A Military History of the Battle that
Lost Philadelphia but Saved America, September 11, 1777

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of the enemy." There were not enough British casualties to "cover the ground," but there is a reasonable explanation why Sullivan left that description: Gen. Howe had trained his soldiers to drop to the ground when the rebels fired upon them. He instilled some light infantry tactics in all of his troops prior to the 1776 New York campaign, and many of the army's regiments were still following this practice. In the smoke and confusion of battle, men deliberately lying on the ground were easily confused with casualties.18

Sullivan also went on to claim, "Five times did the enemy drive our troops from the hill, and as often was it regained, and the summit o'pen disputed muzzle to muzzle. The general fire of the line lasted an hour and forty minutes, fifty-one of which the hill was disputed almost muzzle to muzzle, in such a manner, that General Conway, who has seen much service, says he never saw so close and severe a fire." When Sullivan wrote these words he was defending himself against a series of accusations, and exaggerated some of the details of the fighting. No one disputes, however, that the combat was intense while it lasted, and that the British who made the attack in this quarter suffered as a result.19

According to official British casualty returns, the grenadier battalions suffered 24 killed and 126 wounded, including 14 officers. One of these officers was Lt. Col. William Medows, the commander of the 1st British Grenadier Battalion. According to Capt. George Harris of the 5th Regiment of Foot's grenadier company, "He [Medows] received a shot, in the act of waving his sword-arm just above the elbow, that went out at the back, knocking him off his horse, and the fall breaking his opposite collar-bone." Captain Harris, who was wounded at Iron Hill about a week before the battle and would later rise to the rank of general, was advancing behind the attack in a carriage. He jumped a horse without a saddle and, claimed his biographer, "had the honour to share in the glory of that day, but attended with the drawback of finding his gallant commander and friend most literally in the hands of the surgeon, having lost the use of both his own." Knocked senseless by the painful wound and subsequent fall, Colonel Medows had not yet "recovered his senses when Captain Harris came to him, but looking at him some time, and knowing his voice, he attempted to put out his hand, and not being able to use either, [said] It's hard."20

Assault on Stephen's Division

While Sullivan's division was routing and Lord Stirling's division was being hard-pressed and beginning to fall back, Adam Stephen's division on the far right of the American line remained in place atop Birmingham Hill. Stephen's two brigades, the 3rd Virginia under Brig. Gen. William Woodford and the 4th Virginia under Brig. Gen. Charles Scott, were formed on the military crest of the hill directly above and north of Sandy Hollow, with Woodford on the right side of the division front and Scott on the left. A cloud of skirmishers fanned out forward of the main line of battle, with the 3rd Virginia Regiment, part of Woodford's brigade, fighting to hold the cemetery near the Birmingham Meetinghouse.

Advancing against Stephen were, right to left, the British 1st Light Infantry Battalion, stalled on both sides of the Birmingham Road; 15 companies of the 2nd Light Infantry Battalion; and on the far left, elements of the Hessians and Anspach jaegers. The Germans had swung well east of Birmingham Meetinghouse but were now bogged down in the low ground between Street Road and Birmingham Hill. Brigadier General James Agnew's 4th British Brigade was well behind this advancing line supporting the attack. The British had engulfed the cemetery, threatened the capture of the advanced Virginia outflank (as described above), and forced the regiment to retire.

Lieutenant Colonel Ludwig von Wurmb, the jaeger commander, oversaw the advance and described the initial encounter with the American skirmishers a short time earlier. "I saw that the enemy wanted to form for us on a bare hill, so I had them greeted by our two amusements and this was the beginning of General

Brandywine: A Military History

Howe's column's [arrival]." The bare hill described by von Wurmb was the eastern extension of the site that Brandywine Meetinghouse sits upon. The jaegers encountered American skirmishers on the end of this rise about 1,500 feet east of Birmingham Road.

Although the Germans could not effectively use their smaller guns to support their advance, the Americans had no such problem. Situated on good terrain with a commanding view, the battalion guns attached to Stephen's division did outstanding work defending the position with shell and grapeshot, as did the patriot muskets, which were loaded and fired as fast as humanly possible. The inherent strength of Stephen's position was undeniable. According to the *Jaeger Corps Journal*, the Americans were "advantageously posted on a not especially steep height in front of a woods, with the right wing resting on a steep and deep ravine." The stout defense put up by the Americans likely surprised Lt. Richard St. George of the 52nd Foot's light company, who remembered "a most infernal fire of cannon and musket—smoke—incessant shattering—incline to the right! Incline to the Left!—halt!—charge!...the balls ploughing up the ground. The Trees cracking over ones head, The branches riven by the artillery—The leaves falling as in autumn by grapeshot."

Lieutenant Martin Hunter, another officer in St. George's light company, agreed with his fellow officer and also took note of the imposing defensive nature of the terrain: "The position the enemy had taken was very strong indeed—very commanding ground, a wood on their rear and flanks, a ravine and strong palings in front. The fields in America are all fenced in by paling."

