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Washington at Brooklyn

The defeat that
taught him how
to win the war

The day after Gettysburg

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ESCAPE FROM Brooklyn

Trapped on Long Island, the American army slipped away under the cover of darkness—a defeat that taught George Washington how to win the war

BY THOMAS FLEMING

The night of August 26, 1776, was uncommonly cold for Long Island in late summer. But William Glanville Evelyn, captain of an infantry company in the King's Own Regiment, barely gave a thought to his shivering men as they marched away from the British camp on the western end of the island. The handsome 34-year-old was hoping that before the end of the next day his name would be wreathed in honor. ★ Evelyn knew that he and his men, the advance guard of a 10,000-man column, might head the list of dead and wounded if this march ended in disaster. No matter. Fourteen months earlier, he had led 33 men against Americans entrenched on a Boston height known as Bunker Hill—and come back with five. A hunger for revenge burned within him and others in his regiment. ★ The target of this midnight maneuver was a line of American forts to the north, on Brooklyn Heights. These stretched from Red Hook, directly south of Manhattan, to Wallabout Bay, on the East River. The rebels manned a defense line about a mile and a half inland from the forts in the wooded Gowanus Heights, known in the 18th century as the Hills of Guan. ★ Three passes through the woods were heavily guarded. British loyalists, however, had told Lieutenant General William Howe, commander

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he watched the
fighting at Brooklyn.

REMBRANDT PEALE/INDEPENDENCE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK, PHILADELPHIA



of all the British forces in America, about a fourth pass on Jamaica Road, far out on the American left flank, that was unfortified and seldom patrolled. Howe's second in command, Lieutenant General Henry Clinton, saw that a column could use that pass to outflank the entire American position on Gowanus and cut off their retreat to the forts.

This was how the first major battle of the American Revolution began. Not even two months earlier, the colonists had declared their independence. To put down the rebellion, King George III and Parliament had sent 32,000 men and a fleet of

more than 400 transports and men-of-war. One uneasy American said it looked as if "all London was afloat" in New York Harbor.

Defeat for the rebels was perhaps inevitable. But thanks to ambivalence among British commanders, Evelyn and the others didn't exact the revenge they sought. Though bloodied and humiliated at Brooklyn, George Washington's fledgling army escaped what could have been total destruction. Indeed, the general left the field with a clear sense of how to win the war.

From his headquarters on Broadway in Manhattan in late August 1776, Lieutenant General Washington surveyed his situ-

ation with growing unease. The British had landed on Long Island on August 22, but he was unsure of their numbers. He feared that the move might be a feint while most of the enemy forces landed on Manhattan itself.

The American commander on Long Island was Major General Israel Putnam, the 58-year-old architect of the Battle of Bunker Hill. A Connecticut man, "Old Put" knew next to nothing about the local terrain. Neither did Washington or any other general in his army.

Worse, Washington had no idea how many muskets he could

command on any given day. Officially, he had 27,000 men, but 17,000 were undisciplined militia who came and went as they pleased. When Washington had taken command of the army in the summer of 1775, he had asked the Continental Congress to enlist 40,000 men for three years. John Adams and his fellow New Englanders, who led Congress, had been horrified by the potential cost. Overconfident following the success of mere militia at Lexington and Concord and at Bunker Hill, they told the general he needed only 20,000 men, enlisted for one year. They then detached half this force for an attempt to conquer Canada (a campaign that quickly unraveled, ending in a rout at the town of Trois Rivières on June 8, 1776).

Adams and his friends expected the war would conclude with one big battle—known then as a "general action"—well before the end of 1776. In *Common Sense*, the former British tax collector Tom Paine had assured his new American friends that the British government was virtually bankrupt and could not afford to raise a big force.

Now, however, Washington knew the truth: He faced the biggest army Great Britain had ever risked overseas. And it was about to strike.

As midnight turned to the early hours of August 27, the loyalists guiding Captain Evelyn's men abruptly abandoned the road and led them across farmlands, where they squashed vegetables beneath their boots and cut swaths through fields of corn. When they emerged, they were only a half mile from Jamaica Pass.

A moment later, hoofbeats triggered panic. Had the secret march been discovered? Were Americans in fact crawling all over the area?

Dragoons surged forward and captured five frightened American lieutenants—the only guard posted at the pass. With sabers held high, the cavalymen demanded to know who else was on the road. No one, the mortified soldiers answered. This was hard to believe, but the British soon confirmed that the winding, steep-sided pass, which a few hundred soldiers with cannons could have defended for hours, was empty.

