

"They Behaved Like Soldiers Who Fought From Principle Alone"

The Battle of Harlem Heights

From the Correspondence of Captain John Chilton, 3d Virginia Regiment

Transcription by Bob McDonald, © 2001

**Morris Height Camp
N. York Governm't
Sept. 17th, 1776**

My dear Friends,

I embrace the opportunity of writing to you by Sergt. Beaver of Capt West's Co. whose place Jacob Jessop has taken. My epistle will be incoherent, scarcely to be understood, but your partiality in my favor I know will make anything from me pleasing, where the news it contains is not too bad. I have nothing but the news of the camp to give you and that which I have myself seen, There being so many generals and field officers here that a Captain is only of consequence in his own Company or Regiment, at most. I will endeavor to state plain matters of fact, as they appeared to me.

On Friday last the enemy's cannon played the greater part of the day from their Forts shipping. Friday night we discovered a body of the enemy were landing on a small island in the East River. Our Regt. were ordered to march at 3 o'clock in the morning, after marching and counter marching till about 7 we returned to our camps. Saturday, about midnight we were ordered out and paraded as the day before, returned to Camp, Sunday we had scarce time to get our breakfast after returning, being informed of the enemy's having taken possession of N. York and our Troops, who were chiefly from Connecticut, having shamefully abandoned their Posts below us without exchanging a fire. Our soldiers were greatly exasperated and being drawn up for Battle, it was discoverable that they were determined to fight to the last for their country; every soldier encouraging and animating his fellow. This night our Regt. were on guard posted on an eminence over against the enemy. Monday morning we marched down toward them and posted ourselves near a meadow having that in our front. No. [i.e., the Hudson] River to our right, a body of woods in our rear and on our left. We discovered the enemy peeping from their Heights over their fenceings and rocks and running backwards and forwards. We did not alter our

positions. I believe they expected we should have ascended the hill to them, but finding us still, they imputed it to fear and came down skipping towards us in small parties. At the distance of about 250 or 300 yards they began to fire. Our orders were not to fire till they came near but a young officer (of whom we have too many) on the right fired and it was taken up from right to left. We made about 4 fires. I had fired twice and loaded again, determined to keep for a better chance, but Col. Weedon calling to keep up our fire (he meant for us to reserve it but we misunderstood him) I fired once more. We then all wiped and loaded and sat down in our ranks and let the enemy fire on us near an hour. Our men observed the best order, not quitting their ranks tho exposed to a constant, warm fire. I can't say enough in their favour, they behaved like soldiers who fought from principle alone. During this, 3 companies of Rifle-men from our Regt. West's, Thorton's and Ashby's, with other Companys of Riflemen were flanking the enemy and began a brisk fire on the right of them, on this they began to retreat up the hill carrying off their dead and wounded – for we had galled them a little – And then, let me not forget the brave Marylanders who were below us and sustained the hottest of the fire and must have done the greatest execution as they kept a constant fire after we were ordered to reserve ours. The Enemy retreated about a quarter and a half when they were re-inforced by men and cannon. We had but one field piece in the battle and they had several. The Battle began between 8 and 9 in the morning and lasted till about 2. It was rather a skirmish than a battle. However it was taught our enemy that we are not all Connecticut men and they seem more peacably inclined then before. Their task was to have marched through our Camp to King's Bridge, 4 miles above us the day of the Battle. But they were deceived for once and I hope will be ever so when they assign themselves such tasks. We had three killed & wounded in our Regt. You don't know any of them. Major Leitch was also wounded badly, he received 3 balls, one just above his groin in the side of his belly. He is a man of spirit and bears it as such, it is very dangerous, but I hope not fatal. There are about as many more in other Regmts. killed and wounded. We lost a Colonel, I don't know his name, one Nolton [i.e., Knowlton], a fine man, one of the New England men. It is said we killed a field officer of theirs and about 50 privates. From the blood and bustle they made in carrying off the killed and wounded they certainly had many more killed than we had. You will see a better acct. in the papers.

Johnny Blackwell joins me in our sincerest wishes for your families and all friends and hope you will esteem us

Your loving friends,
John Chilton

*Source: Original manuscript letter within the collections
of the Virginia Historical Society.*