One of the jaeger officers fighting on the left wing, Lt. Heinrich von Fellitzsch, recalled the "counter-fire from the enemy, especially against us, was the most concentrated...The enemy had made a good disposition with one height after the other to his rear. He stood fast," he added, perhaps with grudging respect. Lieutenant Colonel von Wurmb agreed: "We drove the enemy [Stephen's skirmish line] from this [bare] hill and they positioned themselves in woods from which we dislodged them and then a second woods where we found ourselves 150 paces from their line which was on a height in a

wood and we were at the bottom also in a woods, between us was an open field. Here they [Stephen's main line] fired on us with two cannon with canister and," continued the German commander, "because of the terrible terrain and the woods, our cannon could not get close enough, and had to remain to the right." The German light infantrymen, reported one participant, "were engaged for over half an hour, with grape shot and small arms, with a battalion of light infantry. We could not see the 2nd Battalion of Light Infantry because of the terrain, and while we received only a few orders, each commander had to act according to his own best judgment."

Despite the tactical flexibility of light infantry, the wooded, swampy, and sloping terrain in this area, coupled with the heavy American fire, stymied the elite British and German units. The swampy lowlands and thickets had also forced the 4th British Brigade, part of Cornwallis's reserve, to swing well west of the Birmingham Road, which in turn denied the light troops their promised support. Unless the jaegers could warn the American right flank, it would be difficult to reach, let alone carry, Stephen's position.

Stirling's retreat into Sandy Hollow exposed Stephen's left flank to the surging British troops. Stephen attempted to maintain his position rather than retreat, perhaps to provide as much time as possible for Stirling and Sullivan to withdraw their shattered commands to a safe distance and form elsewhere. General Scott's brigade, holding the left side of Stephen's division, was but a short distance from the American artillery position that had just been overrun by the British light infantry and grenadiers, some of whom were still pressing against his front. Woodford's brigade on Scott's right, meanwhile, was facing a fresh threat from the advancing jaegers and newly placed enemy artillery. After encountering significant obstacles in the form of woods, fences, and swampy terrain, the British and Germans finally managed to wheel three guns into an ideal position to enflame Woodford's brigade with grapeshot. Two of the guns, 3-pounders that were probably attached to the 2nd Battalion of Light Infantry, unlumbered along the 2nd Light Infantry Battalion front, with nine companies on their left and another five companies advancing on their right. The third

21 Von Wurmb to von Jungkann, October 14, 1777, 10.
23 Buggeyse, trans. and ed., *Diaries of the Jaegers*, 18; Von Wurmb to von Jungkann, October 14, 1777, 70; Buggeyse and Buggeyse, eds., *Journal of the Honorable Jaeger Corps, 14*. The woods, combined with a slight elevation change, blocked the Germans' view of the British light infantry advancing and fighting on their right. The cannon referenced by von Wurmb were the two 3-pounders assigned to support the advancing jaegers that had been left behind due to the difficulties of terrain.
piece, a 12-pounder, set up between the battalions, with the 1st Light Infantry Battalion advancing on its right. From this advantageous position the British gunners rammed grapeshot down the hot tubes and fired, spraying leady iron rounds at an oblique angle into Woodford's line. Whether these metal balls were responsible for taking out the horses of Stephen's pair of field pieces is unknown, but the animals fell and when the infantry eventually retreated there was no way to take the invaluable field pieces with them. Woodford was also struck in the hand and retired down the southern slope to dress his injury.

While the British guns roared, the 2nd Light Infantry Battalion and jaegers, supported by an advancing Brig. Gen. James Agnew's 4th British Brigade, pressed Stephen's front. Five companies from the 2nd battalion had finally managed to cross the creek bottomland in front of Birmingham Hill and assault Scott's brigade on Stephen's left. "The fire of Musketry all this time was as Incessant & Tremendous, as ever had been Remember'd," wrote Lt. Frederick Augustus Wetherall of the 17th Regiment of Foot's light company, "But the Ardour & Intrepidity of the Troops overcoming every Opposition & pressing on with an Impetuosity not to be resisted." Ultimately, he continued, "the Rebel Line incapable of further Resistance gave way in every part & fled with the utmost disorder." Montrose, Howe's engineer who watched the fighting from Osborne's Hill and later rode the ground to study the terrain, described the difficult attack made by the British light infantry: "the ground on the left being the most difficult the rebels disputed it with the Light Infantry with great spirit, particularly their officers, this spot was a ploughed hill and they covered by its summit and flanked by a wood; however unfavourable the circumstances [the light infantry’s] ardour was such that they pushed in upon [the Americans] under a very heavy fire."24

Scott's men held as long as possible, but Stirling's withdrawal exposed their left, which was turned and engulfed by surging British troops. When the patriot guns on the hill ceased firing, the 1st Light Infantry Battalion closed the distance and overwhelmed the front and engulfed the flank of Scott's line, which collapsed and retreated down the back of Birmingham Hill into Sandy Hollow and beyond.25

