

# **WASHINGTON'S PROVIDENTIAL ESCAPE FROM BROOKLYN HEIGHTS IN AUGUST 1776**

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**THE  
GEOLOGICAL  
SOCIETY  
OF AMERICA**



# In Congress

The delegates of the United Colonies of New Hampshire, Massachusetts Bay, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, New Castle, First & Second of Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, & South Carolina

To George Washington Esquire

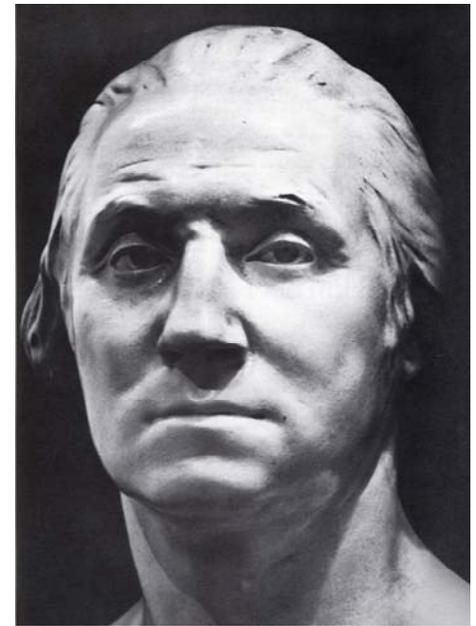
We express especial trust and confidence in your patriotism, conduct and fidelity  
Do by these presents constitute and appoint you to be General and  
Commander in chief of the army of the United Colonies one of all the forces raised or to be raised by them and of all others who shall voluntarily offer their services and join the  
said army for the relief of American Slaves, and for repelling every hostile invasion thereof And you are hereby vested with full power and authority to act as you shall think  
for the good and welfare of the service And we do hereby strictly charge and require all officers and soldiers under your command to be obedient to your orders & diligent in the exercise of their several duties  
And we do also enjoin and require you to be careful in executing the great trust reposed in you by causing strict discipline and order to be observed in the army and that the soldiers are duly exercised and  
provided with all convenient necessaries And you are to regulate your conduct in every respect by the rules and discipline of war (as herewith given you) and punctually to observe any  
such rules and directions from time to time as you shall receive from this or a future Congress of the said United Colonies or a Committee of Congress for that purpose appointed

This Commission to continue in force until revoked by this or a future Congress

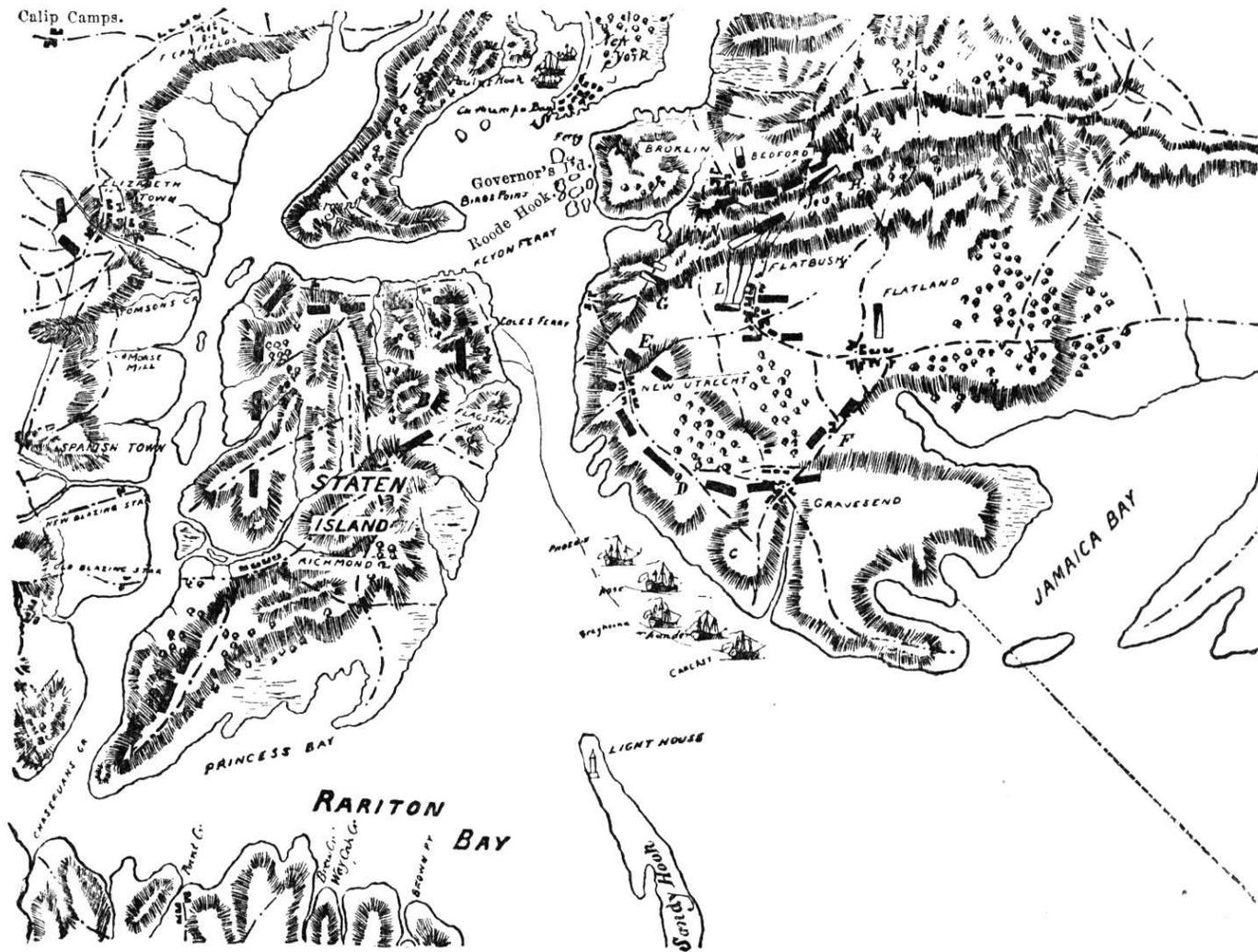
Dated Philadelphia June 15<sup>th</sup> 1775

