

Chapter Thirty Seven

All the Americans were now across. Washington turned around and slowly trotted toward the lines on the American side of the creek. Eighteen rebel cannons lined the slight rise 200 yards back where men poured in the powder and smashed the balls down the barrels. Other men hurried to move the thirty wagons out of the way, up to the road and behind the trees, beyond the sight of the British guns, but not far enough away that the ammunition was unavailable. Three thousand American muskets pointed at the creek and the bridge. Many men lay down in the frozen grass to present a lower profile.

Hand's men were on the right. From Hand's angle, he watched thousands of British come out of the woods behind town and run toward the bridge. He estimated about five thousand British altogether. No doubt, there were others on the road, yet to arrive, along with their cannons.

The British infantry lined up just south of town. They crouched behind houses and trees in case of an American artillery attack. They waited. They loaded. Officers steadied them. A contingent of British grenadiers a hundred yards to the north of the bridge steeled themselves against the expected command.

The Americans heard the dreaded order from across the creek, "Charge!" Forty British soldiers charged fast for the bridge.

The bridge was sixteen feet wide and made of stone. It ran north and south. The railings were stone, three feet above the base of the bridge and nine inches thick. The British came onto the bridge with hatred in their eyes.

American cannons exploded from behind. Cannonballs slammed into the bridge and columns of water shot high in the air. American muskets mowed down the British from far and near. The British scrambled back to their lines. Many were wounded, and others never made it off the bridge.

The firing stopped. Other British came onto the bridge with no interference from the Americans and dragged away the dead and wounded. The walls of the bridge were still intact. Washington was fifty yards from the bridge now. He ordered some men nearby, “You. You men, cover the exit. You too, up to the bridge. You, over there, off to the right. Report to Colonel Hand, over there.”

The British formed heatedly on their side for another attack. A British officer pointed to the bridge. Another fifty British charged with bayonets. The three British cannons, in place now, boomed from secure hiding places in town, aiming for the American guns. There were no hits.

The American artillery opened up again. Hundreds of American muskets went off. Two American cannons aimed for the British artillery at the edge of town and took off the top of a Trenton house, too high a shot. The British cannoneers moved back into the protection of the houses. Another American cannonball smashed the bridge’s right, eastern, stone railing, creating a gaping two-foot hole in the side. Buckets of British blood poured through the opening and into the water below. British soldiers tumbled off both sides and into the creek.

Colonel Hand and an officer watched the battle at the bridge from the right. The officer asked, “Shouldn’t we send some men over there, sir?”

Hand said, “That would be about the stupidest thing we could do.”

The British formed for a third charge. To cover it, the British artillery opened up. Cannonballs flew overhead, striking the mud and scampering around through the American lines. Another fifty British charged the bridge. Cannonballs and bullets slaughtered them. They fell into the creek like cattle off a ravine. Simultaneously, a hundred British rushed to the Americans’ right, Hand’s men defending, and waded into the creek. Henry Knox, with the artillery, pointed them out to his gunners. Hand’s men blasted them with rifles. Cannonballs splashed into the creek from Henry’s guns. Arms, legs, and mangled bodies gurgled to the surface.

The firing stopped. British Major Derring waded into the freezing water to retrieve a wounded soldier. Hand took careful aim. Derring looked down the barrel of a Kentucky Long Rifle a mere thirty yards away and stared coldly at Hand for a long three seconds. Hand lowered his gun. Derring pulled the soldier out.

On the British side, General Cornwallis sat on a horse just south of the buildings, a hundred yards north of the creek. Another officer rode up on a horse. He arrived just in time to see the slaughter at the Battle of the Assunpink. The officer looked south at the many dead and wounded lying on the ground on the British side of the bridge. There was no more firing from there, because proper warfare etiquette forbade the shooting of wounded soldiers in retreat. The officer watched as several British soldiers dragged the wounded men back toward town.

Cornwallis's horse snorted from the acrid smell of gunpowder clogging its nostrils. Cornwallis patted the horse. "There, there. It'll be over soon."

The officer said, "We'd better hold off for tonight, sir. It's getting dark."

"Yes, I know. No matter. I'll bag the Fox in the morning."

The officer said, "If Washington is the general I take him to be, his army will not be found there in the morning, sir."

Cornwallis didn't reply. He only stroked the mane of his horse, indifferent to the carnage at the creek.

"Sir, how shall I report the casualties to General Howe?"

"There were no casualties today, my good man."

Henry Knox spied Cornwallis and the officer on horses 400 yards away. He pointed them out to Alexander Hamilton, nineteen years old, Captain of artillery.

Hamilton was one of those remarkable young officers whose age didn't seem to matter to anyone. Henry remembered him last week at Trenton when he pulled two cannons onto King

Street just as the British were about to counterattack. Two shots from Hamilton's cannons sent the British reeling just in time.

Henry asked, "May I?"

Hamilton motioned to his cannons with a 'help yourself' gesture.

Henry aimed the gun himself. He crouched down behind the gun and lined his eye up the barrel. "Up." The men cranked the gun up an inch. "More." Another inch. Henry shoved the barrel around to the right and realigned it with his eye. He stepped away from the gun to get a better perspective, but Cornwallis moved. Henry went back to the gun. "Wait." He moved the barrel a smidgen to the right and looked up at Hamilton without a word. Hamilton lit a match. Henry took it and touched it to the hole.

The cannon jumped backward. A cannonball sailed over the creek and plowed into the mud three feet from Cornwallis and the British officer. The officer's horse whinnied and went up on its hind legs, so the officer climbed onto the horse's neck to bring it down and then slipped back into the saddle as the animal landed. The impact of the cannonball splattered the officer with mud. Cornwallis backed his own horse up to get out of the way.

Cornwallis looked the officer up and down. "For God's sake, man, clean yourself up."

Hamilton said, "Nice shot, sir."

Henry Knox shook his head, "Damn," and walked away.