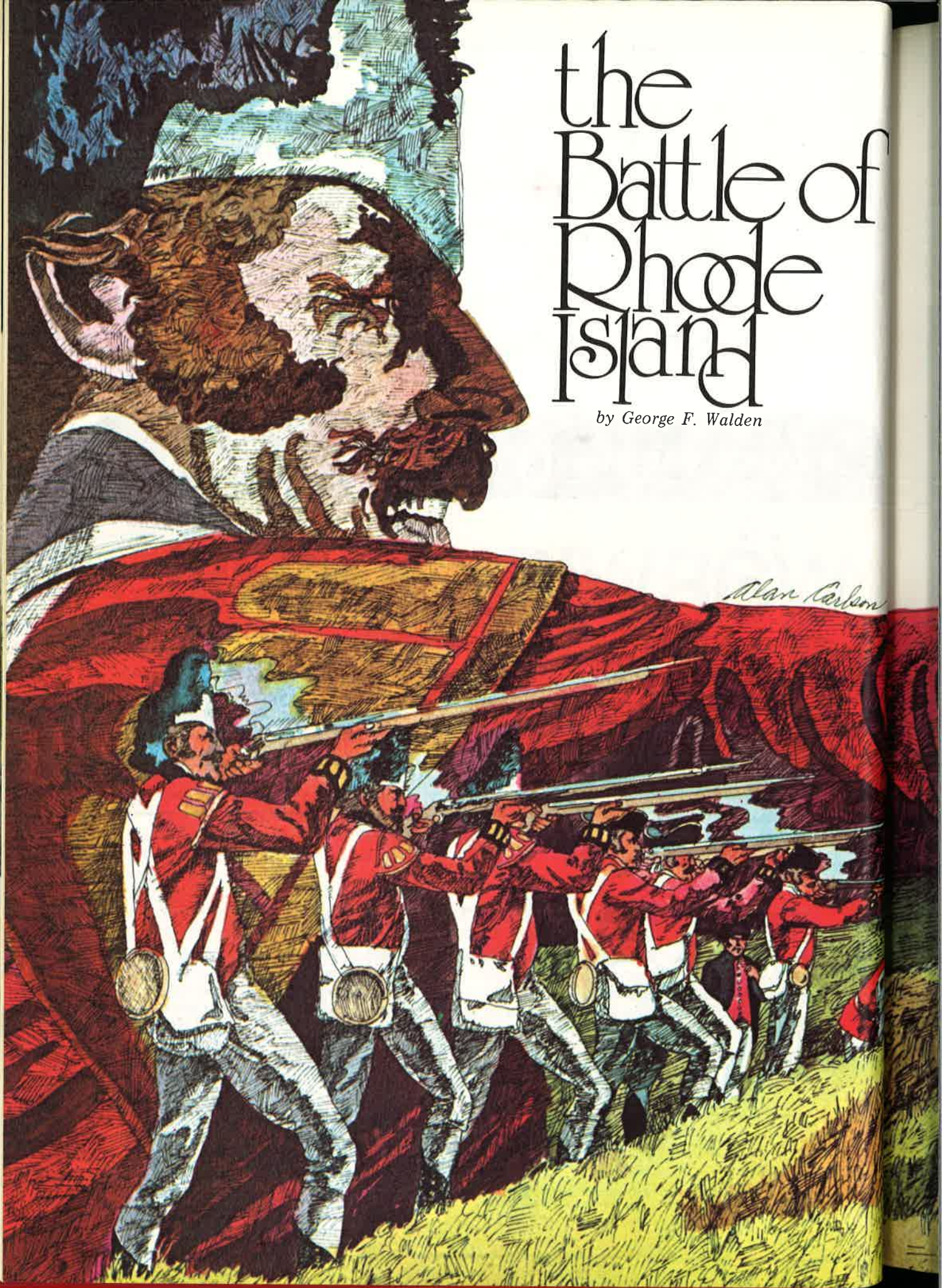


# the Battle of Rhode Island

by George F. Walden

*Alan Carlson*





In mid-July of 1778 the English garrison in Newport was reinforced by the addition of five battalions from New York. Major General Sir Robert Pigot, Bart., was greatly reassured with the arrival of fresh troops. They gave him even more confidence in his ability to keep these piratical Rhode Islanders in line.

