

Official Account of the Bombardment of Fort McHenry.

Copy of a letter from Lieut. Colonel Armistead, to the Secretary of War, dated

Fort McHenry, Sept. 24th, 1814

A severe indisposition, the effect of great fatigue and exposure, has prevented me heretofore from presenting you with an account of the attack on this post. On the night of Saturday the 10th inst. the British fleet, consisting of ships of the line, heavy frigates, and bomb vessels, amounting in the whole to 30 sail, appeared at the mouth of the river Patapsco, with every indication of an attempt on the city of Baltimore. My own force consisted of one company of U.S. artillery, under Capt. Evans, and two companies of sea fencibles, under Capts. Bunbury and Addison. Of these three companies, 35 men were unfortunately on the sick list, and unfit for duty. I had been furnished with two companies of volunteer artillery from Baltimore, under Capt. Berry, and Lt. Commandant Pennington. --To these I must add another very fine company of volunteer artillerists, under Judge Nicholson, who had proffered their services to aid in the defense of this post whenever an attack might be apprehended; and also a detachment from Commodore Barney's flotilla under Lieut. Redman. Brig. Gen. Winder had also furnished me with about six hundred infantry, and Major Lane, consisting of detachments from the 12th, 14th, 36th, and 38th Regim. of U.S. troops - the total amounting to more than 1000 effective men.

On Monday morning very early, it was perceived that the enemy was landing troops on the east side of the Patapsco, distant about ten miles. During the day and the ensuing night, he had brought sixteen ships (including five bomb ships) within about two miles and a half of this Fort. I had arranged my force as follows: - The regular artillerists under Capt. Evans and the volunteers under Capt. Nicholson, manned the bastions in the Star Fort. Captains Bunbury's, Addison's, Redman's, Berry's and Lieut. Commandant Pennington's command were stationed on the lower works, and the infantry under Lieut. Col. Stewart and Major Lane were on the outer ditch, to meet the enemy at his landing, should he attempt one.

On Tuesday morning about sunrise, the enemy commenced the attack from his five bomb vessels, at the distance about two miles, when finding that his shells reached us, he anchored and kept an incessant and well directed bombardment. We immediately opened our batteries, and kept a brisk fire from our guns and mortars, but unfortunately our shot and shells all fell considerably short of him. This was to me a most distressing circumstance, as it left us exposed to constant and tremendous shower of shells, without the remote possibility of our doing him the slightest injury. It affords me the highest gratification to state, that although we were left exposed, and thus inactive, not a man shrunk from the conflict.

About 2 o'clock, P.M. one of the 24 pounders on the south west bastion, under the immediate command of Capt. Nicholson, was dismounted by a shell, the explosion of which killed his second Lieut. and wounded several of his men; the bustle necessarily produced in removing the wounded and remounting the gun probably induced the enemy to suspect that we were in a state of confusion, as he brought three of the bomb ships to what I believed to be a good striking distance. I immediately ordered a fire to be opened, which was obeyed with alacrity through the whole garrison, and in a half an hour those intruders again sheltered themselves by withdrawing beyond our reach. - We gave three cheers, and again ceased firing. The enemy continued throwing shells, with one or two slight intermissions, till one o'clock in the morning of Wednesday; when it was discovered that he had availed himself of the darkness of the night and had thrown a considerable force above to our right; they had approached very near to Fort Covington, when they began to throw rockets; intended I presume, to give them an opportunity of examining the shores - as I have since understood, they had detached 1250 picket men with scaling ladders, for the purpose of storming this Fort. We once more had an opportunity of opening our batteries, and kept a continued blaze for nearly two hours which had the effect again to drive them off.

In justice to Lieut. Newcomb, of the United States Navy, who commanded Fort Covington, with a detachment of sailors, and Lieut. Webster, of the flotilla, who commanded the Six Gun Battery, near the Fort, I ought to state, that during this time, they kept an animated, and I believe very destructive fire, to which I am persuaded, we are much indebted in repulsing the enemy. One of his sunken barges has since been found with two dead men in it - others have been seen floating in the river. The only means we had of directing our guns, was by the blaze of their rockets and the flashes of their guns. Had they ventured to the same situation in the day time, not a man would have escaped.

The bombardment continued on the part of the enemy until 7 o'clock on Wednesday morning, when it ceased; and about nine, their ships got under weigh and stood down the river. During the bombardment which lasted 25 hours (with two slight intermissions) from the best calculations I can make, from fifteen to eighteen hundred shells were thrown by the enemy. A few of these fell short. A large proportion burst over us, throwing their fragments among us, and threatening destruction. Many passed over, and about four hundred fell within the works. Two of the public buildings are materially injured - the others but slightly. I am happy to inform you (wonderful as it may appear) that our loss amounts to only four men killed, and 24 wounded. The latter will all recover. Among the killed, I have to lament the loss of Lieutenant Clagget and Sergeant Clemm, both of Capt. Nicholson's volunteers; two men whose fate is to be deplored, not only for their personal bravery, but for their high standing, amiable demeanor and spotless integrity in private life. Lieut. Russel, of the company under Lieut. Pennington, received early in the attack a severe contusion in the heel; notwithstanding which, he remained at his post during the whole bombardment.

Were I to name any individual who signalized themselves, it would be doing injustice to the others. Suffice it to say, that every officer and soldier under my command did their duty to my entire satisfaction.

I have the honor to remain respectfully, your obedient servant,

G. Armistead, Lt Col. U.S.A
Hon. James Monroe, Secretary of War