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NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
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HEARTS AND MINDS: THE POLITICAL AND MILITARY
EFFECTIVENESS OF THE RHODE ISLAND MILITIA
IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and
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or the Department of the Navy.

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The lessons for tomorrow may sometimes be found in yesterday's mistakes. This paper analyzes the political and military effectiveness of the Rhode Island militia during the Revolutionary War. Through careful study of the roots of Rhode Island and its militia forces, it is possible to understand the various functions performed by these forces in Rhode Island's struggle for independence. Revisionist historians assert that the war was not so much won by America as it was not lost. The militia played a significant part in sustaining the war until England finally withdrew from the conflict. The functions performed by the militia include providing internal control; a source of short-				
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Rhode Island's forces were divided into two major categories--those for the defense of the united colonies and those for the state's defense. The state "citizen soldier" forces were furthered divided into three minor categories. These were the militia, independently chartered companies, and alarm companies. All three are studied in this paper since all three performed the same functions for the state.

On three separate occasions, military and civilian leaders attempted to use the militia in large-scale operations. Each of these three attempts ended in disaster, not through the fault of the militia, but from the misunderstanding of the militia's weaknesses and strengths as a military force. This paper details these strengths and weaknesses in order to prevent modern-day leaders from making these same mistakes.

Countries such as Iraq, Peru, Yugoslavia, and Israel currently employ militia forces. In order to utilize these forces, leaders must understand how these forces were successful in the past. Although parallels can be drawn to Vietnam and other conflicts, this paper merely fills a void in both Rhode Island history and the history of the state's militia. Further research is necessary to apply the lessons learned during the American Revolution to conflicts in other countries and in other wars.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Setting the Stage

Should we conclude then that the root cause of British defeat was not so much in the failure of British leaders or British people, but in the circumstances of the war? That Britain's objective was simply not attainable without great good luck or divine intervention? That there was a disjunction between British ends and British means? That they were trapped in a set of basic assumptions about their problem that made the American Revolutionary War a British Tragedy?¹

American revolutionaries did not win the war, but they did not lose it. What do these words mean, and what is the point of the distinction? Clearly that they mustered enough strength from internal and foreign sources of support not to be defeated decisively, and that they hung on long enough to discourage the British government and people.²

John Shy

These descriptions of the American Revolution are contrary to traditional histories of the war. How does this view of the war conflict with the patriotic legend of the armed "citizen-soldier" firing from behind rocks at the British in their bright red uniforms? What of the patriotic colonists being led by the ablest of generals--George Washington--to glorious victory at Yorktown? Finally, how does Shy's view take into account the

¹John W. Shy, A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 19.

²Ibid., 21.

patriotic Americans who risked all in a life or death struggle with the armed might of the tyrant King George III for the glorious cause? If it is true that the war was not so much won as it was not lost, then how did the colonies survive over eight years of armed conflict with one of the world's largest and most powerful countries of the time? A partial answer to this question may be found in the colonies' use of their militia.

Three questions kept gnawing at me as I researched the Rhode Island militia. Why study the militia during the Revolutionary War? Why Rhode Island? Why now? If Shy's views reflect the true history of the American Revolution, then the myths perpetuated in various history books need to be revised.

Why Study the Militia?

In order not to lose the war, certain actions had to have been taken by the fledgling republic. A major portion of these actions, both politically and militarily, involved the militia. Although considerable effort has been expended detailing the history of the revolution, it was not always done with the view towards military lessons learned in the broader strategic, political, and social perspectives. Indeed, chronological histories of various military actions only tell a part of the story.

The interesting discussions still evolving from this conflict

are incomplete and have been revised to varying degrees during the various bicentennial celebrations. We are still learning lessons from this war. One of the most important lessons is how the political and military effectiveness of the militia forces contributed to the overall success of the war. The study of colonial militias should contribute to this knowledge.

Why Rhode Island?

Given slightly different circumstances, the "shot heard round the world" could have been fired in Rhode Island in 1772. The burning of the *Gaspee*, a British revenue ship patrolling the waters of Rhode Island, could have started the revolution. The democratic and separatist views prevalent throughout Rhode Island's history set this tiny colony apart from the other colonies. The colony's vast coastline, Newport's importance as an ice free harbor, and the multitude of land and sea battles made this colony truly unique during the revolution.

The colony of Rhode Island made several important contributions to the revolution. It provided more men per capita to the revolution than any of the thirteen colonies. It was an extremely important location to the British who continued to patrol, invade, harass and siege the colony throughout most of the war. The continued interest by the British in Rhode Island demanded the militia perform various functions throughout the war. One of the most important functions was to provide men to

the emerging national army. The militia repeatedly responded to the call for men and also provided the second highest ranking Continental general, Nathanael Greene. General Greene was instrumental in establishing a militia company, led Rhode Island's Army of Observation in Boston and became the Continental Army's leading general in the southern campaigns. Despite these factors, Rhode Island rarely receives more than a cursory mention in most studies of the American Revolution.

To understand how the Rhode Island militia was established, maintained, organized and used, the history of Rhode Island must be understood. A look at the laws, acts and resolves of the colony as it emerged from a loose confederation of towns, became a chartered colony, and finally developed into a state will provide the historical perspective on the formation of one colony's militia system. Indeed, an understanding of the social and political formation of this colony is integral to a study of the political and military aspects of their militia forces. This brief history will provide the rationale and motives underlying the political and military organization of the Rhode Island militia from its inception through the war of the American Revolution.

Why Now?

Given today's political and military environment, the importance of studying the militia will increase as the threat of

all-out nuclear war decreases. The strategies prevalent since the great land and sea battles of World War II may be rendered obsolete while the possibilities of conflicts involving smaller forces used in conjunction with militia forces may be on the increase. The militia is still a vital military/political tool. Recent events in Peru, Israel, and Yugoslavia highlight the currency of militia activities. The history of the Vietnam war includes several discussions on militia operations which both succeeded and failed. The "armed citizen" is still in being and must be understood in order to utilize its strengths and exploit its weaknesses.

The militia was more than a set of laws, acts and resolves. Its history is also that of individuals, of leaders, and of various military engagements. To prepare military and civilian leaders to deal with the possibilities of smaller wars utilizing militia forces, a thorough understanding of the successes and failures of various militia forces is required.

This paper will look at the political and military effectiveness of the Rhode Island militia from its inception to the conclusion of the American Revolution. It should develop an understanding of how the "hearts and minds" of the Rhode Islander's were influenced and how the militia was utilized to maintain the patriotic fervor so instrumental in eventually winning the American Revolution.

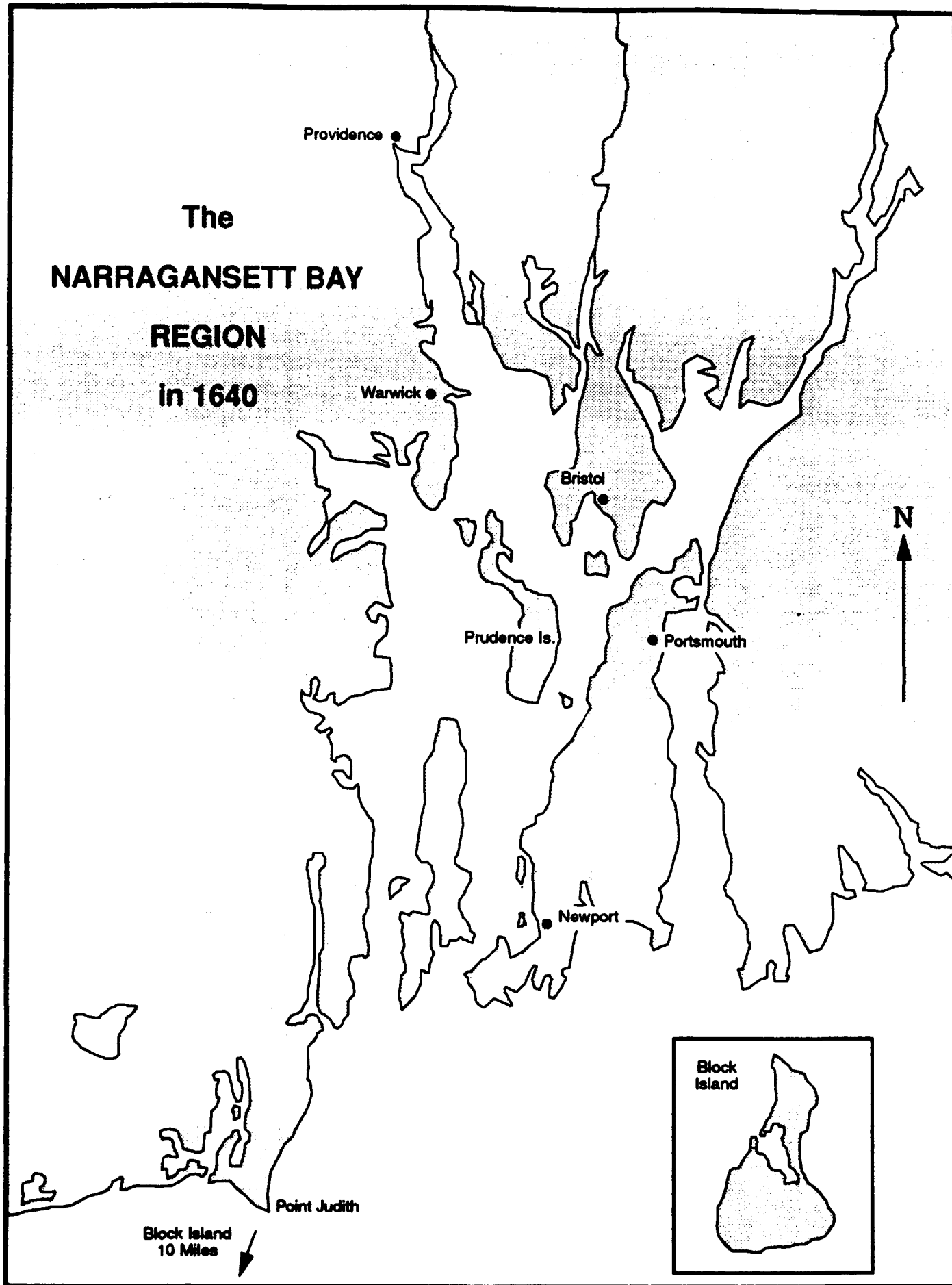
This will primarily be an historical approach to studying the militia. It presents the five functions performed by the

militia: intelligence gathering; local defense; harassing the enemy; reinforcing the regular army; and internal control. The militia performed these tasks effectively. Unfortunately, the militia also had several shortcomings. Among these shortcomings were its competition with the regular army for manpower, the increased need for arms and supplies to support the state's militia forces, the undisciplined and unreliable character of the militia, and the effect calling out the militia had on the state's farming and other trades.

CHAPTER 2

RHODE ISLAND: A BRIEF HISTORY

**The
NARRAGANSETT BAY
REGION
in 1640**



The Beginnings of a Colony

The foundations of the colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations were vested in a series of banishments from Massachusetts and not from an enlightened expansion for better lands. The original colonists were men and women of a religious and political bent neither desired nor tolerated in the Bay Colony. These men and women who were to settle south of Boston were of different political and religious beliefs than those held by the powerful Puritans in the Bay Colony. Their beliefs, and their expressions of these beliefs, led to their banishment to what would eventually become a colony.

Their characteristics of separatism, firm commitment to religious and individual freedoms, and their individualism are trademarks of the area even today. As they developed the region, their organization and use of the militia were closely tied not only to Elizabethan militia systems, but also to the independent and separatist views of the founders of the colony.

The First Settlements

Although various history books record Roger Williams as the father of Rhode Island, other men, not as well known, were earlier inhabitants. In April 1632, the Indians attacked a temporary trading post in Sowamset (now Warren) occupied by three

white men. The first permanent white settlement was initiated in 1634 by William Blackstone. Having sold his land in Boston, he settled in Cumberland near a river that would bear his name. It has also been noted that William Arnold and his family moved in April of 1636 from Massachusetts to what later would become Providence. Regardless of precisely who the original white settlers were, the man who had the most to do with the permanent establishment and growth of the first main settlement, Providence, was a man named Roger Williams.³

Williams had firm religious convictions and was steadfast in his belief of the separation of church and state. These beliefs led to several confrontations with the authorities in and around Boston. After several years of bickering between Williams and the various political, economic, and religious leaders, he was finally banished on October 1, 1635.⁴

With help from Indians he had previously befriended, Williams was able to make it through the winter of 1635-1636. Although he had moved from the Boston area in January 1636, his final resting spot was not yet reached. It seems that he first tried to settle on the eastern shore of the Seekonk river (now the town of East Providence), land under the jurisdiction of Plymouth Colony.

³See Charles Carroll, Rhode Island: Three Centuries of Democracy (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1932), 1:20; Rhode Island Conference of Business Associations, The Book of Rhode Island (Rhode Island Conference of Business Associations, 1930), 14; and Samuel G. Arnold, History of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1859-1860), 1:97-100.

⁴Carroll, Three Centuries, 1:20-23.

After being notified of this indiscretion, he removed himself to an area outside of Plymouth Colony's jurisdiction sometime in June of 1636. This site, known as Mooshassuc, he named "...Providence in recognition of and thankfulness for the Providence of God, which had guided him." Although the first settlement of the future colony, it was not to be the largest at the time of the revolution.⁵

The second settlement, Pocasset, or Portsmouth as it is now called, was originally settled by William Coddington, Anne Hutchinson and her followers with a signing of a compact on March 7, 1638.⁶ Hutchinson, her husband and her followers were also banished from Massachusetts much the same way Roger Williams was expelled. Coddington, although tried for various attitudes against the Bay Colony, was found not guilty by the General Court. Coddington was a rich Boston merchant and held several political and social positions while living in Massachusetts. His experience in these matters was instrumental in helping establish Portsmouth and Newport.⁷

The third settlement, Newport, located at the southern end of Rhode Island (originally called 'Aquedneck'⁸ Island by the Indians), was established by Coddington and others who left

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., 1:27.

⁷See Business Associations, Book of Rhode Island, 15; and Carroll, Three Centuries, 1:26-27.

⁸Arnold, History, 1:70.

Portsmouth by an agreement signed on April 28, 1639.⁹ They were apparently dissatisfied with the "apparently liberal tendencies appearing there, due possibly to the advent of Samuel Gorton."¹⁰ With its fine harbors and location at the mouth of Narragansett Bay, Newport was to become the largest of the original settlements at the time of the Revolutionary War.¹¹

The final major settlement was Shawomet (now called Warwick) in 1642. Samuel Gorton and friends had "distinctive religious and political views [which] had been already rejected by several communities and from Massachusetts soil."¹² Gorton refused to agree to the rules stated during the uniting of Newport and Portsmouth. He took issue with the legal rights of any "group of settlers to establish a government without royal sanction. The issue of legitimacy was fundamental, involving as it did controversy that troubled Rhode Island for a generation, until, in 1663, King Charles II granted the royal Charter."¹³ He was ordered to depart the island and applied to Roger Williams in Providence for freeman status. Opposed by Williams and William Arnold, he was allowed to stay a short while in Providence and then moved to Pawtuxet. After becoming a martyr through his

⁹Carroll, Three Centuries, 1:27.

¹⁰Business Associations, Book of Rhode Island, 15.

¹¹See Carroll, Three Centuries, 1:26-27; and Business Associations, Book of Rhode Island, 15.

¹²Business Associations, Book of Rhode Island, 15.

¹³Carroll, Three Centuries, 1:28.

subsequent actions against the authorities in Massachusetts, Norton and his followers were allowed to move to Shawomet, and establish what is now called Warwick.¹⁴

Although Portsmouth and Newport united in 1640 under a common legislative body, Providence and Warwick were still separate settlements. Various border disputes and other legal threats to all the settlements by the New England Confederacy (Massachusetts Bay, Plymouth, New Haven and Connecticut), caused the settlements along Narragansett Bay to realize a need for legal sanctioning and unification. Roger Williams obtained a patent of civil incorporation from the Parliamentary Committee in England in 1643.

This incorporation, however, did not solve all their problems.¹⁵ Some problems were geographical and some were due to the separatist attitudes of key individuals in each settlement. For example, Warwick was not originally included in the patent of 1643. Meanwhile, a multitude of various jealousies arose. One of these was apparently over their name, "Incorporation of Providence Plantations, in the Narraganset-Bay, in New England."¹⁶ By 1647 the various differences were worked

¹⁴See Carroll, Three Centuries, 1:28-29; and Business Associations, Book of Rhode Island, 15.

¹⁵See Arnold, History, 1:143, 156, 200; and Business Associations, Book of Rhode Island, 15, 17.

¹⁶See Arnold, History, 1:70, 200; and John R. Bartlett, ed., Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England, (Providence: A. Crawford Greene and Brothers, 1856; repr., New York: AMS Press, 1968), 1:145. The records of the General Assembly were published in ten volumes from 1856-1865 under

out, but harmony among the settlements was not to last. After two years of effort, Coddington was able to obtain from the Council of State in England a commission appointing him Governor for life of the Islands of Rhode Island and Conanicut. The commission only lasted a year before Roger Williams and John Clarke, a physician and Baptist minister often in England seeking rights for the colony, convinced English authorities to revoke Coddington's commission.¹⁷

The settlements were united but events in England demanded a new legal document to replace their patent. The patent of 1643 was obtained from a Puritan parliament and was not considered as secure as an official charter from the recently established King Charles II. Clarke was able to obtain this charter in 1663; it changed the name of the colony to "The Governor and Company of the English Collonie of Rhode-Island and Providence Plantations, in New England, in America."¹⁸ The two important aspects of this charter that were to have tremendous impact on the militia,

Bartlett who was the Secretary of State of Rhode Island. Each volume was published in a different year, sometimes by different publishers. All ten volumes were reprinted by AMS press in 1968. For a description of each volume see the bibliography. These records will be referred to subsequently as Bartlett, R.I.C.R.

¹⁷See Carroll, Three Centuries, 1:25-26; and Business Associations, Book of Rhode Island, 15, 17.

¹⁸See the Charter of 1663 located in the Rhode Island Historical Society Library, Providence; Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 2:6; and Arnold, History, 70. For an interesting discussion on the naming of the colony and Aquedneck Island see Irving Richman, Rhode Island: A Study in Separatism (Cambridge; Riverside Press, a division of Houghton Mifflin Company, 1905), 44; and Arnold, History, 1:70.

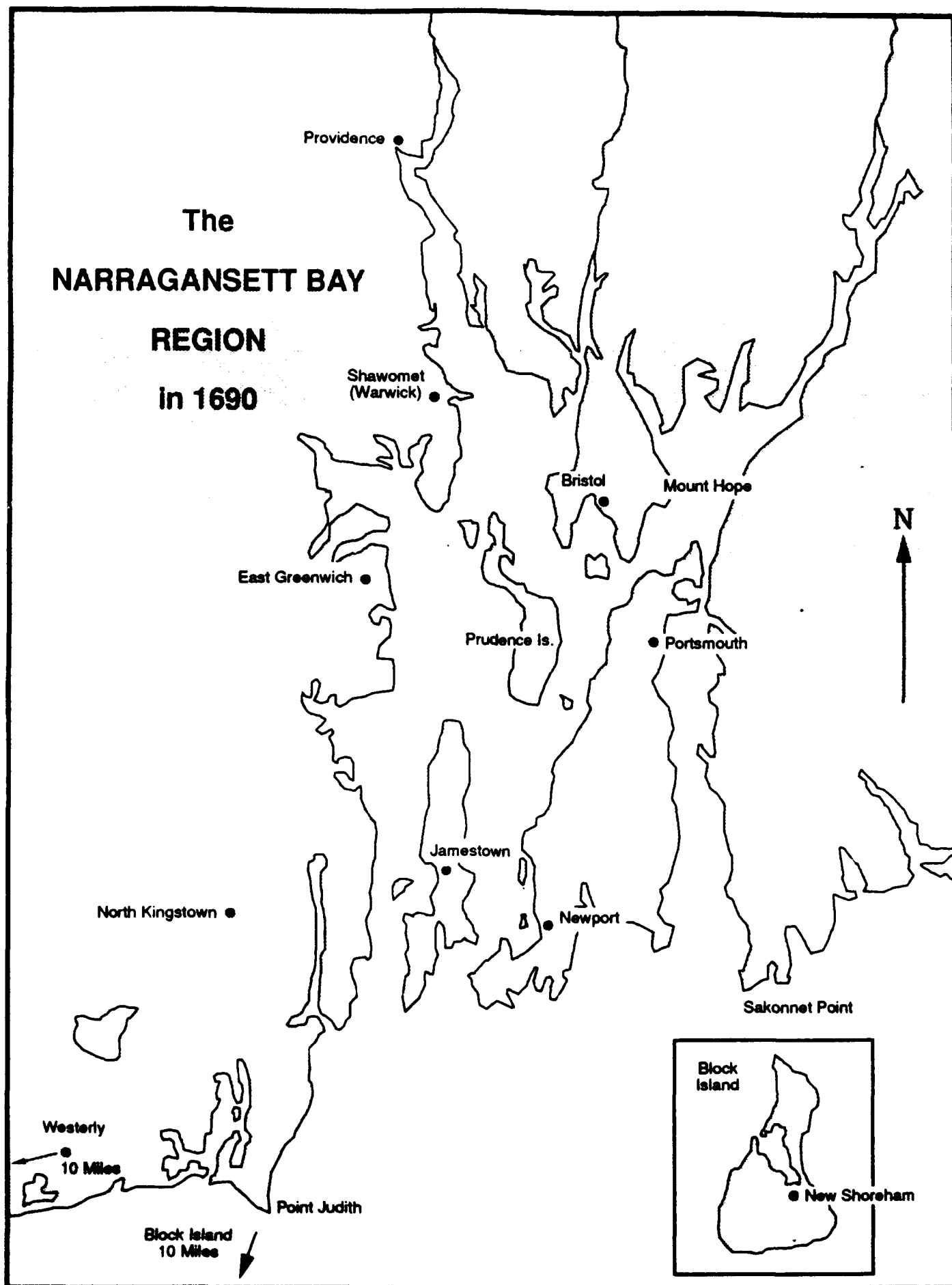
both politically and militarily, were its "lively experiment" in government held "by the free and voluntary consent of all or the greater part of the free inhabitants" and its guarantee of freedom of thought or liberty of conscience.¹⁹

With the exception of Connecticut's charter of 1662, the Rhode Island and Providence Plantations' charter was extremely democratic and unique when compared to those granted to the other colonies. This freedom to conduct a "lively experiment" allowed the colonists of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations to virtually govern themselves. These freedoms were key to the outlook held by the inhabitants of the colony in the period leading up to the American Revolution. Their freedom of religious and political beliefs, their ability to govern themselves in a truly democratic fashion, and their lack of British magistrates, governors, etc., allowed the colony to develop into an increasingly independent set of communities.

Along with these freedoms came the responsibility to provide for their own defense. Thus the need to establish some form of armed force which would meet the needs of a colony with over 400 miles of shoreline, numerous populated and unpopulated islands, and several settlements all opposed to a strong central government. Building upon their experiences of the militia systems in England and modifying them to fit the requirements of

¹⁹See Arnold, History, 274, for a description of events in England at this time; Business Associations, Book of Rhode Island, 17, 19, 21; and Edward Field, ed., State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations at the End of the Century: A History, 2 vols. (Boston: Mason Publishing Company, 1902), 1:101.

New England life, the colonists of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations were to forge a militia system designed for their protection and limited by their beliefs about strong central government and individual freedoms.



CHAPTER 3

THE MILITIA SYSTEM: EUROPEAN ROOTS

The Beginnings of the Militia

America's militia system was an outgrowth of the European militia organization dating back to the tenth century. The basic European military organization from the tenth to the seventeenth centuries had three separate divisions. The first of these was the **housecarl**, the professional army of the king, which could be hired out to other monarchs or overlords. Its soldiers wore uniforms and had the best of equipment.²⁰

The second major military division was the **enrolled militia** or **select fryd**. These farmers and craftsmen were primarily citizens who were employed only secondarily as soldiers in the mode of common infantry troops. They normally conducted operations fairly close to their homes; they were used for maneuvers that did not require much military training or experience; and, when used in conjunction with the housecarls, they were placed in positions supporting the housecarls from noncritical vantage points. Trained by the housecarls, they supplied their own weapons and were purposely kept in rudimentary military readiness. A skilled, armed and hostile mass of subjects was a very real and dangerous threat to most kings and rulers.²¹

Several benefits resulted from enrolling these men. First,

²⁰James B. Whisker, The Citizen Soldier and U.S. Military Policy (North River Press, 1979), 3.

²¹Ibid., 4-5.

they now found themselves on the tax rolls. Second, if they turned out to be good fighters, they could be placed in the ranks of the housecarls. Third, their weapons could be counted and controlled. And finally, census figures and other rolls were determined from the militia rolls.²²

The final division of military forces was the **great fyrd** or the **levees en masse**. Purely a defensive force, these men usually ranged in age from sixteen to sixty; they were untrained, unorganized, and minimally armed. As short-term, local defense forces, they were used only in the last-ditch defense of their homelands.²³

Elizabethan Militia System

The Elizabethan militia system grew out of Queen Elizabeth's direct involvement in trying to meet the desire for military preparedness while also accommodating the antimilitary attitudes prevalent during her reign.²⁴ There were several reasons for the antimilitary attitude. The first was England's geography. As an island, England felt little need for a standing army,

²²Ibid., 5.

²³Ibid., 5-6.

²⁴Lois G. Schworer, No Standing Armies: The Antiarmy Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 8-9.

especially in peacetime. The navy was strong and trusted. The character of the foot soldier was also part of the failings of the standing army. Professional soldiers were often "men from the lowest reaches of society [who] were pressed into service to form the armies that were sent abroad."²⁵ The fear of mercenary soldiers, the high costs of maintaining a standing army, and their perceived uselessness in times of peace were other reasons for the strong antimilitary sentiment in England.²⁶

The queen, "[f]earing an armed peasantry and distrusting a militarily powerful nobility, ... turned over responsibility for England's territorial defense to a new, selective, and predominantly middle-class militia of 'trained bands'. Each county had such organizations made up of yeoman and burghers, administered by royal officers called lords lieutenant, who were drawn from the county aristocracy."²⁷ These trained bands were established in 1573 and numbered more than one hundred thousand men. They were the core of the militia system. Although the trained band remained ultimately under the monarch's control, the lord lieutenant normally commanded it and the country gentry officered and financed it.²⁸

²⁵Ibid., 10-11.

²⁶Ibid., 10-17.

