

Beaufort County 250 Committee
Revolutionary War
Battle Summaries

*The Combahee River
Campaign of August 1782 -
Revisited*

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American Revolution

BEAUFORT COUNTY
SOUTH CAROLINA

The Combahee River Campaign of August 1782 - Revisited

A Reconstruction of the Beaufort-Colleton Operation from Contemporary and Eyewitness Evidence

The engagement generally known as the Battle of Combahee Ferry, fought on August 27, 1782, is remembered principally as the action in which Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens was killed, making him the last field grade officer killed in action in the entire Revolutionary War. That emphasis has tended to obscure both the geographical extent and operational complexity of the affair. The available contemporary evidence suggests that Laurens's fatal encounter at Tar Bluff was only one relatively brief phase of a considerably larger operation extending along many miles of the Combahee River over two days and involving British and American engagements on both sides of a river separating Colleton from Beaufort District.

At this stage of the research, the Combahee action is best understood not simply as a skirmish at Tar Bluff but as a multi-phase riverine operation involving British foraging, American attempts at interdiction, movements across or along the Combahee, a downstream artillery blocking position, and a British amphibious counter-maneuver.

Several important details remain uncertain. Most importantly, Brigadier General Mordecai Gist's immediate report to Major General Nathanael Greene has not yet been examined. Greene forwarded a copy of that report to George Washington only two days after the engagement and described it significantly as an account of the "different operations." Until that document is recovered, portions of this reconstruction must remain provisional.

The British Foraging Expedition

By August 1782 the military situation around Charleston had become unusual. The principal campaigns of the Revolution were effectively over, Cornwallis having surrendered at Yorktown ten months earlier, but Charleston remained occupied by a substantial British garrison under Major General Alexander Leslie. Leslie was preparing ultimately to evacuate the city, but his army, and the Loyalists in refuge there, still had to be fed.

British control of the countryside surrounding Charleston had contracted dramatically. American forces under Major General Nathanael Greene occupied positions outside the British perimeter and attempted to deny the garrison access to provisions. Leslie's request to be allowed to obtain provisions commercially had been rejected by Greene, so Leslie had to resort increasingly to amphibious foraging expeditions into the Lowcountry.

On August 21 he dispatched two such expeditions. One moved toward St. Helena Parish while another, commanded by Major William Brereton of the 64th Regiment of Foot, proceeded toward the Combahee River. Brereton's objective was to collect rice and other provisions from plantations along the river and transport them by water to Charleston. Contemporary American intelligence initially had difficulty determining the destination of the expedition. On August 23 Greene's headquarters warned Francis Marion that Brereton might be moving north toward the

Santee or Georgetown. Subsequent intelligence revealed that the expedition was actually moving south toward the Combahee.

The British expedition was substantial. Accounts describe approximately eighteen vessels of various types, including armed galleys and transports, with perhaps 300 British regulars and approximately 200 Loyalists or other supporting troops. Modern reconstructions describe a flotilla including a sloop of war, three galleys, three brigantines, and approximately ten smaller vessels intended to carry provisions.

Greene responded by sending Brigadier General Mordecai Gist and his light troops toward the Combahee. Gist's command was particularly suitable for such an operation. It included cavalry as well as Continental infantry and elements capable of moving rapidly against an enemy raiding force. Greene described the British force's purpose and size in a letter to Washington dated August 29, 1782, only two days after Laurens's death:

"The Enemy made a detachment into that quarter with a number of armed Vessels, empty Sloops and Schooners with about 500 Infantry to collect Rice."

This contemporary description establishes an important point. The expedition was not merely a raid by several companies of infantry. It was a substantial combined land-and-water operation involving approximately five hundred troops and numerous vessels specifically intended to remove rice. Greene further explained:

"General Gist with the Light Troops, in which Lt Colo. Laurens held a command, was detached to oppose them."

The American objective was not necessarily to destroy Brereton's entire expedition. Greene's instructions were characteristically aggressive but flexible: Gist was to strike the enemy whenever circumstances permitted. The essential American task was to make British foraging increasingly dangerous and, if possible, prevent the provisions collected along the Combahee from reaching Charleston. The British objective therefore produced a corresponding American operation under Gist. The geography largely determined what followed.

