The Battle of Paoli

The Battle of Paoli, September 20, 1777, has remained one of the controversial episodes of the American Revolution ever since its occurrence. Recently, certain important records concerning the operations of the American and British armies before and during this engagement have come to light. It would seem appropriate to present a fair as well as a comprehensive analysis of the whole incident at this time in order to clarify the numerous points which have been the subject of many discussions and much misunderstanding.

The virtual annihilation of the American troops under the command of Brigadier General Anthony Wayne during the night attack by the British forces of Major General Charles Grey, who relied solely upon the use of bayonets, led to the use of the term "massacre" in later descriptions of the incident. This term is manifestly unfair, as students of military history will agree. Any engagement of armed forces in which there is considerable loss of life may be termed a "massacre" if we are to accept such a term in reference to the Paoli fiasco. Actually, the term massacre applies more correctly to willful destruction of innocent persons, such as civilians, by hostile forces, and should not be construed to mean engagements between units of opposing armies during a campaign.

In reality, the Paoli affair was a well-planned, perfectly coordinated, surprise attack on Wayne's encampment, which caught the Americans totally offguard. The diabolical success of this attack was due to the crafty insistence by General Grey that under no circumstances were British soldiers to fire their muskets. In order to secure double assurance that only bayonets would be used, Grey ordered all charges drawn and all flints removed from the locks of the weapons. Obviously, every shot fired in the darkness gave the exact location of an American soldier.

The chief concern of students of military history has been the degree of blame to be attached to Anthony Wayne himself in (1) not
anticipating the attack, (2) not preparing proper defenses against such an attack, and (3) not withdrawing his troops from the scene with sufficient skill and discipline to avoid utter rout and confusion. Anthony Wayne apparently recognized the overwhelming evidence of his culpability. He demanded a court-martial, not so much to clear himself as to present evidence of his personal bravery in endeavoring to rally his troops. He was successful in absolving himself of any taint of cowardice, but the mass of conflicting testimony which appears in the records of the hearings leaves the student completely confused as to what actually occurred during the attack.

The fact remains that, in spite of Wayne's personal efforts and bravery, the rout of the Pennsylvania Line Troops was complete. In their precipitate flight from the scene, several disorganized units collided with the newly arrived supporting troops of General Smallwood's Maryland Militia, throwing them into confusion also. Eventually, order was restored when the scattered remnants finally arrived at White Horse in the early hours of morning.

Of the engagement itself, we probably have the best accounts from the British participants. These are given as they appear.¹

Sept. 20th. Upon intelligence that General Wayne was lying in the Woods with a Corps of 1500 men and four Pieces of Cannon, about three miles distant, & in the Rear of the left Wing of the Army, in order to cutt off our Rear, Major General Grey, was detached late at night, with the 2d. Battalion of Light Infantry, a Troop of Light Dragoons, 42d and 44th. Regiments, to surprize this Corps. The most effectual precaution being taken by the General to prevent his detachment from firing, by ordering the men's Pieces to be drawn, not a man to load, and the Flints to be taken out of the Riflemen's Pieces that could not be drawn; he gained the Enemy's left about one o'clock, at Whiteland Township, being first challenged by a Light Dragoon, who, after firing his Carbine, ran away to alarm the rest; then their Picquet fired a Volley at the Light Infantry and retreated, but did not hurt a man. Without the least noise our Party by the Bayonet only, forced and killed all their out sentries and Picquets, and rushed in upon their Encampment, directed by the light of their fires, killed and wounded not less than 300 in their Huts and about the fires, the 42d. sat [sic] fire to them, as many of the Enemy would not come out, chusing rather to suffer in the Flames than be killed by the Bayonet. The Party took between 70 and 80 prisoners, including several officers, the greater part of their Arms, and eight waggons loaded with Baggage and Stores. Upon the first alarm the Cannon were carried off, and y* darkness of the night only saved the Remainder of the Corps. We had one Officer and 3 men killed, and four wounded. The Party returned to their Camp that morning.