²⁷Fred Anderson, "The Colonial Background to the American Victory," in The World Turned Upside Down: The American Victory in the War of Independence ed. John Ferling (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1988), 2.

²⁸Schwoerer, Standing Armies, 14.

The unpopular and expensive Thirty Years War caused major problems in England. The results of prolonged war and the impact of the standing army on the country led to serious repercussions throughout England. One of these was the Petition of Right of 1628 which "condemned the levying of taxes without the approval of Parliament, arbitrary imprisonment, billeting of soldiers on private householders, and the use of martial law."²⁹ The problems associated with King Charles I and his military powers were to fester in the minds of the populace and the Parliament for the next thirteen years.

With the introduction of the Militia Bill in Parliament in December 1641, the debate over the king's military rights took on a serious nature. The Militia Bill, and the passage of the Militia Ordinance in the spring of 1642, were a direct threat to the crown, the constitution and the laws of the country. The origins of the civil war in England can be greatly attributed to the arguments over who would control the militia--Parliament or King Charles I.³⁰ With the execution of the king and the expulsion of his family, Parliament now ran the country. The New Model Army created by Oliver Cromwell "began as an instrument to win the Civil War and became an instrument to secure a revolutionary government whose base of popular support grew

²⁹Ibid., 19. Underlining added for emphasis. Compare these complaints in the petition to the complaints of the American colonists after the Seven Years War and in the 1770s.

³⁰Ibid., 33-51.

increasingly narrow. It was kept standing for fifteen years."³¹

The problems of military rule by force would eventually lead to the restoration of the crown. The entire population came to distrust military power. The disapproval of the army on moral grounds leads to the restoration of the Stuart monarchy. By placing Charles II in power, England repudiated rule by the sword and increased its already strong convictions against the professional military as a tool of the government.³²

King Charles II, son of King Charles I, was restored to power two years after Cromwell's death and would usher in the start of a series of changes in the way the military was structured.

Along with the regular army, the Restoration Parliament in 1661-63 also established an updated militia, a system intended like its Elizabethan predecessor to be a predominantly middle-class home guard, available if needed to preserve civil order and to defend against invasion, but also to provide a territorial reserve infrastructure for the support of the regulars. However, now that he had an effective standing army, Charles II had little practical use for a cumbersome militia...and from 1670 through the mid 1750s the institution endured a prolonged decline.³³

Thus, the militia came to little use and glory in England at the same time as its power and importance were increasing in the American colonies.³⁴

³¹Ibid., 51.

³²Ibid., 71.

³³Anderson, "Colonial Background," 3.

³⁴See Schwoerer, Standing Armies, 70-76; and Anderson, "Colonial Background," 5-7.

With arguments that a revitalization of the militia could possibly reduce or eliminate the army, England once again revised its militia laws in 1756-1757. The results were a militia force which would be "smaller and a little less under popular control than its advocates had wished...."³⁵ These latest revisions would bring the English militia system to its form at the start of the American Revolution.³⁶

The events occurring in England in 1643, 1663 and in the late 1750s, all bear a comparison to the events happening in the colony. The timing of the first patent, the Charter of 1663 and the revisions accorded Rhode Island's militia system all relate to events in England.

The militia laws in England at the time the colony obtained its charter can be presumed to have had a tremendous impact on the new colony. The distaste for standing armies and a heavy reliance on militia forces played a great part in Rhode Island's defense structure. A look at the various political acts, laws and resolves which shaped the Rhode Island militia will show the development of this defensive force structure and how it developed from these European roots.

³⁵J. R. Western, The English Militia in The Eighteenth Century: The Story of a Political Issue, 1660-1802 (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1965), 140.

³⁶See Schwoerer, Standing Armies, 195; and Western, English Militia, 123-140.

CHAPTER 4

THE POLITICAL ASPECTS OF THE RHODE ISLAND MILITIA

The Early Years

The towns created the General Assembly, but reserved to themselves far more power than did the towns in Massachusetts Bay or Plymouth colonies. One of these powers locally retained was control over the train bands, and the history of these organizations is very closely connected in the seventeenth century with the history of the towns. Efforts were made at various times to achieve an effective central organization, but ultimate control reverted to the towns.³⁷

Robert Kenny

As the settlements grew into towns and the towns formed the colony, the laws and control of the militia forces remained fairly constant. Initially designed to defend against attacks from the Indians, the original militia forces were comprised of the freemen of the town, ages sixteen to fifty. Under the control of the town officers and their captain, each band obtained the necessary weaponry, elected its own officers, and trained in the art of military warfare.³⁸

As other threats grew, the form of the colony's military forces would change. Provincial armies were made up of volunteers and usually placed under control of British officers. These provincial armies were organized to fight in the various wars between England and other European powers, but especially

³⁷Robert W. Kenny, "The Beginnings of the Rhode Island Train Bands," Rhode Island Historical Society Collections 33, no. 2 (April 1940): 26.

³⁸Ibid., 28.

the French and Indian threat to the New England area. Although these same men might have been enrolled in the militia forces of the colony, they were not fighting as militia forces, nor were they called out by the colony's governor in response to a direct threat to the colony. Such forces were especially prevalent during the Seven Years War. They often joined out of financial need, through various drafts, or were induced to serve by the offer of bounties or land grants.³⁹

During the Revolutionary War, the distinction between militia forces and Continental soldiers was often blurred. Often the same person would hold a commission issued from the state and at the same time one from the Continental Congress. At various times the same person would be in the Continental Army for brief periods and would switch back and forth to his state's militia forces for extended periods of time.

Given these various types of military forces, what constituted the Rhode Island militia forces? The following guidelines will be used to determine if the forces were Rhode Island militia: (1) who called out the soldiers; (2) who decided how long they were called out; and, (3) were they used for the defense of Rhode Island or were they despatched outside of Rhode Island?⁴⁰ Under these criteria, men/units called out by the

³⁹See Anderson, "Colonial Background," 6-12; and Field, End of the Century, 1:401-440.

⁴⁰See Mark V. Kwasny, "Partisan War in the Middle States: The Militia and the American War Effort Around the British Stronghold of New York City, 1775-1783," (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1989), 2-3, for a similar approach to defining the forces. Several

Governor or his representative for periods of 15 months or less and served in various capacities for the state's defense will be the focus of this paper.

The phrase Rhode Island will be used to describe the initial settlements which would unite under the patent, the colony under the charter, and the state after it had signed the Declaration of Independence. These correspond to the periods 1636-1663, 1663-1776, and July 1776 on, respectively.

The First Defense Forces: Portsmouth and Newport

Three months after Portsmouth was originally settled in March 1638, and after the first tavern was established, the town turned its attention to the military organization. The officers chosen were two sergeants, two corporals and the clerk. In November of 1638, the Portsmouth militia unit had the first muster of the colony. "The military having before been organized...a general training was appointed, at which all men between the ages of sixteen and fifty years were warned to attend on the following Monday [12 November 1638]."41

law suits will appear for decades after the war trying to prove certain individuals were in one force or the other. These suits were aimed at obtaining war pensions for the participant or his descendants and further tend to blur the distinction of forces. Additionally, Rhode Island would define its citizen soldier into one of three categories: militia, alarm, or independently chartered. Each will be explained during the war years.

⁴¹See Arnold, History, 1:128-129; Kenny, "Train Bands," 27-29; and Arnold, History, 1:129.

A year later Newport would establish its own militia force.

The military organization was very soon completed.... It was kept distinct from the other branches of government, but subject, in the choice of officers, to the approval of the Magistrates. Every man capable of bearing arms was enrolled. 'The Body of the people, viz., the Traine Band,' were left free to choose their own officers to exercise and train them.... No man was allowed to go two miles from town, or to attend any public meeting, under penalty of five shillings fine, without carrying a gun or sword.⁴²

The united towns of Newport and Portsmouth decided at a General Court held at Portsmouth of August 6, 1640, to elaborate the rules of the militia forces on the island. The militia forces of both towns were to meet separately eight times a year, with all the required military weaponry, at eight o'clock in the morning at the second beat of the drum. It was also ordered that there would be two general musters each year where the militia forces of both towns would combine to train.⁴³

The rules of these musters were stringent, but they also took into account the necessities of people being excused from military training for various reasons and for not having all the weaponry required. Fines were established for various shortcomings of the men and/or their equipment, and the uses of these fines were detailed. A fine of five shillings was to be paid for any person failing to appear at a muster. For farmers, one man could stay at the farm, but he was to pay two shillings

⁴²Arnold, History, 1:141.

⁴³Field, End of the Century, 1:396.

and six pence for not attending the muster. For those who appeared without the necessary equipment, the fine was twelve pence. These fines were paid to the clerk of the train band and would go towards purchasing the necessary equipment and supplies needed for the band.⁴⁴

Over the next few years, the laws for the train bands of Newport and Portsmouth were to undergo minor changes. At a meeting of the General Court on September 6, 1641, the fine levied against men missing the muster day was eliminated. The two general musters for inhabitants of the island were also eliminated. Three sessions during 1641 and 1642 further modified the militia structure. The election of officers would be held annually. The officers had to be members of their own bands; could be elected only by the freemen of the band; and could not be residents of another town. In addition, the election results were "...subject to approval of all the freemen of the town at the Annual Court of Elections."⁴⁵

At a town meeting on October 5, 1643, it was stated that the military equipment of each militia member should be inspected. Officers, called "Gun smiths for the Colony," were appointed. It was their duty to count and inspect each person's arms. Furthermore, officers were appointed to insure that ten days before each training day each person had four pounds of shot and

⁴⁴See Field, End of the Century, 1:396; Arnold, History, 1:145; and Kenny, "Train Bands," 28.

⁴⁵Kenny, "Train Bands," 29-30.

two pounds of powder available.⁴⁶

During this same period, the muster days were defined as the first Monday of every month, except for the months of January, February, May and August. These months allowed for the extremely cold weather during the winter and for the planting and harvesting of crops. These basic laws would carry the island until the more extensive militia laws were passed in 1647.⁴⁷

The structure of the town militia met the needs at the time. With civilian control firmly established through the General Court and the Annual Court of Elections, the fear of a strong military force was allayed. Training days were accommodating to the men of the train bands and provisions were made for the farmers who would not necessarily be able to attend all meetings. The inability or lack of desire to practice the military arts during either the cold weather of winter or during the planting and harvesting seasons, were accounted for by the militia leaders and the government. The awareness of seasonal forces on militia attitudes would prove extremely useful to the leaders, both military and civilian, during the employment of militia forces in the American Revolution.

The acknowledgment that each person may not have the appropriate arms, or if they did, that the arms may not be in

⁴⁶Field, End of the Century, 1:397.

⁴⁷See Field, End of the Century, 1:398; Kenny, "Train Bands," 29; and Ebenezer W. Pierce, Civil, Military and Professional Lists of Plymouth and Rhode Island Colonies, 1621-1700 (Boston: A. Williams and Company, 1881), 144.

perfect working order, were also astute observations of the limitations of the militia. The self-regulation and internal fine systems were motivators to military training and not detractors. Through these modest fines, each band was able to help equip itself in the necessary weapons and other accouterments associated with militia duty.

The Settlements Unite for Defense: 1647

Since the four settlements had not merged to form a common entity until after the obtainment of the patent in November 1643, the newly comprised governing body needed to pass laws for the colony's militia forces. The militia law passed in May 1647 was one which basically incorporated most of the guidelines adopted by the inhabitants of Portsmouth and Newport. Several key passages in the law explain the rudimentary defense of the colony:

It is ordered that there is free Libertie granted for the free Inhabitants of ye Province (if they will) to erect an Artillery Garden, and those that are desirous to advance the Art Military, shall have freedom to exercise themselves therin, and to agree of their forme, and choose their officers as they shall agree among themselves.

It is ordered, that all ye Inhabitants in each Towne shall choose their Military Officers from among themselves [annually] on the first Tuesday after the 12th of March....

And that all fines and forfeitures shall be employed to the use and service of the Band.

And if any of ye Traine Band after his appearance shall refuse or neglect the command of his Captain, to be exercised and disciplined he shall forfeit as much as if he had not appeared.

It is ordered, that in regard of ye many incursions that we are subject unto, and that an Alarum for ye giving notice thereof is necessary when occassion is offered. It is agreed that this form be observed, Vidg't: Three Muskets distinctly discharged, and a Herauld appointed to go speedilie threw the Towne and crie Alarum! Alarum!; and the Drum beate incessantly upon which all to repair...unto the Town House ther to receive information of the Town Councill what is farther to be done.⁴⁸

Other parts of the same law dealt with providing fines for delivering weapons to the Indians, affixing training days, providing exceptions for farming, how to pay for the equipping of each man, and what action to take if one of the members of the band took action against the town. A rudimentary "Councill of Warr" was also established that would consist of the town president, four assistants and the captain of every train band.⁴⁹

Although the above quote is fairly extensive, it explains the feelings associated with the rule of the militia. The law was established to provide for the organization, structure and discipline required to defend the united settlements. The arming and training requirements were specific with measures for their enforcement. However, the realization that these same men had

⁴⁸Pierce, Colonial Lists, 144.

⁴⁹Ibid.

farming and other duties which would prevent them from mustering, led to lenient attitudes towards these same specific requirements. The colonial leaders realized the impacts of farming and weather on military endeavors.

The requirements for military training were designed to enable the citizen soldier to defend his farm and neighboring towns, not to make him the equivalent of a professional soldier. In fact, one of the reasons militia forces were allowed to remain so much more inefficient than standing army forces was the deep-seated fear and distrust of large, permanent, well-drilled armies. The understanding, or lack of understanding, of these basic limitations of the militia would dramatically influence the conduct of the war in Rhode Island.

After the Charter of 1663

Rhode Island's Charter of 1663 firmly established a central government consisting of the Governor, Deputy Governor, various Assistants and freemen which, when assembled, would be referred to as the "Generall Assembye." This Assembly was responsible for the organization and training of the militia forces. The General Assembly was

to assemble, exercise in armes, martiall array, and putt in warlyke posture, the inhabitants of the sayd collonie, ffor theire speciall defence and safety; and to lead and conduct the sayd inhabitants, and to encounter, expulse, expell and resist, by force of armes, as well by sea as by lande; and also to kill, slay and destroy, by all

fitting wayes...every such person...as shall...attempt or enterprize the destruction, invasion, detriment or annoyance of the sayd inhabitants or Plantations.⁵⁰

Rhode Island immediately set about to enhance and redefine its militia laws. Just as in England, Rhode Island was revising its militia laws. The first major law passed after the receipt of the charter was enacted on 4 May 1664. In it, the General Assembly stated that

(i)n consideration of the great neglect and defficiency in the use of the military exercise in most townes in this Collony, and considering his Majestyes speciall care of the safty of this corporation, in taking such speciall care concearning the exercise of the people therof in trayning and martiall discipline, as is at large exprest in his Majestyes gratioues letters.... [Therefore], the Assembly doe order and declare, that every respective towne in this Collony, shall, as formerly, have the choyce of ther military officers...and that then the trayned souldyars or such as are capable to trayne, be permitted and required to elect ther respective officers for the exercising the people of each respective towne, in armes.⁵¹

This law gave back to the companies the right to elect their officers. At various times throughout the history of Rhode Island, the General Assembly would grant, and then delete the right of the companies to elect their own officers.⁵²

⁵⁰Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 2:14.

⁵¹Ibid., 2:52.

⁵²See Kenny, "Train Bands," 32-37; Field, End of the Century, 1:441; Pierce, Colonial Lists, 145-147; Rhode Island Acts and Resolves, October 1747 to October 1800 (Newport: n.p., 1747-1800, facsimilie repr., Providence: J. Harry Bongartz, 1908-1925), Supplement to 1730-1736:212; (Bartlett, R.I.C.R., refers to these various acts as either "Schedules" or "Acts and Resolves". They are in 18 unnumbered volumes and the dates they cover are not

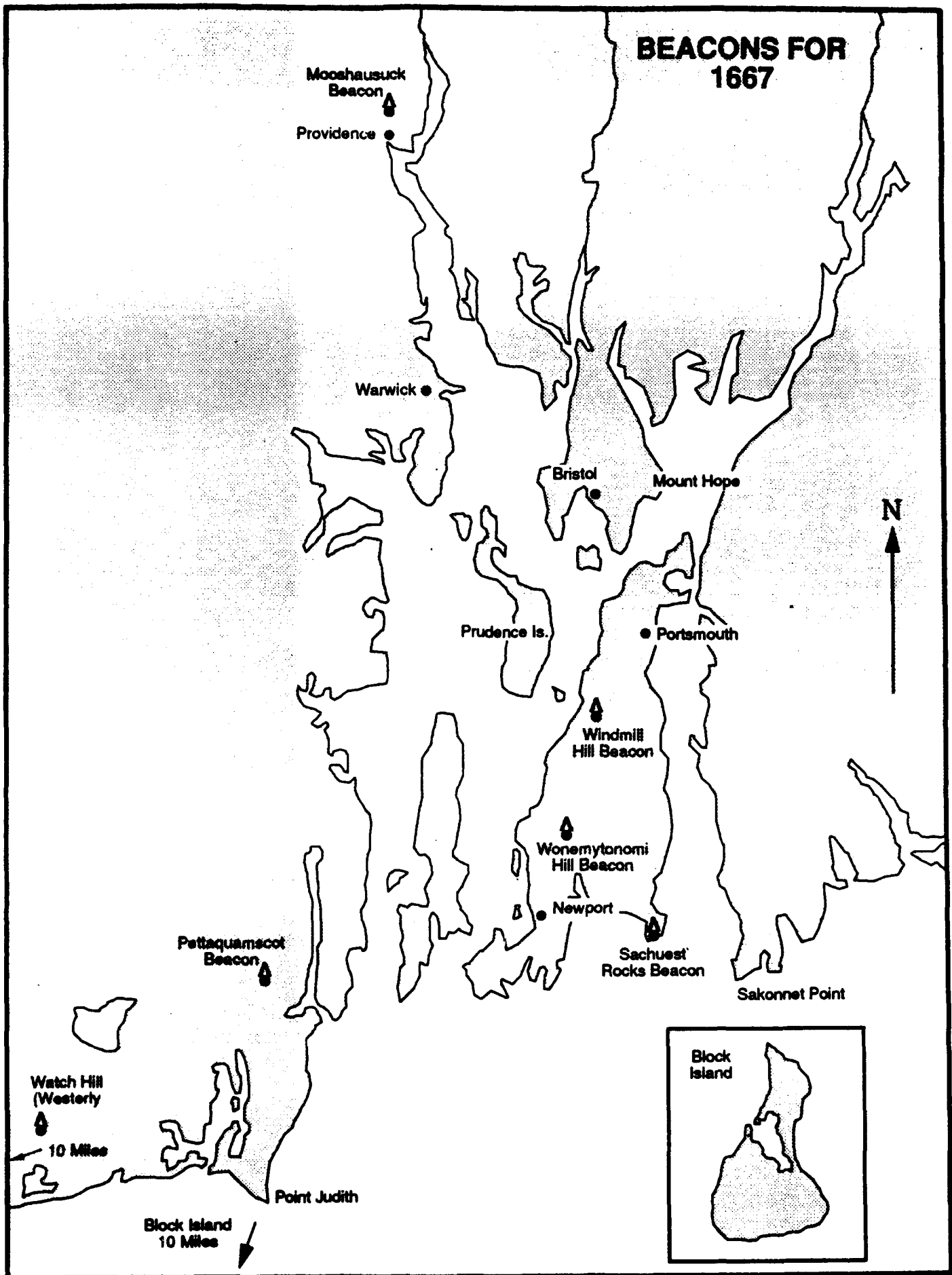
More militia laws were passed in the 1660s and 1670s. These laws were in response to the various military engagements involving the colony. The Indian threat and the wars involving England, France, Holland, and Spain were to have an affect on the militia laws of Rhode Island. However, only a few were different enough to be important.

The first of these was the law passed in 1667. In it the Indians on the main island were disarmed, all ammunition in private hands was to be turned over for the colony's use, a committee to examine all the arms of the citizens was established, and a series of beacons was established so the colony could spread an alarm throughout the islands and the mainland. This same law established a troop of horse on the island of Rhode Island, appointing Captain Peleg Sanford and 'Lieftenant' John Almye commanding.⁵³

necessarily the dates of the laws. In some cases, a law enacted in 1718 will be found in the Acts and Resolves for 1730. In order to find my reference, I will specify Acts and Resolves and the year of the book and the page number); Acts and Resolves, 1730:91; and Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 4:155,173.

⁵³See Arnold, History, 1:330-331; and Pierce, Colonial Lists, 146.

BEACONS FOR 1667



Rhode Island men supported England's wars in several expeditions. The information on these is scarce, but their affect on the colony led to several acts and changes in the military system. With an increase in military-related deaths and disabilities, the General Assembly passed a pension law in 1672 to provide for the "care of the injured and in case of the soldier's death, his dependents; it further allowed the veteran or his family to sue the colony if the pension were not forthcoming... 'forasmuch as too often faithful service is forgott and the slain being burried goe to the land of forgitfullness'." ⁵⁴

The first law exempting people of "tender consciences" from military service was passed on 13 August 1673. This law would undergo various minor changes over the next century. People with certain religious convictions, such as the Quakers, were not required to serve in a combatant capacity. They would, however, end up supporting the revolution by providing money to the cause, in the form of fines, in lieu of military service. They were also required to perform watch and ward duty along the coasts in time of impending invasion. ⁵⁵

The last two major pieces of legislation of the 1600s involved the command structure of the senior militia officer in the colony--the militia Major. In 1678, the Assembly clarified

⁵⁴Kenny, "Train Bands," 35-36.

⁵⁵See Kenny, "Train Bands," 36, Acts and Resolves, February 1777, "An Act for the Relief of Persons of tender Consciences"; and, Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 8:204-205.

the chain of command for the colony's militia forces. Previously, he was under the orders of each respective town council. With multiple town councils, each interested primarily with its own defense, the major was in a tenuous position. The law passed during the 12 June 1678 session clearly removed this power from the town councils and placed it squarely on the shoulders of the General Assembly (the General Assembly consisted of the Governor, the Deputy Governor, and the delegates; or the General Council, whichever was in session).

And alsoe it is ordered, That the authority placed in the former laws and commissions relatinge to the military commanders, wherein the Towne Councils have power to order them, the said clauses and power therein given to each respective Towne Councill, is alsoe hereby made null and voyd: and the severall military commanders are not longer to have their commissions under that injuction of observeing the advice and orders of the Councils of each respective towne; but shall be only injoynd to the Generall Assemblys, the Governor, or Deputy Governor, or Generall Councill's orders.⁵⁶

Thus, the head of the militia field forces and his respective captains were placed under the central government vice their respective town council. This was necessary to develop a centrally-controlled fighting force for the defense of the colony. Each town would ultimately be responsible for insuring the various militia companies were formed, trained and paid, but the ultimate command of the militia was vested in the colony's central government.⁵⁷

⁵⁶Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 3:15.

⁵⁷Ibid.

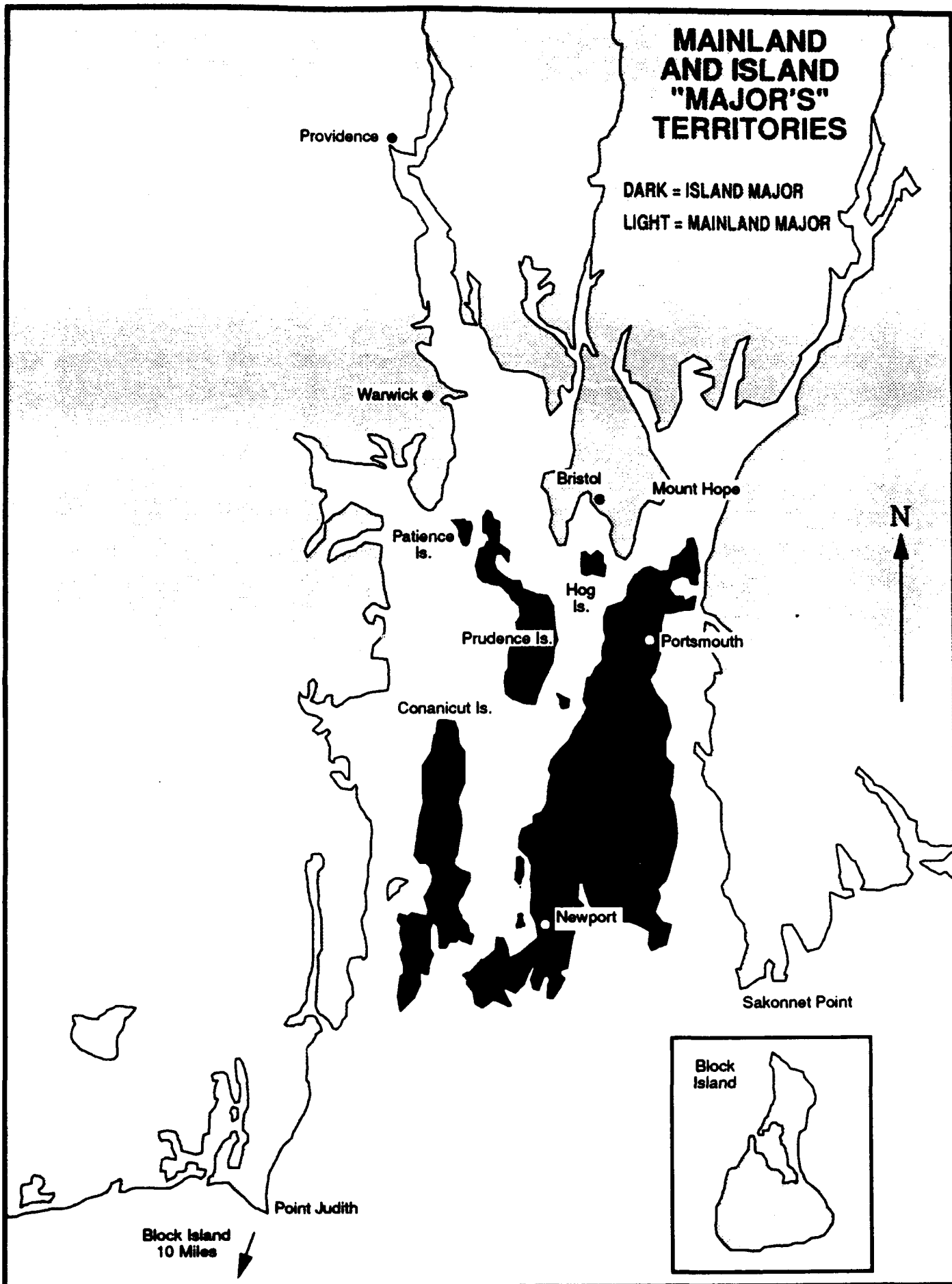
Now that the chain of command was established for the militia major, the colony decided to divide the militia forces into two regiments. During the session held at Warwick on 25 October 1682, the General Assembly

voted, And it is further ordered, That there be two Majors chosen in this Collony annually; one Major for the Islands, and one Major for the maine land. The Major for the Islands to be chosen by the freemen and Traine bands of the Islands, and the Major for the maine to be chosen by the freemen and Traine Bands on the maine; and their voates to be sent in at the generall election of officers in May, annually, by the Clerke of the respective Bands, that they may be recorded; any thing to the contrary hereof, in any wise, notwithstanding.⁵⁸

No mention was made how these coequal majors were to integrate forces in time of war. The major of the regiment before it was split into two was always from Newport or Portsmouth. Once the regiment was split into island versus mainland forces, the island was commanded by an officer from Newport for the next twenty years while the mainland forces were commanded by officers from either Warwick or Providence.⁵⁹

⁵⁸Ibid., 3:118.