The Combahee was simultaneously a district boundary, military obstacle, transportation corridor and British avenue of retreat. The south or western side lay in Beaufort District, while the north or eastern side belonged to Colleton District. British possession of armed vessels gave British field commander Brereton an important mobility advantage. Infantry and provisions could be transported along the river much faster than American forces could move overland through the swamps, creeks and primitive roads of the Lowcountry.

Gist Reaches the Combahee

Gist arrived in the vicinity of Combahee Ferry about August 25, but too late as the British already controlled the ferry crossing. Modern battlefield research places him initially on the eastern or northeastern bank - the Colleton side - where approximately eighteen British vessels were positioned in or near the river. This fleet's presence produced a tactical stalemate. Gist

possessed a mobile brigade force of perhaps 300 men. A 1929 account describing Gist's light brigade identifies its composition quite specifically: Lee's Legion cavalry, formally under Laurens' command but, at the time of the battle, reporting directly to Gist; the consolidated 3rd and 4th Virginia Dragoon Regiment of Colonel Baylor, under the command of Major Richard Call; Lee's infantry; dismounted 3rd Virginia Dragoons; the understrength Delaware battalion of 50 men under Captain William McKennan; and 100 Marylanders commanded by Major Beall.

The British, meanwhile, had come specifically to collect rice. That required their infantry to leave the protection of the vessels and operate among the plantations. The evidence concerning the exact bank occupied by the principal British foraging force at each moment on August 25–26 is not entirely consistent. One historical account describes Gist's light brigade as being directed against the British on the south side of the Combahee. Other accounts state that approximately 300 British troops crossed the river on August 26 and that Gist then prepared to attack them. Those statements may describe successive movements rather than contradict one another.

It appears obvious that a substantial portion of Brereton's force operated on or moved onto the southwestern, Beaufort District side of the Combahee, where its rice plantations constituted the object of the expedition. If so, Beaufort District was not peripheral to the action. It was one of its principal operational theaters.

Gist Attempts to Trap the Expedition

Gist confronted two problems. First, he had to attack or dislodge the British infantry collecting rice. Second, even if successful, the British could simply re-embark and withdraw downstream aboard their vessels. His solution appears to have involved separate but complementary movements intended to contain the elements of the British force. A document dated August 23, 1782, from William Pierce Jr. to Gist instructs him to protect the right flank of Greene's army and to "strike at them [the British] wherever you may find them." That is only four days before Combahee and clearly relates to the operation that followed.

One portion of his force would threaten or attack the British foraging troops. A second, smaller detachment would move approximately twelve miles downriver and establish artillery where the British flotilla could be attacked during its withdrawal.

The latter mission fell to John Laurens, who had been ill near Charleston when he learned of the operation and hurried to join Gist. On August 26 he received command of a small force generally described as approximately fifty Delaware infantry, some mounted troops, and an artillery detachment under Captain James Smith equipped with a howitzer. His destination was Chehaw Neck, in the vicinity of Field's Point and Tar Bluff.

The geography is critical. Field's Point and Tar Bluff were on the Colleton, or northeastern, side of the Combahee. Laurens therefore was not leading the American force against British foragers in Beaufort District. His was a separate movement down the Colleton side, intended to obstruct the British retreat by water. The probable American plan consequently had at least two axes: an attack or threat against British troops operating around the ferry and on the Beaufort side; and a downstream artillery interception position on the Colleton side. The river connected the two operations.

If Gist could drive the British foragers back toward their vessels, Laurens's artillery could make their escape downstream costly or perhaps impossible.

Brereton Seizes the Initiative

The weakness in Gist's plan was timing. His troops were separated geographically, on both sides of the river, and Laurens would be more than twelve miles downstream. Orders and intelligence had to move by horseback over difficult roads. Brereton could move his force by water.

