

General Grant's Letter

I found this page online many years ago, and it doesn't seem to be live any more. It includes a boisterous letter from the much-hated General James Grant describing his part in the Battle of Brooklyn. The fighting he describes on the American's right flank confronted General Alexander, Lord Stirling, and men from Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania. His descriptions of the aftermath and the escape did not reflect the evolving reality on the American side.

The Battle for Long Island



The British forces under Major-General James Grant attacking the Continental right near Gowanus Bay (from a painting by Alonso Chapel).

The Battle of Long Island may well be the singular most important battle in American history. The events that took place on and around Long Island in late August, 1776, represented a number of firsts to our newly declared country: This was the first real battle of the American Revolution (Lexington/Concord and Breed's Hill were fought before independence was declared on July 4, 1776). This was also the first battle of the American Revolution in which George Washington was in command, having been appointed commander-in-chief by Congress on June 17, 1775. Long Island was also the first battle in which the newly formed Continental Army played a significant role, and was the first time since the outbreak of hostilities in 1774 where the British and Continental armies met on relatively open ground in formal lines of battle.

In May of 1776 the 55th regiment was assigned to the Fourth Brigade, commanded by its colonel, Major General James Grant, and Major Cornelius Cuyler (Howe's *Orderly Book*, p 355). Major Cuyler was also General Howe's Aid-de-camp, so Captain John Luke actually commanded the 55th at the battle of Long Island (Record of service, p 3).

General Howe stayed at Halifax with the British Army until June 7, 1776, when the 55th was assigned to embark on the Royal George and the Resolution bound for New

York (Howe, p. 360). Most of the British transports arrived safely off Sandy Hook on June 29, 1776. On July 3, the 55th landed on Staten Island and was assigned to garrison Fort Izzard at the site of present-day Richmond (Howe's orderly book, 3rd July, 1776; MHS letter). After waiting a full month for Howe to make his battle preparations, the 55th crossed over to Long Island on August 22 as part of the New York invasion forces (Fortescue, p 181-182). The light and Grenadier companies of the 55th were part of the first division to cross from Coles Ferry. In both cases, these flank companies were assigned the left of their respective divisions (Howe, 21st August, 1776).

Major Cuyler left for England in early September with word of the Battle of Long Island, returning on December 15, 1776 (Memoirs-Howe to Germaine, p 383; Kemble, p 103). From May until the end of 1776 the Fourth Brigade, along with the Third Brigade and three battalions of the 71st regiment, formed the second line in the British Order of Battle (Howe's Orderly Book, p 355).

Brigadier-General James Grant's account of the battle:

[General James Grant to his friend Richard Rigby, Paymaster to the Forces.]
Long Island, 2 Sepr., 1776.

We landed upon this Island the 22nd [of] August without opposition, the Yankees retiring burnt all the corn they could and drove away their Horses and Cattle. I wrote you from Halifax that they would do so.

You will be glad and Lord North not displeased that we have had the field day I talked of in my last letter and if a good Bleeding can bring those Bible-faced Yankees to their Senses -- the Fever of Independence should soon abate. We marched the 26th at night, the General and the army turned the left Flank of the Rebels [sic]. I was detached with eight Battalions and ten pieces of Cannon to turn their Right Flank, General de Heister remained at Flatbush which was the centre with orders to penetrate when the opportunity offer'd -- I fell in with some of the Rebels advanced Guards upon the March and in the course of the night took a Major and thirty prisoners. The 27th about six in morning I took an advantageous position in sight of all the Rebell's Works, we had skirmishing and a Cannonade for some hours, which drew their whole attention to my Detachment and by that means did not discover the General's March and Disposition till they were surrounded.