Attest: Cha: Thomson fecit

By order of the Congress  
John Hancock President

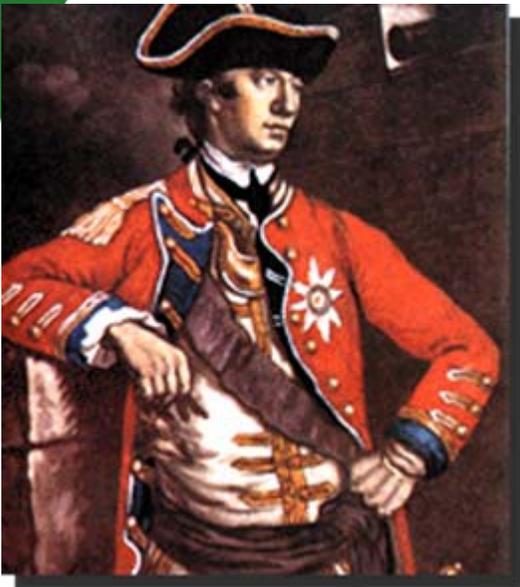


- At the Second Continental Congress in 1775 John Adams nominated George Washington to serve as Commander-in-Chief of the ragtag American Army fighting the British in Boston.
- He promptly set off for Boston, where he oversaw the American effort to keep the British bottled up in Boston. After occupying Dorchester Heights with troops and canon, the British abandoned Boston and regrouped in Halifax, Nova Scotia.
- Washington correctly surmised that the next British objective would be New York City, and moved his Army to New York to make preparations for the English onslaught.
- The ensuing Battle of Long Island and retreat from Brooklyn Heights would be the first time Washington commanded Continental forces in actual combat operations against the British.

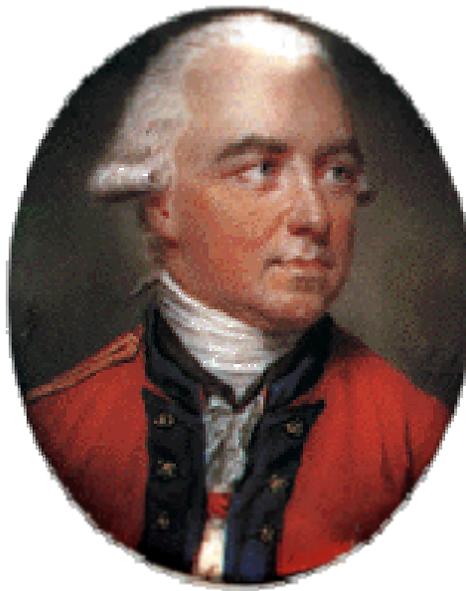


- Between late June and early August 1776 the British landed on Staten Island with the **largest amphibious force ever assembled in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century**: 30 battleships with 1200 cannon, with 300 support vessels manned by **10,000 sailors**, and embarking **32,000 ground troops**.





