



"Bunker Hill" by Richard Simpkin, National Army Museum

# The Battle of Boston 1775

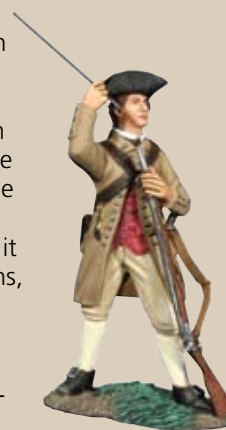
*James H. Hillestad, Member No.6, chronicles the battles of Bunker and Breed's Hills and how they determined the fate of Boston and, in turn, colonial America.*

**F**olklore links the phrase "the shot heard 'round the world" to the fight at Lexington Green on April 19, 1775. More accurately, the dramatic phrase originated with Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Concord Hymn," which was sung at a July 4, 1837 ceremony on completion of the Concord Monument, eulogizing the skirmish at North Bridge, which took place later in the morning on that fateful day.

In similar fashion, the historic battle that is popularly referred to as the Battle of Bunker Hill actually occurred at nearby Breed's Hill. Whatever it is called, it was a critical battle which would have widespread consequences.

After suffering a humiliating retreat at Concord and Lexington on April 19, the British settled down in Boston, where they were besieged by the colonials in Cambridge and Charlestown. The rebels cut off all supplies from the countryside. According to British Lieutenant Barker, "the worst of it is we are ill off for fresh provisions, none to be bought except now and then a little pork."

As the supply of produce and meat dried up, a feeling of claustrophobia set in, as the troops were confined to a town that took pains to make them feel unwelcome. The men itched for action, and for a chance to redeem their tarnished reputation. Under the



Colonial Militia  
Standing Loading  
No.1, No.18044

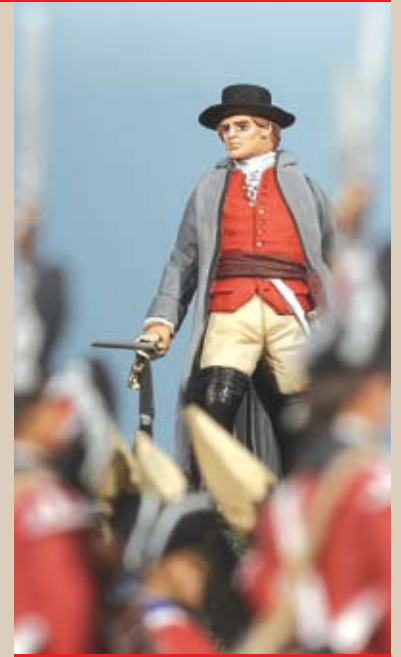
command of General Thomas Gage, the British decided to break out. Plans were made for a four-pronged attack on Dorchester Heights, Roxbury, Cambridge, and Charlestown. Rebel activity on the Charlestown peninsula, however, dictated that it would be the focus of attention.

The Charlestown peninsula, lying 550 yards across the bay from Boston, was roughly triangular. It was bounded on the northeast by the Mystic River and on the southeast by the Charles River. On the southernmost corner of the triangle lay Charlestown, once a thriving village of 2,000 inhabitants, but now abandoned, a ghost town.



# “Don’t fire till you see the whites of their eyes”

--Colonial Colonel William Prescott-1775



Colonial Colonel William Prescott, No.18052

The peninsula had three hills: Bunker, Breed’s, and Morton’s. Bunker, the tallest, rose 110 feet from the flatlands at its base. Its steep slopes made it easy to defend; its elevation made it relatively immune to the guns on the British warships; and it was out of range of the British batteries in Boston. Breed’s Hill was only 75 feet from base to summit, and being closer to Charlestown, was vulnerable to the British cannon, both in Boston and on ships in the harbor. Morton’s Hill was relatively insignificant at just 35 feet, though it would later serve as a platform for British cannon.