The General's plan answered to his wish, it was formed with Secrecy and precision no Body was entrusted with any part of it but those who were to carry it into Execution nor an officer or man knew where they were going but at large to take the Rebell's Redoubts. We think the Disposition was as good as could have been made and that the General from the Abilities he has shown deserved the success he has met with in obtaining a cheap and compleat Victory -- We have in short killed taken wounded drowned or dispersed all the Rebels upon Long Island -- we have also twelve hundred prisoners -- their Loss upon the whole I should think not under 3000, ours trifling, I had 23 killed and 90 wounded, General Clinton and Cornwallis with the Advanced Guard of the Army nearly the same number, the Brigades in Line not a man ... so that the loss sustained by the Army does not exceed 50 killed and 200 wounded -- many of them slightly, the Light Infantry and Guards chiefly in their hands and Arms which is not easily accounted for. Poor Coll [sic] Grant of the 40th and Sir Alexr. Murray of the 17th were killed with me ... so much for the 27th, which had been fixed a fast day all over America, and yet as the Yankees say themselves the Lord was not with them. Those cursed saints put me in the News Papers as being killed and rejoiced Exceedingly at getting rid of a Man who had abused them in Parliament some of their Prisoners having heard that Coll Grant was killed taking him for me said that it would give great pleasure to all America.

The 30th in the Morning the Rebels abandoned all their Works left Cannon, ammunition, Provisions of all kinds, Bread in their Ovens, Horses, Carriages, Cattle, and their Tents standing. We cannot yet account for their Precipitate Retreat, their Flight must be owing to a Quarrel amongst themselves or to an apprehension of being cut off [,] their Retreat to New York which by the way was impossible, their works were very strong, the Ground not so well taken up as I expected to find it, but they might have waited with great safety and have given us much trouble. Having abandoned Brockland, Red Hook, Governors Island they fled to New York in great confusion.

We have no certain information about them but they cannot remain at New York -- their panic will save that Town, which they would undoubtedly have burnt if they had not got a good dressing. Everything seems to be quiet at New York, no Noise [,] no Hurry [,] no Bustle in Town or round it, very few guns mounted in the Rebell Works on that Island, no Guards or Sentries to be seen -- those circumstances added to their panic[,] their Hurry [,] their Precipitation [,] their Dissensions and Divisions convince me that they have already retired -- the Southern People I should think to Philadelphia through the Jerseys, the Yankee New England Men to Kingsbridge and Connecticut for they hate one another and wont [sic] keep together tho' they all are all equally Rebels to Great Britain -- they may from compulsion become dutifull subjects for a time, but they never will be cordial and affectionate. Burke will never convince me to the contrary and Sir George Savile will find it difficult to account for the conduct of these Yankee Heroes in their own Element the Woods -- who you know were to meet us and fight us and beat us. I am much obliged to you for answering him in my Absence. I shall probably have an opportunity of animadverting upon him in the course of next Session -- I need not tell you that every man we meet here is a Friend of Government -- so will the Inhabitants of New York when we get possession which must happen in a few days and yet nobody remained in that Town but the most Violent Rebels those who only wished to oppose the Government of Great Britain without drawing the Sword and throwing away the Scabbard were obliged to fly from the Oppression of Rebell Commanders.

After the affair of New York is settled I think we should proceed to Philadelphia thro' the Jerseys and take up our Winter Quarters with the Hudson River upon our Right and Delawar[e] upon our Left remaining at the same time masters of Long and Staten Islands and adding Rhode Island to the King's Territories and in the course of the Winter the Commissioners will probably be able to bring things to an Accommodation for I don't look for an other Campaign.

Major Cuyler of my Reg[imen]t[,] one of the Generals Aide De Camps carries home the Dispatches, he sets out to-morrow. Lord George Germain will be glad to see him in Pall Mall and three months hence I shall have no objection to pay my respects to you at the Pay Office or at Mistley.

I have the Honour to be Dear Sir,
Your most obedient Servant
James Grant.
(Grant, pp 85-86)

After the battle, on August 31, 1776, the 55th was at Bedford, New York. They were part of the force that landed at Kip's bay on September 15, but saw little action during that crossing (MacKenzie, p 40-47). On October 10th, the 55th was left behind to defend the various British redoubts on Long Island while the rest of the British Army pursued Washington north through New York (Kemble, p 76-78). Two days later they were assigned to the command of Lord Percy, and on October 30th, 1776, the 55th was ordered to join the main army under General Howe in preparation for the New Jersey Campaign (MacKenzie, p 78 and 92). On November 30th the Fourth Brigade was in Newark (Robertson, p 114) and on December 6th, Grant and his Fourth Brigade marched down from New York to Brunswick, New Jersey with General Howe (Stryker, p 16).

For an interesting period account of the battle, see "The Battle of Brooklyn" in the [Ballindalloch Press section](#).

[Bibliography](#)

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