

A Journal of  
The Battle of Fort Griswold  
as Kept by  
John F. Denis  
of the

Fourth Middlesex Regiment of Massachusetts Militia

Friday, 4 September 1981

The last battle in the North is how this activity is described in the local literature. It's hard to believe that the whole business is winding down.

Judy and I made the trip by way of Springfield with an overnight visit there. We set out southward about 1:40 PM this day, moving down I-91 and then switching to Rte 2 at Hartford. I was concerned about the Labor Day Weekend traffic during the afternoon, but beyond Hartford the way was surprisingly clear.

The great concern for everyone over the preceding week has been one Emily, a tropical storm en route to being a hurricane and moving up from Bermuda. She seemed to show promise earlier of mussing up our coast somewhat this weekend. It was enough to make one glad to have invested in a hotel room instead of a tent. The overcast in Masstts had been steady for the previous four days and it remained so in Springfield through this morning. Yet as we moved down the Connecticut Valley, the sun broke into a hazy shine and stayed with us to the coast.

Well, one problem solved is bound to find a replacement. We managed to make our way along the streets of New London with the help of a map issued with our latest marching orders. We even spotted the street where our hotel was situated. It was the hotel itself which gave the surprise. Noticing no sign of life we circled the grounds slowly. The stucco building gave the same impression as the mansion in "Sunset Boulevard." I expected Eric von Stroheim to issue forth at any moment. It was only when I had unsuccessfully tried the front door that I noticed a small note tacked to a service entrance. It proved to be a sheriff's seizure notice.

On the street circling the front of the grounds we found a neighbor, who was happy to fill us in on the details of the demise of the Lighthouse Inn. Heavy loans, inadequate insurance, and a fire in the attic did the old place in. Refurbishing the place was expensive and the owner tried to cut back on taxes to tide himself over. I suppose our \$40 deposit is somewhere among the nice new shingles on the roof.

From this same neighbor we got directions to the Holiday Inn at Groton, and happily — once we found the place — we got a room for at least this one night. It was about 4 PM when we settled into our room. We would have to check the desk early the next morning to see if a vacancy developed for Saturday night.

Our first order of business was registration, and we happily found that our lodgings were about 4 blocks from Ft. Griswold. Parking on Monument St. we entered the fort's museum and found ourselves to be the first from the IVth Middlesex to sign in. After losing on two chances for a free moonlight cruise on Long Island

Friday, 4 September 1981

Sound, we toured the museum's exhibition room for a bit. There was a very elaborate model of the fort depicting the assault of 1781.

We then took a brief stroll through the fort itself. This year the crowd control snow fences are set so as to keep the audience out of the fort altogether. There is also a gate which has been added to the main portal.

On the way back to the car, I spotted Joe Rose's Mustang near the museum. In a moment we found Joe Bausk, Bruce Kidder, and along with J. R. There was much discussion of the next day's schedule, for a supplementary sheet had been issued at registration and it was not terribly precise. Judy and I did receive offers of a foldout couch or the back of a van should the Holiday Inn fail us on Saturday. We were already considering a commute back to Springfield if necessary.

Before returning to our room, we sought out Avery Point, the mustering place for Saturday morning. Since the signs made it appear to be yet another Groton defense plant, I passed right by the point at first. In fact it seems to be a branch of the University of Connecticut which is closely associated with the Coast Guard.

Back at the Inn we rested and watched the various news programs with a view toward spotting weather forecasts. The worst threat on any station was a call for possible showers, but some sun seemed more likely.

Around 7:45 we set out for the dining room. The service and salad were quite good, but nothing else. Salty onion soup was followed by unshelled shrimp whose stuffing was so spiced as to obliterate the flavor of the shrimp. Seldom do I leave any part of a meal behind, but this was unusually bad fare. To further the irritation, the muzak of the dining room was in continuous competition with the disco from the nearby bar.

Channel 11 was running a good old movie, "The Horse Soldiers," so that filled the evening until 10:30. Then we entertained by the shouting of yahoos a few doors down, who had moved their party into the parking lot. They sounded like a 'cycle gang without bikes, but Judy was sure they were here for the re-enactments. I slept well enough at any rate.

P.S. The news mentioned that today's bicentennial birthday of Los Angeles was begun with an earthquake at 8 AM their time.

Saturday, 5 September 1981

Our call came at 6:30 AM. I showered before getting into my uniform. I was wearing the old tattered one today.