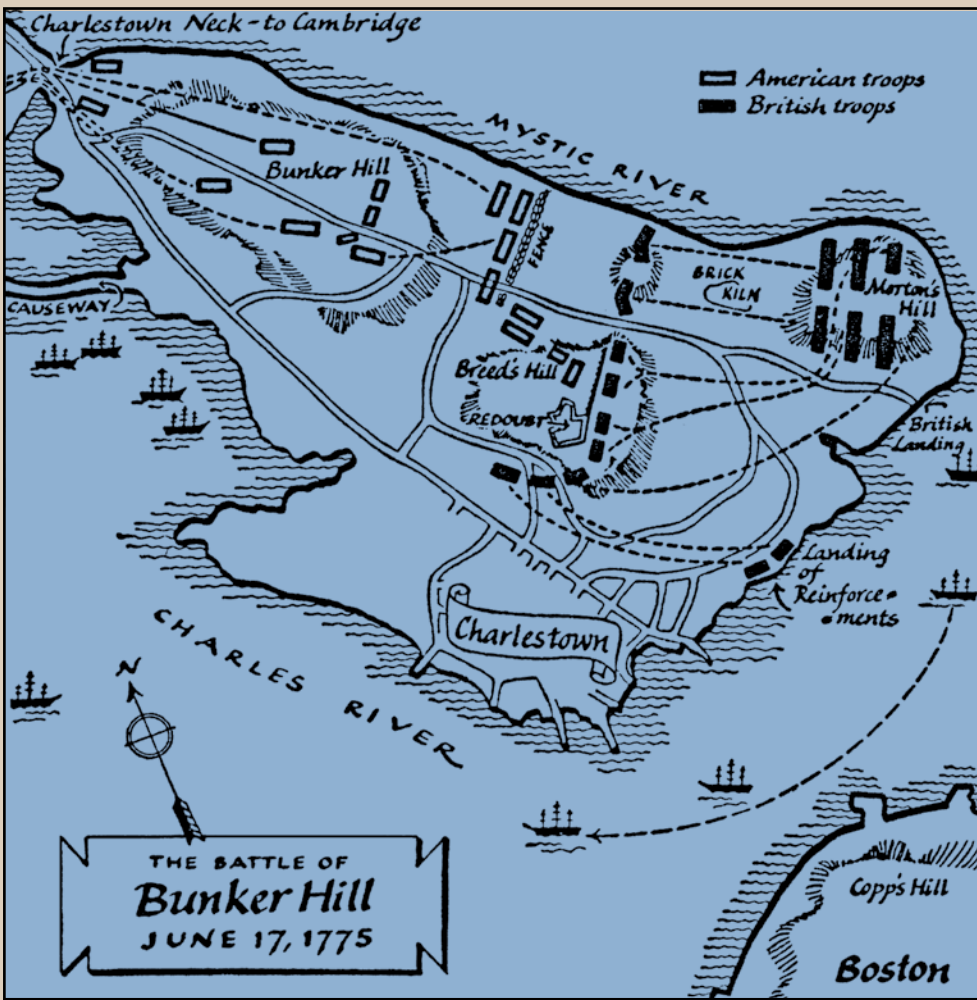
American spies in Boston got wind of the planned British invasion of the Charlestown peninsula, and alerted General Artemus Ward, commanding the colonial militia.

Headquartered in Cambridge, Ward had about 8,000 men, 2,000 more than Gage. However, he could not afford to send the entire force to Charlestown: Cambridge had to be defended, and the supplies stored that had to be protected. He decided to send three Massachusetts regiments, about 1,000 men, along with a Connecticut regiment and a company of artillery. Colonel William Prescott would lead the expedition. Prescott, 49 years old, was a farmer who saw action in the French and Indian War. He was assisted by General Israel Putnam, a 57-year-old dynamo who had also fought in the French and Indian War. He was characterized



Prescott and the Militia defend the redoubt

British 10th Foot Light Infantry Advancing No.1, No.18048. These men were chosen for their physical ability and swiftness







Light infantry slowed down by fencing and challenging terrain

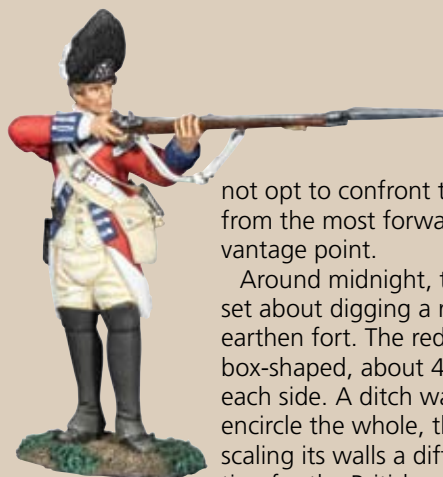
### Brown Bess



The weapon used by the troops was the smoothbore Brown Bess musket, which weighed ten pounds. There was no rear sight, since the man who shot it was not expected to hit anything beyond eighty yards. Soldiers were taught only to point their weapons in the direction of the enemy -- the emphasis was on the volume of fire.

as being impetuous -- going so far as to advocate taking Boston by storm.