Of perhaps even greater interest is a letter from an unnamed British officer in which he describes in vivid language the Battle of Brandywine under date "From the Camp on the Field of Battle Near Delworth on the heights of Brandywine September 11th at Night (1777)." Later on, the letter is completed as follows:

Understand—I do not write from the Camp on the Field of Battle &c &c—neither do I write in the month of September—since the above Date I have been in a more bloody affair—At Midnight on the 22d the Battalion I serve in (the 2d of Light Infantry) supported by Three Regiments & some Dragoon surprised a Camp of Rebels consisting of 1500 Men & bayonetted (We hear) from 4 to 500. The affair was admirably conceived & executed—I will (as it is remarkable) particularize—I was relieved from picquet at Sunset—the preceding Sunset I mounted—and was waked at Nine at Night to go on the bloody business—The Men were ordered to unload—on no account to fire—We took a circuit in Dead silence—about one in the morning fell in with a rebel Cadet (a cadet is a Horse Centenel) who challenged three times & fired—He was pursued but Escaped—soon after Two foot Centrys challenged and fired—who escaped also—We then marched on briskly still silent—our Company was advanced immediately preceding a Company of Riflemen Who always are in front—a picquet fired upon us at the distance of fifteen yards miraculously without effect—This unfortunate Guard was instantly dispatched by the Riflemens Swords—We rushed on thro a thick wood and received a smart fire from another unfortunate Picquet—as the first instantly massacred—We then saw their Wigwams or Huts partly by almost extinguished light of their fires and partly by the [gleam] of a few stars and the frightend Wretches endeavouring to form—We then charged—For two miles we drove them now and then [firing scatttering] from behind fences Trees &c. The flashes of the pieces had a fine Effect in the Night—then followed a dreadful scene of Havock—The Light Dragoons came on Sword in Hand The Shrieks Groans Shouting, imprecations deprecations the clashing of Swords & bayonets &c &c &c—(no firing from us—& little from them except now & then a few as I said before Scattering Shots) was more expressive of Horror than all the Thunder of the Artillery &c on the Day of action. They threaten retaliation—now that they will give no quarter to any of our Battalion—We are always on the advanced Post of the army—our Present one is unpleasant—our Left too open & unguarded We expect reinforcements—There has been firing this Night all around the Centrys—which seems as they endeavor to feel our situation. . . .

N. B. I write from Camp near Beggars Town seven miles distant from Philadelphia—which is garrisoned at present by the British & Hessian Grenadiers under Ld Cornwallis I have been there once—This a fine

Octob 2d midnight in my Tent

2 This letter is in The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
3 This date is erroneous—Author.
There have been few firsthand descriptions of the Paoli battle more vivid and accurate than these two. They are presented here in order to emphasize the complete success of the attack in the eyes of the British. In no part of the official records of the court-martial of General Wayne is there such a detailed picture of the affair.

Having established the actual facts of the surprise attack in the foregoing accounts, it is important for us to discuss in some detail the events leading up to it from the American standpoint.

It is not necessary to give an analysis of the Battle of Brandywine, which took place in the afternoon of September 11, 1777, except in relation to certain features of that engagement which directly affected the Paoli affair. It seems somewhat strange that historians of the American Revolution have given so little consideration to them, although in point of fact they have important bearing upon the succeeding period of that war.

In the first place, the Battle of Brandywine had many unique features in light of the accepted principles of military tactics of that period. General Sir William Howe actually split his army into two major sections on the very eve of the engagement. This in itself was extraordinary. Explanation of this deviation from accepted military procedure may be found when it is recalled that Washington held a strong position on the hills east of the Brandywine from which it would be difficult to dislodge him by a frontal attack. The spot he had selected, with headquarters at Chadd's Ford, had reflected excellent judgment. It was especially advantageous because, in the event that a frontal attack across the Brandywine by the British should prove successful, he could withdraw northward across the Chester Valley towards the American arsenals at Coventry and Warwick, the hospital at Yellow Springs, and the main stores at Reading.