Evidence suggests Gist was attempting to turn the British position by sending mounted troops around the head of the river/swamp system, using the Salkehatchie crossing and cooperating with locally assembled militia. The most important evidence comes from William Gilmore Simms's nineteenth-century *Life of Francis Marion*, which appears to preserve details drawn from earlier accounts no longer repeated in most modern narratives. Simms states that the British had been trying to obtain provisions on the south side of the Combahee, that American cavalry under Major Richard Call was ordered around by Salkehatchie Bridge to join militia assembled in that quarter and strike the British, that Gist's light brigade frustrated their effort to gather provisions, and that the British then returned to their boats.

If this inference is correct, the sequence of movements would have been as follows: Gist blocks the northeast side attempt to gather rice ... Call's cavalry and militia threaten their landward position ... British abandon/cross from the south side ... Call is sent via Salkehatchie to the south side ... British move toward the Colleton side and their vessels ... Brereton organizes the downstream withdrawal. And, during the night of August 26–27, the British began descending the Combahee. Gist's observers apparently discovered the movement at approximately 4:00 a.m. The situation for the Americans changed abruptly. Gist had intended to force the British into a retreat and then attack that retreat. Instead, the British began withdrawing before the American movements could be coordinated.

Laurens, meanwhile, had spent the night of August 26 at the nearby plantation of William Stock, a Laurens family friend, and apparently left the vicinity of the Stock plantation at approximately 3:00 a.m. to proceed toward the downstream position. In reality, he was moving to establish an artillery station designed to intercept a future British retreat, after that retreat had already begun. Brereton made the situation more challenging by landing infantry from his vessels on the Colleton side in advance of Laurens' arrival. Approximately 140 men - principally associated with the 64th Regiment, elements of the 17th Regiment, and perhaps Provincials - were put ashore to protect the passage of the flotilla and eliminate the American artillery threat.

Laurens had been sent ahead to intercept Brereton. Brereton now put troops ashore ahead of Laurens to intercept him. Exactly where Brereton's men landed is unknown, but circumstances and results would indicate they landed downriver of Field Point and maneuvered upriver toward Laurens' approaching detachment.

The River Engagement

One of the most important accounts of this phase comes from William Jenkinson, a Continental

artillery veteran who later applied for a Revolutionary War pension. Jenkinson's testimony was recorded decades after the battle, yet, nevertheless, his recollection contains unusually specific details concerning the artillery operation. He remembered the American force moving through difficult ground and crossing what he called a "pole bridge" before reaching an artillery position near the river. According to Jenkinson, at least one British galley had already passed. Another remained within range.

The Americans opened fire. Jenkinson recalled canister being fired against the vessel and another British galley, positioned around a bend, returning fire against the American battery. This clearly indicates that Laurens's downstream mission was only partially accomplished. The Americans did not simply fail to reach their intended position before encountering British infantry. At least part of the artillery force apparently reached the river and actually engaged British vessels.

The sequence would therefore have been: American artillery reaches the river ... British vessels begin passing ... Americans fire on a galley ... British vessels return fire ... information arrives that British infantry has landed ... Laurens orders withdrawal. The Battle of Combahee consequently contained a genuine riverine artillery engagement before or contemporaneously with the better-known infantry fighting at Tar Bluff.