25 Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land-Warrant Application Files, file 56085; Lis and Eight, ed., Pennsylvania Archives, Series 2, vol. 10, 810-811; Jonathan Nicholson to Joseph Howell, September 17, 1788, National Archives and Records Administration, Lex mant. 1. Howell, Comm. Accounts RG93, accessible at www.saratogapaper.org. Lieutenant Philip Stoughton of the 17th Virginia Regiment remembered the bloody day of conflict for the remainder of his life. After the end of the Revolutionary War, he returned to Chesterfield Virginia and named his farm "Brandywine." Stoughton lived a long life and did not die until 1849. Initially, his farm was the scene of heavy fighting during the American Civil War at the battle of Cedar Mountain on August 9, 1862. Robert E. Sickel, James Jackson at Cedar Mountain (Chapel Hill, NC, 1990), 50.
26 Burgoynes and Burgoyne, eds., Journal of the Jasper Corps, 14; Ewell, Diary, 86. "Dilworthtown" was Dilworth, about one-half mile southeast of Stephen's position on Brantingham Hill; Von Wurmb to von Jorgensen, October 14, 1777, 10. Two of the jaeger officers were later recognized for their service at the Brandywine: Capt'n. Johann Ewald and
“They allowed us to advance till within one hundred and fifty yards of their line,” remembered Lt. Martin Hunter of the 52nd Regiment of Foot’s light company, “when they gave us a volley, which we returned, and then immediately charged. They stood the charge till we came to the last paling. Their line then began to break, and a general retreat took place soon after.” An unidentified officer with the 2nd Light Infantry Battalion described the assault from his perspective. “Our army Still gained ground, although they had great Advantrig of Ground and ther Canon keep a Constant fire on us. Yet We Ne’er Wess daunted they all gave way.” According to the Jaeger Corps Journal, “the enemy retreated in confusion, abandoning two cannons and an ammunition cassion, which the Light Infantry, because they had attacked on the steep slope of the height, took possession of.”

Stephen’s division ended up as scattered and difficult to organize as Sullivan’s broken command. Unlike Sullivan’s men, however, Stephen’s troops were in position and prepared when the British attacked, and acquitted themselves well. This was amply demonstrated when the jaegers reached the summit of the hill and realized that “many dead [Americans] by to our front.” The 52nd’s Lt. Hunter admitted the Americans had “defended [their guns] to the last; indeed, several officers were cut down at the guns. The Americans never fought so well before, and they fought to great advantage.” Although eventually driven from the hill, the Continentals had fought so hard and well against the veteran British units that Gen. Howe believed Sullivan had defended the position with 10,000 troops.

Many of Cornwallis’s units suffered heavily in their victory, not only the grenadier battalions but the light infantry as well. Fifteen light infantry officers fell, and the battalions reported losses of 16 killed and 103 wounded. The jaegers suffered another eight killed, including two officers, and 38 wounded.

Carl von Wrede’s received the Hermitage order for the recent military. They were the first officers of that rank to be thus honored. Lowell, The Hermitage, 199.


29 Von Wilms to von Jungkeln, October 14, 1777, 10; Hunter, Journal of Hunter, 29-30; Narrative of Howe, 98.

30 American losses are reported later in this study, as we do not have them broken out separately as we have for the British and German units. Jaeger casualties are from Burgoyne and Buergoyne, eds., Journal of the Jaeger Corps, 15; Rememberance for 1777, 415-417, Inman, ed., “List of Officers Killed,” 176-205. Among the light infantry officers who fell, Lt. Francis Johnson (38th Regiment of Foot’s light company) was killed. In addition to those mentioned earlier, the following light infantry officers were wounded: Capt. Thomas Morcan (23rd Regiment of Foot), Capt. James Douglas (25th Regiment of Foot), Capt. Nicholas Wade (49th Regiment of Foot), Capt. Henry Downing (59th Regiment of Foot), Capt. James Murray in the 62nd (57th Regiment of Foot), Capt. James DeCourcy (40th Regiment of Foot), Lt. John Birch (50th Regiment of Foot), Lt. John Nicholl (53rd Regiment of Foot), Lt. Charles Leigh (5th Regiment of Foot), Lt. Samuel Rushon (5th Regiment of Foot), Lt. Thomas Armstrong (49th Regiment of Foot), and Lt. Bent Boll (63rd Regiment of Foot). Over a month and half later, Captain Murray was still recovering from his wounded arm. That day he wrote, “[D]o not that my fever has left me I shall be perfectly recovered in a few days.” Eric Robinson, ed., Letters from America, 1773 to 1780: Being the Letters of a Taft officer, Sir James Murray, to his home during the War of American Independence (New York, 1930), 49.

31 Luzader, Exaggerating, 227.