It is probable that Howe realized the futility of a frontal attack even by an overwhelmingly strong force. He probably realized also that a flanking movement by an inadequate force would not only be useless, but also might be utterly disastrous as it was certain to weaken the unit attacking across the Brandywine. He determined to accomplish not only the unorthodox but also the seemingly impossible by flanking the Americans with the very best of his troops. Should he be successful, he would be able to prevent the Americans
from falling back to their bases of supplies even if he did not accomplish complete encirclement.

The outcome of the Battle of Brandywine was somewhat paradoxical. It was a victory for Howe’s forces in so far as they prevented Washington from withdrawing northward across the Chester Valley. But the encirclement of the Americans failed of accomplishment, largely through the efforts of Wayne who opposed the Hessians at Chadd’s Ford. It seems a little strange that neither the official reports of Howe nor of Washington bring out the interesting fact that the Hessians had crossed the Brandywine at the time planned but had been virtually pocketed by the Americans under Armstrong, Wayne, and Proctor. In order to rescue them from their perilous position, a full regiment of Dragoons was detached from the right wing of the forces at Birmingham. Obviously, this greatly weakened Cornwallis’ maneuver and enabled Washington to withdraw in good order towards Chester.5

It is also a matter of history6 that the British failed to follow up their advantage after the Battle of Brandywine by crossing the Chester Valley and moving upon the stores and arsenals of the American troops. It was not until the sixteenth of September that Howe got under way and began to converge the three elements of his army towards White Horse (now Planebrook) in the center of the Chester Valley. Before he could reach his objective, Washington had moved his entire army westward, had reached White Horse, and had deliberately interposed his forces on advantageous ground along the King Road between Three Tuns Tavern and Indian King Tavern.7 A major engagement would have occurred had it not been for a frightful cloudburst that soaked the powder of both armies. Washington withdrew in the night across the Chester Valley and replenished his ammunition at Warwick.

We come now to the incidents immediately preceding and directly connected with the Paoli battle:

Washington had given evidence of real confidence in the fighting

5 The map in the “Journal of John André,” Bibliophile Society Publication, 1902, makes this clearly apparent.
7 Henry Pleasants, Jr., “The Battle of the Clouds,” *General Magazine and Historical Chronicle* of the University of Pennsylvania, XL (1938), 436-446.
qualities of his troops by boldly inviting a major engagement on the South Valley hills on September 16. It seems incomprehensible that he should thereafter have withdrawn to the northern section of Chester County, where he apparently wandered without purpose along the Schuylkill for days. It is important to remember that during this same period the British had moved slowly to their camp at Tredyffrin, situated in the very center of Chester Valley, where Howe was vulnerable in every way. His line of communications to Wilmington had been stretched to the utmost. The Americans had every opportunity to attack him from the north without extending to any appreciable degree their own line of communications to their arsenals and stores.

There was every reason to believe that Anthony Wayne fully expected Washington to make this attack. He sent letter after letter urging decisive action. The most encouragement he received from his commander in chief was permission to cross the Valley and take a position on the South Valley hills with the view to cutting the British line of communications. He was, however, warned to "take care of ambuscades." It has been stated that Wayne sent a letter to Washington on the eve of his departure for Paoli indicating his dependence upon a coincident movement by Maxwell upon the British from the north. Apparently, this letter either failed to reach Washington, or else he ignored it.

