ordered a feint made towards the same beach while the main force of soldiers and marines assaulted a nearby island. The ruse worked. They took the

island along with an enemy battery that they could now turn against the British fort.[4]

Despite the bombardment the British held out. For the next few days the American militia poked and prodded around the enemy's defenses. Although he had the advantage, Lovell refused to make an assault. While the General paused outside the fort, the Commodore moved again to attack Mowatt. Led by *Warren*, three ships moved in but once again Saltonstall came about before they could get close enough to do any real damage. The British gunners with a better eye, more experience, and a good deal of luck managed to put two shots into *Warren*'s main mast, a shot into her bowsprit and one that parted the forestay. *Warren* withdrew and spent the next 2 days repairing her damage.

Inside Fort St. George things were beginning to look up. MacLean stripped his transports of cannon and mounted them on the ramparts, and at the same time he ordered sailors from the same ships into the fort to man the breastworks. Lovell's delay allowed MacLean time to improve and strengthen his position. The campaign was settling into a pattern that gave every advantage to the British. It was a siege and promised to be a long drawn out affair of desultory firing accompanied by a lot of digging and waiting. It was not the kind of operation that the militia and privateers had bargained for. They had expected a quick victory and an equally quick return home. Under these circumstances just how long Saltonstall and Lovell could hold their people at Penobscot was uncertain.

Saltonstall was not inclined to risk all in an attack. He had no stomach for pushing up the harbor after Mowatt as long as the guns at Fort St. George could bear down on him. The privateers, who thus far had been of no help at all, agreed. Saltonstall, Lovell and their officers spent endless hours together arguing about what the others should do. Lovell wanted Saltonstall to take the enemy sloops first, but Saltonstall wanted Lovell to take the fort first. The General would not budge. He told Saltonstall bluntly "the alternative now remains, to destroy the ships, or raise the siege."[5] Other militia officers felt the same way. Col. John Brewer, a Penobscot native, urged the Commodore to attack. Saltonstall responded angrily to Brewer "You seem to be d__d knowing about this matter! I am not going to risk my shipping in that d__d hole."[6] Like many American naval commanders Dudley Saltonstall had the heart of privateersmen. His overriding concern was the preservation of his ships and avoidance of risks. He could never quite accept the doctrine that under certain circumstances it might be wise to risk all in order to achieve victory. On the other side, Lovell and Brewer knew their men and they were none too anxious to lead raw militia against entrenched veteran troops.

Saltonstall tried to maintain his position but it was difficult. In early August a dispatch boat from Boston arrived with intelligence from the Navy Board—a British relief force was on its way. The Board told Saltonstall that unless he hurried all would be lost. Under pressure from all sides he relented and plans were laid for a full-scale land and sea assault to take place on 13 August.

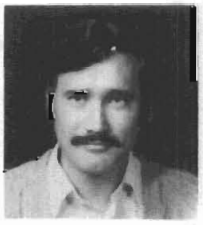
All through the night of the 12th, militia officers moved among their men checking equipment and giving last minute instructions. Offshore, Saltonstall was watching as his ships, according to plan, began to move silently into position. In the grey dawn hours Lovell moved his men close to the fort. Everything was ready. A morning fog delayed the attack a few more hours. As it began to lift the Americans stood by their guns but before the firing commenced *Diligent* drew alongside the flagship with an urgent message. She had been

on picket duty off the coast and came to report that she had sighted several sail bearing up towards Bagaduce. The attack was called off and a hasty conference was called. What *Diligent* had spotted was a British squadron, 10 days out of Sandy Hook, sent to reinforce MacLean and Mowatt. It consisted of the 64 gun ship of the line, *Raisonable* accompanied by three frigates, *Blonde*, *Virginia* and *Greyhound*, along with three sloops, *Camilla*, *Galatea* and *Otter* George Collier was in command. At first Saltonstall thought about defending and trying to hold the British while the transports evacuated the troops to safety farther up the bay. That plan disintegrated as the British ships drew closer and the privateersmen saw their sides bristling with open gun ports. Saltonstall knew that he could never get his nervous privateersmen to join in a straightforward battle and even if he could it was doubtful how much help they would be against disciplined and well-trained British crews. Under the circumstances Saltonstall could do nothing but signal to his ships to scatter and seek safety as best they could. It was a donnybrook. Vessels ran aground. Some, including *Warren*, were blown up by their crews. Others tried to run to safety up the Penobscot River. That was futile and they too ran hard aground. Everywhere sailors and soldiers were scrambling through brush and woods trying desperately to get away.

When it was all over the Americans could count 14 vessels blown up or burned by their crews and 28 captured. Five hundred Americans were either dead or taken prisoner and more than $7 million wasted.[7]

News of the catastrophe got back to Boston before most of the survivors. Someone needed to be blamed and Saltonstall was the logical choice. He was, after all, the senior officer but there was another possible reason as well. The State of Massachusetts was saddled with nearly all the bills for the unfortunate expedition. The men in the Statehouse were anxious to find someone to share the burden if they could. Fixing the blame on Saltonstall would provide a strong argument in favor of the Continent splitting the cost. A Committee of Inquiry from the General Court found that Lovell had not been properly supported by Saltonstall and that the principal reason for the failure was the failure of the Commodore to display "proper spirit and energy." Shortly after that Saltonstall was court-martialed and dismissed from the service. Some thought he got off lightly and should have been shot for presiding over one of the saddest spectacles in American naval history.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



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NOTES

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