



Beaufort County 250 Committee
Revolutionary War Biographies

*Captain James Doharty
Scout Boat Captain
and
Ranger Leader*

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SC 250
ANNIVERSARY
American Revolution

BEAUFORT COUNTY
SOUTH CAROLINA

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Scout Boat Captain and Ranger Leader

Born on January 19, 1743, to British subaltern James Doharty and Mary Ann Talbird Doharty, James Jr was left without a father when his father died in 1748, leaving his Skull Creek property, "Bear Island," to his son. Young Doharty was taken in by his step-grandfather, Henry Talbird and lived his early years on Talbird's Whale Branch Plantation. It was at the age of twenty-eight, tending his father's former plantation on Skull Creek, that he became involved with the American fight for independence. His adventurous life and eventual murder reveal the chaotic, often ruthless split between the loyalist Tories and rebellious Patriots on the southern frontier of the Revolutionary War.

Doharty, an experienced waterman, joined the Beaufort District Militia prior to the Revolutionary War as a scout boat captain. In April 1775, when the first call for volunteers went out from the Council of Safety, Doharty entered militia service. Two months later, when Colonel Stephen Bull issued the order for two scout boats to patrol the approaches to Savannah under John Joyner and John Barnwell, Doharty was selected to lead the militia aboard one of the craft. On July 9, 1775, off the tip of Daufuskie Island, along with a Georgia schooner outfitted with ten cannon and renamed Liberty, the two boats intercepted and confiscated, under arms, the cargo of munitions destined for St Augustine and the Indian allies of the British.

16,000 pounds of gunpowder and another ton of munitions were seized and unloaded on neighboring Cockspur Island. They were later split between GA and SC and, that Fall, 4,000 pounds of the SC share was transported to the aid of General George Washington at the Siege of Boston. In March 1776, when a British fleet anchored off Savannah intent upon procuring rice to feed their troops in the North, he was appointed captain of a detachment directly under the command of Bull and led his men against the fleet from the SC bank of the Savannah River in an engagement called the Battle of the Rice Boats.

Captain Doharty saw action in several skirmishes with British forces during his military career. He was placed in command of the Southward Regiment of Foot of the Beaufort District militia, and, subsequently, in command of all Beaufort District militia south of the Broad River. In late January 1779, Doharty was assigned in temporary command of Fort Lyttleton on the Beaufort River, along with its fifty-man garrison, by its commander John DeTreville. Knowing that the British had landed forces and captured Savannah, and learning that they were heading by land and by

sea towards Beaufort, when the masts were sighted entering the Beaufort River and knowing no reinforcements were nearby, Captain Doharty was ordered to destroy the fort and render it unusable by the British.

In the ensuing land Battle of Port Royal Island, the Continental forces managed to repel the British, but Captain Doharty's half-brother, Richard Talbird, was one of eight Patriots killed during the fighting. After withdrawing to Savannah and regrouping, the British began probes into SC by land. An unexpected Patriot victory at Kettle Creek followed by a defeat at Brier Creek on the Savannah side of the river, moved the 1,200 man Patriot army commanded by William Moultrie to encamp near the town of Purrysburg in Beaufort District.

In April, after a diversionary force headed toward Augusta drew most of Moultrie's men from the camp, in a dawn attack General Augustine Prevost and his army of nearly 2,500 regulars entered SC via crossings at Ebenezer and near Brier Creek and routed the remnants of General Moultrie's American army at Purrysburg, marching toward Charleston. Subsequent battles at Coosawhatchie and Tulifinny Hill resulted in the first large-scale invasion of the Beaufort District by British regulars and Loyalist militias.

As fighting became more chaotic and personal, and with British momentum strong, many District militiamen defected to the British. When Charleston surrendered to the British on May 12, 1780, Doharty narrowly avoided capture and returned home to join a reforming Ranger unit in Beaufort District, participating in numerous raids and skirmishes over the following months. Late in 1780, Captain Doharty returned to his Bear Creek Plantation to retrieve supplies for another military excursion. At this time he learned that his former neighbor and friend, Richard Pendarvis, now known as "Tory Dick" and the Captain of the Loyalist militia on the May River Necks, had publicly called for Doharty's arrest and hanging "for his traitorous actions".

As Doharty was meeting with his two nephews, John and William Leaycraft, and a brother-in-law, Thomas Talbird, also members of the Hilton Head militia, he was informed that the Loyalists intended to trap him at his Bear Creek Plantation and apprehend him. In an attempt to get the upper hand, Doharty began to position the men for an ambush of the Tories. Unfortunately, the Loyalist party arrived as the men were taking their places, resulting in a speedy escape by most of the Patriots, and leading to a deadly shootout between Patriots and Tories. In the exchange, Doharty was shot and killed by Pendarvis, becoming the only Patriot casualty of the attack.

Captain James Doharty left behind a complicated but important legacy. A man born

into a British military family, he was inspired by his father's service and joined the area militia at age 17. By the time the war came actively to Beaufort District, he was a skilled and respected guerilla fighter. He saw conflict across the Lowcountry from the East Florida to Charleston and helped lead the Patriot effort to prevent British control of the Beaufort area throughout during the Revolutionary War. While he did not live to see the success of the Revolution, his distinguished service inspired dedicated resistance in the Beaufort District.

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