The plans outlined for Wayne's movement across the Valley were directly contingent upon his joining forces with General Smallwood's Maryland Militia, which was expected to reach White Horse early on September 19. This unit had not been in the engagement at Brandywine, but had been in the neighborhood of Nottingham. Wayne reached White Horse at the appointed time, but found that Smallwood had not arrived. Instead of waiting for this unit, he pushed on to Paoli with characteristic impetuosity. Had he used

8 Henry Pleasants, Jr., "The Turn of the Tide," The Picket Post (April, 1946), 26–29.
9 Criticism of Washington for retiring to the hills after Brandywine was expected. See quote from Josiah Quincy's book on Samuel Shaw's journal in Washington Irving, Life of Washington (New York, 1855–1859), III, 214.
12 Maryland Archives (Baltimore, 1897), XVI, 370–371.
HENRY PLEASANTS, JR.

reasonable caution and waited even a few hours, the fiasco could never have occurred. It was plainly flying in the face of Providence to place but 1,500 troops without support within three miles of an army of nearly 18,000. There may be some extenuation of Wayne's guilt in assuming that Wayne fully expected Maxwell to attack from the north on the following day. Apparently, also, he had received reassurance that Smallwood was on his way to the rendezvous, and would arrive in a short time.  

That the British commander was kept accurately informed of the movements of the Americans at this critical period is abundantly apparent in the documents on file in the Public Records Office in London, a few of which are pertinent to the present subject:  

(3) John Jackson (A.O. 12, Vol. 40, 50) “Urged by Galloway to reconnoitre for Howe the day before Brandywine. Received 20 guineas.”  
(6) Thomas Burns (A.O. 12, Vol. 43, 322) “Acted as spy. Vouched for by (7) William Henry who was also a guide.”  

In this connection, it is worth noting another interesting document (A.O. 13, Vol. 57, bundle 2L) which records the sworn statement before Judge Edward Shippen of Reuben Haines concerning Curtis Lewis and the cause of his attainder of treason, “Attending detachment of General Grey as guide to the encampment of General Wayne near White Horse in 1777.”  

13 Charles J. Stillé, Major General Anthony Wayne and the Pennsylvania Line (Philadelphia, 1893), 90. Stillé confirms this clearly. Wayne was directed in a letter from Washington of September 19, “to move forward on the enemy.” This letter was intercepted.  
14 From a collection of copies of official records of the Public Records Office, London, now in the Chester County Historical Society. These verbatim copies were made by Lt. Bart Anderson, U. S. Army, now Librarian of the Chester County Historical Society, during his military service in London during World War II. Italics are the author's.
On the other hand, we find that the intelligence system of the American forces was far less efficient. In the court-martial proceedings against Wayne, we find that one George Ross, Capt. 11. P.R. "censured Wayne for having been notified by Maj. Nichols." There is also reference to one "Abrm Jones" who was said to have notified Wayne of the intended attack of the British. In a letter by Colonel Brodhead used in the proceedings there is the statement, "A certain person Gen. Wayne knew had been in the enemies camp and heard the soldiers say that they intended to attack Gen. Wayne that night." This "certain person" might or might not have been the "Abrm Jones" above referred to.

Those who have lived in the immediate vicinity of the scene of the Paoli "Massacre," and who have had an opportunity to discuss the events of that night with the descendants of participants and residents of the neighborhood at the time of the attack have been highly entertained by the stories handed down from generation to generation. One of the most fantastic of these was apparently accepted as partly true by the descendants of General Wayne himself. It was said that Wayne had visited the Warren Tavern at the foot of the hill below his encampment the evening before the attack. There he had imbibed freely in the taproom. When a messenger arrived telling of the surprise, he immediately had one of his orderlies pump cold water on his head to sober him, mounted his horse, and raced back to the encampment. Finding himself actually within the British lines, he had dismounted and turned his cape inside out so that the red lining was prominent. He then proceeded to give conflicting orders to the British in order to confuse them. When one man asked him who he was, Wayne struck him with the flat of his sword, crying, "Mind your superior officer!" He finally got within his own lines, and led his men off the field to safety. The tale was, of course, completed by the insistence that thereafter when the night of September 20 fell, in the dark of the moon, the ghost of Anthony Wayne could be seen and heard riding up the hill from the Warren Tavern at midnight.