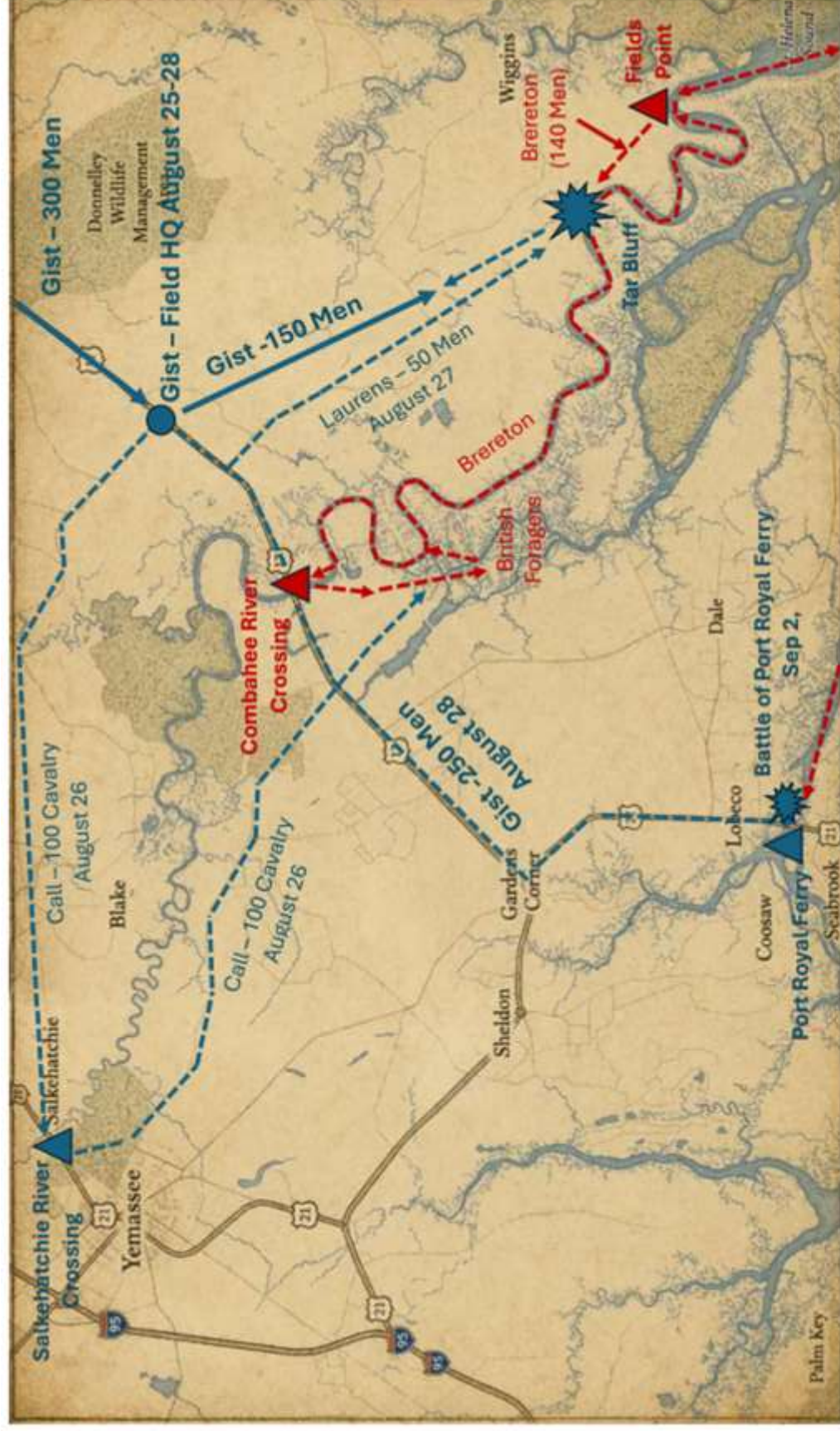
Laurens and the British Landing Force

Jenkinson remembered Laurens arriving at the battery with orders to withdraw because British troops had landed and Gist could not immediately reach the position. The downstream artillery post had been established on the assumption that Gist remained capable of supporting it. Once Brereton inserted infantry between Laurens and Gist, the position became dangerously isolated. During the withdrawal or subsequent redeployment, Laurens's detachment encountered the British covering force.

The traditional account emphasizes Laurens's personal aggressiveness. Patriot Captain William McKennan later criticized his willingness to engage before Gist arrived. That criticism accords with Laurens's established reputation for extraordinary courage accompanied by a tendency toward battlefield rashness. Washington himself later summarized this quality when reflecting on Laurens's character, observing that he possessed scarcely a fault unless "intrepidity bordering upon rashness" could be considered one.

However, Jenkinson's testimony complicates the conventional interpretation. He remembered Major Beall appearing during the movement and instructions being given for an attack. If that recollection is correct, Laurens may not have acted solely upon personal impulse. He may have received an order transmitted through Gist's command. But, instructions issued perhaps thirty minutes earlier might already have been obsolete when they reached Laurens. Whatever the precise command sequence, Laurens ultimately attacked or attempted to engage a substantially larger British force concealed in favorable terrain.

