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Craig L. Symonds
U.S. Naval Reserve

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Nowhere else are the elements of strategy and tactics essential to military success more dramatically etched than in the accounts of past military disasters. Although U.S. forces have logged an impressive record in the field of amphibious operations in recent history, this has not always been the case. Turning back to the War of American Independence, we have, in the following account of the ill-fated colonial expedition to Penobscot Bay, an object lesson in the fundamentals of any military operation which in this case were observed in the breach.

THE AMERICAN NAVAL EXPEDITION TO PENOBSCOT, 1779

An article prepared

by

Ensign Craig L. Symonds, U.S. Naval Reserve

In the summer of 1779, while the major land battles of the American Revolutionary War were being fought in the Carolinas, one of the first American amphibious operations in history was being prepared in New England against a British base which dominated the harbor at Penobscot Bay. The attacking American Fleet consisted of 19 warships armed with 345 guns in all. Opposing this armada was a British squadron of only three ships, mounting but 56 guns. Yet, for some reason, the American Fleet lay anchored in Penobscot Bay for 3 weeks, unable or unwilling to come to grips with the much smaller fleet of the British Navy. Likewise the American Militia, after a successful landing, merely entrenched itself in fortifications without ever seriously challenging the British troops for possession of the port.

Despite its dramatic failure, this expedition demonstrated that a com-

bined naval-infantry operation might be feasible if led by a responsible and courageous commander. Unfortunately, that description can hardly be applied to Commodore Dudley Saltonstall, who must accept responsibility for the Penobscot fiasco. By examining this early American amphibious operation, one may gain a greater appreciation of the dangers and pitfalls inherent in any amphibious operation, regardless of sophistication of weapons and tactics employed.

In mid-June 1779, some 800 British regular troops and Scottish Highlanders, under orders from Whitehall, were transported to the coast of Maine near the city of Castine. Castine was not a vital strategic point in the war of the American Revolution, but its large and well-protected harbor in Penobscot Bay provided an excellent location for a shipping base. Maine at that time was

still a part of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and the patriotic citizens of that State were angered by the thought that a British base lay within their territory. "When the news of the British occupation reached Boston, the general court was in session, and it was soon determined to drive out the enemy if possible, before he had time to strengthen his position."¹

In Boston Harbor an expedition was readied with unusual speed. The small navy of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was to lead the fleet, while privateers were encouraged to join with the promise that the government would make good any losses suffered as a result of their participation. Twelve privately owned vessels finally agreed to accompany the expedition under these conditions. The Massachusetts Navy consisted of three brigs: the *Hazard*, the *Active*, and the *Tyrannicide*—each of which was armed with 14 guns. The privateers were, in several cases, more powerfully gunned than the navy ships. Four of the privately owned ships carried 20 guns each, four carried 18, while the remaining four carried from eight to 16. In addition to these 15 ships, the armada also included the *Hampton*, a New Hampshire Navy ship of 20 guns.

The preparation of this formidable fleet for sea was quickly completed, but before it could set sail, it was reinforced even further by the arrival in Boston Harbor of a squadron of Continental Navy ships under the command of Commodore Dudley Saltonstall. The command of the proposed expedition was immediately offered to the distinguished Saltonstall, and he promptly accepted. The addition of the Continental Navy vessels brought to 19 the total number of warships and greatly increased the overall firepower of the fleet. Saltonstall's flagship was the 32-gun frigate *Warren*, designed by Joshua Humphreys especially to serve in the Continental Navy and one of the

most beautiful ships in the service of the Americans. The other ships of his squadron were the 14-gun brig *Diligent*, under the command of Captain Brown, and the sloop *Providence* with its 12 guns, under Captain Hacker. The latter ship was another famous vessel, having once been commanded by John Paul Jones.

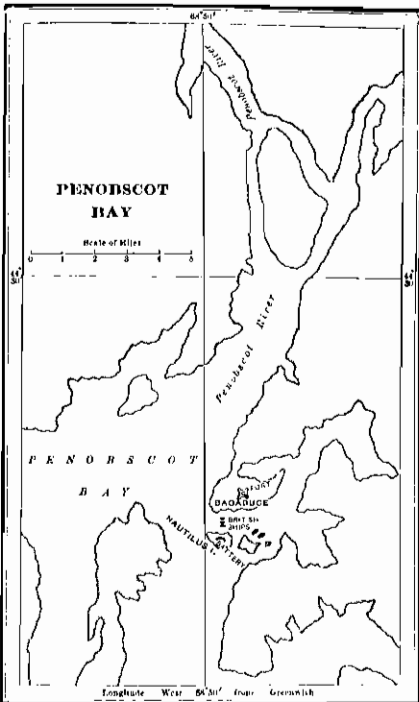
This formidable fleet of armed vessels was to accompany an even larger fleet of transport vessels on which were embarked the landing forces of the expedition under the command of Brig. Gen. Solomon Lovell of the Massachusetts Militia. Generals Cushing and Thompson, who were the commanders of the militia of Lincoln and Cumberland Counties, respectively, had been ordered to furnish 600 men each, while Brigadier General Frost of York County was ordered to provide 300 men. Despite the fact that 1,500 men had been ordered to Boston for the expedition, just over 1,000 actually reported.