His confidence soaring, General Clinton ordered the men forward, convinced they were closing in on a victory that could end this rebellion and teach Americans a lesson that would sting for a century. By the time a glaring, red sun rose, the British were striding briskly down the road toward the American forts at Brooklyn, well beyond the rebel regiments on Gowanus Heights.

As they marched, Clinton ordered two cannons fired—a signal for other British regiments to launch a broad attack on Gowanus Heights. These troops and a contingent of German mercenaries had been skirmishing with the rebels for several days. The Americans, who thought their position virtually impregnable, expected to inflict devastating casualties on the British charging up the wooded slopes into waiting muskets and cannons. Bunker Hill had ignited illusions of easy victories. It

Royal Navy frigates off Staten Island in July 1776. Washington's army faced the largest force Britain had ever risked overseas.



IRWIN JOHN BEVAN/THE MARINERS' MUSEUM, NEWPORT NEWS

Washington vowed to shoot the first man who ran

never occurred to the defenders that General Howe was not going to repeat that mistake.

As the British and Germans surged forward, Clinton attacked the Americans from the east with 4,000 screaming light infantry. Trapped and panicked, the Americans, commanded by Major General John Sullivan, surrendered or fled into the woods, where the British and Germans hunted them down like animals. The Germans were especially merciless because their British employers had told them the Americans would give captured mercenaries no quarter. In dozens of nasty encounters, young Americans pleaded with the Germans for mercy, only to be bayoneted with a ferocity that shocked not a few British officers.

Sullivan and his troops had taken flight without giving the slightest warning to 2,000 Americans on their right commanded by Brigadier General William Alexander (also known as Lord Stirling because he claimed a Scottish earldom). Stirling's men

landers under Major Mordecai Gist. Drawing his sword, the general shouted, "Fix bayonets!" and led a frontal assault on the approximately 10,000 British and Germans attacking them.

Astonished, the royal army recoiled, then began flinging bullets and grapeshot at the advancing rebels from two fieldpieces. Five times the Americans wavered and broke, but Stirling and Gist rallied them. Washington, who had left Manhattan and was now watching from one of the Brooklyn Heights forts, gasped: "Good God! What brave fellows I must this day lose."

Marylanders toppled in the hail of bullets, and the gallant remnant broke and fled. Stirling, miraculously unwounded, surrendered his sword to Lieutenant General Leopold von Heister, the German commander. About the same time, a German regiment flushed Sullivan out of his hiding place in a cornfield.

Only nine of the Marylanders and Gist reached the the forts. A Connecticut militiaman, Joseph Plumb Martin, later remembered that the terrified men who crawled out of Gowanus Creek looked like "water rats...a truly pitiful sight."

Suddenly, General Washington realized that his forts, the product of a summer of exhausting labor, had a fatal flaw. Trenches connected the structures, and these now lay open and undefended. If the British seized them, they would be able to surround and destroy the forts one by one. Washington ordered hundreds of men to pile brush in front of these vital links. On the American left, three New York militia regiments frantically shoveled dirt to erect defenses overlooking the Jamaica Pass, where there was no protection.

General Clinton, meanwhile, asked General Howe for permission to order Captain Evelyn and other light infantrymen to assault the raw New York militia. He was sure he could drive them all the way to the

ferry in Brooklyn, cutting off the American retreat across the East River to Manhattan. Other requests to attack poured into Howe's field headquarters from regimental commanders. One British general wanted to hurl his grenadiers at Fort Putnam, the main bastion on the American left. He was confident he could capture it in minutes.