The first order of business was a check of vacancies. There must have been several, for when I requested a change of room — to avoid the partiers — there was no delay.

It was about 7:45 when we set out for Avery Point. The sky was a murky orange, but you could tell that the sun was putting up a good fight. It was cool enough that I felt quite comfortable in my heavy wool coat.

We made our way to Avery Point without a hitch, but once there could find no clear indications of mustering places. A "no parking" zone near an 18th century camp was nearly filled with vehicles, so we joined the throng and then set off in search of breakfast.

Our first inquiry brought accurate directions to a nearby building. In what appeared to be a dining common or auditorium, we found Joe Bausk and several others just leaving. I thought I now knew where the IVth was gathering.

The breakfast was really rather good. We received scrambled eggs, hash browns, two sausages, two slices of toast, orange juice, and coffee. For all the previous warning's of tight security, I could scarcely give my ticket to the man in charge. By the time we had finished, the dining room seemed all but empty.

I had overheard a woman mention that certain cars were to be towed away, and I now found that many had left my parking area. Son Judy and I now sought safer quarters. As we cruised along I spotted Palmer True. Circling a nearby building — which was another registration center — I found a legal space and parked but a few carlengths from our regiment.

Now I began to find even more confusion. None of the ladies had come from the campground in North Stonington with vehicles. It was with them that Judy had expected to travel, and Judy is unable to drive my car. I would have to travel with the troops on busses leaving Judy to her own devices. Fortunately, Regis Dixon, Jackie Real, and Savatsky were without wheels and Regis could handle a standard clutch. With much rearranging of baggage, we managed to get 4 ladies into 3 seats. Judy would navigate to the vicinity of Mitchell College in New London.

The assembled militia men were by now involved in putting up \$5 per man for the purchase of one pound cans of 3F black powder. The price was really quite good, some stores up home now charging \$9 / pound. The distribution would come too late, however, for some who had small numbers of cartridges. I had brought 120 with me and ended in handing out quite a few later on. I gave Bob Childs 20 for starters at this time.

A continental officer was soon calling for men to board the busses for New London. The ride was not terribly long, and around 9:35 we were in the parking lot of Ocean Beach Park.

Palmer formed us in two ranks straight off and was not pleased at our response time in the brief drill he tried with us. We moved along to a drumbeat, passing several other units which saluted us.

Upon our halting, Palmer divided us into 4 platoons. He mentioned that several companies had never showed up and others were quite understrength, so we would be spread out at several points

Saturday, 5 September 1981

along the way.

Now there was plenty of time to kill, and some began to eat lunch: 2 oranges which had been issued as we boarded the busses. I had left mine behind, not wishing to get orange juice all over my musket.

In a few minutes Judy came along to say that all had gone well with the car. The ladies had parked in the riverside lot of Mitchell College and would wait there for me to arrive after the day's activities. Other ladies of the regiment had come directly from the campground to Ocean Beach.

After a good long while, Palmer marched us down by the parked busses to await further orders. He now told us of the curious problem of the park's water slide, where folks would go up and then hang around without riding down. In time the management learned that the slide had been built all too close to the roofless bathhouse.

At 10:35 we boarded a bus, which took us along .  
At 3 points platoons of the IVth were debarked. The so-called "Bausketeers" were second and at 10:45 "True Crew" landed at the corner of Glenwood St.

Palmer soon sketched the battle scenario. We would await the advancing British column and respond at first with volleys. General skirmishing would follow at Palmer's discretion. We would not use side streets and must stay off private lawns. Eventually we would fall back to an old men's home, where we would cease combat and fall off up the driveway.

And so we started our vigil. I thought at first of walking up to the college to get Judy so she might photograph our part of the action, but Palmer figured I'd never make it back in time. Our one fifer gave a non-stop concert, while the rest of us sat and jawed. People driving by cheered and waved. An ice cream truck did a brisk trade in ice cream sandwiches. I bought a topical red, white and blue popsicle which turned out to be Italian in its colors. Refreshing nonetheless. A fine sea breeze cut the sun's warmth.

At 12:03 the police passed Palmer the word that the British advance was close by, and he ordered a single line to form across the main street. We primed, loaded, and then waited as Palmer and Barry Real advanced to the crest of a rise in the road to check the action ahead. I ordered the line to "shoulder" and took grief for my un-officerlike manner. Palmer then sent word to come to "order" and "rest."