William Howe

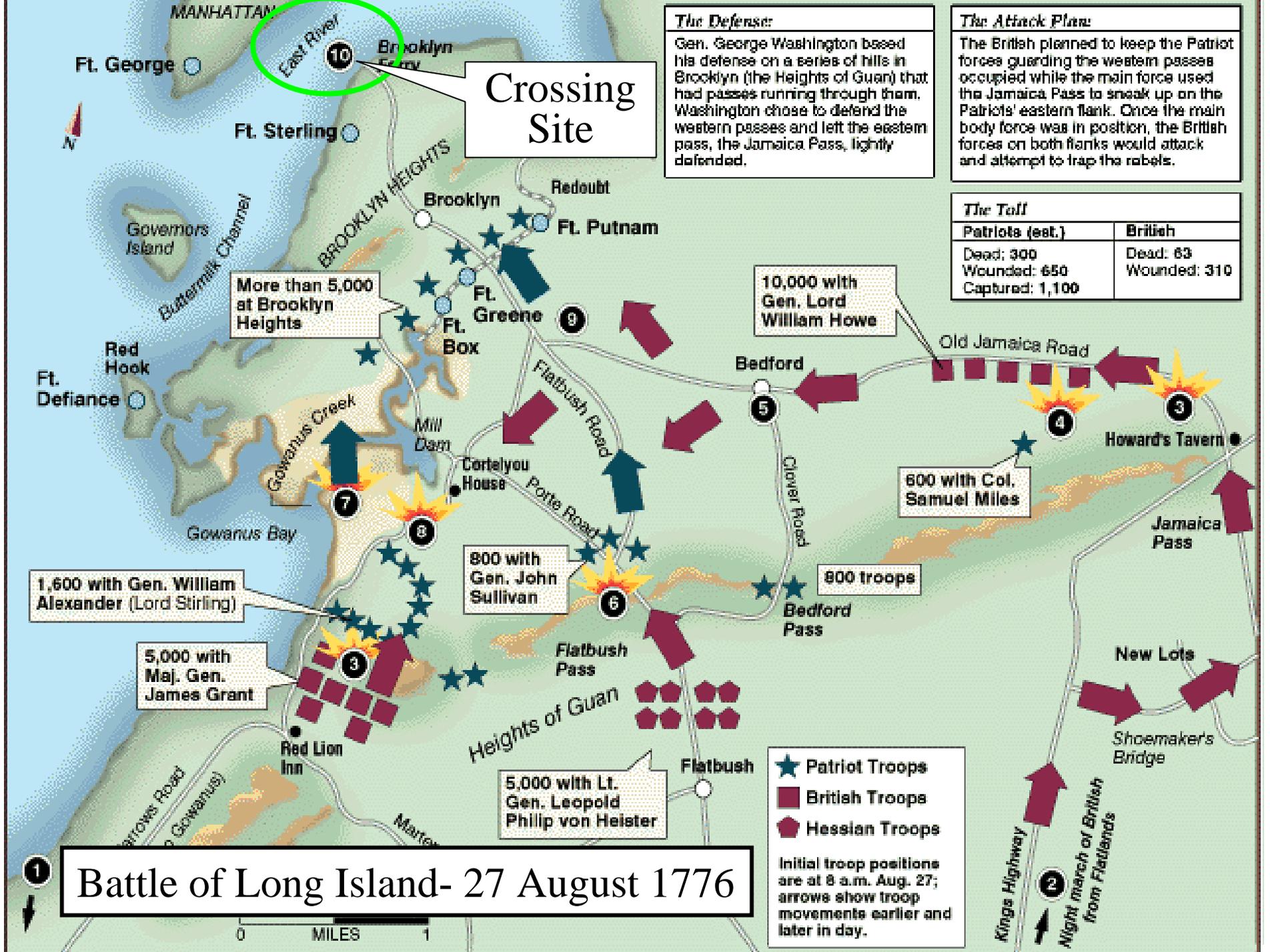


Henry Clinton



Washington

- Washington deployed 3000 men in forward positions on the Heights of Gowan and on Brooklyn Heights, overlooking Flatbush, Flatlands, and Jamaica Bay.
- He retained 6000 troops in the Brooklyn forts, three miles behind the ridge. The Americans were out-numbered three-to-one.
- **British General Henry Clinton** proposed to Howe that they outflank the American positions by marching 3 miles north of the Bedford Road and climbing the ridge through the unguarded Jamaica Pass.



**The Defense:**  
 Gen. George Washington based his defense on a series of hills in Brooklyn (the Heights of Guan) that had passes running through them. Washington chose to defend the western passes and left the eastern pass, the Jamaica Pass, lightly defended.

**The Attack Plan:**  
 The British planned to keep the Patriot forces guarding the western passes occupied while the main force used the Jamaica Pass to sneak up on the Patriots' eastern flank. Once the main body force was in position, the British forces on both flanks would attack and attempt to trap the rebels.

**Crossing Site**

**The Toll**

Patriots (est.)	British
Dead: 300	Dead: 63
Wounded: 650	Wounded: 310
Captured: 1,100	

**Battle of Long Island- 27 August 1776**

More than 5,000 at Brooklyn Heights

10,000 with Gen. Lord William Howe

600 with Col. Samuel Miles

1,600 with Gen. William Alexander (Lord Stirling)

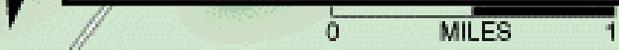
5,000 with Maj. Gen. James Grant

800 with Gen. John Sullivan

5,000 with Lt. Gen. Leopold Philip von Heister

★ Patriot Troops  
 ■ British Troops  
 ◆ Hessian Troops

Initial troop positions are at 8 a.m. Aug. 27; arrows show troop movements earlier and later in day.



# Johnston's 1878 Map

- The most authoritative map of the Battle of Long Island and Retreat from Brooklyn Heights was compiled and published by Henry P. Johnston in 1878



# Using GIS to view the battlefield

- We scanned Johnston's 1878 map and selected various landmarks as points of registry we could lay over present day maps and charts.
- We used the program **ArcGlobe** within **ArcGIS 9.1** to overlay **Johnston's 1878 map** on a present-day **USGS 10 meter Digital Elevation Model (DEM)**
- This can then be rotated in space to provide a bird's eye view of the battlefield topography