Although most of the men supplied their own arms, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts provided an additional 500 muskets for the expedition. Even more importantly, the Massachusetts troops were also well supplied with powder and ammunition, for loaded on board the transports were 50,000 musket cartridges, an equal number of balls, and six barrels of powder. Other supplies included six fieldpieces, 200 artillery rounds, and all "the necessary supplies and camp furniture."²

On Monday, the 19th of July, the initial group of 16 warships and 20 transport vessels put out from Nantasket Roads. Two days later, on the 21st, the fleet arrived at the small seaport village of Townsend where the militia and the rest of the naval fleet were waiting. Two more days were spent in getting these troops ready to embark and in planning the strategy of this, the largest American naval expedition ever assembled. Finally, on Friday the 23d, the militia embarked amid much confusion. The next morning the

fleet left Townsend and "favored by a pleasant N.W. gale, arrived at Penobscot Bay. . . ."³

Prelude to Battle. The bay at Penobscot is a widemouthed and very deep harbor dotted with dozens of large and small islands. The entrance to the protected inner portion of the bay is divided by a narrow strip of land appropriately called Long Island. The British fort was located just beyond this island on a peninsula jutting out into the bay and commanding the principal passage into the inner harbor (see map). Having sighted the entrance to Penobscot Bay, the American Fleet took the rest of the day to tack up the inlet and draw within sight of their ultimate objective. About 2 o'clock the following afternoon, the fleet anchored off Magebagiduce Harbor wherein lay the three British sloops of war that had escorted the British soldiers to Castine.



Source: Gardner W. Allen, *A Naval History of the American Revolution* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), v. II, p. 425.

The British ships were the *North*, of 20 guns; the *Albany* of 18 guns; and the *Nautilus*, also of 18 guns. On the peninsula itself an enormous British flag flew above the hastily erected dirt fort which enclosed the redcoated soldiers of His Majesty's Army. According to a witness on board the privateer ship *Hunter*, "the whole made a very formidable appearance."⁴

While the sailors in the American Fleet thought the defensive works prepared by the British looked rather formidable, they were in reality improvised dirt walls never higher than 4 feet anywhere along the length of the fort. "The fort at this time was ill prepared to resist an enemy."⁵ On the northern face of the fort the walls were only 4 feet in height, and the sides were merely gentle slopes topped by a low stone fence. From the rear the fort was completely undefended, there being only a slight depression in the ground to mark the edge of the fort. There was a moat or ditch around the walls, but it was nowhere over 3 feet deep. "So low were the walls that a soldier was heard to say that he could jump over them with a musket in each hand."⁶ What was even more remarkable was the fact that not a single piece of artillery had been mounted anywhere in the fort. The platforms for the cannon had not even been prepared.

The British commander at the fort, General McLean, had intended to prepare a permanent fortress on the peninsula, but he received word of the impending American expedition in July and immediately set his men to work preparing emergency fortifications. "His troops were kept vigorously at work by night and day," so that when the American Fleet was sighted rounding Nautilus Island in the center of the bay, the British "fort" consisted of a U-shaped dirt wall surrounded by a shallow ditch.⁷ The very day that the American Fleet anchored just out of range of the fort, the British managed to

mount a few cannon on shore, but it was not until the next day, the 26th, that the fort was actually inhabited by the British troops.

It was fortunate for the British defenders that the American forces were not disposed to act immediately. The afternoon of the 25th, the American warships sailed up to within range and fired a few broadsides at the fort and then retreated back up the bay. The fort answered the American cannonade by firing their few hastily emplaced cannon, but according to one observer, the shots were fired "with little annoyance" to either side.⁸

Faced by an overwhelming enemy fleet, the three British sloops shifted their anchorage to a point farther back in the bay, where they would be protected by the guns of the fort. Their withdrawal gave the Americans the first opportunity to land troops. Heretofore they had been afraid that the British ships would be used to harass the landing, but their new anchorage, away from the prospective landing site, obviated such fears.

