THE COMIC OPERA BATTLE THAT MADE A GENERAL

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THE engagement between American forces commanded by General Lafayette and the British under General Clinton at Barren Hill, Pennsylvania, May 19-20, 1778, was characterized by so many blunders and humorous incidents and so little bloodshed that it may well be termed "a comic opera" battle. On the other hand the flower of both armies participated; few, if any, battles of the Revolutionary War saw such an array of military leaders and the outcome did much to advance the reputation of General Lafayette.

Barren Hill is a low hill along the Ridge Road just outside the present city limits of Philadelphia below Norristown and Conshohocken. There is a stone marker at the side of the road which is easily located, from that position the Church and other places hereinafter mentioned may be readily found although changes in roads and surroundings cause some confusion.

The story must begin prior to the event itself when General Grant, one of the British commanders, expressed his contempt for the Americans by boastfully writing home to England that if he should be given 5,000 men, he could march through the entire America and end the war.¹ This will be of more interest as the story develops.

The orders under which the expedition of General Lafayette was undertaken were written by General Washington himself and were dated at Valley Forge on May 18, 1778.²

To the Marquis de Lafayette
Instructions.
Sir:
The detachment under your command, with which you will immediately march towards the enemy's lines, is de-

²Jared Sparks, Writings of George Washington, V, 368.
signed to answer the following purposes; namely, to be
a security to this camp and a cover to the country be-
tween the Delaware and the Schuylkill, to interrupt the
communication with Philadelphia, to obstruct the incurs-
sions of the enemy's parties, and to obtain intelligence of
their motions and designs. This last is a matter of very
interesting moment, and ought to claim your particular
attention. You will endeavor to procure trusty and intelli-
gent spies, who will advise you faithfully of whatever
may be passing in the city, and you will without delay
communicate to me every piece of material information
you obtain.

A variety of concurring accounts make it probable that
the enemy are preparing to evacuate Philadelphia. This
is a point which it is of the utmost importance to ascer-
tain; and, if possible, the place of their future destina-
tion. Should you be able to gain certain intelligence of
the time of their intended embarkation, so that you may
be able to take advantage of it, and fall upon the rear
of the enemy in the act of withdrawing, it will be a very
desirable event, but this will be a matter of no small diffi-
culty and will require the greatest caution and prudence
in the execution. Any deception or precipitation may be
attended with the most disastrous consequences.

You will remember that your detachment is a very
valuable one, and that any accident happening to it would
be a severe blow to this army. You will therefore use
every possible precaution for its security, and to guard
against a surprise. No attempt should be made, nor any-
thing risked, without the greatest prospect of success and
with every possible advantage on your side. I shall not
point out any precise position to you; but shall leave it
to your discretion to take such posts occasionally, as shall
appear to you best adapted to the purposes of your de-
tachment. In general, I would observe that a stationary
post is inadvisable; as it gives the enemy an opportunity
of knowing your situation, and concerting plans success-
fully against you. In case of any offensive movement
against this army, you will keep yourself in such a state
as to have an easy communication with it, and at the
same time harass the enemy's advance.

Our parties of horse and foot between the rivers are
to be under your command, and to form part of your de-
tachment. As great complaints have been made of the
disorderly conduct of the parties which have been sent
towards the enemy's lines, it is expected that you will be
very attentive in preventing abuses of the like nature,
and will inquire how far complaints already made are founded in justice.

Given under my hand, at Head-Quarters, this 18th day of May, 1778.

The Commander-in-Chief seems to have had a premonition of what was about to happen when he wrote:

Any deception—may be attended with the most disastrous circumstances—your detachment is a very valuable one and you will therefore use every precaution for its security and to guard against a surprise.

When he wrote: "a stationary post is inadvisable, as it gives the enemy an opportunity of knowing your situation, andconcerting plans successfully against you," he could hardly have guessed how soon the enemy was to learn the situation and concert his plans. As a matter of fact tribute must here be paid to the British spy system. The neighborhood was full of spies and Lafayette says a Tory Quaker carried information of his location to Philadelphia. This may have been true, but it seems altogether likely that some other messenger must have carried the news direct from Valley Forge at or about the very time the expedition started. John Marshall was of this opinion. As already noted, Washington’s order to Lafayette is dated May 18 and Lafayette marched out with 2,200 men and five cannon at about 8 o’clock that morning. The British were on the march with more than 5,000 men and fourteen cannon the next night (19th). So many men could not have undertaken either expedition without preparation, so it is a fair assumption that news of Lafayette’s intended departure was known in camp before his written instructions were penned early in the morning of the 18th, and in order for the British to have marched the next night, they must have had the report of a spy before any Tory Quaker at Barren Hill saw Lafayette there on the late afternoon of the 18th. True the Quaker may have communicated more precise information of

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a Theo. C. Bean, Hist. of Montgomery County, 159.
b B. J. Lossing, Pictorial Field Book of the Revolution, 122.
e Lossing, Field Book, 122; Tower, Lafayette, I, 337.
the exact location of the Marquis and his detachment, but it is altogether likely that he only confirmed what a spy had already reported from Valley Forge itself.