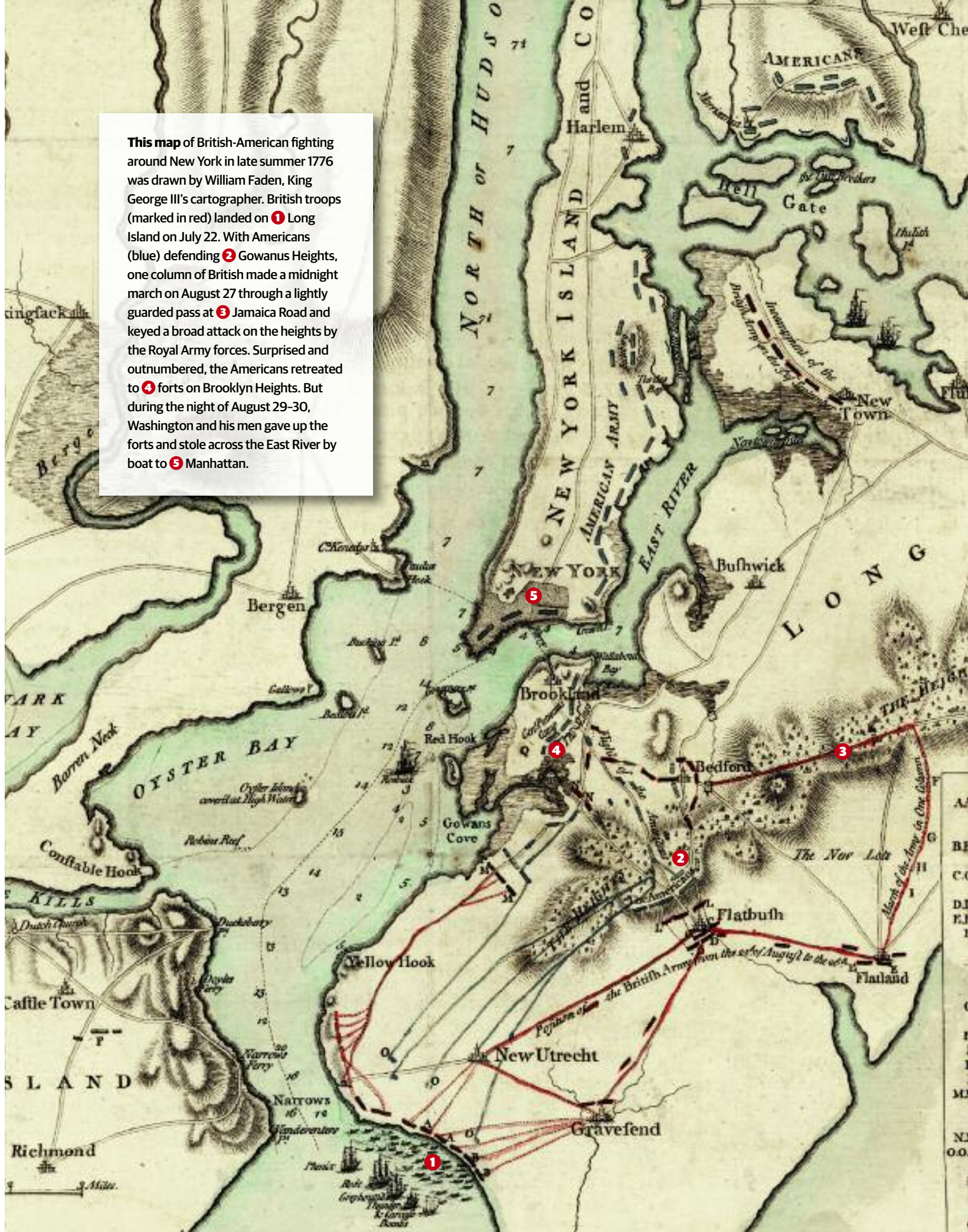
General Howe said no—again and again and again, despite the oaths and pleas of his subordinates. Howe's concern was not British casualties, which had been unbelievably light—only 5 officers and 56 men killed, with 13 officers and 275 men wounded. Nor was it fear of repeating Bunker Hill's slaughter,



Though heavily outnumbered, soldiers from the Delaware Regiment stood against the British early in the battle on Gowanus Heights, allowing others to retreat to the forts on Brooklyn Heights.

were more than holding their own. Early in the fighting, they had charged a British regiment on a hill, routed it, and killed the commander. But the tide turned when the Germans who had chased away Sullivan's men attacked from the left. At the same time, thousands of British grenadiers from the Jamaica Pass column hit them.

Stirling realized there was only one escape to the American forts—across Gowanus Creek, to the rear. But the creek was 80 yards wide and running strong; his men would be slaughtered trying to ford it unless the British were at least slowed. Stirling turned to the best-trained men in his command, some 250 Mary-



DOMENICK D'AMBROSIO, NATIONAL GUARD; OPPOSITE: WILLIAM FADEN, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

The retreat of the Continentals across Gowanus Creek was "a truly pitiful sight," according to one American.



though that memory may have quickened his refusal.