The first goal of any landing party necessarily was the British battery on Nautilus Island, for so long as the British commanded both the island and the mainland, the Americans would be subject to a crossfire. Consequently, at about 6 o'clock in the evening of 26 July, some 200 militia landed on an unprotected shore of Nautilus Island. Since the British post was manned by less than 20 marines, the Americans were easily able to overrun the post and capture the battery. But the main landing of troops on the peninsula was delayed until the following day.

The next morning, Commodore Saltonstall convened a council of war on board his flagship, the *Warren*. The consensus of the ship captains at this meeting was that the marines on the Navy ships should join the militia in making a mass landing on the western edge of the peninsula. The new location

of the British warships precluded a landing on the southern or eastern sides, but those ships would be unable to interfere at all with a landing on the western shore. It was agreed that two of the larger privateers would cover the landing which would be made that evening under cover of darkness.

At about 2 o'clock on the morning of the 28th, the privateers *Hunter* and *Sky-Rocket* preceded the transport vessels in approaching the landing site. At 4 o'clock the two ships opened fire while the militia clambered into their landing boats. The beach in front of them was a very narrow strip of sand, and directly behind it was "a very high hill full of trees, brush, and craggy rocks, where two or three hundred Highlanders and some Britons lay in ambush."⁹

The 200 marines and 200 militia piled ashore and picked their way up the stony beach in the darkness. Their landing had been preceded by a half-hour bombardment of the land behind the beach, but that cannonade did not succeed in driving off the British troops. As soon as the Americans landed, the Britons on the high ground behind the beach began to fire upon them with musketry. In the first few minutes, 16 men were killed and as many wounded. Nevertheless, the Americans "returned the fire, ascended the most impassible [sic] precipice, routed them and took possession of the hill. . . ."¹⁰ It should be noted that the party of Americans who ascended the hill and forced the British from their strong position were nearly all marines; a contemporary stated that the militia stayed behind hugging the beach and taking cover behind the large boulders that lined the water's edge. Consequently, it was the marines that suffered the most in the battle. Their commander, a captain of marines from the *Warren*, was killed in the assault along with 29 others.

General Lovell expressed great optimism after this successful assault despite the loss of 30 men. "We are

within 100 rods of the enemies [sic] main fort, on a commanding piece of ground," he reported. "I hope soon to have the satisfaction of informing you of the capture of the whole army."¹¹ Future events, however, failed to confirm the general's bold prophecy.

The Land Battle. The remainder of Thursday as well as all day Friday and Saturday found the American militia constructing their own fortifications on the peninsula. By the evening of Friday, the 30th of July, the peninsula projecting into Penobscot Bay held two forts, about half a mile apart, about equal in strength, and nearly equally manned. While the American militia built its fort, the British regulars continued to improve their own fortifications, and neither side demonstrated any desire to dislodge or interfere with the other.

On 31 July, Commodore Saltonstall called another council of war. His new plan was to disrupt the communications between the British fort and their small fleet of warships lying anchored in the tiny bay behind the fort. The plan that evolved at this council was for about 200 marines to go ashore at midnight and, in conjunction with the troops from the American fort, to attack the breastworks guarding the point of land closest to the British ships. By capturing this position Saltonstall hoped the British would be unable to coordinate defense plans, and the Americans would be able to deal with each part of the British forces piecemeal.

This attack was finally carried out at about 2 o'clock in the morning, Sunday, "with great vigour and resolution..."¹² The American marines carried the breastworks, but no sooner had they dislodged the British troops than the British ships began a bombardment of the position so recently occupied by their own land forces. The fire from the ships drove the Americans out of the breastworks, and it was

reoccupied by the British.

Foiled in his plan to divide the enemy, Saltonstall wasted the next 2 days cannonading the fort from long range. From the 2d of August until the 6th, the Americans and the British passively confronted each other with meager results. Each day of delay worked to the advantage of the British, however, in that they were expecting reinforcements from Halifax, while the Americans had failed to make provision for additional reinforcements. The position of the American Fleet, anchored deep within the bay at Penobscot, was a very dangerous one should any enemy vessels arrive at the bay entrance. Indeed, the entire American Fleet could easily be trapped between British forces already in the bay and newly arrived reinforcements.

On 6 August the commodore again displayed the flag signal for "all Captains," and another war council was held on board the *Warren*. This time the commodore's plan was for the militia and the marines to attack the fort while the navy attacked the British ships behind the fort. But this plan was not accepted by General Lovell who claimed that his men could not assault the fort unless supported by naval gunfire. He claimed that since his army was composed primarily of militia, untrained and inexperienced, they could not be trusted to attack entrenched regular troops. Finally the council concluded that the American forces should continue to entrench themselves in their positions while further reinforcements were sought from the authorities in Boston. This being decided, a message was sent off to Boston in a whaleboat, asking for additional troops, and the war council broke up.