Behind us on the river we could hear the guns of the Providence as she shelled the shipping in the harbor. Ahead we could hear occasional musketry but see little smoke. The haze was a blessing as we were facing the sun.

Palmer soon scooted back to us, and we could see green-coated Queen's Rangers advancing over the rise in skirmish order. The right flank of our 15-gun line was directly facing a crowd of spectators, so we adjusted our aim to the left. As the first of the redcoats came over the rise, Palmer ordered a volley, a reload, and a second volley.

Now the eight men on the right half of the line fell back while reloading to form a second rank behind the left. This move gave

Saturday, 5 September 1981

us clearer targets.

A couple of more volleys were followed by skirmishing, in which a man fired and fell back to reload, waiting to fire until those now in front of him had fallen back to reload. The manoeuvre allowed for safety and a smooth withdrawal before obviously superior forces.

I believe we took 5 or 6 casualties in this area. The barrels were very hot now. And suddenly my Brown Bess began to embarrass me as never before. After my third misfire I changed flints, only to do so again within minutes. She simply would not spark, even with the flint sharply angled to the frizzen. A third flint missed repeatedly. I used the excuse of my sergeancy to avoid "dying," especially after seeing Don Dacier and his musket dragged from the street by the Rangers. I was not about to have my coat torn or my stock scraped in such a display.

Meanwhile, Rangers were flanking onto the forbidden lawns and suddenly putting spectators in the line of fire. Most of the audience did not need an invitation to run from this situation.

I believe a small cannon was in use at the front of the assault column, but I never did see it fire. We were often facing about to retreat as it was wheeled up.

Although I would not go down as a casualty, I began to give cartridges to Barry Real for distribution as more men seemed to be running out.

It was about 12:40 when we reached the designated parking lot and withdrew from action. Bruce Kidder checked my flints in his Charleville and judged them to be quite good. I shall have to examine Bess carefully at home.

After a few minutes we boarded a bus which was to take us to the college for our second action, but plans were being altered on the fly. The British had taken far more time than planned in reaching their present position, and soon our second skirmish was scratched.

We moved instead to a vacant lot at the end of Bank Street and debarked to await the British arrival. This being so far off in the future, we were dismissed to find lunch. There was one warning — no public consumption of beer. The law is pretty strict hereabouts, and men had been ejected from camps by the police last night for merely holding an open beer.

Around 1:10 we made our way across the thoroughfare to "Grinder King," reputedly the first home of the Italian grinder in the U.S.A. The portions were huge and the quality delicious. As we stood in line to order lunch, a local "dude" tried to get us to cross the street and clean out a local bar for him, saying it was our captain's orders. We told him that our captain knew better than to try to order us out of a chow line.

Around quarter to 2, we went back to our lot. Palmer gathered us to explain the sequence of coming events. The British would eventually appear and fight their way onto the lot and set fire to some small, frame shacks and props, representing old New London. The IVth would not be involved in the fight but would serve as pickets to keep spectators out of danger.

Now I caught sight of Regis and Jackie, who said that Judy was waiting with the car at the college lot. Palmer dismissed me at this time and I got a ride with Betsy Cutler the 2 miles back to

Saturday, 5 September 1981

the lot.

When Judy and I drove past the final field of battle, nothing had yet happened. We decided to head back to the Inn in order to move into our new room. The rest of the afternoon was spent in completing this journal or in sleeping.

Around 6 o'clock we drove to Avery Point for dinner, finding a parking space in the small faculty lot. Supper was a plate of white turkey meat (very plentiful), mashed potato with gravy, peas, and a roll. The food thus far had been surprisingly good. Bob Childs made good use of 3 meal tickets, but I could find no one to take mine.

After supper we walked to the registration building — apparently the campus gym — where the suttlers had set up shop. I did not wish to spend too much time amid the crowd there, so I went straight to Godwin's table. Here I got a pair of stockings — supposedly "thirds" — for \$3.35 and a worm for the Bess ramrod at \$3.95.

Judy wished to spend the evening at our room while I went out to visit the campers, so back to the Inn we drove, with a brief stop for a 6-pack of ale. My drive east was complicated by the fact that Exit 92 on Rte 95 has two offramps at about a mile's distance. I cruised Rte 2 for a bit before finding the poorly marked road to Rte 49.