Oddly, the general and his brother Lord Richard Howe, commander of the British fleet in and around New York, were pursuing a strategy that sought to preserve rather than destroy Washington's army. The Howes appreciated the American grievances against the king; both were solid Whigs, political opponents to King George III, and feared the growing power of the Crown and its hardline supporters in Parliament. Their sympathy for the rebels had deep roots. Their older brother, Lord George Howe, had fought in the French and Indian War and been enormously popular with the colonists. When he was killed in battle, he had died in the arms of Israel Putnam, then an officer in his command. Massachusetts erected a monument in Westminster Abbey in his honor.

The Howes hoped to force the Americans to ask for peace terms, which the British commanders in turn would make as generous as possible. They worried that the total destruction of Washington's army would give the king free rein to execute the rebel leaders and ruthlessly confiscate lands, as British kings had done to rebellious Ireland and Scotland.

When his soldiers brought him the captured American generals Stirling and Sullivan, William Howe tried to enlist them as peace emissaries to the Continental Congress. Stirling refused; his family had seen the savagery of the British stamping out the Scottish revolts. Sullivan, perhaps more naive, agreed to become the Howes' advocate.

The fighting on Gowanus Heights was over by the afternoon of August 27. The rest of that day and the next, the Americans in the forts braced for a final assault. Washington brandished two pistols and vowed to shoot the first man who ran. With a bellow, Putnam repeated his famous Bunker Hill rallying cry: Fire only when you see the whites of their eyes. But the day and night passed quietly. Still convinced that an all-out attack was inevitable, Washington ordered three more regiments from Manhattan to bolster everyone's courage. With that, Washington, his staff, and almost every available general were inside the walls of the forts, plus at least 9,000 men, most of them his irreplaceable regulars.

Aboard the frigate HMS *Rainbow* in the harbor, Captain George Collier wrote in his diary: "If we become masters of this body of rebels (which I think is inevitable) the war is at an end." Yet throughout the day, Collier wondered why Admiral Howe had not ordered the *Rainbow* and three other frigates into the East River, where they could cut off a rebel retreat from the Brooklyn Heights forts to Manhattan.

A bone-chilling rain began to fall on the battlefield. Water filled some of the forts' connecting trenches until it reached waist high and more. At twilight, a brief skirmish broke out as a swarm of British light infantry quickly drove the outlying American pickets inside the fort. At dawn the next day, August 29, the Americans saw what the enemy had gained from this action: A sturdy British redoubt now stood about 600 yards

ALONZO CHAPPEL/THE BROOKLYN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Several militia regiments voted to end the war and go home

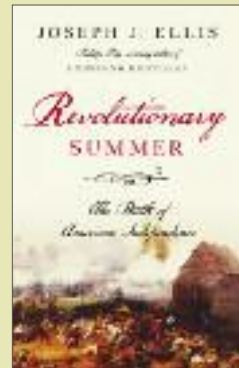
from the fort. Behind it was a network of trenches. General Howe had taken the first step in the siege technique known as “regular approaches.” In a day or two those trenches would be close enough to launch an overwhelming assault.

American morale plummeted. “You must fight or retreat,” Quartermaster General Thomas Mifflin told Washington. The American commander knew he had little choice. He rushed orders to Manhattan to collect every boat on the East and Hudson Rivers. At nightfall, in continuing rain, his retreat began. Fearing a deserter would betray their scheme to the British,

‘The Core of His Character’

PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING historian Joseph Ellis is known for his lively biographies of the Founding Fathers. Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and George Washington have all received the Ellis treatment, their lives pulled into grand narratives that garnered critical acclaim, awards, and big sales.

Now comes Ellis with a book that captures not a man but a moment. *Revolutionary Summer: The Birth of American Independence* draws its storylines from just five months of the Revolutionary War—between May and October of 1776. Roughly half the book takes place in Philadelphia as the Continental Congress midwives a new nation. The rest of the action is set in New York, where George Washington’s army tries to stave off a defeat that could destroy the infant country.



Washington dominates the book, as he did those early months of the war when he was a “one-man embodiment of the Cause,” as Ellis writes. But this is not the Washington of marble monuments; we see his fury at his ill-disciplined troops, his indecision at pivotal moments,

and his rather priggish discomfort at ordering a retreat that would besmirch his name. Faced with sure defeat on Long Island, Ellis says, the great general was virtually paralyzed over what to do, as “the core of his character as an officer and a gentleman, obliged him to suffer death rather than the dishonor of retreat.”

Judge not harshly, the author warns. Honor-bound soldiers of the 18th century were only just beginning to appreciate the value of strategic withdrawal.

