

Immortal 400 Short Version

On December 3, 1774, as thirty-two-year-old Mordecai Gist gathered together a group of freemen, merchants, shipbuilders, and businessmen who were interested in forming the first independent military company in Maryland to protect their rights and potentially to break away from Britain. They were called the Baltimore Independent Cadets, or Independent Company.

This company of wealthy Baltimoreans were required to carry a “good gun” with a bayonet plus a brace (pair) of pistols and a sword into battle. Marylanders of this company wore “a Uniform Suit of Cloathes turn’d up with Buff, and trim’d with Yellow Metal, or Gold Buttons, White Stockings and Black Cloth half Boote.”

And they trained daily, including target shooting.

Among Gist’s papers is a letter addressed to the Baltimore Independent Company in February 1775. Full of classical allusions, the letter was signed by an admirer of the company who called himself Agamemnon, the name of the Greek king who united his countrymen to fight against the Trojans. After asking that his letter be read aloud to the group, he refers to Xerxes’s army of Immortals and compares the Marylanders to the Spartans who stood against a much larger force at the Battle of Thermopylae. The letter explains, “About three hundred men whose hearts were warmed with patriotism, [held off] an Army of Twenty thousand.” The letter writer believed that Gist’s men, like the Spartans and other elite units throughout history, could play a crucial role in shaping the future of the new nation. (See the 2006 movie “300”)

In a little over a year, George Washington would call upon the Marylanders to make an epic stand of their own against overwhelming odds that would earn themselves the Immortal title.

Washington had been commissioned as the “General and Commander in Chief of the Army of the United Colonies.” Maryland resolved to raise an Army of 1,444 troops for the Continental Army. Gist, given the rank of Second Major, and his men were placed under Colonel William Smallwood who led the first Maryland unit to support the Continental Army. It was called Smallwood’s Battalion. Free African Americans also joined the ranks.

Smallwood's Battalion made its way to New York where George Washington was preparing a defense against the British assault on New York. John Adams described New York as "a kind of key to the whole continent," for which "no effort to secure it ought to be omitted." Unfortunately, the British Army saw it the same way. Covered by the guns of five warships, British and Hessian soldiers made an amphibious landing on Long Island.

On August 27, 1776, at the Battle of Brooklyn, the Maryland battalion would earn their name of the Immortal 400.

The Battle of Brooklyn is the first, but not the last time when militia troops would turn and run at the sight of the British Army advancing on them with bayonets, mostly because the militia typically did not have bayonets to defend themselves in a bayonet charge. British also used their warships' cannon on the militia to make it a losing battle. The British smashed through the American positions, sending the mostly raw troops fleeing for their lives.

An obstacle stood in the way of the American army's retreat: a stone house and its grounds occupied by hundreds of British troops led by one of Britain's greatest captains of battle, Lord Charles Edward Cornwallis V.

Lord Stirling, a Scottish-American officer commanding a brigade under Washington, ordered a suicidal preemptive strike to buy time for the American army to escape.

"I found it absolutely necessary to attack a body of troops commanded by Lord Cornwallis, posted at the house near the Upper Mills," Lord Stirling recounted to Washington, "This I instantly did, with about half of Smallwood's [Battalion], first ordering all the other troops to make the best of their way through the creek."

Cornwallis's men trained their muskets and a light cannon on the advancing Marylanders. "Fire!" The fusillade dropped many of the men in their tracks, severing limbs and heads, killing several instantly. Undeterred, the men of Gist's companies formed into lines and again charged into the hail of fire coming from the British soldiers in the house.

George Washington was visibly moved by the courage and great sacrifice of the Marylanders. According to one account, "Gen. Washington wrung his hands, and cried out, 'Good God! What brave fellows I must this day lose!'"

Eventually, the remaining Marylanders found themselves surrounded and had to return to the main body through Gowanus Creek and the surrounding marsh. Many lost their lives due to high waters in the creek, some who could not swim and were not tall enough to keep their heads above the water. The total losses for Gist's men at the Battle of Brooklyn were 256 enlisted and officers missing or killed.