⁵⁹Pierce, Colonial Lists, 141.



One final event was to affect the militia in the seventeenth century. With the combining of Massachusetts and Plymouth under one charter in 1692, a threat to Rhode Island's control of its militia forces took shape. Sir William Phipps was named governor of the newly united Massachusetts colony and his commission made him commander-in-chief of all the land and naval forces in New England--including those of Rhode Island! This concerned the government of Rhode Island and they immediately told the militia to disregard the commissions sent from Governor Phipps and to "hold their companies ready for defence."⁶⁰

Through various appeals by the colony's leaders, Rhode Island was finally granted exclusive power over her forces in 1693. During his explanation of why Rhode Island should have control of her forces, the British attorney general who passed judgment on this issue would foreshadow what was to happen to all the colonies' forces in time of war. Thus, he actually presaged the development of the Continental Army in 1775-1776.

His opinion sustained the position which he had before taken, that these colonies had the exclusive control over their militia in times of peace, but added, that in case of war, if necessary for the common defence, a chief commander might order out a requisite number of troops [for duty outside the colony], with the aid and assistance of the governor, leaving enough at home to secure the safety of each colony.⁶¹

This procedure would be followed by General Washington and Rhode

⁶⁰Arnold, History, 1:524-526.

⁶¹Arnold, History, 1:528. Emphasis added.

Island's governor, Nicholas Cooke, Jr., during the initial stages of the revolution with the transition from militia forces as the primary form of defense to the establishment and use of the Continental Army.

Laws 1700 to 1773

During the May 1701 session, the General Assembly passed an act "for the better regulating the militia, and for punishing offenders as shall not conform to the law thereunto relating."⁶² This law included the requirement of all persons within the colony from sixteen to sixty to watch and ward. It included such people as housekeepers, widows, as well as others to either perform these duties, find someone else to do it for them, or pay enough money for the town to hire someone to do it.⁶³

Another important change to past laws was the harshness of punishment for a lack of discipline by soldiers. Previously, disobeying orders or other such infractions merely warranted a fine. This new law now made punishment more severe.

Be it further enacted, That the respective Captains and commissioned officers of each respective Company or Train Band in this Collony, have full power and authority during alarums, or upon any other occasion whatsoever, to punish any private sentinall that shall misbehave himself, with tying him neck and heels; or riding the wooden horse; or a fine, not exceeding four shillings; at

⁶²Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 3:430.

⁶³Ibid., 3:430-434.

the discretion of said commissioned officer.⁶⁴

The various wars which the colonial soldiers had been involved in over the past few decades had some affect on the colony's militia laws. The new and harsher punishments of the troops were probably a result of seeing the British army in action. Before these wars involving provincial armies, it was difficult to get the towns to elect their militia company's officers once a year. This would change as the threats to the colony increased. The very serious nature of the threats to the colony's survival mandated more stringent enforcement of military discipline. From the first settling of the colony, the attentativeness to the militia as a force was directly proportional to the perceived threat to the community. As the threat increased, so did the laws and activity of the various militia forces.

Due to the varied and often contradictory laws regulating the militia, the Assembly enacted an all-encompassing militia law during its two sessions in 1718.

An Act for the Repealing several Laws relating to the Militia within this Colony, and for further Regulation of the same.

WHEREAS the Body of Laws for Settling and Regulating of the Military Forces within this Colony, are increased to so great Number by reason of the many Wars, which from time [to] time this Colony hath so engaged in against French, Indians and other Enemies, which hath rendred

⁶⁴Ibid., 3:433.

many of them Useless, and may be for the Future prejudicial, if not Repealed.

BE IT THEREFORE Enacted by the General Assembly of this Colony, and by the Authority of the same; and it is hereby Enacted, That all Acts heretofore made, relating to the Militia, or appointing Officers of the same, Be hereby and are Absolutely Repealed and Declared Null and Void, and that for the future the following Order, Regulation and Rules relating to the same, be kept and observed by all Persons in this Colony.⁶⁵

This law was comprehensive, but it did not change most of the previous laws as much as it updated the wording of some and consolidated the rest. The law was over nine pages long and would satisfy most military requirements until the turmoil of the Seven Year's War (1756-1763).⁶⁶

Two acts in 1757 would show how the militia supported and benefitted from the Seven Year's War. These two acts dealt with raising forces for the provincial armies. The first act, passed 1 February 1757, was

An Act for raising, clothing and paying four hundred and fifty able bodied, effective men, for the ensuing campaign against His Majesty's enemies in North America.

Whereas, His Excellency the Earl of Loudoun, commander in chief of all His Majesty's forces in North America, hath demanded of this colony an aid of four hundred and fifty able bodied, effective men, to be employed in His Majesty's service, for, and during the ensuing campaign, in North America.⁶⁷

⁶⁵Acts and Resolves, 1730, 90-91.

⁶⁶Ibid., 90-99.

⁶⁷Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 6:22.

This first act was to raise four hundred fifty men to be under "the immediate command and direction of" the Earl of Loudoun for a term of not more than one year. The five companies comprising these four hundred fifty men would have an overall commander appointed by the General Assembly, and each company would have a captain, two lieutenants, and an ensign. Each rank had its own pay scale and the enlisting officer would be paid forty shillings for each man he enlisted. Each person enlisted would receive a bounty of 30 pounds, old tenor, a good blanket, and a monthly pay of 25 pounds. Since this was the second act to raise soldiers for the expedition against Crown Point, it further stipulated that these soldiers would be entitled to the same privileges, benefits and immunities as the first group of enlistees.⁶⁸

The "muster masters" were military men appointed to examine the enlistees and insure that they were suitable for combat, clothed and armed appropriately. One reason for these muster masters was the lack of quality, either in health or abilities, of some of the enlistees. As the colony had trouble enlisting these additional four hundred fifty men, each town was apportioned a quota to fill. This could be filled with men from the town or transients. Both would count towards each town's quota. The act stated that if the men were not raised by the next session of the Assembly,

⁶⁸Ibid., 6:22-24.

the deficiency shall be proportioned unto the several towns in this colony, so that the number demanded, may be ready to march at the time His Lordship hath appointed, that every inhabitant who enlisteth, shall be deemed and taken to be one of the numbers which the town he belongs to is obliged to furnish; that every transient person who may be enlisted, shall be taken and deemed to be one of the number that the town, where he enlists, ought to supply.⁶⁹

The volunteers, including any transients, were not enough to fill out the necessary number of men. At the Assembly's next meeting, 14 March 1757, they passed another act to help complete the four hundred and fifty men demanded of His Majesty's commander-in-chief in America. This act called for impressing "such and so many men as shall be wanted, after the returns made to the several field officers, to complete and make up the four hundred and fifty men."⁷⁰

This method of drafting soldiers for the provincial army was not without escape clauses.

And every man so impressed, shall be obliged to serve as a soldier, or find a good, able bodied, effective man to serve in his stead; unless he hath some reasonable or lawful excuse, to be made unto, heard, and fully determined by the three field officers.

And when any man that hath been impressed, is excused or doth not pass muster, the captain who impressed him shall be ordered by the field officer, who heard such excuse, to impress another, forthwith, in his stead.

And any man so impressed, upon his paying a fine of 100 pounds, old tenor, to one of the field officers, in the same regiment, shall be excused; and such field officer shall order another to be impressed in his stead...and so on...as often as any shall be excused, or pay a fine,

⁶⁹Ibid., 25. Bold added for emphasis.

⁷⁰Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 6:34.

until the required number of soldiers shall be completed and made up.⁷¹

The law also stated that these men who were drafted would receive the same pay and benefits as those who voluntarily enlisted. A time and place for everyone to meet for this expedition was posted and the captains were notified.⁷²

The second act of major importance was enacted by the General Assembly in Newport on 10 August 1757. This act was to raise men from the militia to go to Albany in support of forces already there. It is an important act because it describes how the militia lists were used to support provincial army operations and how the men were chosen from these lists. It is also worth noting that there were protests to this act filed with the Assembly.

An Act for raising One Sixth Part of the Militia in this Colony, to proceed immediately to Albany, to join the Forces which have marched to oppose th French near Lake George.

Whereas a Number of Men is demanded of this Colony by the Commanders of His Majesty's Forces near Lake George, for the Relief of Fort William-Henry, which is invested by a large Body of French and Indians.

In Compliance with the said Demands, and to the End that every Thing in the Power of this Colony may be done for the Preservation of the Country,

Be it Enacted by this General Assembly, and by the Authority of the same, It is Enacted, That One Sixth Part of the whole Militia of this Colony, be forthwith raised

⁷¹Ibid., 6:35.

⁷²See Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 6:35-37; and, Acts and Resolves, 1756-1757, passim.

and sent to Albany with all possible Dispatch, to be under the Command of the Commander in Chief of His Majesty's Forces near Lake George, and to continue in the Service as long as the immediate Preservation of the Country requires their stay there.

And be it further Enacted by the Authority aforesaid, That the Names of all Persons in the List of each Company, shall be written on a Scroll of Paper, and rolled up, and then put into a Hat or Box, and one Sixth Part thereof shall be drawn (unless the Company agree, that the Commission Officers shall press said Sixth Part) and the Persons whose Names shall be drawn or pressed, shall go on this Service. Provided Nevertheless, That any Person drawn, who declines going, and shall immediately procure an able-bodied effective Man to go in his Room, shall be excused, but no Person shall be excused without. Provided Also, That no Person's Name be put into the Hat or Box, who thro' Sickness or Lameness cannot go, or who was out of the Government before the Meeting of this Assembly.⁷³

The Assembly went on to appoint the officers to command this regiment: John Andrews, colonel; Major Joseph Wanton, Junior, lieutenant colonel; Major Henry Babcock, second lieutenant colonel; and Mr. Stephen Potter, major of the regiment. The act was thought to be unfair because it limited the draftees to only those on the militia lists. A formal protest was filed by Major Joseph Wanton, Jr. (the second man in command of the regiment and the son of Joseph Wanton, Governor of Rhode Island from May 1769 until he was deposed for his Tory leanings November 7, 1775).⁷⁴

We dissent from the within act, because the method proposed for raising the men, operates only upon a particular part of the government; when, in our opinion,

⁷³See Acts and Resolves, 1756-1757:42-46; and Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 6:75-81.

⁷⁴See Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 6:78; and, Arnold, History, 2:566.

it ought to extend to the whole, upon such an emergency as the present.⁷⁵

Thus, not everyone on the militia lists had to go, since they could find someone to go in their place. It is interesting to note how adamant Joseph Wanton, Jr., was about not serving in this capacity for the King. He would be instrumental in Tory actions in Newport during the revolution and would fight against the forces of his own state during its fight for independence.⁷⁶

The legislative state of the militia did not undergo any significant changes until 1774. The colonial government did, however, learn several lessons from the years leading up to the American Revolution. These included such lessons as how to draft or 'impress' men into service; how having men on militia lists and actually having them serve were not necessarily the same thing; how difficult it was to employ large military forces for lengthy periods of time; and how expensive it was to raise, clothe and pay for those forces.

⁷⁵Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 6:79-80.

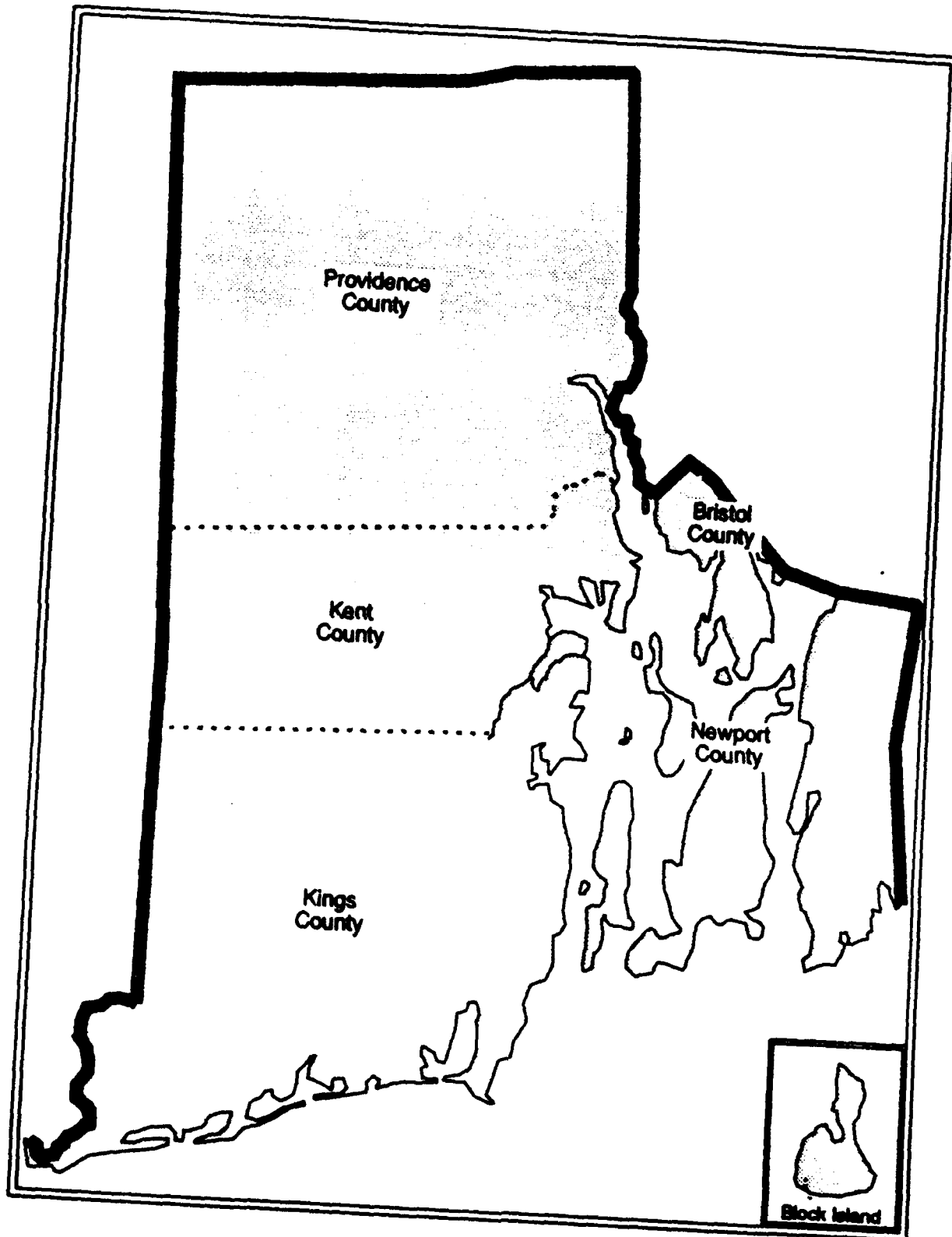
⁷⁶See Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 6:78; and, Arnold, History, 2:556.

CHAPTER 5

THE MILITARY ASPECTS OF THE RHODE ISLAND MILITIA

MAP OF RHODE ISLAND COUNTIES

CIRCA 1775



The Indian Threat, 1636-1700

One of the most useful institutions brought to America by English colonists in the seventeenth century was the military organization of citizen soldiers known as the train bands out of which developed the American militia. Its primary purpose was the defense of the new colonies from attacks by Indians, although it was sometimes found useful in cases of civil disorder.⁷⁷

Robert Kenny

The initial Rhode Island settlements were friendly to most native Indians in the area, but there were occasions when the settlements required defense against Indian attack. The demands on this defense force would grow as the settlements grew larger and as animosities between the Indians and the colonists grew. As various European wars started involving the colony, the military expeditions and experiences of the colony's forces increased in depth and savagery. This chapter will describe some typical military engagements of the Rhode Island forces and will show how these forces evolved into a substantial military organization at the beginning of the mid-1770s.

Each town's train band was designed for defense in times of local attack. The town constable was responsible for alarming the town in case of an emergency. The captain of the train band

⁷⁷Kenny, "Train Bands," 25.

would then direct the company for the defense of the town. Only a direct attack on the town would cause the train band to fight as a unit. Its mission was strictly local defense. When a force was required to go out of the immediate area of the town, volunteers, not the train band, were sent. These expeditions were usually short-term in nature, designed with a specific objective in mind such as finding and attacking a particular group of Indians or other such enemy.⁷⁸

In 1667, during the war England was waging with France and Holland, the councils of war of the various towns, (consisting of the town council, the captain and the lieutenant of the train bands) were alarmed at the less than friendly attitudes taken by the natives. In one case, the fear of attack from Indians caused the militia to disarm the Indians on the main island of Rhode Island and to advise the towns on the mainland to do the same.⁷⁹

In 1667, as fear of attacks grew, the General Assembly ordered a series of beacons to be erected so that these signal fires, when lit, would notify the militia forces up the coast as far as Providence to be ready to repulse an invasion.

The principal beacon was on Wonemytonomi hill, whence the alarm could be spread along the whole coast by bale-fires on the rocks at Sachuest, at Pettaquamscot, and on Watch hill, and northward on Windmill hill, the highest point of the island, and thence to Mooshausuck, now Prospect hill, in Providence; and a general system of defence was adopted for all the islands and exposed settlements in

⁷⁸Ibid., 26-27.

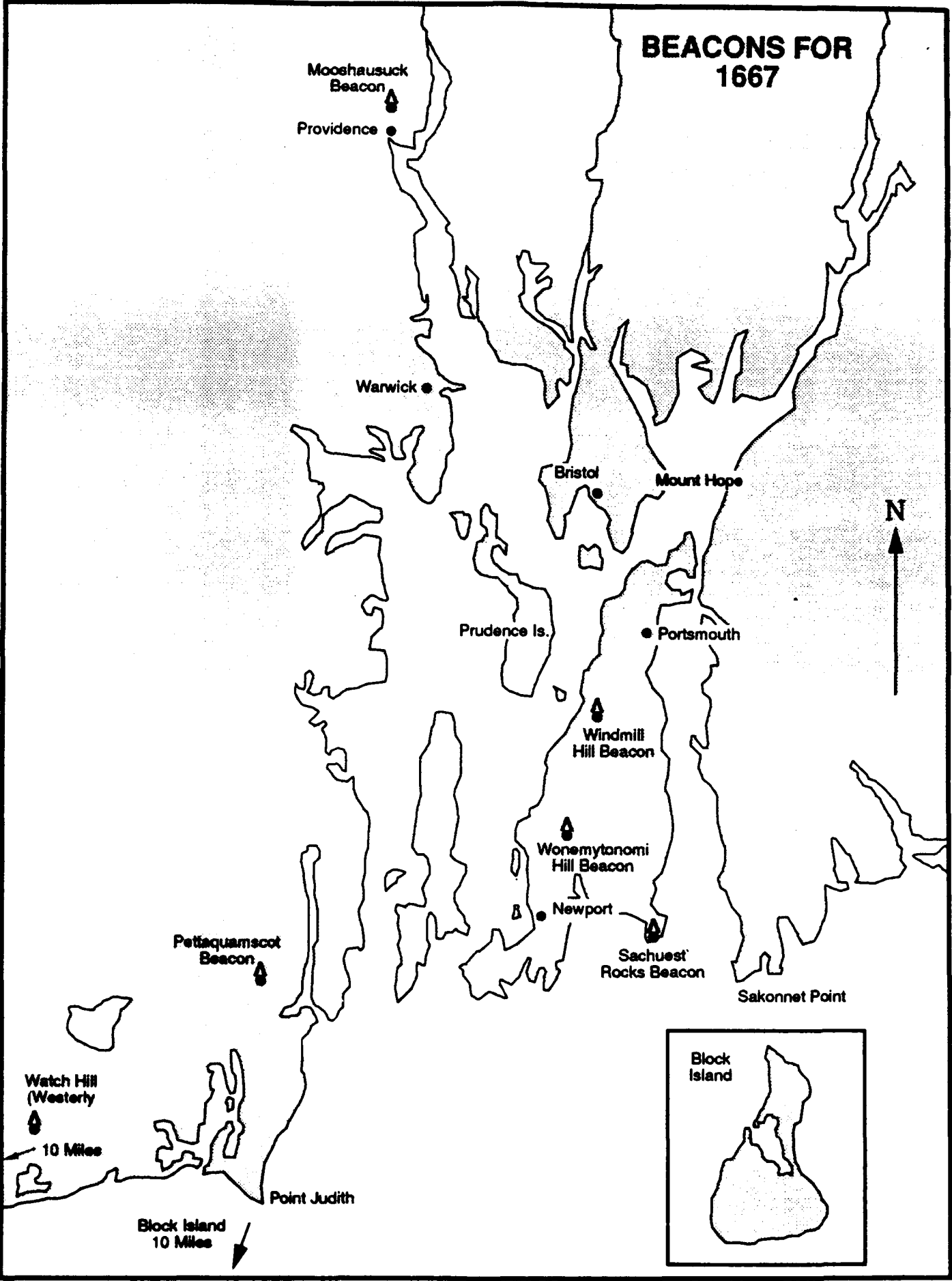
⁷⁹Arnold, History, 1:330-331.

the colony and in Kings Province.⁸⁰

Fortunately, these defense measures were premature, but the use of beacons for alarming the colony was to continue during the American Revolution.

⁸⁰Arnold, History, 1:331.

**BEACONS FOR
1667**



Repeated Indian attacks during King Philip's war demonstrated the lack of capability of the militia to successfully defend the various settlements. This same militia force that only ten years before would not train according to the colony's laws, were now called upon to defend against savage Indian attacks. The militia's lack of success would cause the colonists to witness the depopulation of entire towns and the destruction of most of the colonists' personal possessions, including many homes.⁸¹

The majority of these battles against the Indians were fought by "old Indian fighters." However, one battle, fought in the summer of 1675 near the town of Smithfield, used a Providence militia company commanded by Captain Andrew Edmonds.⁸² As the war raged during the summer and fall of 1675, the lack of effectiveness of the militia was repeatedly demonstrated. "Whole towns were wiped out by fire and the inhabitants either massacred or carried away into captivity."⁸³

The defenses were so lacking that the majority of the population of Providence relocated to Newport, where "it is significant that the leading officers of the Colony were residents of the Island, and had thus provided a strong body to protect its shores from any hostile demonstrations of the

⁸¹See Kenny, "Train Bands," 33-34; and, Field, End of the Century, 1:401.

⁸²Field, End of the Century, 1:403.

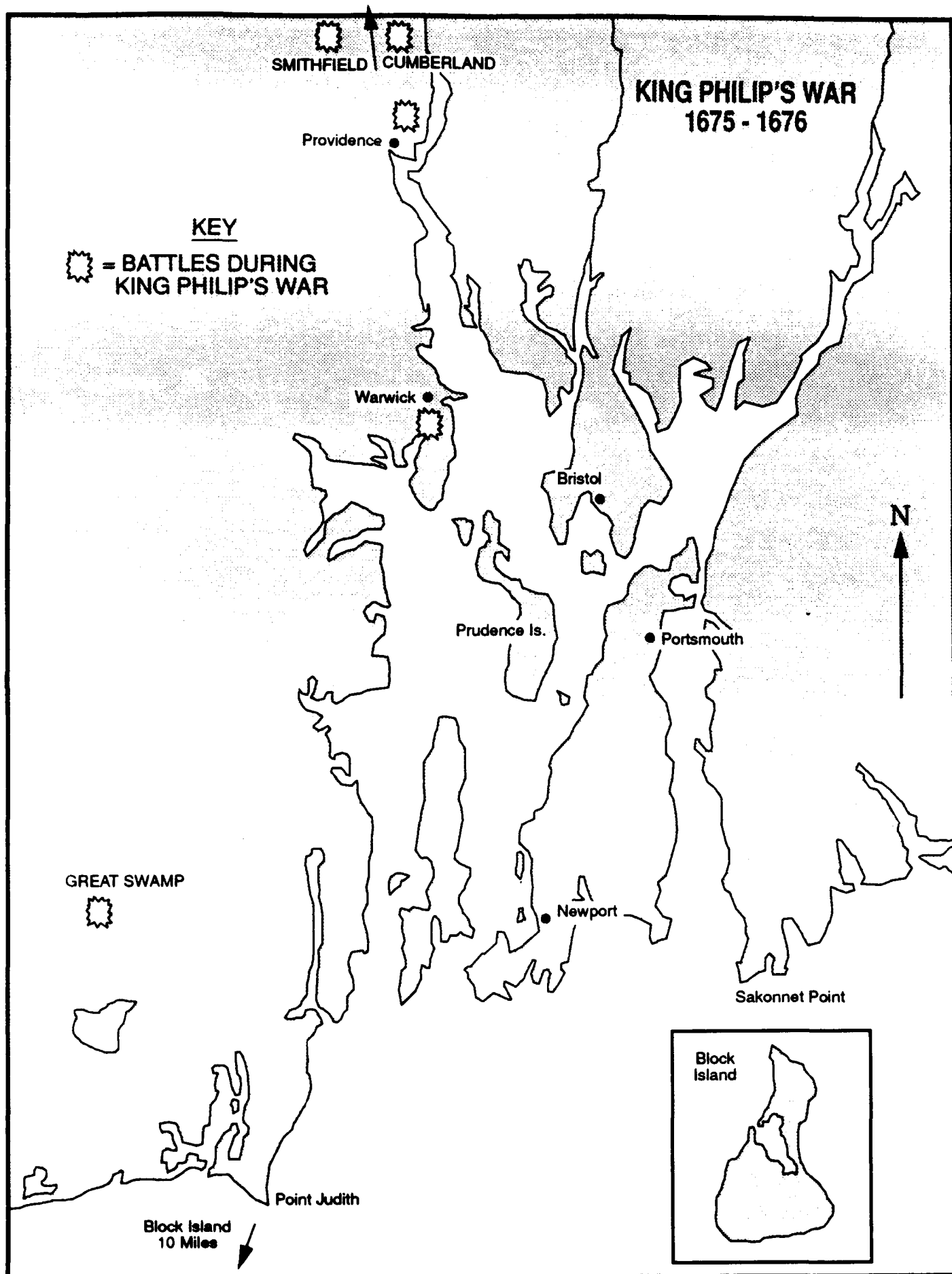
⁸³Ibid., 1:403-404.

enemy."⁸⁴ Although the Great Swamp fight in December of the same year decimated most of the Narragansett tribe, retaliation was soon effected by small bands of Indians against the colonists.