The American force crossed the Schuylkill at Swede's Ford which is the present Norristown, and proceeded along the Ridge Road to Barren Hill where they arrived about sunset.\(^8\)

General Lord Howe had just been relieved of the command of the English army in America and General Clinton had taken his place.\(^9\) Both were in Philadelphia with the main British force and their fleet was in the Delaware. Lafayette himself is authority for the statement that the British Generals had invited some ladies to sup with him, and had prepared a frigate in which to carry him off as a prisoner of war.\(^10\) This seems not at all unlikely, as the great Mischianza took place on the 18th,\(^11\) and it may well be that the British Officers were so pleased with their party and the lovely ladies who graced it, that they, possibly somewhat “in their cups,” planned further celebration to cap the climax.

The British moved out in three columns.\(^12\) The chief force under General Grant was stated by the British to have been 5,000 men\(^13\) but Lafayette and Wayne say it numbered 7,000.\(^14\) They left Philadelphia at about half past ten at night, marching toward White Marsh.\(^15\) The second was a strong detachment under General Grey. They marched along the Ridge Road directly to Lafayette’s front.\(^16\) The third group was under General Clinton himself, with General Howe accompanying him to see the fun. Two of the groups, and possibly all three, included Hession soldiers and their officers. They moved by way of Germantown.\(^17\)

When General Grant with the main part of the army reached

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\(^10\) *Memoirs, Correspondence and Manuscripts of Gen. Lafayette* (N. Y. 1837), I, 47.
White Marsh, there occurred an incomprehensible blunder on the part of the Americans. General Potter and 600 Pennsylvania Militia had been posted by Lafayette at White Marsh for the express purpose of guarding against a surprise movement from that quarter. General Potter had an appointment to meet Lafayette sometime the next day for a consultation as to the disposition of this force. When Grant got to White Marsh, the Militia was somewhere up the Bethlehem Pike, and Grant with his 5,000 men walked peacefully by, unmolested and unreported. It is difficult to understand this blunder which might have caused the loss of the entire force at Barren Hill, and while General Potter did not escape severe criticism, he seems to have lived it down for he was later promoted to be a Major General. Grant then proceeded to his goal in the rear of Lafayette's position at Barren Hill, within about a mile from him and a like distance from Matson's Ford, the present location of Conshohocken.

General Grey with the Hessians were not so successful in escaping observation. Captain McLean and a company of fifty Indians had been posted as pickets at Mile Post 9 on the Ridge Road. The sight of the fine red-coated British on their handsome horses was too much for the Indians. They let out a war whoop (Mad Anthony Wayne called it a "Hollow") and ran away as fast as they could. The British, however, didn't like the savages and their "Hollow" any better than the redskins liked them, and they ran just as fast in the opposite direction. The honors seem to rest slightly with the Indians, for General Wayne says they fired their guns and killed some of the horses, and an article in one of the newspapers of the day says the British soldiers dropped some of their cloaks which the Indians gathered up and made into "leggins."

20 Tower, Lafayette, I, 329; Address of I. C. Williams at Barren Hill, 21 May, 1898.
21 Wayne to Delaney; Tower, Lafayette, I, 329; Lossing, Field Book, 122.
23 Stedman, American War, I, 377.
26 Pennsylvania Packet, June 3, 1778.
With the three British columns in position, Lafayette and his force were virtually surrounded, and in a desperate situation. Grant had only to advance, block the ford at Conshohocken, and seize his prey while Clinton and Howe looked on and applauded his success. But Grant did not advance. There are several explanations for the delay. First there was a consultation with his officers. Sir William Erskine was in favor of advancing at once, but Grant insisted on awaiting word that Grey was in position. A second explanation from British sources is that it took over an hour to deploy the force in battle array for the advance. There is a local tradition that one cause of the delay was a very good breakfast served to the General by an attractive bar maid at the Broad Axe Tavern. Whether enjoying a good breakfast, or placing his troops or waiting for word from General Grey, the fact remains that Grant did not make the ford. It was a warm morning following two hot days, the soldiers had made a long all night march and these factors may have contributed to the cause.