During the period of waiting that followed, the American position became more untenable with each passing day. Having lost the momentum of their original assault on the beaches, the American land forces committed several

irresponsible acts, including the burning of many of the houses and barns of local inhabitants who were citizens of the State of Massachusetts and therefore the very people the Massachusetts Militia had been sent to protect. A witness on board the *Hunter* wrote: "The procedure [of burning the houses and barns] was judged to be conducted with great imprudence, as it would only have a tendency to distress the poor inhabitants. . . ." ¹³

This policy of delay continued until the 9th of August when again there appeared the familiar signal of "all Captains" above the *Warren*. At this conference, the captains urged that the naval fleet be used to attack the British ships, but the commodore "judged . . . that the attack would be attended with great risque and danger of having our ships much injured."¹⁴ The fact that a commodore who commanded 19 ships of war mounting nearly 350 guns should fear to attack three sloops at anchor was the most remarkable of Saltonstall's many injudicious decisions throughout the campaign. The commodore rejected this proposed attack, and once again the decision of the council was to do nothing. An observer on board the *Hunter* noted at this time that "A general uneasiness is discovered through the fleet at being detained so long, many desert from the ships every night."¹⁵

On Tuesday, 10 August, another conference was held on board the *Warren*, and this time a positive decision was made to attack the British fort and the ships simultaneously. The attack would commence the next day when General Lovell would lead the militia and the marines against the fort, while Saltonstall would lead the American Fleet against the British ships.

The following morning General Lovell led some 750 men out onto the plain between the British and American forts, and they shuffled about in confusion while the general tried to put

them in some military order. The plan of the militia attack was for a small detachment of about 250 to parade in front of the British fort just out of musket range in order to tempt the British to sally forth: the small detachment would then lead the British into the jaws of the larger group of militia across the plain. It was a simple plan, almost naive, but it proved to be remarkably successful in its primary goal.

The detached party of 250 proceeded across the plain toward the British fort. The ensuing activities were described in the journal of the ship *Hunter*:

. . . a detached party of 250 proceeded to the small battery near the S.E. point to excite the British troops to attack them from their citadel; after they had paraded themselves in the battery, about fifty-five regular troops sallied from the citadel, and advancing with resolution and intrepidity, put the whole party to flight, without discharging a gun; they pursued them to the main body, and then discharging a volley, drove the whole seven hundred and fifty into the fort, in the greatest confusion imaginable—the officers damning their soldiers, and the soldiers their officers for cowardice, many losing their implements of war, &c.¹⁶

The captains of the American Fleet were in excellent position to watch the rout of their land troops, and Commodore Saltonstall called off the proposed attack on the ships. That night the American commander called another council of war. General Lovell claimed, with understandable anger and disgust, that his troops were not capable of opposing British regulars "on account of their inexpertness and want of courage." The general felt that since the American soldiery was inadequate and since no reinforcements were imminent, it would be best to raise the siege. But

the captains of the fleet voted to continue the siege despite the fact that they felt themselves unable to launch a full-scale attack on the British fortifications. The next day their lack of sound judgment and foresight would be clearly demonstrated.

The Battle at Sea. Friday, 13 August 1779, began as a rather warm, but foggy day. The writer on board the *Hunter* wrote that "very great uneasiness appears throughout the fleet at being thus detained at the risk of British reinforcements arriving, and the prospect of reducing the place, either by sea or land, was so dubious." It is safe to assume that his disgust was general throughout the fleet. The attitude of the invading force was now radically changed. Rather than planning action against the land forces, the eyes of the fleet captains looked regularly toward the entrance to the bay, fearing the arrival of British warships. The journal on board the *Hunter* eloquently stated the situation:

Three weeks have now elapsed since our siege began, and little or nothing is affected to our advantage. In the meantime our opponents are fortifying, and have completed a very formidable citadel, where they are secure against us; which at our arrival was only a breastwork, containing five or six pounders, which then, in all probability, we could have reduced very easily. . . . in the course of which time thirteen or fourteen councils of war have been held, resolving one day to attack, and the next reversing their schemes. The Commodore complaining that the General is backward, and the General that the fault is in the Commodore; the people censuring both, and are determined, unless something is directly done . . . that they would leave the ships, and not risk an

attack by a superior force which was daily expected.¹⁷

With the American Fleet thus resting at anchor, the officers undecided as to the proper course of action, and the troops demoralized, a lookout on board the *Warren* sighted the topsails of a ship-rigged vessel standing into Penobscot Bay; it was followed by another, then another, and the alarm spread from ship to ship as seven British men-of-war rounded the headlands of the bay and bore down on the American vessels. The last entry in the journal of the *Hunter* reads:

. . . five or six British ships hove in sight, making a formidable appearance, which has thrown our fleet and army into great consternation, the ships are all heaving up, the land forces embarking on board the transports, waiting to see what force this consists of, and consulting how to escape if the force should be superior, concluding to attempt an escape by the west side of Long Island, or run the ships ashore and betake ourselves to the woods.¹⁸

Commodore Saltonstall now planned to slow up the advancing British as much as possible in order to allow the transports to escape. He formed his ships in a rough crescent across the bay and waited there for the advance of the British Fleet. The advancing squadron consisted of one 64-gun razeed, the *Raisable*, three small frigates, and three sloops. All together, the British Fleet mounted some 210 guns to the Americans' 345, but the larger British ships were capable of throwing a heavier weight of metal. There was no thought of battle in the American commodore's mind. As soon as the lead British ship, a small 20-gun frigate, approached the massed American Fleet, the entire mass turned and made all sail to escape. The British ships advanced according to the speed of each individual vessel, with the smaller frigates and sloops reaching the

American Fleet first. Clearly, their position would have been dangerous had the Americans decided to make a fight of it, but the Americans were already on the run and the British hurried their retreat by firing their bow chasers.

Two of the American vessels tried to escape by sailing up the narrow passage on the far side of Long Island, but they were cut off by a British frigate and they ran themselves aground. The rest of the fleet fled upriver. Eventually all of the American vessels were burned or blown up to prevent their capture. The loss of the *Warren* was a serious blow to the infant American Navy—she was one of the few regularly commissioned warships in service in 1779, and she was virtually irreplaceable. The only warlike action on the part of the American forces that day was a halfhearted attempt to send a fireboat downriver against the British ships. But the British ships easily towed the burning sloop to shore, and the battle at sea came to an ignominious end for the American armada.

Conclusions. The preponderance of blame for the spectacular failure of the American forces in the Penobscot expedition of 1779 must go to its commanding officer, Commodore Dudley Saltonstall. His appointment to command had been political in the first place, and he repeatedly demonstrated his military incompetence throughout the course of the 3-week siege of Penobscot Bay.

Two weeks after the fiasco of Penobscot Bay, Commodore Saltonstall was

tried by court-martial on board the frigate *Deane* in Boston Harbor. The court found that Saltonstall should be peremptorily dismissed from the Navy. His conviction by that court was all the more damning in that the charge against him was one of "cowardice." Certainly Saltonstall erred badly when he refused to attack the three British sloops on first arriving at Penobscot Bay. He erred even further in refusing to fight the first advance ships of the British relief force on the final day of the siege, but his greatest error was in waiting 3 weeks between these two events and refusing to take any action at all. Gardner W. Allen's conclusion: "The whole affair is a record of blunders and lack of foresight"¹⁹ could hardly be more warranted.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Ens. Craig L. Symonds, U.S. Naval Reserve, did his undergraduate work at the University of California at Los Angeles and earned his master's degree in American history from the University

of Florida where he was a National Defense Education Act fellow. After teaching 2 years in the Florida public school system, he entered the Navy and received his basic training at NTC Orlando. A distinguished graduate of the Naval Officer Candidate School at Newport, Ensign Symonds is currently serving as Research Assistant to the President of the Naval War College.

FOOTNOTES

1. Gardner W. Allen, *A Naval History of the American Revolution* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), v. II, p. 420.
2. "Operations in Maine in 1779, Journal Found on Board the *Hunter*, Continental Ship, of Eighteen Guns," *The Historical Magazine*, February 1864, p. 51.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
4. *Ibid.*
5. George A. Wheeler, *Castine Past and Present* (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1896), p. 30.

6. Wheeler, p. 29.
7. *Ibid.*
8. "Operations in Maine . . .," p. 53.
9. *Ibid.*
10. "Operations in Maine . . .," p. 53.
11. *Boston Gazette*, 9 August 1779.
12. "Operations in Maine . . .," p. 53.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 53-54.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Allen, p. 436.



. . . an officer may be highly successful and even brilliant, in all grades up to the responsible positions of high command, and then find his mind almost wholly unprepared to perform its vitally important functions in time of war.

*RADM William S. Sims, USN, Address to
Naval War College, December 1919*