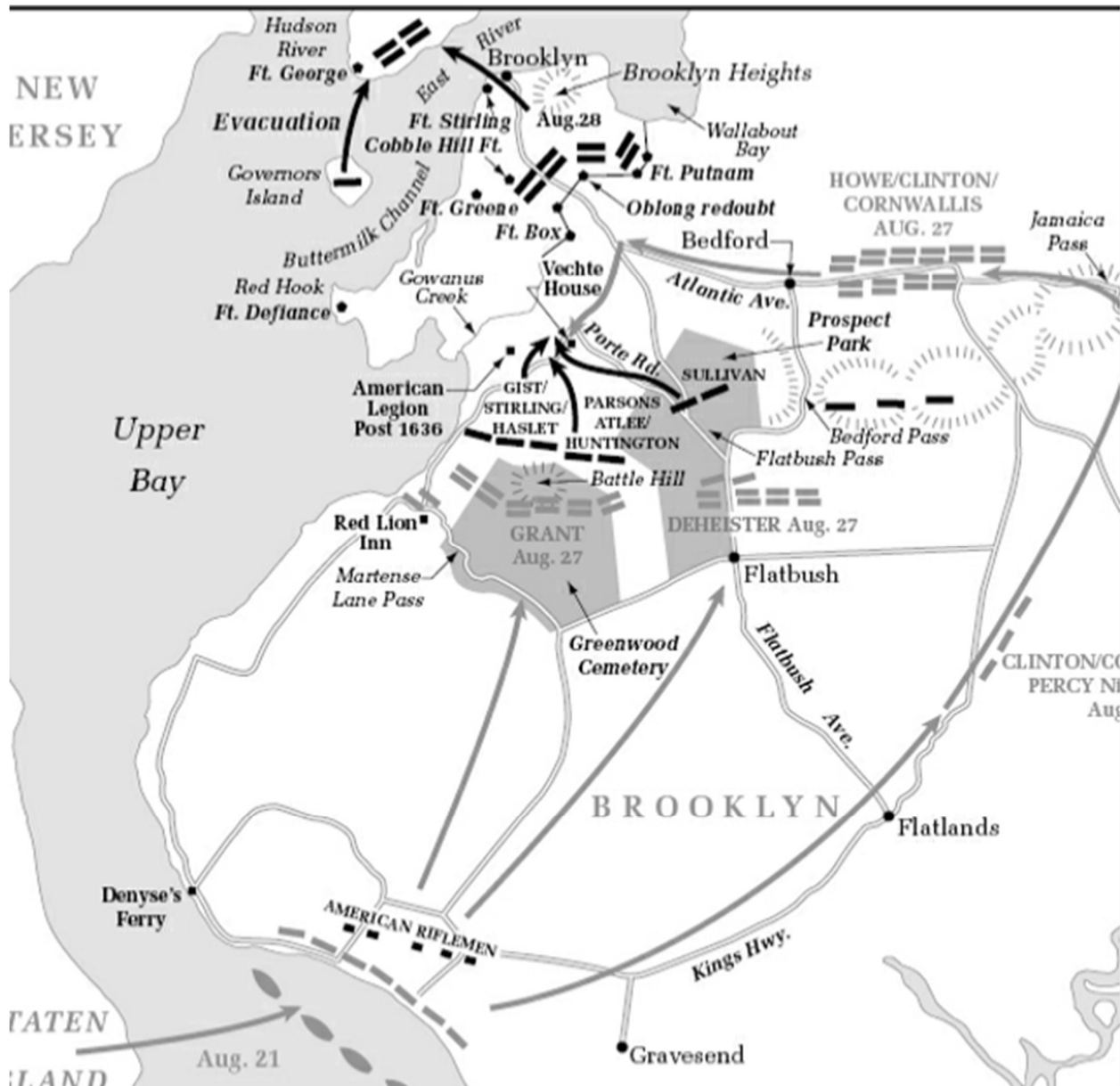
The Marylanders stand chewed up daylight on the afternoon of August 27 and bought Washington time, preventing the British from uniting their various wings of their army to make a combined assault on the Brooklyn Heights defenses that day. Had Howe pressed the attack with a unified army, it would have been a total victory, and an end to the Continental Army. It could have crushed the Revolution.

The Marylanders who participated in that unorthodox, suicidal assault became known as the Maryland 400, or the Immortal 400. With their blood, the Immortals bought "an hour, more precious to American liberty than any other in its history."

Washington so respected the Maryland Regiment that he came to refer to them as his "Old Line." The State of Maryland would gain one of its nicknames from this unit: "The Old-Line State."

The Maryland Regiment would be reformed and would go on to participate in many other defining battles of the Revolutionary War including Trenton, Princeton, Valley Forge, Camden, Cowpens, Guilford Courthouse and ultimately final victory at Yorktown.

Map



Reference:

O'Donnell, Patrick K.; *Washington's Immortals: The Untold Story of an Elite Regiment Who Changed the Course of the Revolution*. Grove Atlantic.