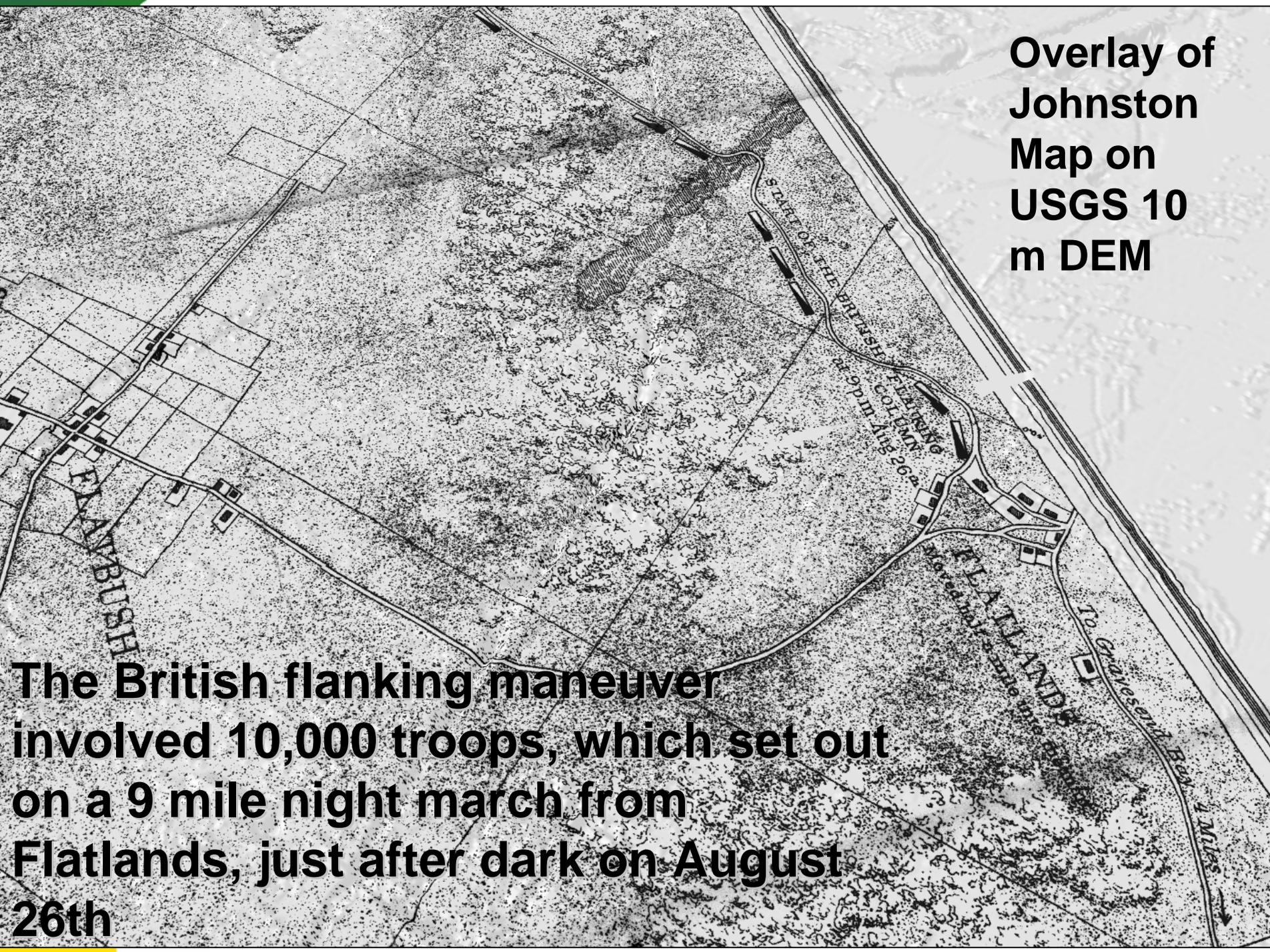
Sullivan

Heister's  
Hessian  
Division

Stirling Parsons

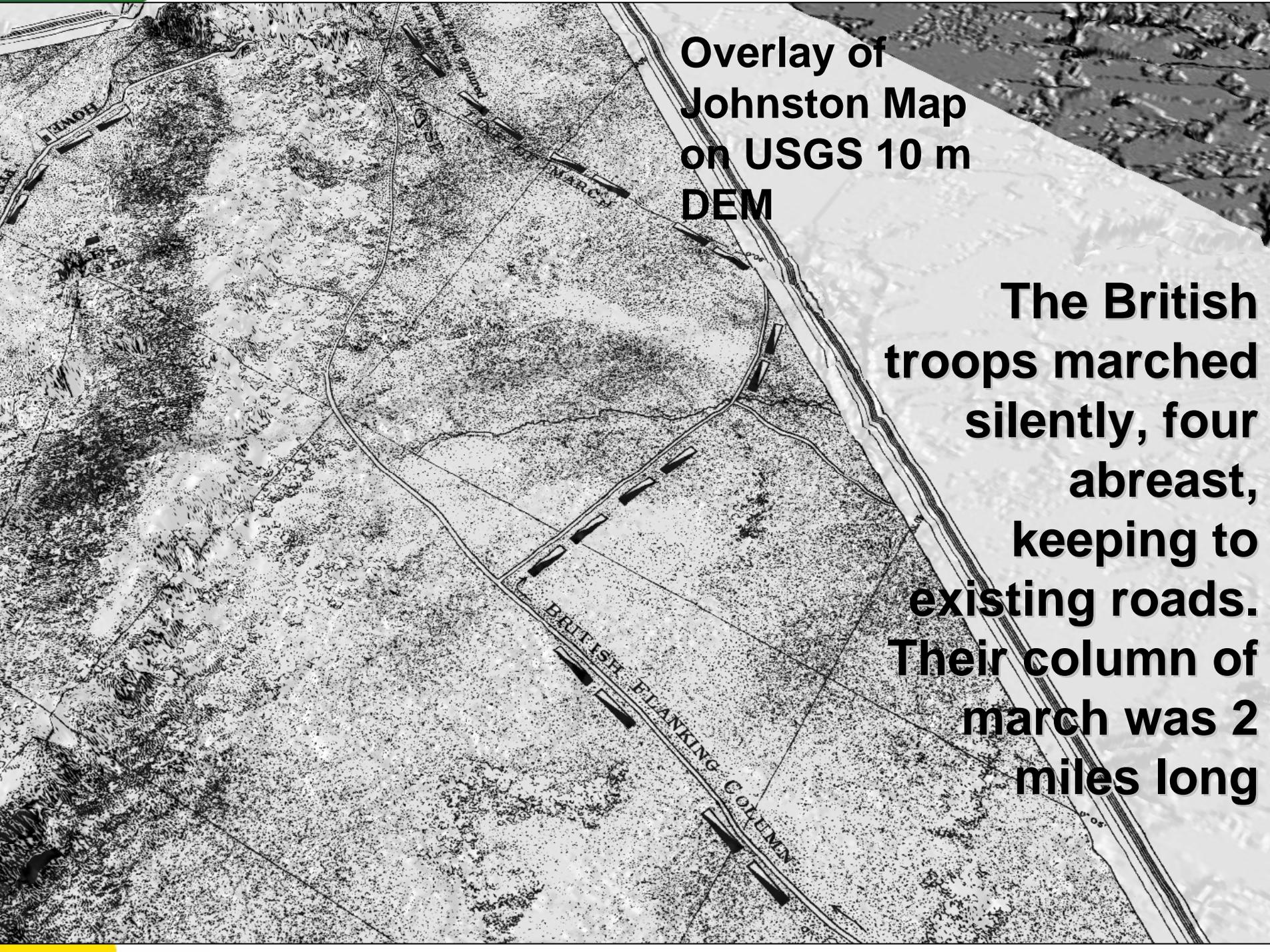
Grant's  
Brigades

Bird's eye view of the  
American's forward  
positions – spread out  
over 6 miles