During March 1676, the towns of Warwick (16 March), Cumberland (26 March), and Providence (29 or 30 March) were virtually destroyed by the Indians. In Warwick, every house but one was burned to the ground. During the battle in Cumberland, sixty-six defenders died. It appears from records of that battle that no forces from Rhode Island participated in the town's defense. Why the local militia was not employed is not mentioned in the histories of the action. In Providence, where the inhabitants had dwindled from nearly five hundred to less than fifty, the Indians were able to burn all the ungarrisoned and deserted houses. It took years to recover from this devastation, but it did motivate the colony to increase its defenses by the establishment of a garrison in Providence.⁸⁵

⁸⁴Ibid., 1:405.

⁸⁵See Field, End of the Century, 1:404-414, for a complete account of the various engagements with the Indians during this period. Although some militia forces from Rhode Island fought in some of these battles, the majority of the men providing defense were from Plymouth Colony and were assisted by Cape Indians.



The Colonial Wars, 1700-1763

The Indian wars quieted down for the next few years, but conflict and poor military preparedness would again strike the inhabitants of Rhode Island. On 4 May 1702, England declared war on France and Spain. News of this reached Rhode Island two months later. When it did, a flurry of military activity ensued. The mainland's major of the militia forces, Major John Dexter, called together all the officers of the companies and read the declaration of war received from the governor. A council of war on March 15, 1703-4,⁸⁶ directed several towns to erect suitable garrisons at the colony's expense. The General Assembly agreed with the requirement for these garrisons, but repudiated the act and required the towns to build and pay for their own protection.⁸⁷

During the eleven years of this conflict, Rhode Island militia forces provided scout services for the colony and performed garrison duty at the various forts in and around Newport. As expeditions required, volunteers were sent in

⁸⁶This representation of the date is due to the differences between the start of the calendar years around the world. The English continued to use March 25 as the changeover to the new year, when most other countries used January 1. This depiction, 1703-04, simply means the year on English correspondence would reflect 1703, in other countries using 1 January as the start of the new year, their correspondence would reflect 1704. For more information on this, see C.R. Cheney, ed., Handbook of Dates for Students of English History (London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, 1970), 4-5, 10-11.

⁸⁷Ibid., 1:421-422.

accordance with quotas levied against the colony by England.⁸⁸ It must be remembered that these military excursions differed from militia duty.

It was not economically or militarily feasible to form up the militia and send those forces on extended duty away from their farms and towns. Thus we have the creation of what Professor Anderson calls "short-term provincial armies." He clearly describes the difference between provincial armies and the militia.

Provincial armies were entirely separate from the militia and were comprised principally of volunteers.... During wartime the colonies annually raised provincial forces, enlisting men in the spring of each year and discharging them in the fall.... As war followed war in the eighteenth century, provincial units came to perform virtually all of the active defense, as well as the offensive military functions.... (T)he militia assumed a variety of supportive roles. Militia units provided the manpower pool from which provincials could be recruited or drafted. Militia magazines comprized a rear-echelon supply network. Militia officers trained their townsmen in the rudiments of drill and maneuver. Finally, militia regiments constituted each province's last line of defense in case of invasion.⁸⁹

The militia stayed in an almost purely defensive posture until the Seven Year's War. At that time, an act was passed ordering one-sixth of the colony's militia to Albany to support provincial army forces already there. The provincial forces already fighting at Albany were made up of volunteers supported

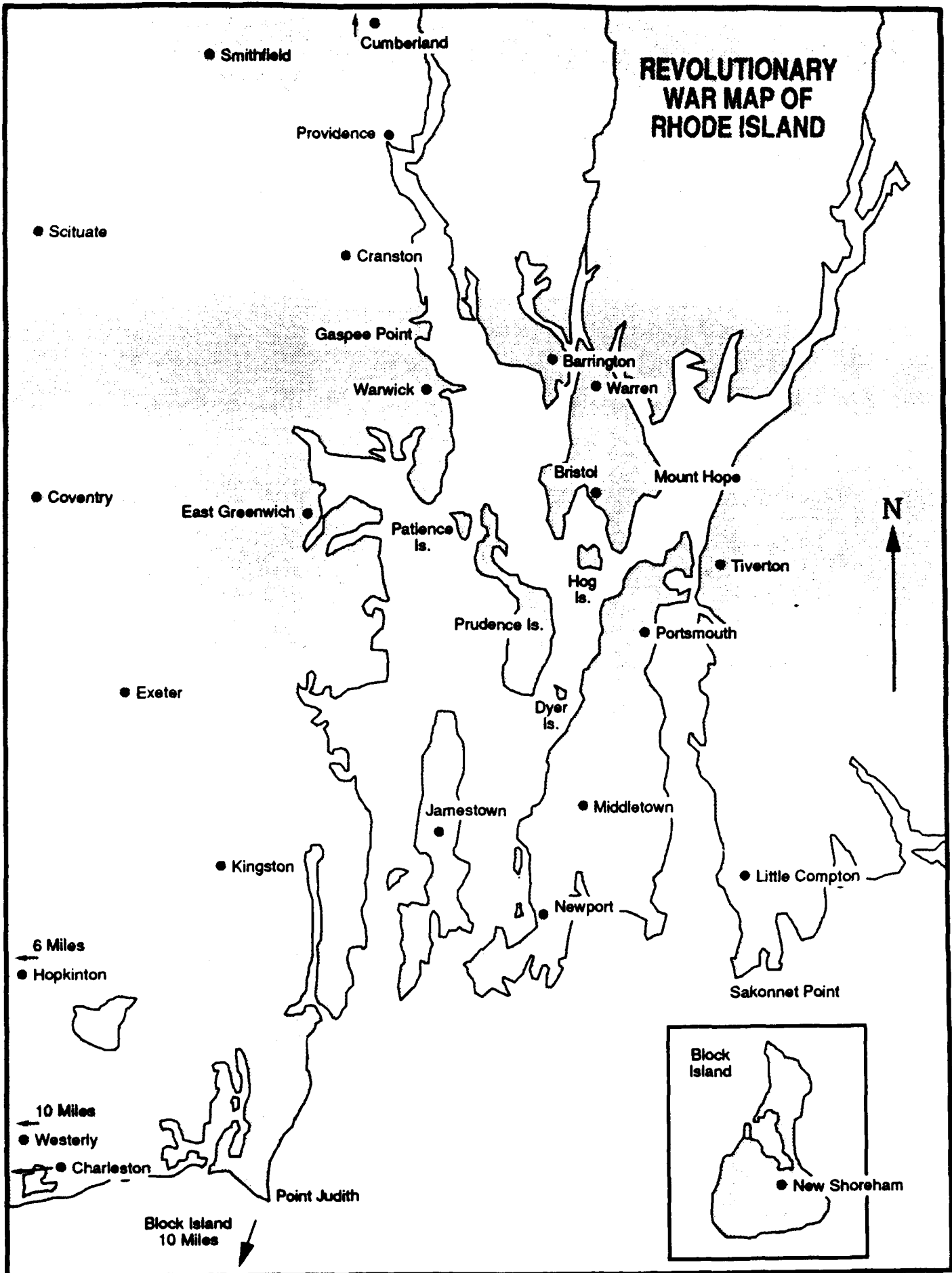
⁸⁸Ibid., 1:423.

⁸⁹Anderson, "Colonial Background," 6-7.

by militia men impressed out of various militia companies.⁹⁰

The experience gained from these expeditions would be beneficial to the men who would be fighting for their freedom against England in less than thirteen years. Several of the volunteers for these expeditions would assume prominent positions in the colony's militia during the American Revolution. Other than the experience some men received from the expeditions, not much changed in the development of the militia forces during this time. The two main roles played by the militia during the colonial wars were to provide manpower for the provincial armies and, if required, provide limited local defense.

⁹⁰Acts and Resolves, 1756-1757, 72-74.



The Interwar Years, 1764-1773

A lack of interest in the militia was always evident during periods of reduced threat to the colony. Indeed, the arming and training of the militia reached its nadir in the years between the colonial wars and 1774. This does not mean that acts of violence did not occur in Rhode Island. As resistance to British interference in the colony's affairs grew, several violent acts were committed by Rhode Islanders.

The first of these occurred in 1764 when a small riot broke out between the people of Newport and the crew of the British schooner, the St. John. The following year, as a protest to the press gang operations being conducted by the British, a mob in Newport seized one of the small boats of the British ship Maidstone, dragged it to the parade ground and burnt it. Four years later, in 1769, Newporters destroyed the armed sloop Liberty, a British ship sent to enforce the revenue laws.⁹¹ The most important act of defiance by the inhabitants of the colony, however, was the destruction of the British revenue schooner, Gaspee.

The Gaspee

The British armed schooner, Gaspee, started patrolling the waters around the Narragansett Bay in March 1772. According to

⁹¹Business Associates, Book of Rhode Island, 35.

Admiral Montagu at Boston, the ship was sent to protect shipping in and around the bay from privateers, provide assistance to the trading business and the revenue it generated, and to prevent illicit trade from being conducted in Rhode Island.⁹² The manner in which Lieutenant Dudingston, captain of the vessel, conducted this assistance inflamed the people of the colony. While enforcing various trade and navigational acts, Lieutenant Dudingston blatantly confiscated the goods of even "small craft (the wood boats, oyster boats, fishing boats, [and] river packets) so that provisions became scarce and expensive."⁹³ British ships, such as the Gaspee, "had earned an ugly reputation while doing the bidding of the customs commissioners."⁹⁴

The devastation in lost revenue Dudingston caused to privateering and illegal smuggling can only be estimated, but the illegal seizures of several legitimate ships' cargos fed the frustration felt by the colonists. Long irritated by Dudingston's confiscations and illegal dispatches of seized cargo to Boston, the residents of the colony were waiting for the appropriate time to affect revenge. The time came on the night of 9 June 1772.

⁹²Carroll, Three Centuries, 1:252-253.

⁹³Florence Simister, The Fire's Center: Rhode Island in the Revolutionary Era, 1763-1790 (Providence: Rhode Island Bicentennial Foundation, 1979), 44.

⁹⁴Max Savelle, A History of Colonial America, rev. ed. by Robert Middlekauff (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 540.



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Drummers were sent through town beating their drums and calling for volunteers. A group of men gathered at the tavern of James Sabin and planned their attack.⁹⁷

With other sea-faring men such as Captain Abraham Whipple and Captain John Hopkins, the group set out in five eight-oared vessels. The men approached the Gaspee whereupon Dudingston was shot and his men were told to evacuate the ship. Soon after midnight the rebellious group set fire to the Gaspee. As the ship burned down to the water's edge, the wounded Dudingston was taken to Pawtuxet.⁹⁸

This act has been cited by some historians as the first shedding of British blood in the American Revolution, and by others as the Lexington of the sea.⁹⁹ It was neither, but the way the group organized and acted would be imitated by militia men in the coming years. The beat of the drum to raise the alarm; the meeting of the men at a prominent tavern; the violence waged against British troops; and the cohesiveness of the population in supporting this violence, were all actions consistent with militia operations throughout Rhode Island during the upcoming revolution.

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸Ibid., 1:255-256.

⁹⁹See Arnold, History, 2:313; Carroll, Three Centuries, 1:257; and, Simister, Fire's Center, 54. Although an historic moment in Rhode Island's past, it is only one of many events that would lead to the start of the revolution. The first naval engagement of the war would occur in Rhode Island and would involve the same Captain Whipple, but the burning of the Gaspee was not the start of the revolution.

The political consequences of the Gaspee burning are more important to the start of the revolution than the act of violence itself. Although no act "short of open rebellion could have been more outrageous,"¹⁰⁰ the repercussions to the event is what truly lend credence to the tremendous importance ascribed to the Gaspee affair. After the British were made aware of the event, a royal commission was set up to find the culprits involved in this act.

This commission, started on 5 January 1773 and concluded on 23 June 1773, had in its power the ability to transport suspected conspirators in the Gaspee burning to England for trial. This so alarmed the American colonies that actions were taken by the various colonies to establish committees of correspondence. The speed and accuracy of the details of the battles at Lexington and Concord were made possible through the committees of correspondence established as a result of the Gaspee Commission.¹⁰¹

Another result of the Gaspee burning was an increase in the Rhode Island newspapers' calls for resistance to English authority. The two prominent papers of Rhode Island at this time were the Newport Mercury and the Providence Gazette. While

¹⁰⁰John Shy, Toward Lexington: The Role of the British Army in the Coming of the American Revolution (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 401.

¹⁰¹See Eugene Wulsin, "The Political Consequences of the Burning of the Gaspee," Rhode Island History 3, no. 1 (January 1944): 3-9; Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:225-239; Simister, Fire's Center, 54; and, Cohen, "Molasses to Muskets," 103.

reviewing the coverage of the commission's actions and the resulting outcome, it becomes obvious that this event heightened and sustained interest in colonial affairs by the colony's populace.

Previously, the front pages of these papers covered local lotteries and occasionally an event of some European importance. Throughout the years 1773 and 1774 a dramatic change occurred in the substance of the front pages of the newspapers. The press started covering the front page with various articles written against British attitudes and actions. Several of these were anonymous, but more often than not, the editors of the papers were overt in their attempts to flame the fires of emotion of the Rhode Island populace.¹⁰²

The headlines and leading stories of the weekly papers would soon be limited almost exclusively to actions of military or political significance regarding England and the colonies. The inability of England to appreciate this raising of popular support for resistance would be a major factor in England's unpreparedness for the coming war.¹⁰³

¹⁰²Providence Gazette and Newport Mercury, 1773 to 1774, passim.

¹⁰³Ibid.

CHAPTER 6

PREPARING FOR WAR: 1774

Inflaming Passions

The Ministry seems to be determined to embrue their cursed hands in American Blood, and that once Wise and Virtuous Parliment, but now Wicked and weak Assembly lends an assisting hand to accomplish their hellish schemes--The Soldiers in Boston are insolent above measure, soon very soon expect to hear the thirsty Earth drinking the warm Blood of American Sons. O how my eyes flashes with indignation, and by bosom burns with holy resentment.¹⁰⁴

Nathanael Greene

Such were the sentiments of many Rhode Islanders. During this year, the colony was preparing itself for war. The Boston Tea Party of 16 December 1773 only increased the tensions between England and the colonies. Rhode Island took several actions in 1774 that can only be interpreted as warlike. In addition to building on the popular support of the people from the Gaspee affair, the press continued its unrelenting articles against the British Parliament. The colonies saw actions in Boston as a precursor to actions in their colony. The First Continental Congress met and military clubs, companies, and supplies grew throughout the area. Rhode Island prepared for a war.

When news of the Boston Tea Party reached the various towns of Rhode Island, a unity of effort was achieved which was not

¹⁰⁴Nathanael Greene, Coventry, to Samuel Ward, Jr., Westerly, 10 July 1774, Nathanael Greene Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence.

previously common in this independent-minded colony. From January to March almost a dozen town councils condemned any person who imported, bought, sold, distributed, or used tea as "enemies of their country."¹⁰⁵

Other efforts to increase support for resistance occurred throughout the year, and was instrumental in encouraging enlistments into the militia and in forming independently chartered military companies. "Mobilization of public opinion was central to the winning of a war for political independence which was at the same time the first successful effort in the modern era by a colonial people to sever an imperial connection with a great world power."¹⁰⁶

A town meeting in Providence on 17 May 1774 proposed the first meeting of a congress of the colonies. It was quickly acted upon by the Virginian committee of correspondence, and on 28 May the Virginians asked the various colonies to submit delegates to this congress.¹⁰⁷ The burning of the Gaspee and the political response by setting up these committees of correspondence made such timely coordination possible among the various colonies.

¹⁰⁵See Carroll, Three Centuries, 1:260; and, Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:272-287.

¹⁰⁶Richard B. Morris, "We the People of the United States: The Bicentennial of a People's Revolution," American Historical Review 82 (February to December 1977): 2.

¹⁰⁷See Carroll, Three Centuries, 1:261; and, Brigham, "Rhode Island in the Revolution," 1:225.

Summer: The Military Responds

Military preparations began in earnest during the summer of 1774 and continued through December. An increased interest in belonging to some form of military organization was evident with the increase in requests to the General Assembly for forming such organizations. Before the first independent company was formed, the people of Providence formed a military club. Not much is known about this club as only a few pages of its history are available. However, several excerpts from what remains of their history shed light on the interest in the military spirit growing within the colony.

We will meet at some convenient Place,...at a certain Hour, and all those who shall be absent, shall...be Fined a Sum not exceeding four pence.

If the Company shall think proper hereafter to enter into any Rules or Regulations, all such Matters shall be determined by Vote of the Majority.

Mr. Asa Franklin expressing a Desire to Join the Company and attend the Four Gentlemen of the Company who go to Capt. Waterman's to Learn the Exercise there....¹⁰⁸

It appears that the company met once a week and discussed such issues as training, watching the Providence Cadet Company perform, levying fines for not having the appropriate armament, and writing articles of behavior for the club to follow. Some of the members of this club would attain high rank and win renown in

¹⁰⁸"A Military Club," Publications of the Rhode Island Historical Society 3 (1895): 183-184.

other military organizations in the upcoming war. These club members were William Barton, Silas Talbot, and William Field, to name but a few.¹⁰⁹

The General Assembly, meeting on the second Monday of June in Newport, accepted a charter for an independent company, called the Light Infantry. The charter for this independent company was only three short paragraphs, but would start a flood of requests from other independent companies that would continue over the next several years. The charter was approved with the following guidance.

At the request of the persons formed into a company, by the name of The Light Infantry, for the county of Providence.--

It is voted and resolved, that the following persons be, and hereby are, appointed the first commissioned officers for the said company, to wit:

John Mathewson, captain; Jonathan Ellis, first lieutenant; Thomas Truman, second lieutenant; Asa Franklin, ensign.¹¹⁰

An important distinction should be made about the differences in the three types of "citizen soldiers" of Rhode Island. The first type is that of the militia company. Its legal requirements have been spelled out in chapter 4 and it performed the major portion of the colony's self defense efforts. The second major type of citizen soldier was the independently chartered company.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 186-187.

¹¹⁰Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:247.

The independent companies received their charter from the General Assembly. These charters were requested by the men petitioning the Assembly and were of generally the same format. They included any articles accepted by the company detailing training or behavior, the names of the company, the size and structure of the company, and its election of officers. The Assembly generally limited these companies to fifty men for horse companies and one hundred men for infantry companies.¹¹¹

The chain of command for these independent companies lay outside the chain of command for the militia companies. The militia captain answered to his commanding colonel, usually the commander of the company's regiment. The independent company captains received their orders directly from the governor of the colony. The ranks of the officers of the independent companies were also different. The captain of an independent company possessed the rank of colonel; his first lieutenant, the rank of lieutenant colonel; his second lieutenant, the rank of major; the cornet or ensign, the rank of captain; and the quartermaster, the rank of lieutenant.¹¹² More will be covered on independent companies as the war begins.

The General Assembly passed numerous laws regulating both the

¹¹¹See Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:247,262-264; and, Acts and Resolves, 1776-1777: 144-147. As the colony wages the war, it will improve upon these charters and detail the command structure and responsibilities. These will be covered in the years the laws are passed.

¹¹²"Captain General's Cavaliers Meeting Minutes," Smithfield, Rhode Island. MSS, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence.

militia and the independent companies in 1775 and 1776, and began including the third major type of citizen soldier, the alarm company. It appears from alarm lists of the various towns, that all those men capable of bearing arms who were not enrolled in the various militia companies, were merely listed on sheets of paper and kept by the captain of the town's militia company.¹¹³ As the requirements for men increased throughout the war years, the General Assembly would organize these men and place them under the militia. More will be said about the organization and use of these three types of forces.

Fall: The Colony Arms

As the summer ended, the military spirit of the colony began in earnest. One of the reasons for the continued interest in arming and preparing the colony for conflict was the appearance in the fall of H.M.S. Rose, a frigate of 24 guns. With a crew of over one hundred men, the appearance of this ship in Newport harbor created quite a stir among the inhabitants. Captain Wallace, commanding officer of the Rose, only stayed one day, but would return on 11 December of this year.¹¹⁴

During its October meeting, the General Assembly granted

¹¹³"Town of Smithfield Alarm List, 1 August 1778," Military Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence.

¹¹⁴Simister, Fire's Center, 63.

charters to five more independent companies: the Newport Light Infantry, the Providence Grenadiers, the Pawtuxet Rangers, the Light Infantry of Glocester, and the Kentish Guards. This last company holds a particularly warm spot in the hearts of the Rhode Island people. Perhaps more has been written about this one company than any other of Rhode Island's distinguished militia, continental, or independent companies. One of the main reasons for all this publicity was the quantity and quality of leaders who were members of this company at various stages of the war.

The most well known of these was Nathanael Greene. Although not an original member of the Military Independent Company of East Greenwich, the forerunner to the Kentish Guards, Greene went on to win acclaim as the brigadier general in charge of Rhode Island's Army of Observation at Boston in 1775 and in his military battles conducted in the southern regions of the colonies. His beginnings in the Kentish Guards tell a lot about the formation and training of independent companies. In this case, they paid for their own equipment, paid for their own training, and determined their own officers.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵See Warren Dietzel, A History of the Kentish Guards Rhode Island Militia (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1967), 2; Theodore Green, "The Youth of General Greene," Rhode Island History 1, no. 4 (October 1942): 114-115; Fred Grenier, "The Private's Strategy," Soldiers 31, no. 5 (May 1976): 42; and, Richard K. Showman, ed., The Papers of General Nathanael Greene (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 68-69n. The Independent Company of East Greenwich was formed in about August 1774 and the request for the charter was initiated on 25 October 1774.

Winter: Legislative Action Abounds

Perhaps the most important military activity of the year occurred in the month of December. At its meeting in Providence on the first Monday of the month, the General Assembly enacted several laws and resolves that improved the colony's military preparations for conflict. The first of these directed all the cannon

now at Fort George [on Goat Island] (excepting two eighteen-pounders and one six-pounder), and all the powder, shot and stores, thereto belonging (excepting so much powder and ball as are sufficient for the cannon to be left at said fort), be immediately removed to the town of Providence; that Col. Joseph Nightingale, be, and he is hereby, appointed to see the same done.¹¹⁶

The various militia and independent company colonels continued to help distribute arms and equipment throughout the colony.

A committee was formed to purchase three hundred half-barrels of pistol powder, three tons of lead, and 40,000 flints. These military stores were distributed to the colonels of the militia and independent companies so each soldier would be equipped with the arms required by law. Furthermore, in an effort to conserve powder and shot, the Assembly prohibited the firing of cannon or small arms, "especially by the militia, or incorporated companies, on days of exercise, excepting only for perfecting themselves as marksmen, under the immediate direction of the

¹¹⁶Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:262.

commanding officer."¹¹⁷

The excess firearms of the colony were located in Newport. An order was immediately issued to deliver these guns to the various counties who were still short of their allocations. The guns were to be marked with the colony's marking in order to track and account for them as they were issued and turned back in to the colony.¹¹⁸

The creation of the position of Major General of the colony's forces was passed with Simeon Potter appointed to the post.¹¹⁹ With the governor as a captain general, the deputy governor as a lieutenant general, and the newly formed major general, the colony was now ready to deploy the forces of the colony anywhere required. Any two of the three generals, in any combination, could order and direct the forces of the colony to the assistance of any of the other colonies. When these forces were deployed out of the colony, they would remain under the immediate command and direction of the major general.¹²⁰ Rhode Island was now prepared for open hostilities.

¹¹⁷Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:266.

¹¹⁸Ibid., 268.

¹¹⁹Acts and Resolves, 1776-1777: 150; and Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:269.

¹²⁰Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:270.

CHAPTER 7

BLOOD REPLACES RHETORIC: 1775

The Calm Before the Storm

One comfort we have, that Divine Wisdom and Goodness often bring good out of ill; that the Issue of this Same Contest will be the establishment of our Liberties, I as firmly believe as I do my existence, for I never can think that God brought us into the wilderness to perish, or what is worse to become Slaves, but to make us a great and free People.¹²¹

Samuel Ward

1775 was one of three years in the War of Independence where Rhode Island's militia forces performed crucial services in substantial numbers. To support these efforts, the ranks of the militia swelled to thousands by the end of the year. Land and sea duty taxed the resources of men, commanders, towns, and the colony. Before the year was over, many had left their militia companies and enlisted in the Continental Army. The transition was not smooth for either the men, Washington, or the colony.

Although the militia forces had been organizing and arming for most of 1774, armament and training remained inadequate to prosecute a war against one of the most formidable European military powers. The functions of the militia during the revolution's first year were the same duties they will perform throughout the war. The militia, independent and alarm companies of men prepared fortifications; intimidated and detained those who remained loyal to the crown; evacuated cattle, sheep, hay and

¹²¹Samuel Ward, Philadelphia, to Henry Ward, Providence, 30 September 1775, Ward Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence.

other goods from the colony's many islands; repelled invasion along the coast; provided manpower to the Continental Army; suppressed open rebellion to the revolution; confiscated Tory property; and controlled the movement of Tories and patriots alike.

During this year, the colony confronted considerable turmoil; it deposed its governor and lieutenant governor, shifted its seat of government from Newport to Providence, and raised men, money and material for the war. With its liberal charter, trade with England, and significant military shortcomings (extensive coastline, lack of military armament, and lack of naval vessels to patrol and protect the numerous islands), Rhode Island had "the most to fear and the most to lose."¹²²

What made it possible for Rhode Island to support the revolution? Undoubtedly it was the independent-minded character of its population and their belief in the ability of their military force--the militia.

This chapter will review the multitude of tasks levied on the militia and evaluate their effectiveness in supporting the revolution. Only 1777 and 1778 challenged Rhode Island's military forces to a greater extent.