The British delivered devastating fire, and Laurens was killed almost immediately, Captain Smith was wounded, and the American detachment was forced back. The artillery was lost.



Combahee River Campaign – August 26-27, 1782

- ▲ American Controlled Site
- ▲ British Controlled Site

Distance From Combahee Ferry Crossing to Salkehatchie Crossing

Tar Bluff to Combahee River Crossing

Fields Point to Tar Bluff

British troop movement - - - - -

American troop movement - - - - -

15 Miles

12 Miles

2 Miles

Another Veteran Remembers the Maneuvers and Retreat

The pension testimony of Jacob Grist, another participant, provides useful independent corroboration of the broader sequence. Grist remembered British "small craft" coming up the Combahee and landing troops. He recalled Laurens commanding the American advance and described a sharp engagement followed by an American retreat through swampy terrain. The survivors eventually encountered Gist's approaching force. According to his recollection, after Gist arrived the British returned to their boats and "descended the river." Although recorded long afterward, Grist's testimony supports several important elements of this reconstruction: the British operation was amphibious; Laurens commanded an advance element rather than Gist's entire force; the Americans retreated through difficult swamp terrain; Gist subsequently arrived with reinforcements; and the British ultimately withdrew by water. In any case, Laurens' death did not terminate the Combahee operation. It occurred during one phase of a continuing contest over the British withdrawal.

The Unresolved Beaufort District Operation

The greatest remaining uncertainty concerns the southwestern or Beaufort District side of the river. Available evidence clearly indicates that British troops were operating there or crossed there during the foraging expedition. Gist intended to attack them before their withdrawal.

What remains uncertain is precisely: where the British crossed; how many troops were ashore; who commanded the American force assigned against them; and when those troops rejoined Gist. This issue may explain an otherwise interesting numerical discrepancy. Gist's light corps appears to have contained roughly 300 men, yet accounts of his rapid movement toward Laurens frequently describe him as bringing only approximately 150 infantry and cavalry. A plausible explanation is that part of Gist's force remained committed to the separate operation against Brereton's foragers or was temporarily separated from him by geography and the river.

Greene's Contemporary Description: "Different Operations"

Greene's August 29 letter to Washington is especially important because of how he characterized the enclosed report. After reporting Laurens's death and describing the British expedition, Greene wrote:

"Enclosed is a copy of Genl Gists Letter containing an account of the different operations."

The wording deserves attention. Greene did not describe Gist's enclosure merely as an account of the "action," "skirmish," or Laurens's death. He referred to "the different operations." That contemporary phrase fits remarkably well with the military picture emerging from the other evidence: British foraging ashore, armed vessels in the river, American movements around the ferry, a downstream artillery detachment, British movement by water, a British amphibious landing, an artillery exchange with the flotilla, Laurens's infantry engagement, and Gist's subsequent arrival.

Greene also placed the event within the larger problem of British amphibious foraging. In the same letter he observed:

"The Rivers of this Country are very favorable for those kind of enterprizes."

That statement could almost serve as the operational explanation for Brereton's success. The Combahee gave the British mobility. Gist had to maneuver around the river. Brereton could maneuver on it.

Contemporary Recognition of Laurens's Final Action

The Continental Congress later summarized Laurens's death in language that also confirms the essential nature of the operation. Its record stated that Laurens:

"fell in bravely endeavoring with a small force to repel a Considerable detachment of the British Army, who were foraging on the River Combahee."

That description is useful because it emphasizes that Laurens's action belonged to a larger British foraging expedition, not an isolated encounter between patrols. The contemporary understanding was therefore substantially broader than the later image of Laurens simply stumbling into an ambush.

Conclusion

The evidence presently available supports interpreting the Battle of Combahee Ferry as a geographically dispersed combined land-and-river operation rather than a single engagement at Tar Bluff. British troops came to the Combahee to obtain rice. Armed vessels protected and transported them. Gist moved to interfere with the expedition and appears to have developed a plan involving pressure against the British foragers coupled with a downstream artillery position intended to obstruct their retreat.