**Overlay of  
Johnston  
Map on  
USGS 10  
m DEM**

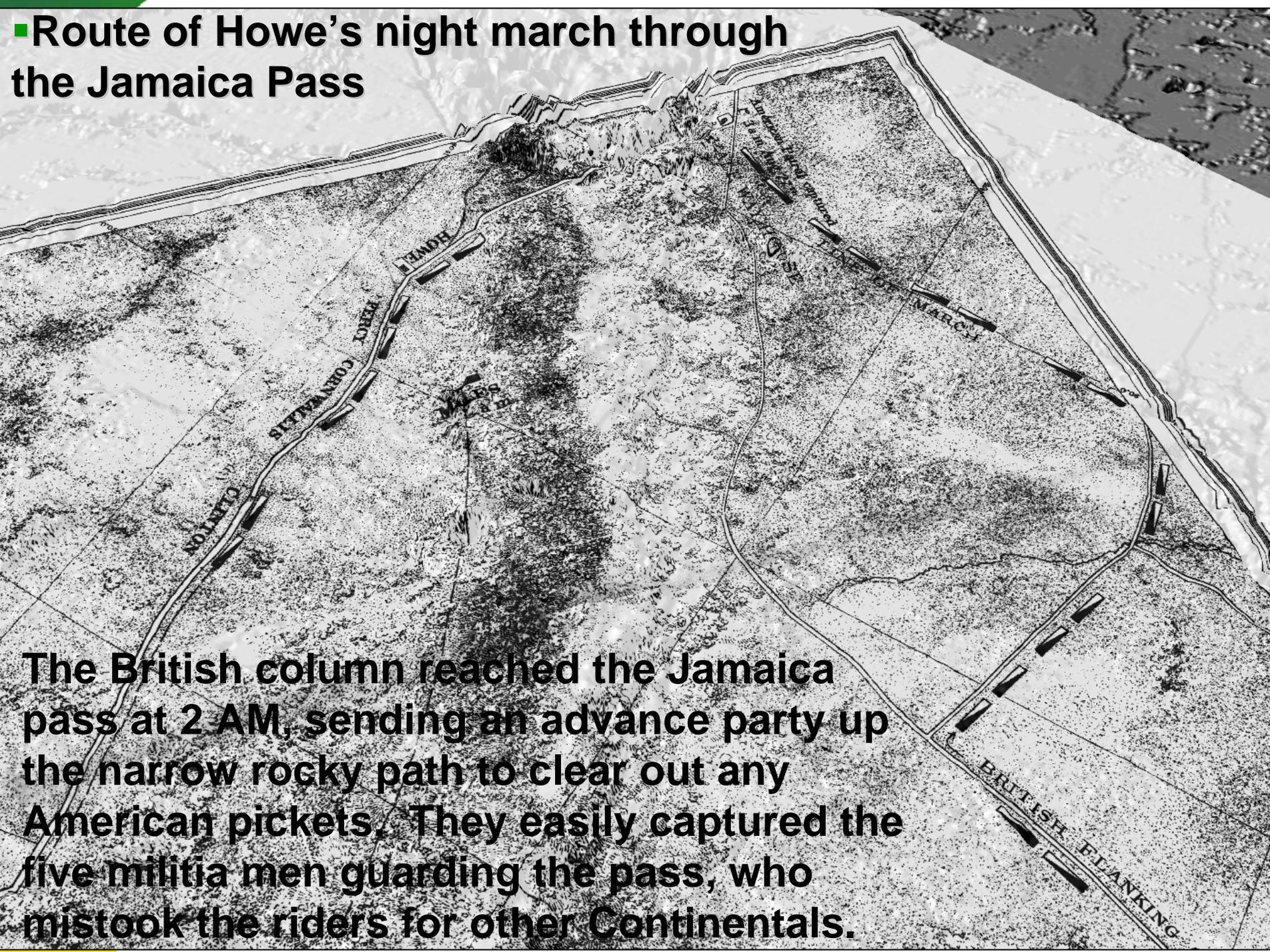
**The British flanking maneuver  
involved 10,000 troops, which set out  
on a 9 mile night march from  
Flatlands, just after dark on August  
26th**