Not much exists in the history books or in the manuscript collections about the winter of 1775. Winter months were traditionally quiet months in New England, given the economic

¹²²Patrick Conley, "Revolution's Impact on Rhode Island," Rhode Island History 34, no. 4 (November 1975): 121.

parameters of colonial life and the severe winters. However, militia training continued. In the Kentish Guards for instance, the British military training instructor hired by Nathanael Greene kept them hard at it.¹²³ On 5 January 1775 the town of Warren voted to purchase six good guns, while a watchtower and watchhouse were built on Burr's Hill.¹²⁴

The Storm: April 1775

The political situation in Massachusetts had prepared Rhode Island for the onset of war. Two weeks before the events at Lexington and Concord, Rhode Island had mustered all its military forces. On 3 April 1775 a general muster of all the militia companies occurred throughout the colony. Some reports showed that as many as 2,000 men turned out from a single town. On the following day a review of all recently formed independent companies was received with tremendous enthusiasm by the colony's populace.¹²⁵

¹²³Richard Showman, ed., The Papers of Nathanael Greene, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 1:70-71.

¹²⁴Marion Wright and Robert Sullivan, The Rhode Island Atlas (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1982), 138. Although this appears to be a weak source of history, the officers of this publication include two well known Rhode Island historical specialists, Patrick Conley and Dr. Joel Cohen, who edited this atlas.

¹²⁵See Arnold, History, 2:345; and, Carroll, Three Centuries, 1:265.

Rhode Island received the news of Lexington and Concord on the evening of the 19th of April. Within hours the word had spread throughout the colony and men armed themselves and assembled to march to Boston. Not all would wait until daylight to travel. Colonel Varnum, commanding officer of the Kentish Guards, supposedly had his men assembled and ready to march within three hours of being notified. The hard training had paid off.¹²⁶ The main part of the colony's force would not attempt leaving until daylight.

On the morning of the 20th, no less than 1,000 militia and independently chartered soldiers were marching to Massachusetts. Stopped in Pawtuxet with word the British were safely back in their barracks in Boston, the men went back to their farms and their homes.¹²⁷

Shortly thereafter a meeting was held in the town of Providence to plan strategies for the future. The members of this meeting were the officers of the military forces and a "number of gentlemen." They directed two expresses to Lexington to obtain "authentic Accounts" of the action while other express riders were sent to Connecticut and to the rest of the Colony. When word came back from Lexington on the 21st, the people of Providence were outraged, and realized exactly what these events

¹²⁶Howard Preston, "The Varnum House," Rhode Island Historical Society Collections 20, no. 4 (October 1927): 117.

¹²⁷Carroll, Three Centuries, 1:265.

meant.¹²⁸ Their preparations for conflict were to be severely tested over the next few months.

As an emergency session of the General Assembly was called, the papers declared a state of war, and furthermore, were encouraging all those who were friends of America and Great Britain to speedily terminate this conflict.

Thus, through the sanguinary Measures of a wicked Ministry, and the **Readiness of a standing Army to execute their Mandates**, has commenced the American Civil War, which will hereafter fill an important Page in History. **That it may speedily terminate** in a full Restoration of our Liberties, and the Confusion of all who have aimed at an Abridgement of them, should be the earnest Desire of every real Friend of Great Britain and America.¹²⁹

During this emergency session of the General Assembly, patriotic passion was at an all time high. The fear to the colony was real and immediate measures for the safety of the colony were taken. The Assembly voted to "enlist fifteen hundred good, effective men, for the service of the colony."¹³⁰ These would receive a bounty of \$4 and monthly wages. This was no rabble of farmers or shopkeepers. Rather, it was a well-drilled and efficient group of men, abiding by rules drafted for the duration of their service. A Rhode Island committee drafted these fifty-three articles for this Army of Observation, most of which

¹²⁸Providence Gazette, 22 April 1775, 1.

¹²⁹Ibid. Emphasis added.

¹³⁰Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:311.

would be adopted by the Continental Army.¹³¹

Another issue dealt with during this meeting was the coordination of defenses for the colonies of New England. Early in the session, Samuel Ward and William Bradford were appointed a committee to go to Connecticut's General Assembly. They were to "consult with them, upon measures for the common defence of the four New England colonies," and make a report at the next session.¹³²

Samuel Ward would not make it to Connecticut. The Second Continental Congress was scheduled to reconvene on 10 May, and Nathaniel Greene was selected to go in his place.¹³³ There is no further mention of what transpired at Connecticut's Assembly meeting in the Rhode Island histories. However, if this Nathaniel Greene (his name always appears as Nathaniel in matters dealing with the legislature--even on his brigadier general's commission) is the same one who would later command the Army of Observation, it would explain why he went from a private in the Kentish Guards to Brigadier General of such a large force virtually overnight.

General Nathanael Greene could have risen from the rank of private in an **independent company** to be Brigadier General for several reasons. He came from a prosperous family and was well connected politically--he was very good friends with Samuel

¹³¹Ibid., 340-346.

¹³²Ibid., 309-310.

¹³³Acts and Resolves, 1775-1776, 168.

Ward's son, Samuel junior; he was a son-in-law to Ward through his brother's marriage to one of Ward's daughters; and his brother Jacob was a deputy in the legislature from Warwick and a prominent member of the five-member Committee of Safety for the colony.

If he went to Connecticut with William Bradford, his background, political connections, family connections, and recent attendance at a conference for the "consulting upon measures for the common defence of the four New England governments,"¹³⁴ would all have qualified him to rise over several other men of equal or higher connections. Who better to send as commander? Certainly, there were men who outranked him (virtually everyone, since he had never held a commission), but whatever caused this stroke of luck, this talented commander was selected to represent Rhode Island.

Much has been written about the turnover in Rhode Island's legally elected government at the start of the revolution, but its impact on the military forces should be appreciated.¹³⁵ Owing to their allegiance to the crown, Governor Wanton and

¹³⁴See Acts and Resolves, 1775-1776, 168; Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:311-312; and, Showman, Papers of Nathanael Greene, 1:xix, 70, 78-79.

¹³⁵See Joel Cohen, "Lexington and Concord: Rhode Island Reacts," Rhode Island History 26, no. 4 (October 1967):99-102; Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:311, 325-326; Howard Preston, "Rhode Island Loyalists," Rhode Island Historical Society Collections 22, no. 1 (January 1929): 5-6; Jarvis Morse, "The Wanton Family and Rhode Island Loyalism," Rhode Island Historical Society Collections 31, no. 2 (April 1938): 33-36; and, Carroll, Three Centuries, 1:266-267.

Deputy Governor Sessions protested the raising of the Army of Observation. As the only one in the colony who was authorized to sign the commissions of the colony's officers, Wanton was in a position to halt this revolt before it started. What is important to understand is that previous laws for the militia required the governor, deputy governor and the major general of the forces (or any two out of the three) to approve forces sent out of the colony. With only one of the three still in his position, the legislature was hard pressed to act militarily.

This problem was quickly resolved. The legislature selected Nicholas Cooke, a prominent gentleman from Providence, to be the new deputy governor. It further authorized the colony's secretary, Henry Ward, to sign the colony's commissions. Thus, the forces of the colony had some sort of legitimate status.

By the Honorable the GENERAL ASSEMBLY of the English
Colony of RHODE-ISLAND, and PROVIDENCE PLAN-
TATIONS, in New-England, in America.

To Jeremiah Olney Gent. ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ Greeting.

WHEREAS for the Preservation of the Rights and Liberties of His Majesty's
loyal and faithful Subjects, in this Colony and America, the aforesaid GENERAL
ASSEMBLY have ordered Fifteen Hundred Men to be enlisted, and embodied into an
Army of Observation, and have appointed you, the said *Jeremiah Olney* *Captain of a Company*
~ ~ ~ ~ ~ of the Regiment to be raised in the County of
Providence ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ You are therefore hereby, in His Majesty's Name, G E O R G E
the Third, by the Grace of G O D, King of Great-Britain, &c. authorized, empowered,
and commissioned, to have, take, and exercise, the Office of *Captain of a Company* ~ ~ ~ ~ ~
~ ~ ~ ~ ~ the Regiment aforesaid; and to command, guide and conduct the
same, or any Part thereof. And in Case of an Invasion or Assault of a common Enemy, to
infect or disturb this or any other of His Majesty's Colonies in America, you are to alarm and
gather together the *Company* under your Command, or any Part thereof, as you shall deem suf-
ficient, and therewith, to the utmost of your Skill and Ability, you are to Resist, Expel, Kill and
Destroy them, in order to preserve the Interest of His Majesty, and His good Subjects, in these
Parts. You are also to follow such Instructions, Directions and Orders, as shall from Time to
Time be given forth, either by the GENERAL ASSEMBLY or your superior Officers. And for
your so doing this Commission shall be your sufficient Warrant.

By Virtue of an Act of the said GENERAL ASSEMBLY, I *Henry Thos. Higgin* ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ Secretary of the said Co-
lony, have hereunto set my Hand, and the public Seal of the said Colony, this *Eight* ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ Day of *May*
A. D. 1775 and in the Fifteenth Year of His said Majesty's Reign.

Henry Thos. Higgin

Summer and The Militia Mobilizes

Four days after the Assembly's 4 May 1775 meeting, the armed forces began assembling. Henry Ward was busy issuing commissions while the captains of the various companies of the Army of Observation were enlisting their men.¹³⁶ It took almost three weeks to raise and send the men to their camps near Boston. The enlistment dates on Captain Olney's company show only a few enlistees from 8-11 May. The majority of his enlistees occur towards the weekend and almost a week from the first notification of the call to enlist.¹³⁷

A short war was expected. The belief in the militia was uncontested. Sentiment for these citizen soldiers ran high while the British regulars were condemned as unworthy of the fight. In an article in the Providence Gazette, dated 27 May 1775, one writer believed that the numbers of militia patriots alone would quickly win the war.

If 300 undisciplined Yankeys, as they are contemptuously called (for all accounts agree there were not more engaged at any one time) can vanquish and drive before them 1800 of the best ministerial veterans, can even the ministry think of sending a sufficient force to effect their wicked purposes?

¹³⁶See Henry Ward, Providence, to Samuel Ward, Junior, 8 May 1775, "Commission as Captain of a Company of the Regiment to be raised in the Countys of Kings County and Kent," Ward Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence; and, Jeremiah Olney, "Enlistments for 4th company in Colonel Hitchcock's Regiment, May 1775," Jeremiah Olney Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence.

¹³⁷Jeremiah Olney, "Enlistments for May 1775."

Although the logic and conclusions of this argument are suspect, is it any wonder that the colonists thought this would be a short war in which the outcome was a certain victory? The men encamped on Prospect Hill and at other locations were in general a poorly armed, ill-clad and undisciplined group of men. One section stood out--the Rhode Island Brigade.

One of these encampments, however, was in striking contrast with the rest, and might vie with those of the British for order and exactness. Here were tents and marquees pitched in the English style, soldiers well drilled and well equipped; everything had an air of discipline and subordination. It was a body of Rhode Island troops, which had been raised, drilled, and brought to the camp by Brigadier-General Greene.¹³⁸

With over a thousand of Rhode Island's men out of the colony, preparations continued for the defense of Rhode Island. Some of these preparations included the erecting of numerous towers, beacons and forts. For example, the Kentish Guards spent the year building Fort Daniel in East Greenwich using their own money and supplying their own labor.¹³⁹ Although the men worked earnestly to build defenses for the colony, only about one-fourth of them appears to have had any real military training. Couple this with an extreme shortage of engineers for the military

¹³⁸Washington Irving, The Life of George Washington (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1889), 1:6.

¹³⁹See Albert Klyberg, "Wartime Providence," in Providence: From Provincial Village to Prosperous Port, 1750-1790, ed. Linda Levin, Rhode Island Forum Series, vol 1. (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1978), 7-8; and, Dietzel, "Kentish Guards," 3-4.

forces, and the works constructed could only be considered crude at best.¹⁴⁰

Throughout the summer, units were despatched to the various islands in and around Narragansett Bay. They removed property such as sheep, cattle and hay, and they repelled foraging parties from Wallace's troops. In a letter to his brother, Samuel Ward, Henry describes events affecting the militia forces. He describes the success in raising companies for the Army of Observation in Newport and Bristol, but shows how other counties have not yet decided to fully support the war.

In Kings County Things are far otherwise; the disaffected People there have given such Discouragement to the Service that the Officers notwithstanding all their Exertion have not been able to inlist more than Two Thirds of the Men.¹⁴¹

Not everyone supported the war. It has been thought that only a third of the colonists fully supported the war, while one-third was against it and the final third either did not care or did not express their opinions. The one-third who openly opposed the war created many problems for the colony. Actions by the Tories demanded an immediate response by the colony.

We have since you left us, had an important Discovery of a place amongst the Torys back of us. They passed Counterfeit money which it is supposed was made at Newport, and brought up to enlist men! One is hanged and it is thought a second man will be executed. It is

¹⁴⁰James Deerin, "The Militia in the Revolutionary War," Guardsman 30 (August/September 1976): 3.

¹⁴¹Henry Ward, Providence, to Samuel Ward, 30 May 1775.

really melancholy to think of these creatures families
innocent women and children must suffer with the guilty
but this is the fate of war.¹⁴²

In June a group of leading citizens in Newport formed an association claiming their allegiance to the king and declaring that they would maintain peace in Newport. When it became obvious that these actions would not maintain their position of neutrality, most of the original signers to the association would join the rebellion.¹⁴³ In East Greenwich trouble of a potentially violent nature broke out. Only when troops were dispatched from Providence County was violence prevented.¹⁴⁴

Throughout the summer months, the militia units were busy evacuating sheep, cattle and people from exposed islands. General Washington had advised Governor Cooke of the possibility of the British fleet raiding the coast, but Wallace and his men were what caused the most concerns to the Rhode Islanders.¹⁴⁵ By September, "about three hundred minute men from the Main Land have been to Block Island and got off the stock, and the stock is

¹⁴²Katy Ward Greene, Potowmut, to Captain Samuel Ward, Jr., Camp at Boston, 26 May 1775.

¹⁴³Joel Cohen, "Rhode Island Loyalism and the American Revolution," Rhode Island History 27, no. 4 (October 1968): 98.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., 99.

¹⁴⁵George Washington, Camp at Cambridge, to Nicholas Cooke, Providence, 26 July 1775, Nicholas Cooke Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence.

all taken off of James Town and Prudence Islands."¹⁴⁶ The minute men performed other duties such as preventing the Tories from communicating with Wallace in Newport.¹⁴⁷ The reference to minute men by Jacob Richardson and John Howland, refer to that part of the colony's militia which had formed into minute men companies.

During the 28 June 1775 session of the General Assembly, an act was passed enlisting one-fourth of the militia and independent companies into service as minute men. They were formed into companies of varying sizes, their officers were appointed, and the deputy governor would allow the secretary to issue them commissions. They trained one half-day every two weeks and were under the direct control of the colonel whose regiment they belonged, unless they were sent out of the colony. In that case, only the lieutenant general or major general of the colony (since there was no governor, there was no captain general of the colony at this time) were allowed to direct them.¹⁴⁸

The movement of sheep from Block Island was directed by the Assembly during its August session. Since two of the six additional companies scheduled to join the Army of Observation

¹⁴⁶Jacob Richardson, Newport, to Captain Isaac Sears, 13 September 1775, in George Mason, Newport: Historical and Social Reminiscences of Ye Olden Times, n.p., 1892.

¹⁴⁷John Howland, Notices of the Military Services Rendered by the Militia, as Well as the Enlisted Troops, of the State of Rhode-Island, During the Revolutionary War (Providence: n.p., November 1832), 3.

¹⁴⁸Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:358-361.

had not yet marched out of the colony, they were directed to take 250 men to secure the stock until it could be taken off the island. Colonel James Rhodes was to lead this expedition and the report of his progress by Joseph Stanton, Jr. reflects the trials and tribulations of these forces.

I have been Obligated to take the Towns Stock of Powder and Ball from Westerly Charlestown and Hopkinton, to Equip the Troops for the Block Island expedition and to press 50 for arms.

Capt Wallace with three tenders gave Chase in pursuit of two of our Transports, with 75 men who were on their passage to Block Island, the night coming on, when they were in the middle of the sound and About a League Distance from the Rose and tenders, which Gave our troops an opportunity to make their escape.

In the morning the Ship Rose and her tenders came into the above harbor, began a heavy fire on the town which continued most of the day. The women and children abandoned the town in the midst of a severe rain storm.

Colonel Rhodes is on the Island with 180 troops the Remainder will Imbarque in Small Boats as we think it most Safe, Immediately, we have not a sufficient Supply of powder for the Island expedition.¹⁴⁹

By the end of September, all but two hundred head of cattle had been removed from Block Island, the minute men were dismissed from service on the island, and Captain Ethan Clarke, commander of the 9th Company from Kings and Kent counties, was waiting for further instructions from General Washington via Governor

¹⁴⁹Joseph Stanton, Junior, Charlestown, Rhode Island, to Nicholas Cooke, Providence, 1 September 1775, Nicholas Cooke Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence.

Cooke.¹⁵⁰ The details of this expedition tell a lot about the ability, or lack of ability, of the militia units.

Shortages of military supplies in the form of firearms, cannon, powder, shot and boats, plagued both the colony's militia troops and the Continental Army. Rhode Island forces would rarely have full control of the various waterways around Narragansett Bay until the British moved their operations to the south later in the war. The various commanders had to do like Stanton did for this expedition--take needed arms and other equipment from one sector of the colony to support operations in another location. This shortage of arms and ammunition continued throughout Rhode Island for the duration of the war.

Fall (of Tories) and Winter of Transition

The last three months of the year saw the militia intimidate and detain Tories, transport goods from the various islands to safer areas on the mainland, and transition from a colonial militia to a much feared (by the Americans) and unsupported standing army. In its capacity as a Tory suppression force, the militia was fast and effective.

¹⁵⁰See James Rhodes, to Nicholas Cooke, Providence, 23 September 1775, Nicholas Cooke Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence; and, Nicholas Cooke, Providence, to Captain Ethan Clarke, Block Island, 29 September 1775, Nicholas Cooke Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence.

On 4 October 1775 the council of war directed Ezek Hopkins and William West to take the five companies of minute men from the county of Providence plus various militia companies from Tiverton and Little Compton, and proceed to Newport. They were to prevent Wallace from removing livestock from the island, repel any invasion and apprehend a Tory named George Rome.¹⁵¹ With an estimated force of almost 600 men, Hopkins arrived in Newport on the 6th.

The expedition was not entirely successful. Rome had taken refuge on one of the British vessels in the harbor, but Hopkins and his militia forces were able to apprehend other British sympathizers.¹⁵² Brigadier General Hopkins had responsibility for "the care, charge and management of the several estates by him ordered to be taken" according to the General Assembly.¹⁵³ He also had control over the movement of people to and from the various islands and the mainland. Thus, significant control over the population, especially the Tories concentrated in Newport,

¹⁵¹Nicholas Cooke, Providence, to Esek Hopkins and William West, 4 October 1775, Papers of Ezek Hopkins, 1677-1799, Rhode Island Historical Society. This was a council of war order issued inbetween Assembly sessions. Cooke signed it as deputy governor and it was ordered by Henry Ward. George Rome had Loyalist leanings from before the start of the war. Three days after Wallace first started patrolling Narragansett Bay, Rome had him over for dinner. A study of the attempted capture of Rome and the confiscation and distribution of his property shows the extent of power of the militia and also the legal workings of Rhode Island. Over thirty pages in the R.I.C.R. mention Rome and the disposition of his property.

¹⁵²Preston, "Rhode Island Loyalists," 7-9.

¹⁵³Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:405.

was vested in the commander-in-chief of the colony's militia forces.

Hopkins was also able to stop Wallace and his men from removing livestock from Brenton's Point. This caused Wallace to send an angry note to the people of Newport demanding the removal of the militia. Wallace threatened a bombardment of Newport, but apparently realized how impossible it would make it in the future to procure provisions from those few remaining friends of the crown if he laid waste to the town. In apparent frustration, Wallace loaded up his marines and sailed up the coast on the 7th.¹⁵⁴

On the evening of the 7th, Wallace immediately demanded thirty cattle and 200 sheep from the inhabitants of Bristol. When the town refused his order, he set to bombing the town for over an hour. It is reported that two people were killed in this raid and that the town eventually sold him forty sheep while his men stole another ninety. Where Bristol's militia forces were during this exchange is not clear. Even if Bristol's militia forces were in the area it is doubtful that such a force as Wallace presented, a squadron of fifteen ships and a bomb brig, could have been repelled by the militia force of the town.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴See Simister, Fire's Center, 72; and, Field, End of the Century, 1:231.

¹⁵⁵See Raymond Thomas, Two Hundred Years of the Bristol Train of Artillery: Rhode Island Militia, 1776-1976 (n.p., ca. 1976), 8; Howard Peckham, ed., The Toll of Independence: Engagements and Battle Casualties of the American Revolution (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 8; Nicholas Cooke, Providence, to Ezek Hopkins, 4 October 1775, Papers of Esek Hopkins, Rhode Island

Unsuccessful at engaging large enemy forces, the Rhode Island militia soon adapted to its primary functions of repelling enemy foraging parties and preventing the British from obtaining supplies through coastal raiding parties. Militia Colonel John Waterman, a delegate from Warwick, reports on the success and the problems associated with removing livestock from the islands, and the subsequent difficulties in protecting the islands. It became obvious that the summer militia forces were not able to perform the duties of permanent military forces. Long-term duty infringed on the well-being of these farmers' personal lives.

This moment returned from prudence Island...[where the inhabitants and field officers had] a Consultation Concerning taking of the Stock and finily concluded that the corn and hay was of as much consequence to them as Stock and Desire it may be all Guarded, but your honour must Determine that, the Troops, That was on this Evening amount to 220 or thereabouts: those of the militia being Chiefly Farmers are Exceeding uneasy as in their absence their business Suffers at home. Pray your honor to take this in to your consideration, if forces is to be kept there Let them be minute men or some that Can leave home.¹⁵⁶

The deputy governor consulted with the council of war acting between sessions of the Assembly, and directed Colonel Waterman to

withdraw your Regiment from Prudence as soon as possible, as we are of Opinion that the 60 Men placed there by General Hopkins with the Assistance of the Inhabitants

Historical Society, Providence; and, Simister, Fire's Center, 73.

¹⁵⁶John Waterman, Warwick, to Nicholas Cooke, Providence, 10 October 1775, Nicholas Cooke Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence. Emphasis added.

will be sufficient to repel any Force that is at present in the River [Wallace and his men] and prevent their taking off any Stock. You will direct them to repair to their several Homes and keep themselves in Readiness to march at a Minute's Warning when called for. In Case you find the Enemy are about to land upon Prudence you will send on some Men to assist in beating them off.¹⁵⁷

Keeping the militia in the field for long periods of time was not the only problem facing the colony with the coming of winter. Although the Assembly had now "engaged" Cooke to be its governor and William Bradford to be the deputy governor, the raising of troops, both for the Continental Army and for the colony's defense, was not proceeding smoothly at all. The October session passed an act to raise 500 men in the service of the colony for a year. This regiment was to be under the command of Brigadier General Hopkins and paid for by the colony.¹⁵⁸

With the tremendous draw towards Continental duty¹⁵⁹ and the initial excitement of the start of the war receding, Rhode Island

¹⁵⁷Nicholas Cooke, Providence, to Colonel John Waterman, Warwick, 11 October 1775, Nicholas Cooke Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence. As a postscript, Cooke directed Waterman to "take off all the Stock upon the Island of Patience and carry it to Warwick Neck; and also the Sheep which you will send up to Providence if Opportunity offers otherwise carry it to some safe Place in Warwick."

¹⁵⁸Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:384-386, 403-404.

¹⁵⁹Samuel Ward, Philadelphia, to Henry Ward, Providence, 21 November 1775, Nicholas Cooke Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence. In this and other letters between the two brothers in November and December, Samuel Ward details the problems of reenlisting the forces into a Continental force. In this letter he states, "By letters from Camp, I find there is infinite difficulty in reenlisting the army. The idea of making it wholly continental, has induced so many alterations, disgusting to both officers and men that very little success has attended our recruiting orders."

had a tough time filling up the ranks of its own home guard. To help, the Assembly directed that the commissions for the captains and subalterns be withheld until they had enlisted the proper number of men into the service of the colony. These enlistment quotas were twenty men for each captain and fifteen men for each lieutenant and ensign.¹⁶⁰

An important distinction between the officer corps of the militia and that of the independently chartered companies needs to be made. Previous laws (covered in chapter 4) required the officers of the various militia companies to be appointed by the Assembly. References to the raising of Rhode Island companies and regiments invariably include the officers appointed to the various commissioned positions. Independently chartered companies annually elected their officers and submitted these names to the Assembly for approval.¹⁶¹

Later in the war when alarm companies were formed, they too would elect their officers, but would come under the command of the militia. This distinction is significant when studying the building of the various Rhode Island militia units throughout the

¹⁶⁰Ibid., 7:405-406. The Assembly gave each officer twenty days after the rising of the Assembly to give to the secretary's office a certificate from the town's committee of safety certifying that the officer enlisted his quota, if not, he lost his commission and his position was declared vacant.

¹⁶¹See Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 4:155,173, and 7:399; Field, End of the Century, 1:441; and, Captain General's Cavaliers, "Meeting Minutes, Smithfield, Rhode Island," Manuscript Collection, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence. It is also found in the various charters granted by the Assembly to the independent companies.

war. It appears that several of the officer positions were filled by men whose ability to recruit may have been more important than their ability to command.