Drew Lindsay

Washington told the men he was repositioning the army. Not until soldiers saw the waiting small boats at the East River ferry landing did they realize what was happening.

The best troops, Continentals from Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware, were left in the forts. For two hours the exodus went smoothly. Then a strong northeast wind began to blow. The small sailboats that made up the bulk of the evacuation fleet struggled against it. Disaster loomed. Brigadier General Alexander McDougall, who commanded the ferry, told Washington there was no hope of getting everyone across before dawn.

At 11 o’clock, the wind suddenly swung around to the southwest—the best direction to send the boats swiftly across the river. The water became as smooth as the surface of a pond. Boatmen began to pile soldiers and equipment into the vessels until there were only two or three inches of freeboard. A single British cutter with a swivel gun in its bow could have wreaked havoc on these defenseless craft. Plenty of cutters plied the nearby harbor, but none appeared.

As dawn’s first light turned the sky gray, the Continentals left behind in the forts grew edgy. An attack was certain the moment the British saw that no one had replaced the men in the connecting trenches. “[We] became very anxious for our own safety,” Major Benjamin Tallmadge said.

Then came another change in the weather that proved providential for the Americans. A dense fog engulfed the lines. “I could scarcely discern a man at six yards distance,” Tallmadge recalled. Even after the sun rose, the fog hung low, enabling every Continental to escape undetected. Stepping into one of the last boats was the tall, cloaked figure of General Washington. He had not slept for 48 hours.

With the troops now in Manhattan, Tallmadge asked Washington if he could return to Brooklyn to rescue his horse. Washington, a fellow horse lover, agreed. Tallmadge recrossed the river, and as his oarsmen pulled hard for Manhattan with the steed aboard, they heard angry voices in the fog. British infantry appeared at the ferry landing and fired a wild volley. But they were too late.

It is likely that no one among the British was more upset at the Americans’ escape than Captain Evelyn. His chance for revenge and glory had vanished. A few months later, when the British landed a large force in Westchester County, Evelyn led his men in a headlong charge on a Massachusetts regiment crouched behind a stone wall in what is now the Bronx. The captain went down, hit by three bullets, and died three weeks later in New York.

The escape didn’t exactly hearten the Americans, either. On the morning of the retreat from Brooklyn Heights, jittery New York civilians thought Washington’s men looked “sickly” and “cast down.” Over the next few days, several regiments of militia voted to end the war and go home.



At the Brooklyn ferry landing, Washington (on horseback) directed his men’s crossing to New York—and was on the last boat to safety.

As panic mounted, General Sullivan headed to Philadelphia to fulfill his promise to Lord Howe and deliver to Congress the plea for peace. The American leaders delegated Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Edward Rutledge to meet with the admiral on Staten Island. Lord Howe earnestly tried to persuade the congressmen to trust George III’s forgiveness, insisting that Britain did not require unconditional surrender. But he refused to transmit Franklin’s proposal to let the Americans negotiate as spokesmen for an independent state.

Franklin and the others came away convinced that their best hope was to fight. We continue to rely “on your wisdom and fortitude, and that of your forces,” Rutledge wrote to Washington in his report on the meeting.

In Manhattan, George Washington began rethinking his strategy for the war. He wrote to Congress and declared that it was time to recruit a large army of regulars commissioned for three years. Moreover, from now on the Americans “on all occasions should avoid a general action or put anything to the risk, unless compelled by necessity, into which we ought never to be drawn.” Instead the Americans would “protract the war” until the British quit in frustration or exhaustion or both.

This new strategy meant the Americans would often have to retreat, which Washington knew might earn him reproach. But he believed the fate of America depended on it.

From Brooklyn, George Washington emerged as a thinking man’s general—and the political as well as military leader of the Revolution. The Congress agreed to his new strategy, and he repeatedly demonstrated its wisdom. Later in 1776, when the British left regiments in the isolated town of Trenton, New Jersey, Washington attacked them with stunning success. Always his goal was to maintain a trained regular army “to look the enemy in the face.” Yet when other battles, such as the 1777 confrontation on Brandywine Creek in Pennsylvania, went against him, he did not hesitate to retreat.

Five years after the shattering defeat at Brooklyn, the strategy born in its wake yielded the ultimate fruit: a victory at a Virginia tobacco port called Yorktown.

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MHQ contributing editor THOMAS FLEMING has published over a dozen books on the American Revolution. His most recent work is *A Disease in the Public Mind: A New Understanding of Why We Fought the Civil War*. He is a former president of the Society of American Historians.