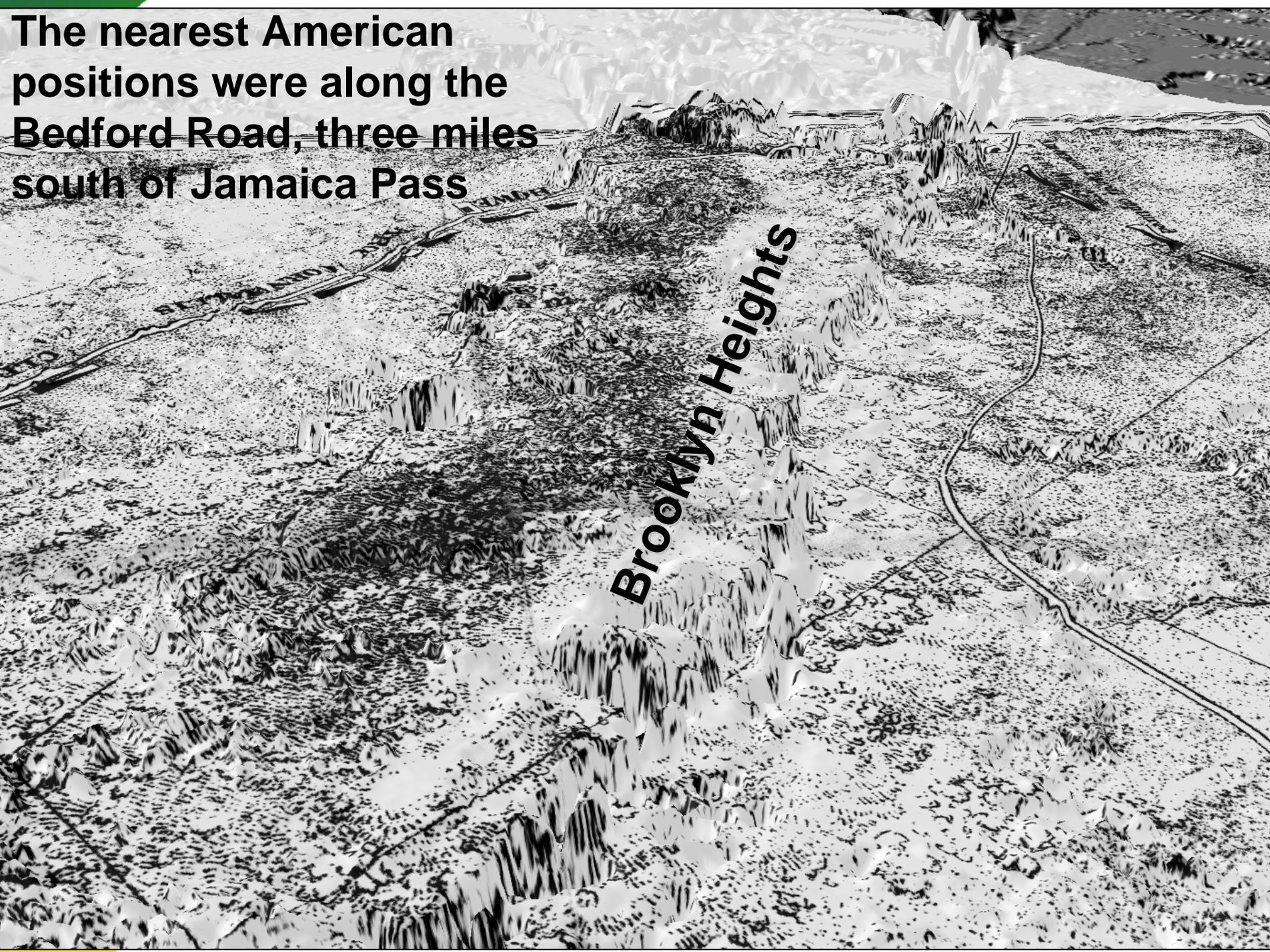
**Overlay of  
Johnston Map  
on USGS 10 m  
DEM**

**The British  
troops marched  
silently, four  
abreast,  
keeping to  
existing roads.  
Their column of  
march was 2  
miles long**