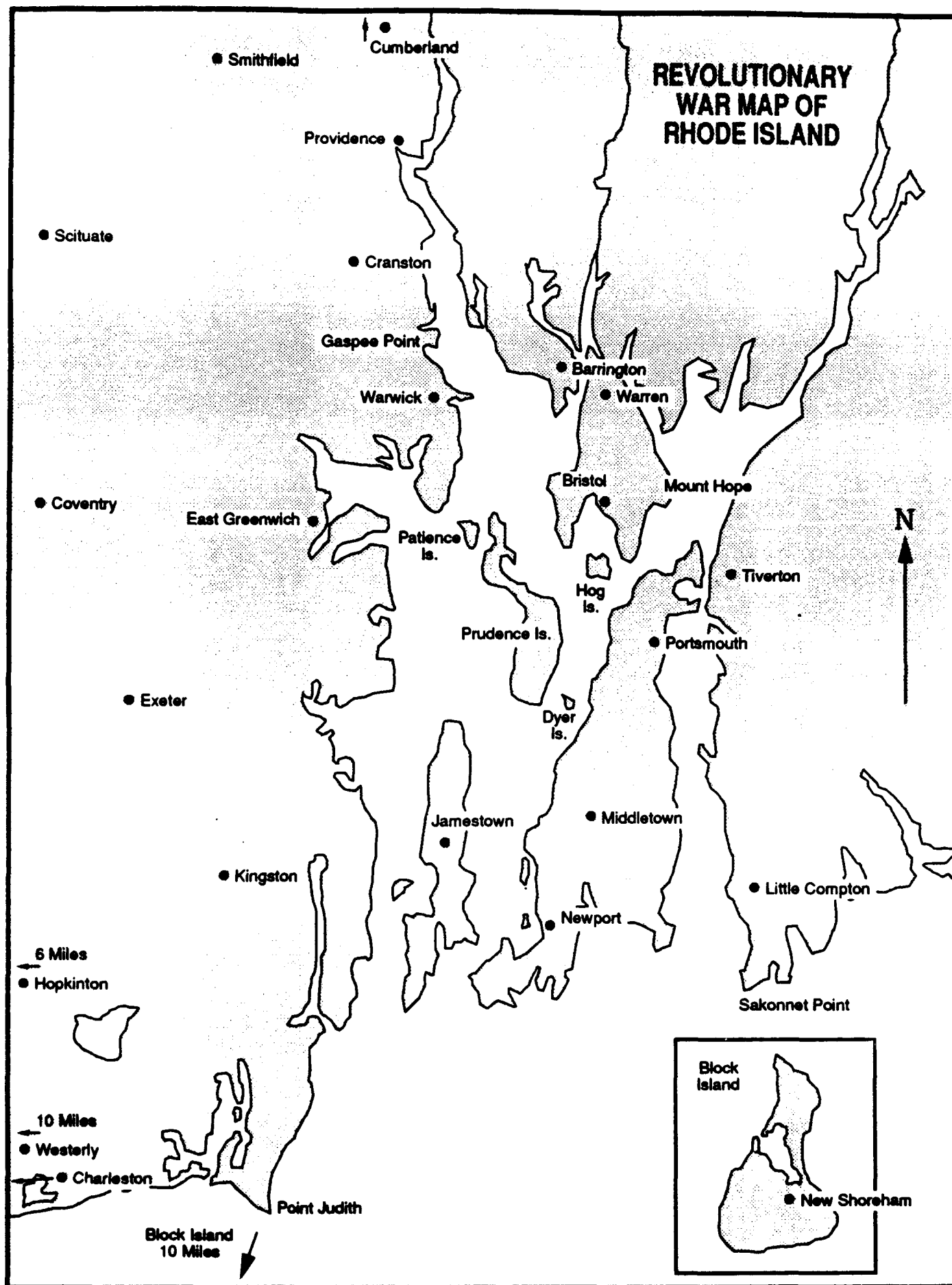
The year closes with Wallace causing massive damage to the town of Jamestown on the island of Conanicut. During the skirmish with the militia, two Americans were killed, seven wounded and two captured. This was the last major coastal raid made by Wallace--he would soon be leaving Narragansett Bay.¹⁶²

The major functions of the militia in the first year of the war would not significantly change over the next seven years. They removed from the many inlands and coastal towns the livestock and other supplies required by the British forces; they repelled minor enemy foraging parties; they apprehended Tories and confiscated and controlled Tory properties; they provided reinforcements to the forces under General Washington; they built and manned fortifications; and they kept up the morale of the inhabitants of the colony. These functions were performed extremely effectively. However, the militia had its drawbacks.

The first of these was its inability to counter large enemy forces. Where Wallace and his men attacked with sufficient force, the militia could only offer support in too little quantity, too late to do much good. The cost of paying for these forces was rapidly depleting the colony's treasury. As General Washington was trying desperately to raise and equip the

¹⁶²See Simister, Fire's Center, 76-77; and, Peckham, Toll of Independence, 10.

Continental Army, the colony's militia competed for the men and their arms. Without a navy to support the ground forces, the overall combat effectiveness of the militia was extremely low. Thus, the militia receives mixed marks for its service in the first year of the conflict.



CHAPTER 8

THE FIGHT FOR INDEPENDENCE: 1776

January to April 1776: Maintaining Vigilance

But the expectations of the Country have been so long raised they have so long expected that we were in Actual readiness for to Storm--that now to mention the greatest Martial preparations going forward we are retorted upon with a why not done before?--I do suppose that Powder has been lacking....Our Men are in high Spirits and we have a number of Officers that have a great thirst for military glory.¹⁶³

Ebenezer David

As the colonies developed a united defense for America, Rhode Island prepared its own defense network. Throughout 1776 the militia continued to perform its primary functions of local defense, harassment of the British forces, internal control, safeguarding livestock and supplies, and repelling British landings along the coastline. Deaths of both Rhode Islanders and British troops increased during these coastal engagements as the size of the British landing parties increased. The largest of these landings occurred in December as an entire British army lay siege to Newport and the island of Rhode Island.

The Assembly raised men to support the Continental Army while simultaneously raising troops for local defense. These competing enlistments will continue to thwart General Washington's efforts at building a large standing army. The demand for arms, artillery men and other supplies continued to exceed supplies.

¹⁶³Jeannette Black and William Roelker, ed., A Rhode Island Chaplain in the Revolution: Letters of Ebenezer David to Nicholas Brown, 1775-1778, (Providence: Rhode Island Society of the Cincinnati, 1949), 13. Letter from David to Brown from Camp Prospect Hill, Massachusetts, 1 March 1776.

One of the reasons for this was the competition between the states and General Washington for these limited resources.

The men in the various militia and independent companies continued to provide the manpower for building and manning fortifications along the coastline. Artillery companies were required in each seaboard town, while watchtowers kept up the vigilance for the expected British invasion.

Once Rhode Island and the rest of the colonies declared their independence from Britain, all hope of legal resolution to the conflict ended. Only success on the battlefield would compel the king and his ministers to cease and desist their unlawful attempts to enslave the American states.

Acts of internal control by the militia increased as well as efforts to publicly identify those individuals not in full support of the revolution. The militia forces acted on behalf of the Assembly in removing livestock and people from the various islands. The militia was the police arm of the Assembly when people did not comply with the Assembly's orders for livestock removal.

As the year ended, the state was divided between the British forces on the island of Rhode Island and the American forces on the mainland. Repeated calls for help from General Washington and his forces go unanswered--the Continental Army stayed together and fought as one unit instead of dividing itself into several smaller parts to meet each state's individual requirements for defense. Therefore, Rhode Island state forces

continued to provide the state's primary means of defense.

During the month of January, the militia forces were busy repelling raiding parties on the islands of Conanicut, Prudence, Rhode Island, and along the west side of the bay near Warwick Neck.¹⁶⁴ Perhaps the largest raiding party so far was the invasion of Prudence Island by 250 British marines on 12 January 1776. During this engagement, the fifty militia defenders were unable to repel the invaders. The militia forces evacuated the island at a loss of two men killed and two captured to three British casualties and twenty men wounded.¹⁶⁵

During the spring months, the British continued to receive fire from the various militia forces along the coast. Very few casualties resulted from these skirmishes, but the lack of success in foraging greatly exacerbated conditions of the British fleet in Narragansett Bay and in Boston.¹⁶⁶

Almost 1500 militia men were encamped in and around Newport by the end of January. They spent their time building fortifications and waiting for the long-expected British invasion.¹⁶⁷ The fear of invasion was at its height when the

¹⁶⁴See Peckham, Toll of Independence, 12; and Gordon Martin, "73,050 Yesterdays....," Air Reservist 28 (4 July 1976): 4.

¹⁶⁵See Thomas, Train of Artillery, 9; and, Peckham, Toll of Independence, 12. Various accounts of this engagement exist, but it appears the British were successful in removing sheep and cattle from Prudence Island and were able to transport them to Boston where they were desperately needed. Losses range from two to fourteen on the British side and up to two on the American side.

¹⁶⁶Peckham, Toll of Independence, 12-14.

¹⁶⁷Field, End of the Century, 1:231.

British evacuated Boston on 17 March 1776. Although the spring passed without such an invasion, measures were taken by the Assembly to increase the defenses of the colony.

The 500-man regiment ordered raised during the October 1775 session was augmented to 750 in order to shore up the colony's defenses. To increase their protection against the British fleet, the Assembly required eighteen towns within reach of the bay to raise fourteen-man artillery companies. These artillery companies trained once a week on their two, three or four-pound field pieces. Still fearing an invasion of the colony, the Assembly ordered another regiment of 750 men added to the colony's defenses.¹⁶⁸

The January session of the Assembly required all town clerks to prepare lists of the inhabitants of each town required by law to arm themselves and the status of each man's armaments. These lists enabled the colony to size their shortages in armament and their potential forces for augmenting the militia and independent companies.¹⁶⁹ These lists were later used to organize Rhode Island's alarm companies. The cost of defense was exhausting the treasury and the physical resources of the colony. (For more information on the distressed condition of the colony, see the letter from the General Assembly to the Continental Congress, 15 January 1776.¹⁷⁰)

¹⁶⁸Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:410,414-415.

¹⁶⁹Ibid., 7:422-424, 480.

¹⁷⁰Ibid., 424-426.

As the costs of the war increased, support for the enlistment of forces was wanting in several areas of the colony. As an example, a militia colonel and his adjutant were attacked by several men in the town of West Greenwich during their attempt to raise one-fourth of the militia for the colony's use.¹⁷¹ Warrants were issued for the perpetrators of the riot against these militia officers, but support for the war was far from universal.

Summer 1776: Independence

Three major events of the summer are worth noting. The colony declared its independence; the Assembly passed, and strictly enforced, oaths of loyalty to the newly declared independent state; and a prominent militia commander was relieved of duty for insanity. Each of these play some small part in the study of Rhode Island's militia forces.

On 4 May 1776 Rhode Island renounced its allegiance to the king. This act has been claimed to have been the first declaration of independence by any of the thirteen colonies, but its importance to the militia was not its legal validity as an act of independence, but its representation of the resolve of the leaders of the colony towards prosecuting the war. The

¹⁷¹Ibid., 426-427.

renunciation of allegiance to the crown cemented their fate-- either win the war against the British, or submit to Parliamentary rule.¹⁷²

To further suppress British sympathy amongst the population, the Assembly passed a loyalty oath act in June 1776. This act required all inhabitants of Rhode Island to publicly declare their support for the war. With the so-called Test Act, it was possible to flush out those people whose loyalty to the cause was questionable. Several men would not subscribe to this test and were taken out of their towns and forced to live in other towns throughout the colony. Only one militia officer failed to subscribe to the loyalty oath, but the militia had other problems to contend with.¹⁷³

Colonel Henry Babcock, who had served in several military positions for the past three decades, was relieved of duty during the May session of the Assembly. As stated earlier, commanders in the militia were often appointed by the Assembly due to their

¹⁷²See Walter Angell, "Rhode Island's Declaration of Independence," Rhode Island Historical Society Collections 19, no. 3 (July 1926): 65-80; Patrick Conley and Albert Klyberg, Rhode Island's Road to Liberty (Providence: Rhode Island Bicentennial Foundation, 1987), 1; Glenn LaFantasie, "Act for All Reasons: Revolutionary Politics and 4 May 1776," Rhode Island History 35, no. 2 (May 1976): 39; and, Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:522-526.

¹⁷³See Cohen, "Rhode Island Loyalism," 101-102; Thomas Vernon, Reminiscences of Thomas Vernon, an American Loyalist: Royal Postmaster at Newport (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1880), also as a part of Sidney Rider, ed. "The Diary of Thomas Vernon: A Loyalist Banished from Newport by the Rhode Island General Assembly in 1776," no. 13 of Rhode Island Historical Tracts (Providence: Sidney S. Rider, 1881); Morse, "Wanton Family," 36; and, Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:566-569.

ability to enlist recruits or through their political connections. In Colonel Babcock's case, his father, Major General Joshua Babcock, was head of the colony's militia. His son's position as colonel of the regiment ordered raised by the Assembly in January 1776 was a result of his military background and his position in the Rhode Island community. His commanding ability had previously been questioned by General Washington during the siege near Boston, but his latest actions caused the men under him to severely question his abilities--regardless of background or connections.

During the 18 March 1776 session of the General Assembly, Babcock's military competency had been questioned. A committee was formed to "take evidences and informations before this Assembly, respecting the conduct of Henry Babcock, Esq., as colonel-commandant of the colony's brigade," but he was absolved of any incompetency and continued in command.¹⁷⁴ This was not acceptable to the men under his command. In a letter to Governor Cooke, the leading men under Colonel Babcock described the problems of serving under this high-ranking militia officer.

It is with great anxiety of mind and Real Grief that we the Subscribers find ourselves obliged by the Duty we owe to God, ourselves and the common Cause we have embarked in, to represent the Conduct of Henry Babcock.

[They described several movements of troops which were both unnecessary and dangerous with Wallace and his men still anchored in the harbor.]

What Conduct above mentioned, had it not been Contrary to

¹⁷⁴Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:473,476-477.

express act of Government, might have been put up with, had we Reason to think it the Result of a sound Mind--but so far from that we frequently judge him to be in a state of Lunacy--His Conduct and Behavior for a week past has absolutely Declared him to be Insane.

(F)or we do not look upon ourselves safe under his command.¹⁷⁵

Cooke consulted with Major General Joshua Babcock as both the head of the colony's militia forces and also as the father of the colonel in question. The father still had faith in his son to command, but agreed that his son had problems.

Since my Writing your Honour of Yesterday have been Surprized at the Accounts received of my unhappy Sons Conduct, which whether owing to real Insanity or Intoxication or from both, am uncertain; but cannot but conjecture more owing to the latter, and unless He will entirely abstain from inebriating Liquors, think it best that He may be discontinued in the Service; but I request that He may not be dealt roughly with, for He in particular cannot, will not bear it, but will be eternally Studious of Opportunitys to avenge Himself of Such as seek to restrain Him of his Liberty. [A threat of violence or revenge from one of such high rank in the militia?]

If He cannot be got well, He cannot be fit to command; if He can, who is there fitter?¹⁷⁶

The General Assembly finally removed Henry Babcock from

¹⁷⁵Colonel William Richmond, Camp at Middletown, Rhode Island, to Governor Nicholas Cooke, Providence, 11 April 1776, Nicholas Cooke Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence. This letter was also signed by Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Lippitt and Major Caleb Gardner.

¹⁷⁶Joshua Babcock, Westerly, to Nicholas Cooke, Providence, 19 April 1776, Nicholas Cooke Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence.

service and declared his position vacant.¹⁷⁷ The importance of this episode may seem transparent to research on the militia, but the success or failure of various units throughout the war was directly attributable to the commanders of the various militia units. General Nathanael Greene mentions several times to the Assembly and to his friends during the remodeling of the Continental Army how important a strong officer corps is to effective operations.

Can there be any doubt of the effect Colonel Babcock was having on his officers and men when he ordered useless and unsafe troop movements with the enemy just off the coast? The study of the strengths and weakness of the different Rhode Island militia commanders is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is an area which needs exploring.

During the American Revolution, Rhode Island troops would have many successes and many failures. Invariably, the failures occurred during engagements where commanding officers were weak, indecisive or incompetent. The success stories involved units whose commanders were aggressive, had superior judgment and possessed tremendous initiative. The trappings of political appointments to the militia run deeper than just this case with Colonel Babcock, but it typifies the problems associated with political appointments of military leaders.

¹⁷⁷Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:537.

Winter and the Siege of Rhode Island

General Washington desperately needed reinforcements for his forces in and around New York. The Continental Congress ordered a regiment from Rhode Island sent to reinforce Washington in September 1776. As this would leave the tiny state of Rhode Island almost defenseless, troops were requested from Massachusetts and the Assembly ordered another state regiment enlisted for three months.

Wallace had departed during late spring for Halifax to have his fleet refitted which made the surrounding states relatively safe from invasion. With the newly enlisted state regiment and with troops from Massachusetts, Rhode Island made it through the fall without any major engagements. This was to change drastically as winter, and a large British contingent, arrived in December 1776.¹⁷⁸

The 'watching and warding' along the coastline paid dividends in early December. Job Watson, from a watchtower on Tower Hill in South Kingstown, located an incoming British fleet. He raised the alarm and soon the entire state was notified. The military companies were poised and ready to respond. This British fleet had sailed from New York on the 29th of November with almost 7000 troops. They sailed into Narragansett Bay on the 7th of December

¹⁷⁸See Field, End of the Century, 1:234; and, Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 7:622-625.

and anchored in Newport harbor. Tension throughout the state was high, but the state had previously expressed its belief that the men and fortifications on Rhode Island could repel any invasion. Those claims were put to the test.¹⁷⁹

On 8 December 1776 approximately 6000 troops embarked at Weaver's Cove in Newport and proceeded to occupy the island. The 600 Rhode Island militia troops had already retreated to the northern end of the island the previous day and made good their escape across the bay on the 8th. Most of the cannon, all the ammunition, livestock and militia forces had been evacuated before the British could reach the north end of the island.¹⁸⁰

In this instance, the militia allowed the capture of the most prominent town in the state without a single shot having been fired. It is true that the odds favored the large British force, but the many fortifications in and around Newport, coupled with the advanced notification by Watson, should have allowed some minimal defense of the island. As is the case with the militia

¹⁷⁹See Field, End of the Century, 1:469-470; Douglas Marshall and Howard Peckham, Campaigns of the American Revolution (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1976), 30; and, Nancy Chudacoff, "The Revolution and the Town: Providence, 1775-1783," Rhode Island History 35, no. 3 (August 1976): 72. Accounts vary as to how many ships were in the fleet and how large an army actually landed on Rhode Island. The size of the army varies from as few as 3000 to as many as 8000. For some of the various accounts of this landing also see "The War of the Revolution: Centennial Commemorations," Rhode Island Historical Society Proceedings (1878): 84; and, Henry Carrington, Battles of the American Revolution: Battle Maps and Charts of the American Revolution (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1877, repr. New York: New York Times and Arno Press, 1968), 255.

¹⁸⁰Field, End of the Century, 1:469-470.

throughout the war, their effectiveness in any defensive capacity is extremely low when facing superior numbers.

The British went about setting up their winter quarters and were content with the capture of the island. No expedition further into the state was contemplated by General Clinton, head of the British forces in Newport, due to the oncoming winter months. Provisions and barracks were his main concern.¹⁸¹

Although the British were able to keep the island under their possession until they evacuated it on 25 October 1779, buying supplies and foraging were major problems during their entire stay.¹⁸² They would make no further advances on the state, but neither would they be thrown off the island. It was not because the state was not raising enough forces--it was, and then some.

With the British occupying a large portion of the state, the General Assembly attempted to enlist virtually every able-bodied male in the state. At its 10 December 1776 session, it ordered two infantry regiments of 750 men each and an artillery regiment of 300 men raised for the defense of the state.¹⁸³ Fearing that these forces may not be adequate, the Assembly ordered the last of the major divisions of "citizen soldiers" to be organized.

The assembly voted that "the alarm-list, in each town within this state, be embodied into a separate company, to be led by one

¹⁸¹Marshall, Campaigns, 30.

¹⁸²Sydney James, Colonial Rhode Island: A History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 354.

¹⁸³Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 8:61.

captain, two lieutenants and one ensign, to be chosen by the company so embodied."¹⁸⁴ The company was required to equip itself and the governor would issue them their commissions. The officers would "take rank with the several independent companies within this state, and do duty, accordingly."¹⁸⁵

The two paragraphs which formally organized the men on the alarm lists into something more than just a roll call were definitely open to interpretation. Therefore, the Assembly added to the duties and descriptions of the "alarm-men." In its session on 23 December 1776, the Assembly

Resolved, that it was, and now is, the meaning and intention of this Assembly, that the officers of said companies, in all courts martial and councils of war, shall hold the rank of like officers in the independent companies; that at all times of general alarm, and on general field-days, they be under the command and direction of the field officers of the regiments within whose districts they respectively live; and that at all other times they are to meet with, and be under the command of the officers of their own companies.

And it is further resolved, that until the alarm-men, in each town have formed themselves into companies, as aforesaid, and elected their officers, and returned their names to the Governor, in order to be commissioned, they be under the command of their respective militia officers, in the same manner they were, before the passing of the said act; any thing therein contained, to the contrary, notwithstanding.

And it is further resolved, that there shall be thirty-two men, at the least (exclusive of officers), in order to entitle them to the privileges of a separate company.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴Ibid., 8:67.

¹⁸⁵Ibid.

¹⁸⁶Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 8:75.

With three major types of state forces clearly defined, the Assembly directed the drafting and organizing of all these men (militia, independent, and alarm) into three divisions. Each division would perform such duty as the governor directed. The length of service would be one month for each division, so that fully one-third of the eligible force of the state was on duty at any one time!

The British army's threat to the state was summed up by General Nathanael Greene when he recommended to Governor Cooke that Rhode Island try to remain peaceful towards the British at Newport.

As the enemy have got possession of Rhode Island and done all the mischief they can, it will not be bad policy to let them remain in quiet until Spring. To attempt any [thing] against them unless you are sure of success will be very dangerous manoeuvre. Tis an endless task to attempt to cover all the Country. You must drive back the Stock from the Shores and make a disposition to cover capital Objects; by too great a division of your force youl be incapable of making any considerable opposition where ever they may think proper to make a descent. But its my oppinion they will be peaceable if you will, for from the best accounts we can get they consist of the Invalids of the army. They may attempt to plunder the Shores, but nothing more than that this Winter.¹⁸⁷

At least General Greene knew the strengths and limitations of the state's forces. The safeguarding of livestock and the concentration of force were lessons he had learned through his experiences with militia forces while commanding the Continentals. Had Rhode Island followed his advice, large

¹⁸⁷Showman, Papers of Nathanael Greene, 1:375. Emphasis added.

amounts of men would have been spared rigorous duty throughout the state, and the state's treasury would have been spared to a great extent. Unfortunately, 1777 and 1778 would see Rhode Island and its troops take a different course of action regarding the British forces on the island.

CHAPTER 9

THE WAR DRAGS ON: 1777

The British Amongst Us

We the Subscribers do solemnly and sincerely Declare That we Believe the War Resistance and Opposition in which the United American States are now engaged against the Fleets and Armies of Great Britain, is on the Part of the said States just and necessary: And that we will not directly nor indirectly afford Assistance of any Sort or Kind whatever to the said Fleets and Armies, during the Continuance of the present War; but that we will heartily assist in the Defence of the United States.¹⁸⁸

Philip Allen, et al.

The full fury of the British invasion of December 1776 extended no farther than the island of Rhode Island. Several skirmishes up and down the coast occupied the militia, independent and alarm companies throughout the winter months. The British forces dwindled to 3000 men around Newport, while two expeditions to expel them from the state were attempted. A daring kidnapping of the leader of the British forces on Rhode Island was successfully accomplished, while efforts were made to involve all the state's manpower--even those with tender consciences.

It was a year that severely taxed the people and the government of the state. The presence of the British created a drain on the state's military forces and the treasury supporting these forces. The two unsuccessful expeditions against the

¹⁸⁸"Subscription of Loyalty, June 1777," MSS, 3:13, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence.

British on Rhode Island displayed to all the shortcomings of the militia forces.

January 1777 opened with the burning of H.M.S. Diamond by militia forces around Warwick Neck. There were a minimum of three skirmishes between militia and British forces during the first two weeks of the new year. There were no major plans by the British to capture more of the state, so two thousand British troops were withdrawn from Newport on the 21st of January to support General Howe at New York. The withdrawal of these troops meant that the forces under American General Spencer roughly equalled those of the British in the area. Taking the initiative to repel the British from the state, word went out to all Rhode Island that an expedition was planned and volunteers were needed.¹⁸⁹

The forces under General Spencer, additional volunteers included, remained too small to attack the British on Rhode Island and the expedition was canceled. The commanding officers of the forces who volunteered to go with the forces under General Spencer were told to dismiss their troops on 20 March. Meanwhile, the treasury paid for this failed attempt.¹⁹⁰

One very important lesson should have been learned during this meager attempt at expelling the British. The leaders of the state, both military and civilian, should have witnessed a

¹⁸⁹See Peckham, Toll of Independence, 29; and, Carrington, Battle Maps, 294.

¹⁹⁰Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 8:178-179.

primary shortcoming of the state troops. With a full month of recruiting, the various officers of the state's military companies could not enlist enough men to accomplish this large-scale, offensive attack. Rhode Island militia men were extremely successful at repelling small enemy foraging parties, but they were incapable of organizing and executing large-scale offensive operations.

Short-term operations were almost a necessity with militia forces. During the Assembly's second session in March 1777, they voted to reorganize the state's three divisions into two. Previously, each division was called out for a one-month tour of duty. Whether the units complained or the Assembly thought the new arrangement was more efficient is not mentioned in the records, but the new system reduced three divisions to two and decreased the tour of duty from one month to fifteen days. Obviously, somebody started to recognize that smaller forces for shorter periods of time was the best way to organize the state's forces.

So far only one portion of the population had failed to contribute to the war effort. These men were of "tender consciences." During its February 1777 session, the Assembly had strengthened the test requirements for those pleading religion as a reason for not engaging in military activity.¹⁹¹ With the increased demands for money and manpower, these people needed to contribute to the war effort. The answer lay in an act passed

¹⁹¹Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 8:122.

during the April session of the Assembly.

This act was an amendment to an act passed earlier entitled, "An act for the relief of persons of tender consciences; and for preventing their being burthened with military duty."¹⁹² This amendment required these people to contribute "their equal and necessary proportion for the defence of our rights, privileges and estates; and from which they do, and will, derive, in all respects, equal benefit and protection with other subjects of this state, not exempted from personal military service."¹⁹³

This amendment required people of tender consciences to pay the expense of hiring a person to take their place during militia and alarm drafts. If they refused to pay, the law allowed the state to confiscate their "goods and chattels" in order to sell them to raise the required money. If the individual was less than twenty-one and did not have enough money to pay, his parents or legal guardians were held responsible for the fine. This amendment did not require abstainers from military service to pay for times of general alarms, just when men were being drafted to perform certain militia or alarm company duties for specified periods of time. Now everyone benefitting from the war was contributing to its success.¹⁹⁴

One last act of organization of the state's military forces was passed in 1777. In this act, virtually every male aged

¹⁹²Ibid., 8:204.

¹⁹³Ibid.