The Beaufort District side appears to have been an important component of the foraging operation, while Laurens's blocking force operated farther downstream on the Colleton side at Field's Point and Tar Bluff.

Brereton defeated the American plan primarily through mobility and timing. The British did not wait for Gist's coordinated dawn attack. They crossed away from the threatened south-side position and began moving downriver under darkness. The Battlefield Trust states that Gist's advance lookouts detected their departure at about 4:00 a.m. on August 27 and that Gist then hurried toward Chehaw Neck with roughly 150 infantry and cavalry. By that point Laurens had already moved toward the downstream position. Instead of the Americans pushing the British into their boats and Laurens intercepting the retreat, the British used their boats to get ahead of the Americans and placed infantry between Laurens and Gist. That is probably the central operational event of the battle.

Post-Analysis

Major Call's maneuver may explain why all of Gist's mounted force was not at Tar Bluff sooner to prevent the outcome at Tar bluff. When Call's cavalry was sent on a wide movement through Salkehatchie Bridge to cooperate with militia on the Beaufort side, Gist's mobile strength was geographically dispersed when Brereton unexpectedly moved downstream. This helps explain why Gist's light brigade, which possessed substantial cavalry, could not rapidly overwhelm Brereton's relatively small landed covering force. Part of the answer may be terrain - but part may also be that some of the cavalry had been committed to the Beaufort-side turning movement. And, that may explain Gist's reservation to commit his forces available to full engagement at a time they may have been able to prevent Laurens' ambush. By moving downstream during darkness and landing infantry ahead of the American artillery position, he transformed Gist's attempted interception into an American command-and-control crisis. Laurens's isolated detachment became exposed before Gist could concentrate his force.

The veteran Jenkinson's account suggests that American artillery nevertheless reached the river and engaged British galleys before the fatal land encounter. Jacob Grist independently remembered the British landing troops, the American retreat through swamp, Gist's arrival, and the eventual British withdrawal by boat. Greene's contemporary description provides perhaps the most appropriate framework. He called Gist's report an account of the "different operations." That phrase should guide further investigation.

Combahee was a multi-axis riverine operation extending across the district boundary and along more than twelve miles of river, in which British control of the water allowed Brereton to disrupt an American attempt to combine land pressure against his foragers with artillery interdiction of their retreat. That interpretation restores the river, and the operations on both sides of it, to the center of the battle.

Aftermath

Laurens, the last American field-grade officer to be killed in action in the entire war, and one other American died on the field, and 19 more were wounded in the last significant battle in Beaufort District during the war.

Deprived of the needed provisions from the Combahee plantations, Brereton raided along the way and sailed into St Helena Sound intending to rendezvous with the second of Leslie's foraging expeditions headed to St Helena Island. Following the western shoreline, he entered the Coosaw River on which he would ultimately arrive at the Port Royal Ferry crossing.

Unable to completely stop the foraging along the Combahee's south side further downriver, Gist turned his attention to the St Helena Island foraging party and rode south with his 200 remaining men. With scouts tracking the movement of the British on their raid, Gist proceeded to the Port Royal Ferry crossing anticipating the British raiding party would eventually arrive there.

On September 2, the British on land, along with the galleys *HMS Balfour* and *HMS Shark* as escorts and transports turned into the Coosaw River. Abruptly, and at close range, Gist fired on

the ships with his artillery piece from his prepared position. Unable to fire back, both ships slipped their cables and tried to escape. The *Balfour* quickly ran aground, with its crew spiking the guns and abandoning the ship, and though *Shark* escaped she was badly damaged. The Patriots captured the *Balfour*, along with her cargo of beef, rice, and poultry. She was later repaired, outfitted with new guns, and was put into service with the American navy.

Only three more battles would take place in the South Carolina Lowcountry in the following three months as the Patriots and Continentals closed in on Charles Town, and in mid-December the British would begin evacuating the strategic strongpoint marking the end of formal warfare in the South.