## ■ Route of Howe's night march through the Jamaica Pass

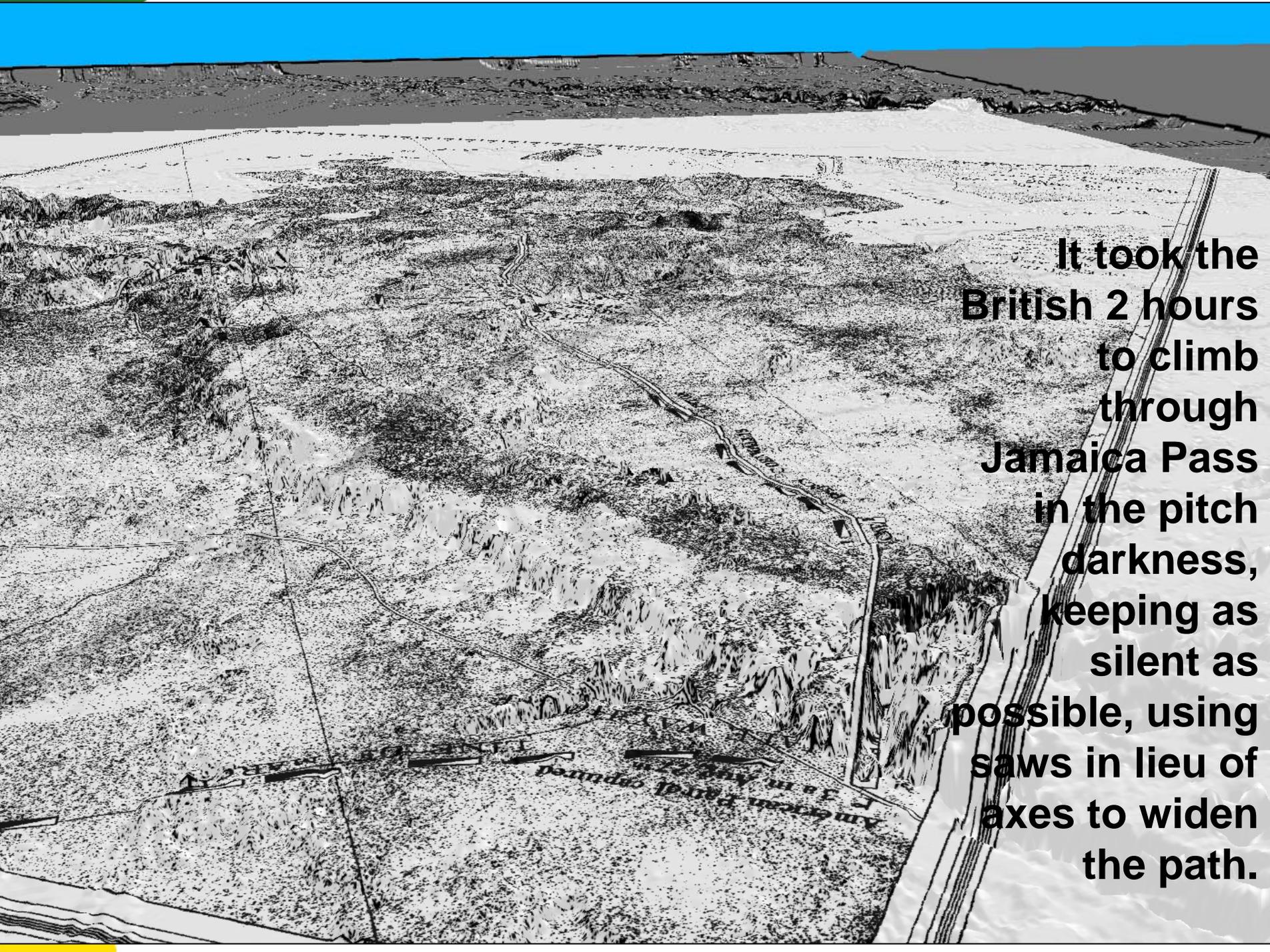


The British column reached the Jamaica pass at 2 AM, sending an advance party up the narrow rocky path to clear out any American pickets. They easily captured the five militia men guarding the pass, who mistook the riders for other Continentals.



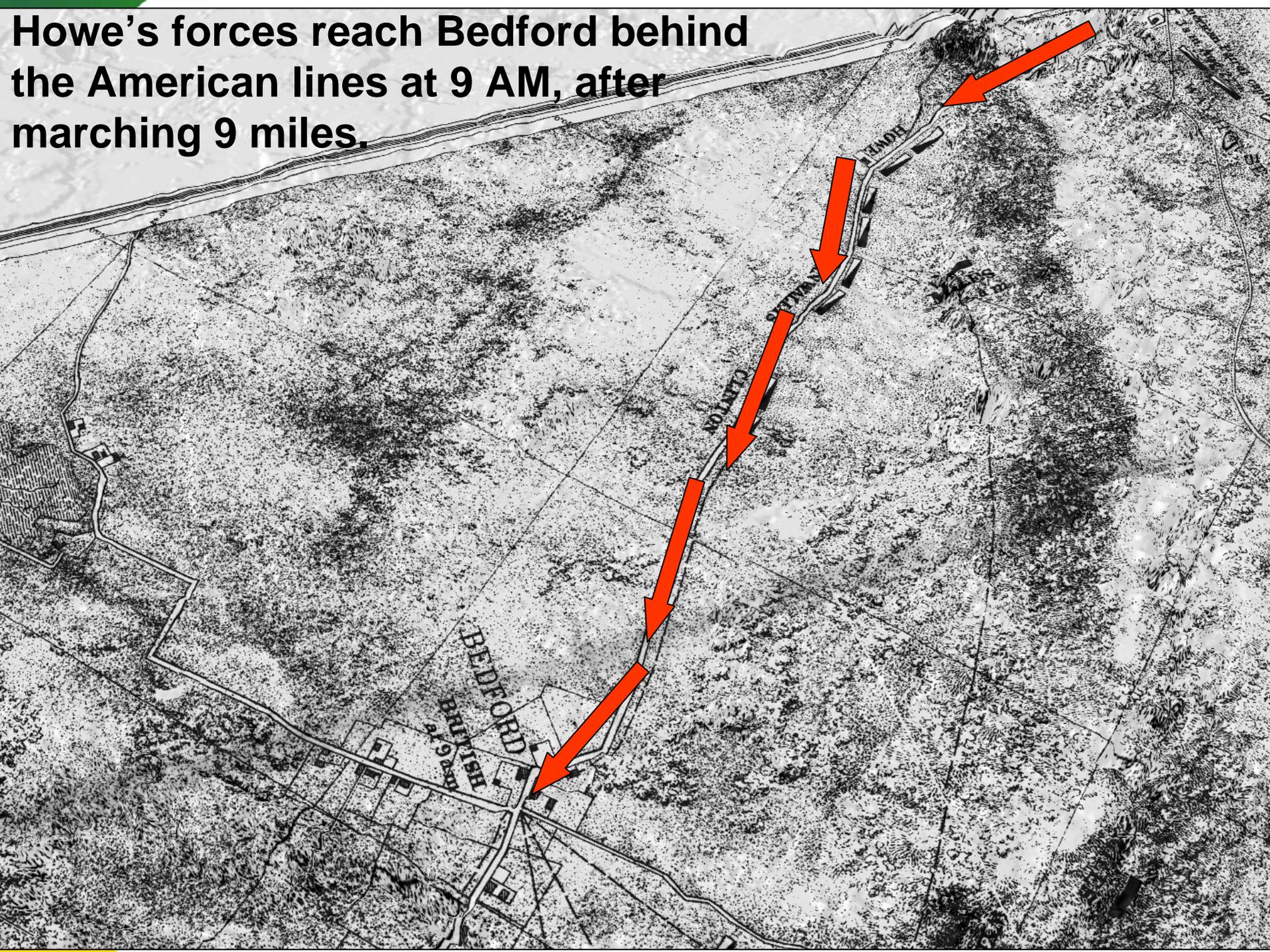
The nearest American positions were along the Bedford Road, three miles south of Jamaica Pass