¹⁹⁴Ibid., 204-206.

sixteen and above was included. Committees were formed to develop lists of the male inhabitants of the state and place them in the following categories: 16-50 able to bear arms; 16-50 not able to bear arms; 50-60 able to bear arms; 50-60 not able to bear arms; aged 60 and upwards; transients; Negroes and Indians; and all Friends of Society (Quakers). These lists were greatly expanded alarm lists and showed the state the demographics and war fighting capability of the state. It appears that nothing was done with these lists other than a quick review of the state's manpower pool.¹⁹⁵

The Capture of Major General Prescott

One of the true highlights of Rhode Island's militia during the war was their capture of the commanding officer of the British forces laying siege to the island of Rhode Island. This event raised the spirits of the entire state and was an example of what types of functions the militia excelled in during war.

In August 1775, William Barton was the adjutant of the 1st Providence County Regiment.¹⁹⁶ During 1776 Barton was stationed in Newport until the arrival of the British in December forced him to withdraw his command to Tiverton. He was placed in

¹⁹⁵Ibid., 188-189.

¹⁹⁶Joseph Smith, ed., Civil and Military List of Rhode Island in the Revolutionary Era, 1763-1790. (Providence: Preston and Rounds, 1900.

Colonel Joseph Stanton, Jr.'s, regiment and given the rank of major. This son of a hatter from Warren despaired greatly at the capture of his hero, General Charles Lee, in December 1776. Seeking some way of avenging this capture, Major Barton came upon a plan in the summer of 1777.¹⁹⁷

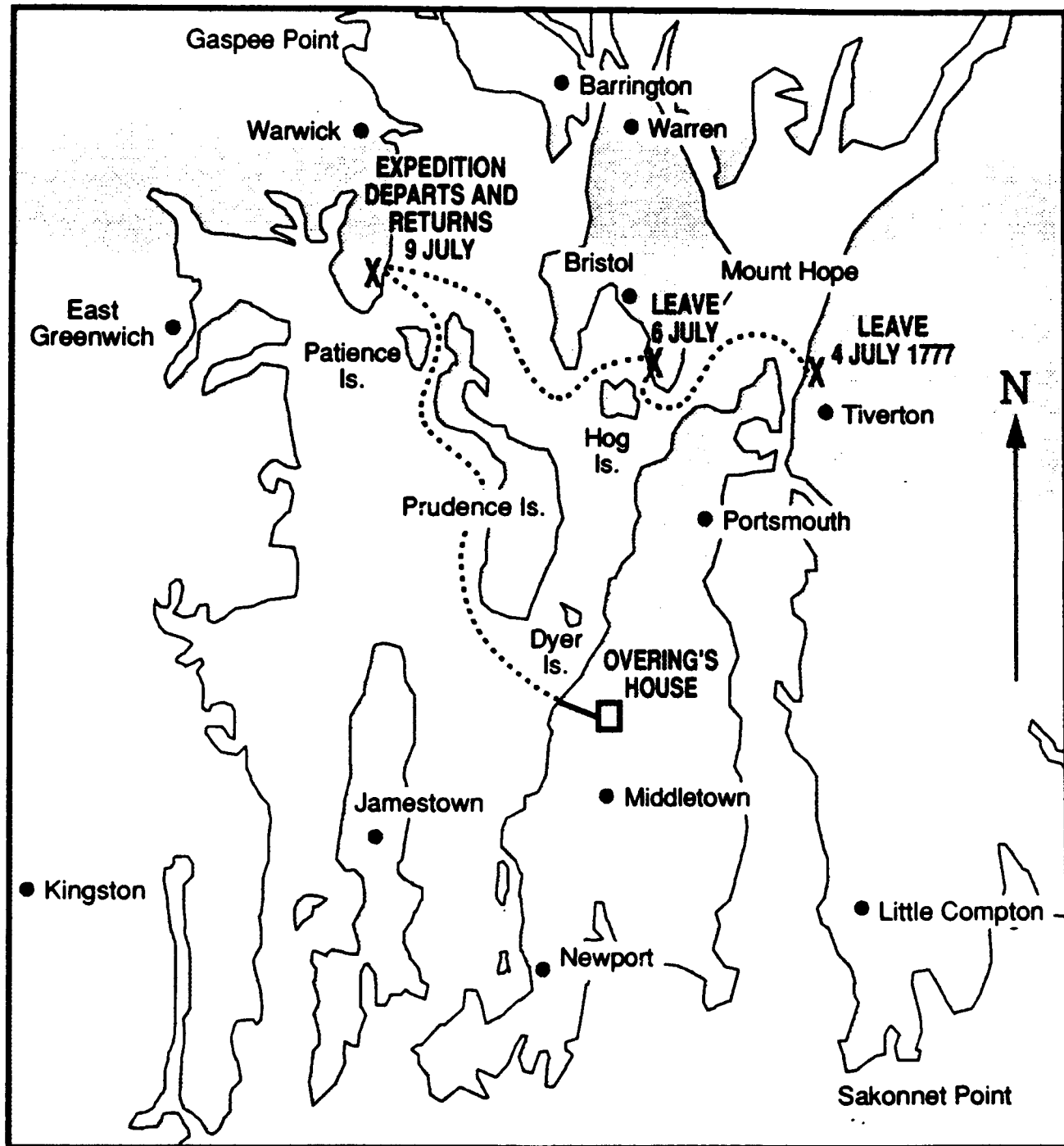
With knowledge from the island that General Prescott frequented a home of one Mr. Overing, Barton decided he could capture the general and affect an exchange for General Lee. The tale of this capture is detailed in Barton's own handwriting in a small ledger entitled "A Narrative of the particulars relative to the capture of Major General Prescott, and his aid-de-camp Major Barrington."¹⁹⁸ This daring act exemplifies one facet of the militia which was not commonly exploited during the war.

Having decided on a plan, Barton recruited forty volunteers to accompany him on this nighttime raid. They set out on the night of 4 July from Tiverton, but due to severe winds, they became separated and landed along various parts of the shore near the town of Bristol. Having gathered together the following night, they proceeded to Hog Island where Barton discussed his

¹⁹⁷See Field, End of the Century, 1:471-472; and, Richman, A Study in Separatism, 224.

¹⁹⁸William Barton, "A Narrative of the particulars relative to the capture, of Major General Prescott, and his aid-de-camp Major Barrington," MSS, vol. 3, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence.

BARTON'S CAPTURE OF GENERAL PRESCOTT



daring plan. The men were unaware of exactly what the mission entailed until then. All volunteered to continue the mission. They went back to Bristol and stayed there until the night of the 6th. They needed to avoid the British ships patrolling this area so they rowed up to Warwick Neck where they hid their boats.¹⁹⁹

The weather was bad on the 7th and "several new obstacles" hindered their going on the 8th. On the evening of the 9th, Barton gathered together his forty men and warned them against plundering, making noise, or partaking in "spiritous liquors" during this expedition. They came to the coast near Mr. Overing's house, divided into five groups and proceeded to capture General Prescott. The alarm was raised shortly after they departed in their boats, but the British ships in the bay did not know what the alarm was for so they did not try and apprehend the five boats loaded with men. They made good their escape and arrived back on Warwick Neck six-and-a-half hours after they set out. Eventually, Prescott and Lee were exchanged.²⁰⁰

Barton's success on this mission led to his appointment as a lieutenant colonel in Rhode Island's fifteen month brigade.²⁰¹ The Assembly paid Barton and his men \$1120 for their capture of Prescott. This reward was a holdover incentive from the aborted

¹⁹⁹See Barton, "Capture of Prescott," *passim*; Field, End of the Century, 473-475; and, Richman, A Study in Separatism, 224.

²⁰⁰Barton, "Capture of Prescott."

²⁰¹Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 8:263.

March 1777 expedition. The Assembly, hoping to encourage action against the forces at Newport during the March expedition, offered various rewards for capturing enemy officers and soldiers.²⁰² Barton later received a commission as a colonel in the militia and became commander of Rhode Island's Second Battalion in December 1777.²⁰³

October And Another Failed Attack

On 16 April 1777, the Continental Congress recommended that Rhode Island collect a force sufficient to repel the British from Newport. Rhode Island was to use forces from Massachusetts and Connecticut and use the utmost dispatch in carrying this attack out under the command of a general appointed by Washington.²⁰⁴ It would be the end of September before any real action was taken by Rhode Island.

Finally, during its session on the 22nd of September 1777, the Assembly ordered one half of the militia, alarm, independent, and artillery companies to be drafted on the 27th to perform duty for one month commencing 1 October. They would be under the

²⁰²Ibid., 8:290.

²⁰³Ibid., 8:328,348.

²⁰⁴John Hancock, Philadelphia, to Rhode Island General Assembly, Providence, 16 April 1777, in Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 8:216-217.

command of Major General Spencer and Brigadier General Ezekiel Cornell. This brigade would be composed of six regiments who were to meet at Providence on Monday, 29 September, to receive further orders from General Spencer.²⁰⁵

It was the middle of October before this force was assembled near Tiverton. On the 13th of October, records indicate that Spencer had over 8300 men ready to march. Poor planning and logistics shortfalls caused the attack to be delayed until the morning of the 16th. Lieutenant Colonel William Barton, of General Prescott fame, was to lead the brigade with his 300 men. Preparations were still not ready on the 16th so the attack was delayed. A storm hit on Friday the 17th and lasted for two days.²⁰⁶

This storm delayed the attack until Sunday, 19 October. This caused severe stress among the troops for two reasons. The first was their reluctance to start a battle on the Sabbath. The second was the lowered morale of the troops when it appeared the battle might not be fought. Men started leaving camp and

²⁰⁵Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 8:304-308.

²⁰⁶See Field, End of the Century, 1:236-237; George Mason, "Report of the Procurator," Proceedings of the Rhode Island Historical Society, (1883-1884): 58-59; and, Simister, Fire's Center, 121. Further insight on the delay in preparations can be gained by studying various pay abstracts of the militia during this time. Captain Oliver Arnold's 2nd Company of Colonel Richard Fry's Independent Regiment was formed on the 1st of October, but Captain Thomas Carlisle's abstract shows his artillery company not forming until 10 October. As late as 16 October volunteers were still coming into camp headquarter's at Tiverton. These pay records show how large-scale operations with the militia forces were difficult if not impossible to coordinate and execute.

returning to their homes. The indecisiveness of General Spencer in conducting the attack on the 19th must have convinced the other officers not to push the issue. For whatever reason, the attack was postponed until Monday, 20 October.²⁰⁷

During the night another storm hit the area and further lowered morale. The weather would remain bad until 31 October. Men began to disperse in larger numbers. At a council of war convened on the 28th, it was voted that the attack would commence if at least 6500 men were still in camp. A muster was held which counted less than 5000 men still available for the attack. General Spencer called off the expedition and returned to Providence.²⁰⁸

Fully one-half of the state's entire militia, independent, alarm, and artillery forces were called out for this expedition. The results were miserable. The men were not organized efficiently, they were discouraged by all the delays, they were disheartened by the continuous bad weather, so they departed for home in droves before the battle could commence.

As in March, General Spencer failed to appreciate the limitations of the militia. The forces came to the operation piecemeal; they stayed for short periods of time; they became discouraged easily; and they left camp frustrated with the whole ordeal--in short, they behaved like militia forces. These limitations of militia forces are well documented.

²⁰⁷Field, End of the Century, 1:236-237.

²⁰⁸Ibid.

Unfortunately, Rhode Island would not accept these limitations and act accordingly during the rest of this war.

Although a failure at large offensive operations, the militia continued to excel at providing internal control for the state. In May 1777, the Assembly ordered all military officers to assist the sheriffs of each town in apprehending people suspected of being unfriendly to the United States.²⁰⁹ The Assembly sent General Spencer and his troops to Exeter, Rhode Island, to "sieze, detain and confine in the jails within this state, or under guard, such and so many of the dissaffected inhabitants of said town" as he deemed appropriate. What was the crime committed by these Rhode Islander's? They were merely refusing to raise, or assist in raising, the troops ordered by the Assembly in April.²¹⁰

The difficulty of raising troops was not confined to the town of Exeter. The Assembly increased the bounty for raising troops in May 1777, because "the calling forth the militia for defence of this state, greatly prevents the carrying on necessary husbandry, and is attended with many other inconveniences." An increase in bounty money might increase enlistments. Additionally, the need for artillery companies was so great the Assembly would not permit non-commissioned officers or privates in the train of artillery to enlist in the Continental Army.²¹¹

²⁰⁹Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 8:236.

²¹⁰Ibid., 8:238.

²¹¹Ibid., 8:247,276.

The competition between Rhode Island and General Washington for troops was so high that Washington wrote a stinging letter to Governor Cooke complaining about Rhode Island's recruitment techniques.²¹²

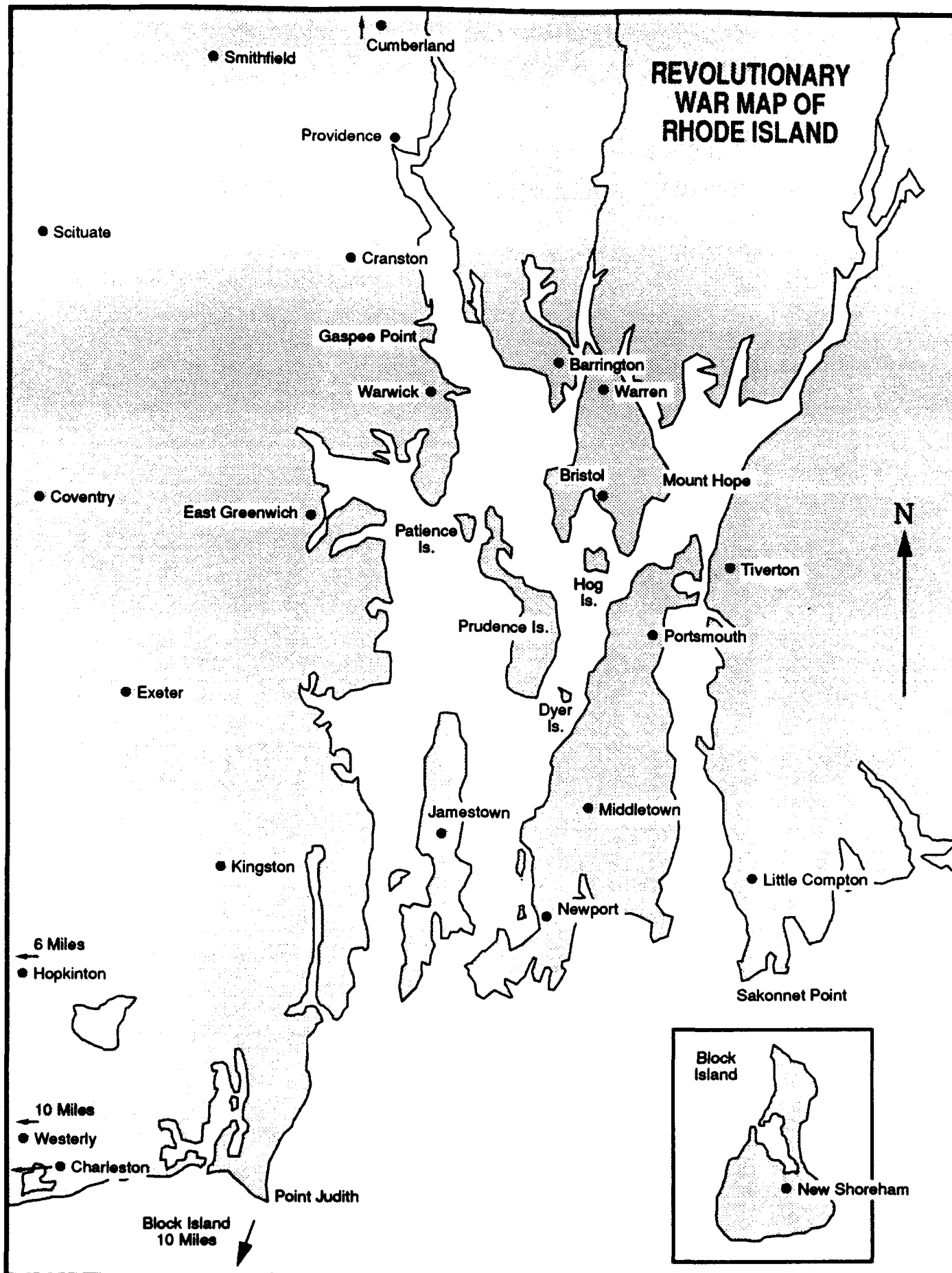
Despite these problems, Rhode Island's militia forces continued excelling at the same tasks they performed in 1776. They protected the coastline from British foraging parties, they increased their effectiveness in providing internal controls, and they raided and harassed British forces (even capturing one of their highest ranking generals). Their short-term expeditions against the enemy proved effective on numerous occasions. Unfortunately, they were called upon twice during 1777 to perform duties they were neither trained nor organized to perform--large offensive operations.

The first of these expeditions failed before it was even attempted. Through a lack of volunteers, the March expedition was canceled. In October, with one-half of all the state's forces assembled, a large-scale offensive operation was still not possible. The effectiveness of the militia decreased as the size and duration of the expedition increased. This fact was not appreciated by the military or civilian leaders in Rhode Island, but would become apparent in 1778 when the stakes and the casualties would be higher.

²¹²Ibid., 8:212-213.

CHAPTER 10

THE BATTLE OF RHODE ISLAND: 1778



The New Alliance: France Joins The War

There has been great expence and much distress brought upon the Country in calling the Militia together at this busy season of the year. A force nearly sufficient for the reduction of the place is now collected and all the necessary apparatus provided for subdueing the Garrison. If the expedition fails for want of the countenance of the [French] Fleet and Troops on board, It will produce great discontent and murmuring among the people.²¹³

General Greene to Count d'Estaing

The prospects for success for the independence-minded United States dramatically increased with the entrance of France into the conflict in February 1778. The promise of vast amounts of aid in the form of money and manpower greatly lifted the sagging spirits of the Americans. The possibilities of having a fleet capable of challenging the British were endless. All that needed to be decided was where to have this first joint Franco-American expedition. By default it would be against the British in Rhode Island.

The arrival of the French fleet under Charles Hector Theodat, Count d'Estaing, in early July 1778 raised the hopes of General Washington for a victory over the British. An immediate attack was planned against the British fleet in the harbor, but the largest of the French ships could not pass over the sandy bar at

²¹³Showman, Papers of Nathanael Greene, 1:481.

Sandy Hook. Thus, the hopes of an immediate Franco-American victory over a portion of the British forces were ended.²¹⁴

The possibility of a Franco-American joint expedition still existed. Since December 1776, Rhode Island had been unable to raise the necessary forces to expel the British army at Newport. With the help of d'Estaing's fleet and the 4000 marines on board, it would now be possible to rid Newport of the British. In addition to d'Estaing and his men, General Washington sent 2000 Continental soldiers to augment General Sullivan's Rhode Island forces. Troops from Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire would join Sullivan's rapidly swelling forces.²¹⁵

The French fleet anchored off Point Judith on 29 July 1778. Anxious for a fight and in desperate need of fresh water and other supplies, d'Estaing was dismayed to find the Americans still a week away from being able to conduct any landings against the British. A plan was being developed, however, which would utilize the French fleet, its marines, the Continentals, and the growing numbers of militia forces. Washington had attained a tremendous amount of experience in exploiting the strengths of his militia forces and would pass on this knowledge to the commanders of the Rhode Island forces.²¹⁶

²¹⁴Field, End of the Century, 1:489-490.

²¹⁵See Showman, Papers of Nathanael Greene, 2:482-484; and, Field, End of the Century, 1:490.

²¹⁶Paul Dearden, The Rhode Island Campaign of 1778: Inauspicious Dawn of Alliance (Providence: Rhode Island Bicentennial Foundation, 1980), 46-48.

In a letter dated 27 July, General Washington instructed General Sullivan to divide his army into two divisions. Each division would have a superb commanding officer, General Nathanael Greene on one side and Lafayette on the other. He further instructed Sullivan to put the various militia units in and amongst the regular units. This would help the militia units build confidence in their ability to fight and "probably make them act better than they would alone."²¹⁷

The forces were located at Tiverton for the battle, but their organization and training were still insufficient to proceed with the proposed landing. The attack was to commence on 8 August, but the militia was still arriving in camp. Therefore, General Sullivan delayed the attack.²¹⁸ Much has been said about the numerous delays and their effect on this battle. The militia has received the greatest proportion of the blame for its late start and subsequent failure, but a review of several pay and muster returns of the various Rhode Island militia companies show something quite different.

The militia was usually slow to start, especially during the planting and harvesting season. The leaders had taken this into account for over 130 years, as a review of their dates for training the militia forces explained earlier. Although the militia had drafted their men on 1 August, they were not enlisted

²¹⁷Ibid., 46.

²¹⁸Showman, Papers of Nathanael Greene, 484.

in the state's service until 6 August.²¹⁹ If any fault is to be assigned to the delays caused by the militia, it should go to the civilian and military leaders who delayed drafting and enlisting of the militia units until a full week after d'Estaing arrived off the Rhode Island coast.

Another failure of the military and civilian leaders in arranging the militia forces to fight was their period of duty. The returns of the militia companies show that they were only expected to perform their duty for twenty days. Enlisting on the sixth meant the battle would be over for these militia companies no later than 26 August.²²⁰ Unfortunately, the weather and the French would not hold to that timetable.

Since militia companies were still arriving in camp on 7 August, Sullivan delayed the planned invasion until the 9th of August. Count d'Estaing had sealed off the eastern passage and was free to sail up the main passage on 8 August. Sullivan further delayed the landing until the tenth and had just notified d'Estaing when word reached him that the British had withdrawn

²¹⁹See Peter Burllingame, "Pay and Muster Roll, September 1778," Military Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence; William Field, "Company's Muster Roll, 6 August 1778," Military Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence; Emor Olney, "Company's Pay Abstract, August 1778," Military Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence; and, "Town of Smithfield, Alarm List, 1 August 1778," Military Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence. The Assembly ordered the drafting of one-half of all the militia forces on 29 July. The men were drafted on 1 August and ordered to duty on 6 August for twenty days. Any expedition which lasted past the 25th of August was one which would require the other militia forces not drafted. This was ordered later, but it would be too late to save this expedition.

²²⁰Ibid.

from the northern redoubts of the island. This left Butt's hill open to American occupation. The withdrawal by the British forces was due to the threat posed by the French fleet stationed near Dyer's Island.²²¹

The Battle of Rhode Island Begins

A quick council of war was called and an immediate decision was made to land Colonel Topham's forces on the northern end of the island. These forces successfully occupied the northern end of the island. The timing caused consternation to the French as it appeared the Americans landed early to earn the glory of this battle.²²²

As d'Estaing's troops were disembarking on the western side of the island, a fleet of British warships was spotted. This was the fleet commanded by Howe. The British anchored off Point Judith and watched the French closely. Count d'Estaing quickly placed his men back on his ships and on the morning of the 10th, set out to attack the British fleet.²²³

The Americans were distressed at this turn of events, but with over 10,000 men, decided to attack the British forces now

²²¹Showman, Papers of Nathanael Greene, 2:484.

²²²Dearden, Rhode Island Campaign, 74-75.

²²³Ibid., 74-80.

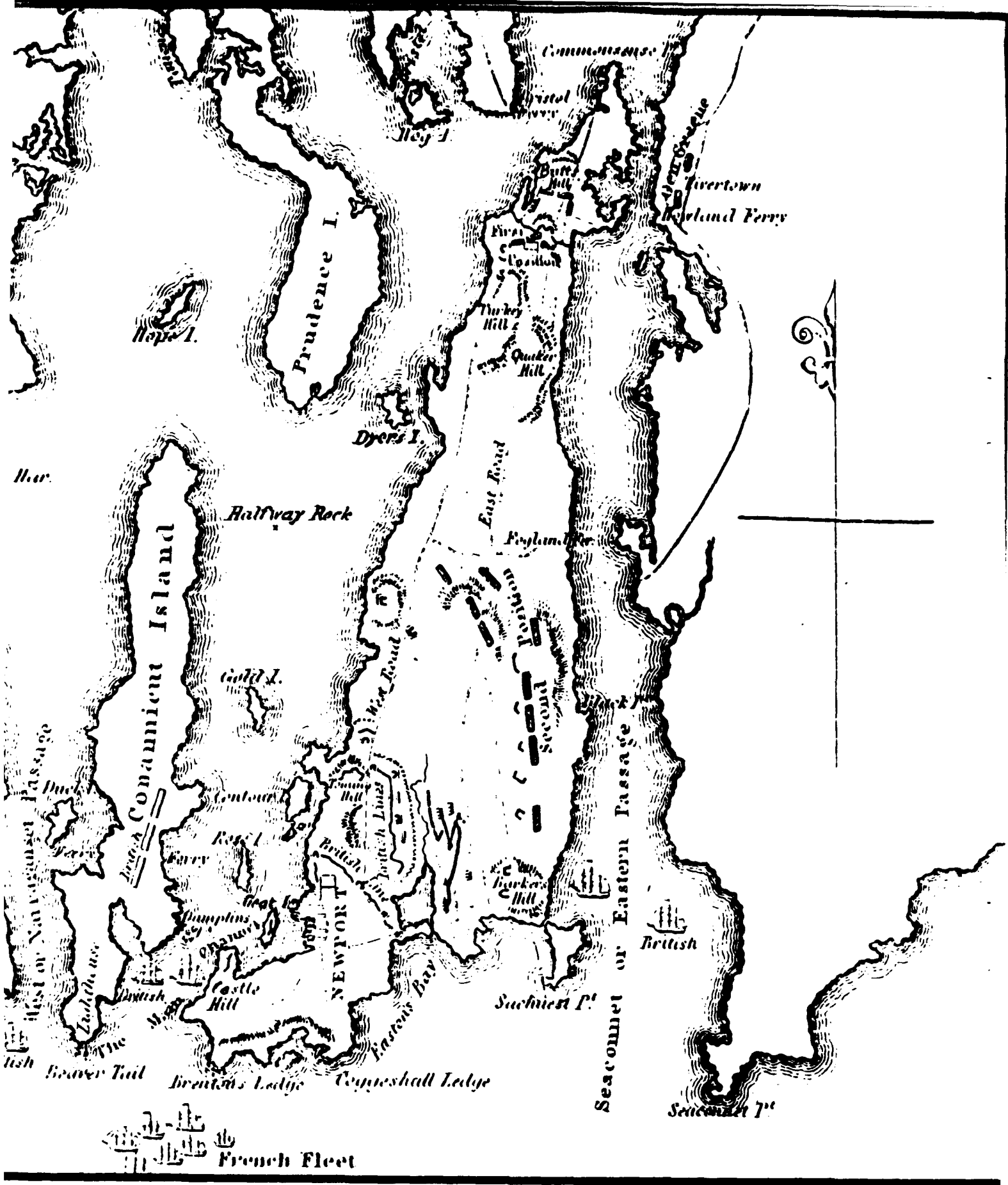
numbering almost 7000.²²⁴ The attack was launched on the 12th with Greene's division going down the west road and Lafayette's the east road. Unfortunately for both the French fleet and the Americans a hurricane hit the area on the afternoon of 10 August. It lasted for almost two-and-a-half days and did tremendous damage to the French fleet and to the military forces on the island of Rhode Island. Some of the volunteers, disheartened by the weather and being away from home during the harvest season, decided to forego the fight.²²⁵

These numbers were relatively small and did not cause the American commanders to change their mind about attacking the British. The army started its march south at six in the morning on 15 August. By the evening they were within two miles of the British forces. Engagements throughout the southern end of the island lasted from 18 to 20 August when the French fleet sailed back into Narragansett Bay. This raised the spirits of the Americans until they were notified that d'Estaing and his troops were headed to Boston to repair their weather-torn ships. This news caused desertions from the raw recruits to increase dramatically.²²⁶

²²⁴See Field, End of the Century, 1:490; Showman, Papers of Nathanael Greene, 2:484; and, Dearden, Rhode Island Campaign, 73.