Ward had given instructions that the colonials were to dig in and fortify Bunker Hill. What happened when they reached Bunker Hill is to this day a matter of conjecture. What is known is that an argument took place between Prescott and Putnam, and it was decided to march on to the less defensible Breed's Hill. Who made that fateful decision, Prescott or Putnam, is not known. However, it is hard to imagine that the bellicose Putnam would



British Royal Irish Grenadier Standing Firing, No.18029.

The mitre-like headpieces made them look taller and more imposing.

not opt to confront the British from the most forward possible vantage point.

Around midnight, the colonials set about digging a redoubt, or earthen fort. The redoubt was box-shaped, about 40 yards on each side. A ditch was dug to encircle the whole, thus making scaling its walls a difficult proposition for the British.

Daylight revealed the rebel intrusion, which Gage viewed as an unmistakable challenge. He ordered an amphibious landing on the southeastern tip of the peninsula, followed by a frontal attack on the fortifications on Breed's Hill. The force would number 2,300 men, the elite troops of the British Army, made up of grena-

diers and light infantry.

At 1:00 p.m. on June 17, the troops led by General William Howe climbed into the boats and headed straight for the Charlestown beaches.

The imminent arrival of Howe's water-borne assault force was heralded by British cannon fire. Prescott's artillery was limited to two four-pounders to counter the British battery of four six-pounders, four twelve-pounders, and four five-inch field howitzers, not to mention the dozens of cannon provided by the ships in the harbor.

In mid-afternoon, Howe landed 2,000 troops at Morton's Point and began the assault on Breed's Hill. Here he made two tactical mistakes. First, he did not give the order for his troops to remove their heavy packs, which slowed them down. Second, he ordered the troops to advance in lines,

### Did you know?

**Did you know that there were 103 troops of color (88 African Americans and 15 Native Americans) in the American fortifications on June 17?**





**ABOVE**  
The diorama,  
25 x 45 inches

**LEFT**  
In line formation,  
the Grenadiers  
advance



rather than in columns. These decisions gave the defenders a wide target to aim at, while the heavy packs and bright red uniforms made them as vulnerable as sitting ducks.

Crossing the fields bisected with fencing and pock-marked by small holes that were hidden by the tall grass was challenging. Further, a profusion of sharp rocks littered the way. For troops trained in precision alignments, the irregular terrain was at the very least disruptive. Howe complained that the fences broke the perfection of his line!

The fighting raged. British warships fired heated cannonballs into the wooden buildings of Charlestown, setting the town ablaze.

Two British infantry assaults failed, with severe losses. Howe lost all his staff officers. Grenadier companies were decimated. Once nearly 40 strong, they were now

reduced to eight men, led by a sergeant.

At battle's end, a British observer offered "...we have lost some of the best officers in the service. Nor do I see that we enjoy one solid benefit in return."

Howe was stunned, but determined. He ordered a third assault. The rebels were running out of ammunition. Alarmed, Prescott ordered his men "Don't fire till you see the whites of their eyes," but nothing could save the situation. In a frenzied bayonet charge, the British swarmed over the parapet and routed the colonials from their entrenchments. Breed's Hill fell to the British, who went on to overrun Bunker Hill. Prescott later said that, had the defenders had one more round of ammunition, they would have prevailed.

The British had won a tactical victory, in that they had taken the battlefield. But it cost them dearly.

While the rebels suffered 400 casualties, the British lost more than a thousand officers and men, the cream of the army. Of all the British officers who would fall in battle in the eight years of the American Revolution, nearly one-quarter did so at Bunker Hill.

Nathanael Greene of Rhode Island quipped, "I wish we could sell them (the British) another hill at the same price as we did Bunkers (sic) Hill."

The patriots proved themselves a formidable adversary. So much so, that Gage withdrew his troops from the Charlestown peninsula, and subsequently evacuated Boston.

There was now no turning back for the patriots. The notion of an independent American nation was no longer a dream. In the eyes of the King, they were traitors, and they were prepared to accept that -- and move on to achieving independence.

By their tenacity and resilience, the army that fought at Bunker Hill and Breed's Hill kept the cause alive.



**British Royal Irish  
King's Colour No.1,  
No.18049**

**Jim Hillestad operates under the name The Toy Soldier Museum. His museum, containing more than 35,000 figures and a large collection of militaria, is located in the Pocono Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. For directions and hours, call him at 570 629-7227, or visit his website: [www.the-toy-soldier.com](http://www.the-toy-soldier.com)**