Having paid the \$2 visitor's fee to the campground, I got a ride to the site with the Shapleighs.

At the area reserved for the IVth Middlesex, I found Bob Childs already settled down to an evening of gunsmithing. His main concern was repair of young Ron MacInnis's lock, which would not hold at full cock. This problem had forced Ron, Jr., to act as a casualty from the start of his very first battle this morning. There was a small line of customers here, so I parked my musket and accepted Mark Dodge's offer of a certain English ale.

A little later, leaving a box of rolled cartridge wrappers for those who might need them — many had run low on ammo today and were now preparing for tomorrow's bigger action. I was seeking Palmer in order to go over some rewrites and additions to the Rochambeau March program, which I have been preparing over the past month.

It was near Leo Zschau's trailer that I found the gathering of our officers. They were working over "activity assignments" for the march to Yorktown. I found that I shall be either a contra-dancer or a member of a musketry drill team.

The next item of business was a response to a bad blunder by this weekend's organizers this afternoon. Our musicians had reported to a certain pier after the battle as ordered. The absence of any audience other than a few fishermen suggested a snafu; and the failure of any transport to come by really iced the cake. The music was rescued after 2½ hours by the chance passing by of one of our vans.

Now the organizers had scheduled another performance for Ft. Trumull in New London early the next morning. Palmer asked the music at least to speak to the organizers before deciding whether to perform; any decision by the music would be fine with him. All present agreed to spell out their grievance in no uncertain terms and then make the choice.

Saturday, 5 September 1981

This ended the meeting, and I was now able to get Palmer's attention. We moved over to his area, and I got my pound of powder while he fixed his lantern. He then checked over my latest writings, offering a few observations. We then checked through the comments and questions of the other officers on the first edition. Leo's suggestions were particularly good and helpful, and I incorporated most of them. As this went on, officers began to gather round to check the new material. I was especially pleased with the response of Les Longworth, who was reading the papers for the first time. At the conclusion, all agreed that the final form was ready for preparation.

I made my way back to Bob, and he was about ready to check my Bess. After clearing the frizzen play by filing the flashguard, he diagnosed the main problem as being too soft a frizzen.

Dwight Dixon took charge here. At his table he produced an acetylene torch and soon heated the frizzen to a cherry glow. On to the striking surface he sprinkled "fairy dust," the casing compound. Once this compound was applied, the frizzen was reheated until the compound was part of the frizzen surface. Quenching in water keeps the hardening carbon on the surface, according to the technical description given by our Mr. Wizard as he worked.

When Bob reassembled the musket, the sparks seemed to guarantee success tomorrow. He quickly set to fixing the next gun in line.

Audrey Childs brought out some crackers and cheese, while Regis Dixon began cooking up some kielbasa. As the party was preparing, Ron MacInnis and I checked over my tin whistle. An excellent fifer, Ron claimed to have no luck with the whistle. In a while he noticed that the fingering of the upper octave is the same as that of the lower, unlike the fife's fingering. Soon he was playing a tune.

I spent a few minutes with the gathering at the Dixons', where Yukon Jack seemed to make quite an impression. I expected things would continue quite nicely for a while, but I needed sleep and walked back to my car. I think I made it into the sack before midnight. A sky full of stars promised to give the lie to the forecasters once again. It was cold enough this night for breath to be visible.

P.S. This was the 200th anniversary of one of the most significant actions of the entire war, yet not once during the day did the Battle of the Chesapeake occur to me.

P.P.S. Les offered to share bachelor quarters in his van on the way to Yorktown. I shall take him up on the offer.

Sunday, 6 September 1981

We awoke at 7:30 to find the same sort of weather as on the previous morning. It took us a while to get out, but once the car was packed I checked out at the front office. Here I picked up one of the local papers, which seemed to give good coverage of yesterday's action in New London.

It was around 9:05 when we entered the virtually empty cafeteria at Avery Point. I do believe that we were the last to be served. The cooks prepared fresh scrambled eggs and toast for us, and the server gave us double the sausage ration to clean out the leftovers.

On the way to Ft. Griswold, I stopped to tank up for the homeward drive. We had long ago decided that it would be best to depart right after Sunday's supper. I doubt that we could have afforded another night at the Inn.

We did not have to cruise very long to find a good parking spot on a corner about a block north of the fort. There had been no specific instructions for a time or place of meeting, but we figured it would be easy enough to spot our troops.