²²⁵Dearden, Rhode Island Campaign, 8-9; and, Showman, Papers of Nathanael Greene, 2:485.

²²⁶Showman, Papers of Nathanael Greene, 2:485.



Although exact numbers are not known, only about 1150 total men could have deserted. The size of the American forces was approximately 10,122 on the 11th while General Sullivan reported a force of 8,974 men, including artillery, on the 23rd.²²⁷ The militia units were scheduled to end their tour of duty on 25 August and their replacements were not due until about the same time.²²⁸ With almost the entire Rhode Island militia due to rotate, General Sullivan ended his siege of Newport and effected a remarkable retreat.²²⁹

Another Failed Expedition

Although attempts were made by Colonel Mathewson and others to have the missing men returned to Rhode Island, these attempts were too little, too late.²³⁰ The expedition was over before the other half of Rhode Island's militia responded to the call to

²²⁷See Field, End of the Century, 1:490; and General John Sullivan, Camp before Newport, to General Nathanael Greene, et al, Camp before Newport, 23 August 1778, in Showman, Papers of Nathanael Greene, 2:492.

²²⁸See Field, "Company Muster Roll," and, Simon Whipple, "Notice to All Militia and Alarm Companies in Colonel John Mathewson's Regiment, 21 August 1778," Providence Gazette, 22 August 1778, 3.

²²⁹Showman, Papers of Nathanael Greene, 2:486.

²³⁰Colonel John Mathewson, "Notice To His Regiment, dated 18 August 1778, Camp on Rhode Island," Providence Gazette, 22 August 1778, 3.

arms. It does appear that virtually all the state's militia forces were on the move during the last week of the month, but even with these additional forces, the siege could not last long. General Greene points out, correctly, that the British position was too strong along the entire area from New York to Newport for a siege to succeed.²³¹

The failure of this expedition was blamed on the refusal of the French to join the battle when it returned to Narragansett Bay on 20 August. The weather has also received blame for the lack of success of the Americans in capturing the British forces at Newport. The state's militia forces were also blamed for the failed battle. In reality, the failure of this expedition rests on the shoulders of all the various commanders with the excuses mentioned above as contributing to their demise.

There are entire books which cover the specifics of this battle. This paper is only concerned with the military effectiveness of Rhode Island's militia forces during this expedition. What lessons on employing militia forces can be drawn from this conflict? Many of the same that General Washington had already learned in his almost four years of dealing with these forces.

First of all, calling together large militia forces takes time. It is especially critical during certain seasons of the

²³¹See General Nathanael Greene, Camp before Newport, to General John Sullivan, Camp before Newport, 23 August 1778, in Showman, Papers of Nathanael Greene, 2:493-496; and, General Nathanael Greene, Camp near Newport, to George Washington, 28/31 August 1778, in Showman, Papers of Nathanael Greene, 2:499-502.

year. Planting and harvesting are critical times for the citizen soldiers in the state of Rhode Island. The mustering of one-half of the state's militia forces during the month of August was a difficult task. The forces of the state had been called together twice before for an expedition against the British and not a shot had been fired. Was this expedition to be any different?

Once the militia was finally present, the commanders did an excellent job of training and organizing these forces. Militia training normally revolved around small, independent units using local or point defense tactics. They were never systematically trained to go into battle in large armies. Their training along the coastline was centered around repelling invasions, not performing them. To compensate for this training deficiency, the commanders followed General Washington's suggestions on organizing these raw, recently recruited militia forces.

To compensate for their lack of experience in battle and to overcome their insufficient training, the militia forces were dispersed among the regular forces to bolster their confidence and to have strong, well-disciplined officers over them and regular soldiers fighting beside them. Washington had obviously learned this through his many dealings with the militia in previous battles.

The delays caused by the slow organizing of the forces and the subsequent storm, also highlight a problem when utilizing militia forces in a battle such as the one described here. Militia forces were small units employed for specific activities

for short periods of time. The state's militia forces enlisted for this battle expected to serve twenty days or less. Any longer was unthinkable. General Greene was aware of this fact when he wrote to General Sullivan on options to consider after the departure of the French fleet on the 20th of August.

The time for which the Rhode Island Militia were engaged is now near expiring. It will be difficult to detain them any longer, and if you should, they will be mutinous, difficult to govern and of little service in our future Operations. There are many other reasons that urge a retreat, but these may suffice and would be sufficient in my humble opinion to justify you in affecting one immediately.²³²

One further lesson was highlighted during this battle. The morale of the militia forces were dramatically influenced by any adversity affecting their condition. Militia forces were not campaign-hardened regulars. They were called away from their homes on short notice with little provision and expected to perform quick operations of a limited nature. When the brutal weather hit the islands, these troops acted like other raw recruits--they did not weather the storm well and decided that they had had enough. This happened to newly-recruited regular troops throughout the war, too.

The few militia forces that left after the storm did not influence Sullivan's operations. Of the 8,974 men in Sullivan's

²³²General Nathanael Greene, Camp before Newport, to General John Sullivan, Camp before Newport, 23 August 1778, in Showman, Papers of Nathanael Greene, 2:494.

forces on the 23rd of August, almost 5,000 were militia. To consider any attack against almost 6,000 British regulars entrenched in well-constructed redoubts defies all military logic. Once the French fleet departed, the remaining forces, even hardened regulars would have been severely tested in trying to dislodge the British dug in around Newport. Any serious attempt to utilize these militia forces in such a long offensive operation shows a tremendous lack of understanding of the militia.

Finally, General Greene points out another limitation of the militia forces when in his possible courses of action he describes the militia forces making "sham attacks" against the British.²³³ By placing the militia in a harassing role, Greene would have exploited their abilities as skirmishers without risking them in a frontal attack or other such operation.

Although General Washington praised the retreat, the failure of this expedition is unquestioned. Lessons on employing the militia were applied before the battle while others were learned during the engagement. After their glorious retreat, the militia forces of the state went back to effectively performing those military and political functions they were trained to accomplish.

²³³Ibid., 2:495.

CHAPTER 11

THE WAR MOVES SOUTH: 1779-1783

The British Leave

These are the rewards and gracious returns I am to expect for years of hard and dangerous service, where every sacrifice of Interest, ease, and domestic pleasure has been given up to the service of my Country....I cannot help feeling mortified that those that have been at home making their fortunes, and living in the lap of luxury and enjoying all the pleasures of domestic life, should be the first to sport with the feelings of Officers who have stood as a barrier between them and ruin.²³⁴

Nathanael Greene to John Brown

General Greene was not the only one who felt the strain of long years of war. It would become increasingly difficult to raise forces within the state without the threat of direct invasion. With the failed expedition against General Pigot and the British forces in Newport, Rhode Island turned to more peaceful duties such as updating the militia laws. The year proceeded quietly, but there were still minor skirmishes as British foraging parties were sent up and down the coast.

Rhode Island, like the other states, had a hard time meeting its quotas of armed and clothed troops for General Washington's army. Problems were also encountered in the management of the state's forces. Changes involving the militia included the creation of a new law for supplying the army within the state, a

²³⁴General Nathanael Greene, Coventry, Rhode Island, to John Brown, [Providence], 6 September 1778, in Showman, Papers of Nathanael Greene, 2:512-513. Greene was referring to the attacks on his abilities after the failed expedition against the British in August 1778.

resolve on General Sullivan's part not to use his office to enforce civil laws, and the organizing of a corps of light infantry to support *Petit Guerre*. The most important military event of the year occurred on 25 October 1779 when the British evacuated Newport after almost three years of continuous occupation.

During one of the last sessions of the General Assembly in 1778, a law was passed regulating how the forces within the state would be supplied. General Sullivan opposed this law and provided details on how cumbersome this law would be if followed. The law required such a lengthy process for the quartermaster to follow, that any quick response by the army would be impossible.

Innumerable must be the inconveniences arising from the delays and altercations which will follow the mode pointed out by this act; even the breaking of a wheel, laming a horse, breaking a chain, or even the smallest article must delay a whole army.²³⁵

Sullivan was so offended by the wording of this law, he declared that "the Assembly supposed [him] totally incapable of judging what would be most for the good of the service, or the army under [his] command."²³⁶ In the same letter, Sullivan explains how he was reluctant to use the military to enforce civil authority, but did it for the good of the state and the country. With the attack on his judgment implied by the supply

²³⁵General John Sullivan, Providence, to Governor William Greene, Providence, 5 January 1779, in Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 8:522-523.

²³⁶*Ibid.*, 8:523.

act, he declared he would no longer enforce those laws.

Sullivan's description of why he originally enforced those laws tells a lot about the militia's role in internal control. Although he does not mention specific military actions taken, his grasp of the importance of these militia forces in the defense of the state bears quoting.

I have been informed that some zealous members of the Assembly are jealous of the army; and that some inhabitants suppose they are under military law.

I should be as much alarmed if that was in fact the case, as any citizen in the state, and should oppose it as much. I am sensible that the Assembly once empowered me to call delinquents, who refused to obey the civil authority, to their duty. I accepted it with reluctance....and cannot help expressing my surprise, that an Assembly, who found the reins of civil government too weak to compel individuals to assist in the defence of the state, should, by an act risk the safety of the army and country, upon the obedience of those, who had refused to defend their own possessions.²³⁷

In these two paragraphs Sullivan detailed the dilemma of using the militia to enforce civil laws. If the government was so weak it took military force to insure people assisted in the defense of the state, then were the people truly supporting the state? If the civil authorities constantly required the military to enforce the state's laws, could the state only survive under perpetual military law? How could a state survive (especially during a war of independence) without the support, both financially and physically, of all the people?

²³⁷Ibid. Emphasis Added.

General Sullivan was bitter over the double standard imposed on his command. Either grant him full power to perform all the functions assigned to him by the government, supplying the army included, or expect him to perform only those functions which are truly military in nature. He closes this letter with notification that the troops are now without wood and that no act of the Assembly appears sufficient to procure this wood. He is faced with one of two options: "compel the army to remain on the ground and perish; the other is, to dismiss the men, and leave the post unguarded, till a more favorable season will permit their return."²³⁸

During the February 1779 session of the Assembly an act was passed to raise a brigade of 1500 men for one year's service to the state. By June 1779 the force was restructured downwards. The new battalion would consist of only 930 men. The state was having tremendous difficulty raising forces in the fifth year of the war, so a new twist was added. Since "the enemy have given the highest proofs that they intend prosecuting a partizan, predatory and desultory war," the Assembly voted to raise a corps of light infantry. This corps would consist of four companies of fifty-four men each.²³⁹

The British were trying to adjust to a new strategy in the war against independence, but they were too late. The militia forces had controlled the countryside for too long to let the

²³⁸Ibid.

²³⁹Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 8:561.

British gain any advantages. General Gates recommended to the Assembly that the new light infantry corps be commanded by Colonel William Barton (the same William Barton who captured British Major General Prescott in 1777).²⁴⁰

The Assembly also realized the importance of having the right types of officers command such a unique force. With Barton's "qualifications and experience in the *Petit Guerre*," and realizing it was "expedient that the officers be peculiarly calculated for this kind of war," they permitted Barton to select his own officers. The Assembly would still have final approval, but this was a dramatic change for the civilian government. The Assembly had always allowed the independent and alarm companies to select their own officers, but officers in the various militia companies, regiments, battalions and brigades had previously been appointed by the General Assembly.²⁴¹

By October 1779, Rhode Island forces had decreased to about 1500 men. The threat of British invasion had decreased since the major emphasis of the war had headed towards the southern states. Finally, on 25 October 1779, the British evacuated Rhode Island. After three long years the state was finally free of the enemy. With the British went between fifty and a hundred Tories.²⁴²

One of the reasons Rhode Island's militia had such a small role in suppressing Tory activity was that almost all the Tories

²⁴⁰Ibid., 561-562.

²⁴¹Ibid.

²⁴²Field, End of the Century, 1:244.

in the state were located in Newport and were under British protection for most of the war. Problems in Exeter and other towns were quickly brought under control by the militia, but formed only a small portion of the internal control functions performed by the militia.

On the same day the British evacuated Newport, the state dismissed the militia coast guard from duty after serving almost three years.²⁴³ The state would continue to draw down its forces due in large part to the difficulty of raising and paying for these forces. The winter of 1779-1780 was severe. These hardships further impeded the state's ability to raise troops.²⁴⁴ The militia forces were frequently called on to assist in obtaining recruits for the Continental Army, but this caused problems.

The War Winds Down In Rhode Island: 1780-1783

Some of the most useful lessons to be drawn from the study of the Revolution lie in consideration of why the powerful British, unable to control a rather modest force of American insurgents, lost the War for Independence.²⁴⁵

Robert Detweiler

²⁴³Arnold, History, 2:448.

²⁴⁴Field, End of the Century, 1:246.

²⁴⁵Robert Detweiler, "Why the British Lost the War," Marine Corps Gazette 60, no. 7 (July 1976): 19.

Only three pieces of legislation passed by the Assembly during this period dealt with the militia. The first dealt with the requirement of the militia to aid and assist in carrying out a tough act for impressing delinquents into military service. The second act, passed in February 1781, ordered a body of men to be raised for the state's service, but stated these men were not to be marched out of the state. The third, a resolve approved in July 1781, recommended the militia perform guard duty for supplies belonging to the United States.²⁴⁶

In 1780, the Assembly went back over the records of the state and identified which towns had been delinquent in providing draftees during the August 1778 expedition against the British in Newport. To enforce these drafts almost two years after the fact, the Assembly required each town to form a committee and raise one man for each four it had not raised during the Battle of Rhode Island.²⁴⁷

If, for whatever reason, the committee refused to draft these men, committee members would be convicted by a jury of their peers before the superior court of judicature and placed in jail. Furthermore, each person convicted of such a serious crime would never be allowed to hold any office, military or civilian, in the state. To help enforce this act, the "general, field and commissioned officers of the militia within this state, be, and

²⁴⁶Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 9:131-132, 333, 436.

²⁴⁷Ibid., 9:130-131.

they are hereby, called upon and directed to afford their utmost aid and assistance in carrying this act into execution."²⁴⁸

The second act, passed in February 1781, was "An Act for embodying and bringing into the field twelve hundred able-bodied, effective men, of the militia, to **serve within this state**, for one month, from the time of their rendezvous, and no longer term; **and not to be marched out of the same.**"²⁴⁹ Instead of raising and paying men to serve the country, Rhode Island prohibited these forces from even thinking about going out of the state. They were raised exclusively for the state's use! Much had changed since Rhode Island raised and voluntarily sent the Army of Observation to Boston in May 1775.

In a move almost opposite from the act mentioned above, the Assembly voted to send militia forces out of the state to do guard duty in July 1781. It appears there were some military supplies belonging to the United States which needed to be transported to Connecticut. The Assembly recommended Colonel Archibald Crary "to furnish a guard for the said stores to be transported by water, from the militia under his command, if a **sufficient number will voluntarily enlist for that purpose.**"²⁵⁰

This was the last major contribution to the war effort by the Rhode Island militia. The militia performed well during the closing years of the war, but these were the same functions

²⁴⁸Ibid., 9:131-132.

²⁴⁹Ibid., 9:333. Emphasis added.

²⁵⁰Ibid., 9:436. Emphasis added.

performed throughout the war, and do not shed any new light on this subject. What functions were performed by the militia and how effectively they were performed has been the theme of this paper. In the final chapter, some conclusions will be drawn from the history of the Rhode Island militia.

CHAPTER 12

CONCLUSIONS

It is time we should get rid of an error which the experience of all mankind has exploded; and which our own experience has dearly taught us to reject--the carrying on a war with militia...against a regular, permanent and disciplined force.²⁵¹

George Washington

People coming from home with all the tender feelings of domestic life are not sufficiently fortified with natural courage to stand the shocking scenes of war. To march over dead men, to hear without concern the groans of the wounded, I say few men can stand such scenes unless steeled by habit or fortified by military pride.²⁵²

Nathanael Greene

Both Washington and Greene were correct--the militia was not trained nor capable of defeating the British. Neither was the Continental Army. Both forces complemented each other's strengths and weaknesses, and contributed to the success of the war. A thorough understanding of the effectiveness of the militia is required to deal with future conflicts covering the entire world. Military and political changes around the globe require our leaders to understand those lessons from the past which will prove useful in today's changing political and military environment.

²⁵¹George Washington, Headquarters near Passaic, to William Greene, Providence, 18 October 1780, in Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 9:249-250.

²⁵²Nathanael Greene in Washington Irving, The Life of George Washington (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1889), 2:262-263.

Functions Of The Rhode Island Militia

The independent character of Rhode Islanders, their fears of standing armies, and their belief in the militia all had an influence on how the militia was trained and used. Its mere existence during 1775 allowed the separate colonies time to organize a government and an army to defend the newly united colonies. Without such a force, it is likely the colonies would have had to devise such a force to resist British infringement on American rights.

So what did the Rhode Island militia accomplish during the American Revolution? Five functions were performed to varying degrees. These five functions were intelligence gathering, local defense, harassing the enemy, reinforcing the regular army, and internal control. Each function was performed effectively throughout the war, but emphasis on the different functions changed as circumstances changed.

Intelligence gathering by the militia was accomplished in many ways. Enemy troop strength and movement were relayed from the various militia companies and passed up the chain of command so military and civilian leaders could take the appropriate responses. The watchtowers erected along the coast allowed early sightings of enemy fleets. Enemy deserters were interrogated by the militia officers. Without such intelligence, Barton would not have been able to successfully capture General Prescott.

One of the most successful functions performed by the Rhode Island militia was the protection of its 400-mile coastline. General Washington had consistently refused to divide up his Continental Army and detach it to the individual states. Thus, for Rhode Island and other states, the militia had to perform local defense without assistance from the Continental Army.

The first steps taken by the militia for local defense were the erection of fortifications up and down the coastline and on numerous islands. These fortifications did not prevent the British from landing and occupying the island of Rhode Island, but they did prevent the British from proceeding up the harbor and landing at Providence. During the war several ships were fired upon by the men at these fortifications as the British attempted to land foraging parties. Thus, the Rhode Island militia was effective in harassing the British movements even without an effective naval force.

The development of a minute man force increased the effectiveness of the militia responding to British raiding parties. These forces were expensive to maintain, but they often provided relief for the regular militia forces. The minute men were especially critical to securing the numerous islands within the state. This service was required repeatedly during the initial stages of the war.

The militia was used heavily in the earlier stages of the war to remove livestock and other goods from the islands and along the coast. With the British forces limited to what goods they

could obtain from England or through foraging parties, it was extremely critical to safeguard the cattle, sheep and hay on the exposed islands and coastline.

When the British attempted to land on the various islands or along the coast, the local militia companies repelled them. The numerous accounts documented throughout the war attest to the success of the militia in this endeavor. Unless the British landed with vastly superior forces, such as at Newport in December 1776, the state's forces were able to limit the British intrusion and normally succeeded in preventing the British from effective foraging. Since Washington would not send any of the regular army to provide this protection, the success of the state in defending itself rested entirely on how well the militia performed this service. In Rhode Island's case it performed this exceptionally well.

Another function performed exceptionally well by the Rhode Island militia was harassing the British. Although not as consistently as in other states during the war, Rhode Island forces were able to harass the British ships patrolling Narragansett Bay. These ships were performing along similar lines of communication and supply as the rear guard of British land forces in other parts of the country. Perhaps the best example of how Rhode Island militia forces harassed the British was when Barton captured the commander of the British forces stationed at Newport. This daring exploit lifted sagging spirits throughout the state. It was a tremendous display of initiative

and leadership in a militia officer.

The militia also functioned as an augmenting force to the regular army. In the case of the Battle of Rhode Island, when the fighting was extremely intense the force mixture was 5000 militia and 3000 regular troops. Without the militia it is doubtful that any such expedition could have been considered. Rhode Island's location prevented the state's militia from frequently joining Washington's forces, but the militia's constant vigilance along the coastline freed many regular troops from having to perform this duty.

The only other alternative to calling in large regular forces would have been for Rhode Island to relinquish the state to the British. This would have been an unacceptable option for the fledgling republic. With the British able to secure not just Newport and its harbor, but all the land of Rhode Island with its plentiful supplies of livestock and hay, Washington would have been hard pressed to outlast the British. Thus, the Rhode Island militia complemented the regular forces simply by protecting the state.

The last function, and probably most important, was internal control. The British were not the only threat to America's independence. The Tories could have greatly altered the outcome if they had been given the chance. Fortunately, the militia forces provided the necessary control over Tory actions. Rhode Island militia forces administered loyalty oaths, took possession of Tory property, apprehended individuals providing aid or

information to the enemy, and suppressed Loyalist riots.

By administering the loyalty oaths in public, the militia officers identified the Tories and subtly coerced those indifferent into pledging their loyalty to the war. There were numerous accounts of individuals renouncing their loyalty to the king and pledging their support to the cause due to the pressure exerted by the militia.

As a state police force, the militia were extremely effective. With such a small population, Rhode Island militia officers would know by sight who still held sympathy for the crown and who did not follow the laws of the state. One example was when Colonel Esek Hopkins apprehended several Tories from Newport and transported them to other towns in the state. When it was discovered that George Rome, one of the more notorious Tories, was hiding on a British vessel and could not be apprehended, Colonel Hopkins confiscated Rome's property.

When the island of Rhode Island came under British control, the militia regulated the movement of individuals to and from the island. In this way, Hopkins controlled the flow of information between the British and any of their sympathizers on the mainland. Various militia officers became administrators of confiscated Tory property. By confiscating this land, the state was able to raise money for the war effort through rents and by eventually auctioning off the property.

Finally, the militia suppressed loyalist riots. On several occasions, the militia was called on to prevent violence among

both sides--those supporting the war and those opposed to the war. The enforcement of drafts for the Continental Army in the town of Exeter by the militia was one very important way of continuing the war. Without the help of the militia, this would not have been possible. General Sullivan correctly stated how the military force of the state enforced the laws which the weak civil authorities were unable to enforce.

Shortcomings Of The Militia

Any report on the effectiveness of the Rhode Island militia would be incomplete if it did not include the many inherent shortfalls of these forces. Just as there were functions which the militia performed exceptionally well, there were also areas where the militia was detrimental to the war effort. These shortcomings included its competition with Washington's army for manpower, the increased need for arms and supplies due to this large militia force, they were undisciplined and unreliable, and husbandry virtually halted when the militia was called out in large numbers or for long periods of time.

The first shortcoming involved the recruitment techniques of the Rhode Island authorities. At the same time the Continental Congress was trying to raise its army, the state of Rhode Island offered higher bounties, shorter enlistment periods, and the

expectation of staying within the state's borders. This was tough competition for General Washington and he complained to the Governor of Rhode Island on numerous occasions.

Once these forces were recruited by the state, they needed arms and clothing. With limited supplies, this competition between the militia and the standing army was a tremendous shortcoming in prosecuting the revolution. At no time in the war did Washington feel his troops were adequately manned or equipped. On numerous occasions Rhode Island divided its supplies equally among its militia forces and Washington's army. Unfortunately, the demand was greater for Washington. The supplies used by the militia were more than those used by regular troops. They went through provisions faster than regular troops, not being accustomed to hard marches or tough duty. It also cost more to field these forces. With their short enlistment periods, double pay was required during their frequent turnover.

Another shortcoming involved the discipline of these militia forces. With few exceptions, the militia forces were undisciplined when compared to regular army troops. They could not be counted on during periods of bad weather, for periods of time longer than their enlistments, or during pitched battles. Their training emphasized the use of small units for short periods of time. The militia had neither the training nor the discipline to attempt assaults or siege warfare. This severely limited their effectiveness in fighting conventional army wars.

The last major shortcoming of using militia troops lay not in

their military abilities, but in the way it affected husbandry. With a major portion of the work force carrying guns, the planting and harvesting of crops was left to those unable to adequately perform those farming functions. During the revolution, farming was predominantly manual work. With all the men between sixteen and fifty eligible for militia duty, women, the very young and the very old were all that were left to tend the fields. This was acceptable for most of the year, but the spring and fall were critical periods of the year. Most militia training was scheduled around these critical farming periods, but war was not always this sympathetic.

Although the militia were the largest portion of the fighting force during the Battle of Rhode Island, they could not overcome their inability to fight like regular soldiers. This expedition pointed out almost all of the shortcomings of the militia as a combat force. They were slow to respond, timid, unable to provide offensive operations, lacked discipline, fled with little warning during times of crisis and were severely restricted from harvesting their crops.

As others continue the study of the militia and apply it to other countries in other times, it is important to remember the lessons learned from our own past. Utilize these forces wisely and chances for success increase. On the other hand, understanding how militia forces were effective politically and militarily, opposition leaders may determine the means of defeating these forces. Perhaps General George Washington said

it best when he wrote to all the governors pleading for their help in changing from such heavy reliance on the militia to the building of an adequate standing army.

I solemnly declare I never was witness to a single instance that can countenance an opinion of militia or raw troops being fit for the real business of fighting. I have found them useful as light partices to skirmish in the woods, but incapable of making or sustaining a serious attack. This firmness is only acquired by habits of discipline and service. I mean not to detract from the merit of the militia--their zeal and spirit upon a variety of occasions, have entitled them to the highest applause; but it is of the greatest importance we should learn to estimate them rightfully. We may expect every thing from ours, that the militia is capable of; but we must not expect from any levies for which regulars alone are fit.²⁵³

²⁵³George Washington, Headquarters near Passaic, to William Greene, Providence, 18 October 1780, in Bartlett, R.I.C.R., 9:250.

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