The utterly preposterous feature of the folk tale is evident from the fact that the Warren Tavern at that time was owned and oper-

15 Paoli Massacre and Wayne Papers. Chester County Historical Society.
16 A variation of this legend is recounted in Harry Emerson Wildes, Anthony Wayne, Trouble Shooter of the American Revolution (New York, 1941).
ated by a well-known loyalist. Moreover, it was almost within the limits of the outposts of the British and was probably packed to the doors with thirsty soldiers of Howe's army.

Another less fantastic tale relates that Wayne was actually at his own home less than two miles distant. It is clear that the British hoped to capture him there for a detail was sent to the house just at the time of the attack. In this connection, it is interesting to note a letter to General Wayne from his friend, Abraham Robinson, September 22, in which he states that Wayne's home had been searched but that the officers treated the women of the household with great courtesy. It is significant that John André, then a captain and aide-de-camp to General Grey, gave no account of the battle in his journal, as would be expected had he himself been present. Is it not reasonable to assume that André was one of the officers who visited Wayne's home?

The conclusion that the careful student of the American Revolution must reach in appraising the conflicting accounts of the Paoli battle is that Anthony Wayne was caught napping. He suffered considerable loss of prestige as a result. On the other hand, there is considerable evidence that the strange vacillation of Washington in not giving Wayne the support he fully expected at a critical time was at least indirectly responsible for the fiasco. Just why Washington should have led aimlessly up and down the Schuylkill and the northern Chester County hills those troops in whom he had previously displayed a confidence so complete as to oppose them against the full strength of the British only three days before is difficult to understand. Certainly other units had had as much opportunity to replenish their supply of powder as had Wayne's brigade. Granted even that they had not done so, it would seem at least unreasonable for a commander to send a single unit on such a dangerous mission involving complete isolation close to a large hostile army.

The sinister implications revealed after careful study of the records are unmistakable. It appears that the chief advisers on Washington's staff completely dominated their leader at this time. It is not improbable that Wayne's letters were purposely delayed. It is certain that letters from Washington to Wayne were never

18 Stillé, op. cit., 92.
delivered. It is also incontrovertible that Wayne was thoroughly unpopular with his superior officers because of his arrogance, his braggadocio, and probably his insolence. He had been assigned to a dangerous and ignominious post at Brandywine, and had distinguished himself. Had the American commander acted upon his urgent suggestions and completed the encirclement of the British at Tredyffrin, a complete victory would probably have resulted. This in turn would have redounded to Wayne’s infinite credit.

Wayne’s insistence upon a general court-martial after the Paoli affair opened up many possibilities of trouble, not only for Washington’s staff but also for the leader himself. For Wayne to have been found guilty of incompetence, if not cowardice, and cashiered from the Army would have started an investigation that might have been more far-reaching than a mere court-martial. Wayne had many influential friends. Moreover, he was a fighter in every respect, and a loyal soldier. He honored and respected his commander in chief—so long as he remained in the army. Out of that army, there would be no telling how far he would go to bare certain facts which would cast no credit on Washington’s leadership. Wayne was cleared. His later exploits at Monmouth, Stony Point, and in South Carolina, to say nothing of his supremely efficient leadership in the Northwest territory after the Revolution, testified to his real ability.

Calm and unbiased analysis of the Paoli “Massacre” leads one to the inevitable conclusion that it was an extraordinarily well-executed tactical procedure from a military standpoint. That it was fully justified under the circumstances cannot be denied when it is clearly understood that Howe was in a most critical position at Tredyffrin at the time. Only such a desperate night attack, perfectly planned and superbly executed might be his salvation, particularly if he assumed that Washington was cognizant of his vulnerability and intended to launch a three-point offensive.

*West Chester, Pa.*

*Henry Pleasants, Jr.*