His confidence was short lived, however, for on the 29th of July the French fleet under the command of Admiral Charles Hector Comte d'Estaing arrived off Newport. The major portion of the French fleet anchored on Brenton's Reef but two ships anchored off the north end of Conanicut Island (Jamestown) and several others made up Sakonnet Passage where they "*occasionally the blowing up of the King Fisher floop and two armed gallies.*"

Pigot prudently withdrew his men, artillery, and livestock from Conanicut and placed his outlying positions on alert with instructions to withdraw on the main body immediately upon signal. He strengthened his seaward defenses, not expecting any action from the landward side.

*Illustration courtesy of Alan Carlson*





On the 5th of August "as soon as the determination of the enemy to enter the harbour became apparent, the commanders found themselves under the greivous neceffity of burning the *Orpheus*, *Lark*, *Juno*, and *Cerberus* frigates, as they were soon after of sinking the *Flora* and *Falcon*."

On the 9th of August the French landed 400 men on Conanicut to prevent its re-occupation. At the same time, a force of 10,000 colonial troops, composed largely of New England units, and under the command of General John Sullivan, crossed from the mainland to Rhode Island at Howland's Ferry.

An English squadron under Admiral Richard Howe the Viscount Howe, the brother of General Sir William Howe, arrived off Newport. There were thirteen ships of the line and several frigates in the command.

On the 10th of August the French moved to sea against the newly arrived English, a move that is often questioned in its wisdom by some authorities. At the same time, American light infantry moved to within one-half mile of the English positions.

On the 11th and 12th a hurricane wreaked wondrous havoc among the ships of both fleets but the French were by far worse off for wear. Admiral d'Estaing's ship, the *Languedoc*, which mounted 90 guns, was dismasted. The English ship *Renown*, (a name that has been used with honor and distinction by several ships since), under the command of Captain Dawson and mounting 50 guns engaged the disabled *Languedoc*. The crippled ship soon had her rudder shot away and was only saved by the coming of night. The *Renown* waited nearby hoping to renew the fight with the arrival of daylight. Six French war ships appeared with the dawn and forced the rapid withdrawal of Captain Dawson from the area.

Two other English warships, the *Preston*, under Commodore Hotham and the *ISIS*, under Captain Raynor engaged the *Tonnant* and what is believed to have been the *Zele* respectively. The French again came out the poorer and on the 21st of August withdrew to Boston to refit.

General Sullivan had not been idle. On the 14th the Americans began construction works on Honeyman's Hill opposite the English positions. The construction of a battery there forced General Pigot to reply in kind. Sullivan had set up his Head Quarters at the Oakley Farm. The center of his positions rested on Honeyman's Hill and ranged left and right from there. There began about this time an incessant cannonading. The duel raged for several days and kept both the American and British troops very busy both ducking incoming round shot and building or rebuilding their positions.

On the 19th the Americans opened a new battery on their left and the fire from this new position forced the English to withdraw the bombarded encampment to the rear.

A new English battery was opened on the right of Green End Fort. The volume of cannonading increased with the completion of each new battery and continued without interruption.

On the 20th of August, the day before the French fleet would withdraw to Boston, the English abandoned all their outer works facing east.

Without the support, both real and psychological of the French fleet, the American forces crumbled. Entire units packed up and went home. Desertions, always a problem, increased enormously. By the 23rd the American Army had been reduced to 5,000 men. General Sullivan wisely prepared to retreat and opened a brisk covering fire on the British positions.

On the 25th they sent off their heaviest guns and baggage to the mainland. Advance ships of another British squadron appeared in the harbor, entering unopposed. These ships brought the promise of reinforcements and supplies that would arrive soon.

A combination of the withdrawal of the French fleet and the promise of additional reinforcements for Pigot motivated Sullivan to reach the mainland as rapidly as possible so as to avoid being trapped by the now overwhelming superior, in light of the reduction in Sullivan's strength, British Army.



These same events spurred Pigot to send his troops out in hot pursuit of the retreating colonials.

A small but sharp engagement at Butt's Hill left the English in command of all the island and the Americans in full retreat. On the night of the 30th Sullivan completed his prudent evacuation. Prudent in that his reduced force was vastly inferior to the heavily reinforced British and more prudent yet because the 31st of August brought Sir Henry Clinton with the promised additional reinforcements. General Sullivan had escaped what would certainly have been absolute disaster and had done it with the skill and control of a much more experienced soldier.



*Photos Courtesy of Tiverton Rotary Club (re-enactment scenes)*