The first order of business was to check out the offerings of the vendors along Monument St. Here I picked up three cachets commemorating the day's events. Presuming that the medals to be awarded us later were the same item, I did not check out the medallions.

Judy now thought that it would be a good time to enter the fort and snap some pictures before the crowds really arrived. But upon entering the fort we found a continental soldier shooing everyone — including colonial troops — right back out. Gun platforms were being prepared and wiring for explosive charges was being laid, so no outsiders were wanted to trip over things and get in the way.

Noticing a number of men of the IVth hammering on a platform on the west wall, I left Judy to her own devices and got past the guard by pleading the call of duty. I arrived in time to lend a hand in moving a platform to the south wall. After forming a triangle of muskets and ditching the accoutrements we set to work under the direction of Bob Childs. In short order we had a crew of about a dozen. I tried to make myself useful by pulling old nails from the 2 x 4s. Dale Blue sawed them to proper length to serve as legs and braces for the platform. Mel Fuller used tomahawk and cutlass with equal skill to form bracing stakes and to chisel the legs.

The big concern, once the platform was standing, was that the gun's wheels might slip through the spaces between the floorboards. We remedied this by hammering hardwood planks perpendicular to these boards. While I do not know just how the heavy fieldpiece sat when placed here, I heard of no complaints against the workmanship of the IVth Middlesex.

Our last engineering task lay in preparing the gun platform in the half-bastion which projects from the east wall of the fort. The platform was quite large and heavy and lay upside down on the inside slope of the work. About a dozen of us took the lower edge and raised it until the platform was perpendicular and then carefully lowered it so as to flip it right side up. At this point it was about in proper position for bracing up.

Figuring that this would be a worthwhile activity to record on



Sunday, 6 September 1981

film, I set out to look for Judy. I found her easily enough over by the park's main gate. Having got the camera from her, I was soon sidetracked when I saw Audrey over by the snow-fence. Audrey and Betsy Cutler had placed blankets along a section of fence near the northeast bastion so as to guarantee box seats for our own cheering section.

I went back to the gate to get Judy and then was sent off to buy some drinks at one of the string of ice cream trucks parked along the east side of the park. Upon my return to the ladies, I was able to see Bob leaping up and down on the now erected gun platform to prove its ability to hold a 6-pounder fieldpiece.

Audrey and I now re-entered the fort — the sentry had long since given up on keeping out folks in colonial clothing. I was particularly interested in filming the progress of the big gun up the slope and onto this last platform. Outside our fifes and drums were performing their 11 o'clock program in front of the reviewing stand.

The sun had by now burned off quite a bit of the haze, and the sky had become rather blue. The heat was more noticeable than yesterday, so I removed my heavy coat for the rest of the day.

The heat had caused Judy to decide on a change of outfit, and we now walked back to the car for the other clothing. At the school next to the park the rest rooms had been opened. While Judy went inside to change, I met my old comrade in arms, George Brooks. He is just about to move to Texas and expects to miss part of the Rochambeau March next month. He is keeping his beard until the bitter end. I mentioned my surprise at not seeing our other shipmate, Jack Dwyer, and George said that Jack had been aboard the Providence on Saturday and probably was there again today.

We parted when Judy and I decided on lunch at a hot dog truck just across from the park. The long hot dogs were a bit expensive but quite good. We finished off with a chocolate-covered from an ice cream truck. I suspect that these food vendors turned a very nice profit today.

Back at our viewing area I set up the camera and then put on my accoutrements. It was about 5 minutes before our 1 o'clock muster, so we moved across the field toward a large shade tree to await Palmer. The field was littered with white styrofoam cups full of explosive which would be electrically triggered during the battle. Back on the walls of the fort engineers were still placing explosive charges and planting fraises. One of them had inadvertently opened a bees' nest, and the insects were now exploring the spectators' area.

By 1:15, when Palmer joined us, most of the regiment was present. Eric Vollheim had test-fired his musket and caused quite a stir. Palmer wasn't pleased either when I tooted my whistle to get everyone's attention for the battle orders.

The orders did not seem overly complicated. Palmer noted that the planners wished for there to be a certain show of confusion inside the fort to add a note of realism. To further enhance the authenticity we would seldom fire by volley, we would not stand on the walls, and we would engage in hand to hand action when the redcoats came over the top.

We had about finished when a state cop came by to order us to