Lafayette was just as quick as Grant was slow. He at once had a small force of his men display themselves in the edge of the woods, which are no longer there, and around the Barren Hill Church. The original church is also gone but a new stone building now stands guard over the little God's acre, the stone wall of which was used by some of the Americans as a protection. Lafayette's plan was to give the impression that he was preparing to fight, and this was done with the smallest possible number of his men marching back and forth in and out of the edge of the woods, and in the cemetery around the church. At the same time, General Poor was sent with the main force in a bold attempt to make the ford under the cover of the hill. The British were actually closer to the ford than the Americans, but the crossing was made in safety, Lafayette following with the

29 Letter of von Wurmb to von Jungkenn, 1 June 1778, von Jungkenn MSS.
30 Von Jungkenn MSS., letter of 7 June, 1778.
33 Ibid., 47.
rear guard. When Grant realized that the American activities on the hill had quieted, he advanced, only to meet Grey coming from the other direction, whereupon both rushed to the ford to find Lafayette safely drawn up on the other side to prevent their pursuit.

The reports of casualties are quite irreconcilable. The Pennsylvania Packet published two accounts, one of which said that not a man was lost to the American Army, while the other article said three were killed and four captured. Lafayette wrote that six or seven were killed and wounded, and Washington reported the loss of nine men. British and German reports would have it that the retreat was in great confusion and a large number were either killed or drowned.

General Grant was severely criticised for his failure. There were suggestions that he should be court-martialed. One of the British Officers characterized him as "A counsellor ever unsuccessful in the Cabinet and in the Field." The Germans were quite outspoken in their criticism saying that he was afraid Lafayette's retreat was only a ruse to draw him into a trap, while one of them pointedly called attention to the fact that this was the same man who had made the proud boast of conquering the whole country with 5,000 men; when given the force of that number, he did not venture within six miles of Washington's camp. Grant cannot be excused on the score of comparative numbers, for his force alone was double that of Lafayette and he had the support of the detachments under Clinton and Grey, in addition; he also had more than twice as much artillery as the Americans. Nothing can be said for him on account of lack of familiarity with the country, for there had been another encounter between small parties at the same place less than a month before, and the Engineer of the English Forces in America had made

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Ibid., 48.
Ibid., 48, 78; Stedman, American War, I, 378.
Letter to his wife, 16 June, 1778.
Letter to Congress, 24 May, 1778.
Various von Jungkenn MSS.
Baurmeister Journal, loc. cit.
Letter of von Wurmb to von Jungkenn, 1 June, 1778.
Montresor Journal, loc. cit., 486.
a map of all the fords of the Schuylkill, including the one by which Lafayette made his escape. Grant was transferred to the Bahamas.

Lafayette was generously praised for his skill in extricating himself from this danger. "Mad Anthony" Wayne called it a "happy escape"; while Washington reported to Congress that Lafayette made a "timely and handsome retreat in great order." Washington and John Marshall watched the affair through glasses and Marshall testifies to Washington's joy at the return of the detachment.

The whole affair is suggestive of the old nursery rhyme about the King of France who had 300,000 men, and marched them up the hill then marched them down again. True there were not so many at Barren Hill, and instead of a King, there was only a very young marquis in command, but otherwise the story is quite similar. At the same time, this comic opera battle was not without its importance. There was probably no other occasion, except possibly, the escape of Washington at Long Island, when such a large percentage of both armies were in such close proximity without giving battle, and probably no other place but Yorktown brought together so distinguished an array of opposing commanders: Washington, Lafayette, von Steuben, Wayne, Poor and others on the American side; Howe, Clinton, Erskine, Grey, von Kniphausen and Grant on the other side.

It was Lafayette's first independent command. His prompt decision and skillful execution of the retreat confirmed the confidence Washington had in him, and no doubt had much to do with his being given the important command entrusted to him at Monmouth a short time later. This seems to justify the conclusion that the affair at Barren Hill really discovered to the American Army the unusual military talents and ability of General Lafayette.

The story is not complete without a quotation of part of Lafayette's letter to his wife, modestly and briefly telling her of the incident and his part in it.

Ibid., 419.
Wayne to Delaney, 21 May 1778.
Sparks, Writings of Washington, V, 377.
Valley Forge Camp, June 16, 1778

Chance has furnished me, my dearest love, with a very uncertain opportunity of writing to you, but, such as it is, I shall take advantage of it, for I cannot resist the wish of saying a few words to you....

General Washington had entrusted me to conduct a detachment of 2,400 chosen men to the vicinity of Philadelphia... in spite of all my precautions, I could not prevent the hostile army from making a nocturnal march, and I found myself the next morning with part of the army in front, and 7,000 men in my rear... but they were so kind, alas, as to permit us to retire quietly, without doing us any injury. We had about 6 or 7 killed or wounded, and they 25 or 30, which did not make them amends for a march, in which one part of the army had been obliged to make 40 miles.