Brooklyn Heights

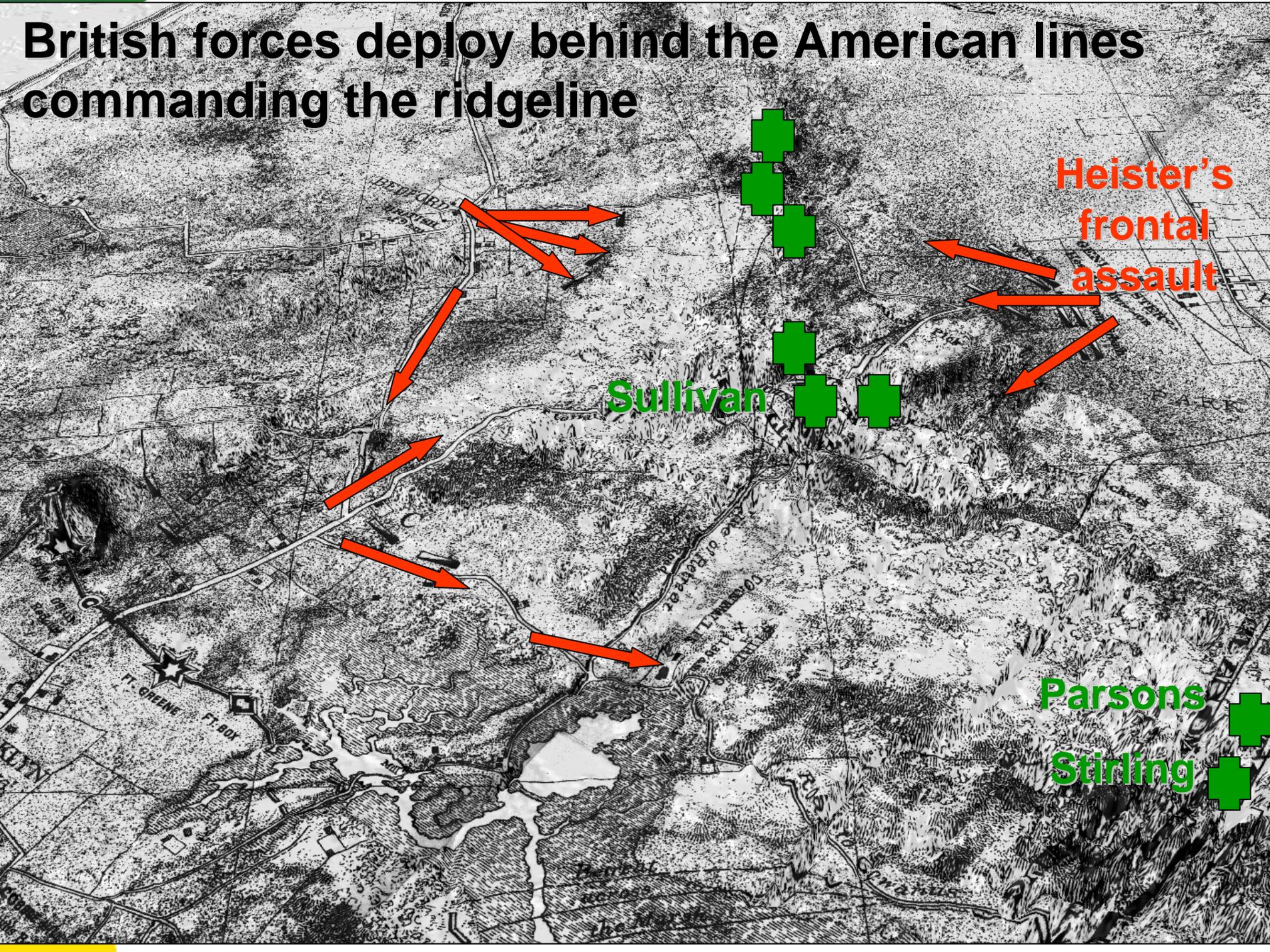


**It took the British 2 hours to climb through Jamaica Pass in the pitch darkness, keeping as silent as possible, using saws in lieu of axes to widen the path.**

**Howe's forces reach Bedford behind the American lines at 9 AM, after marching 9 miles.**



# British forces deploy behind the American lines commanding the ridgeline

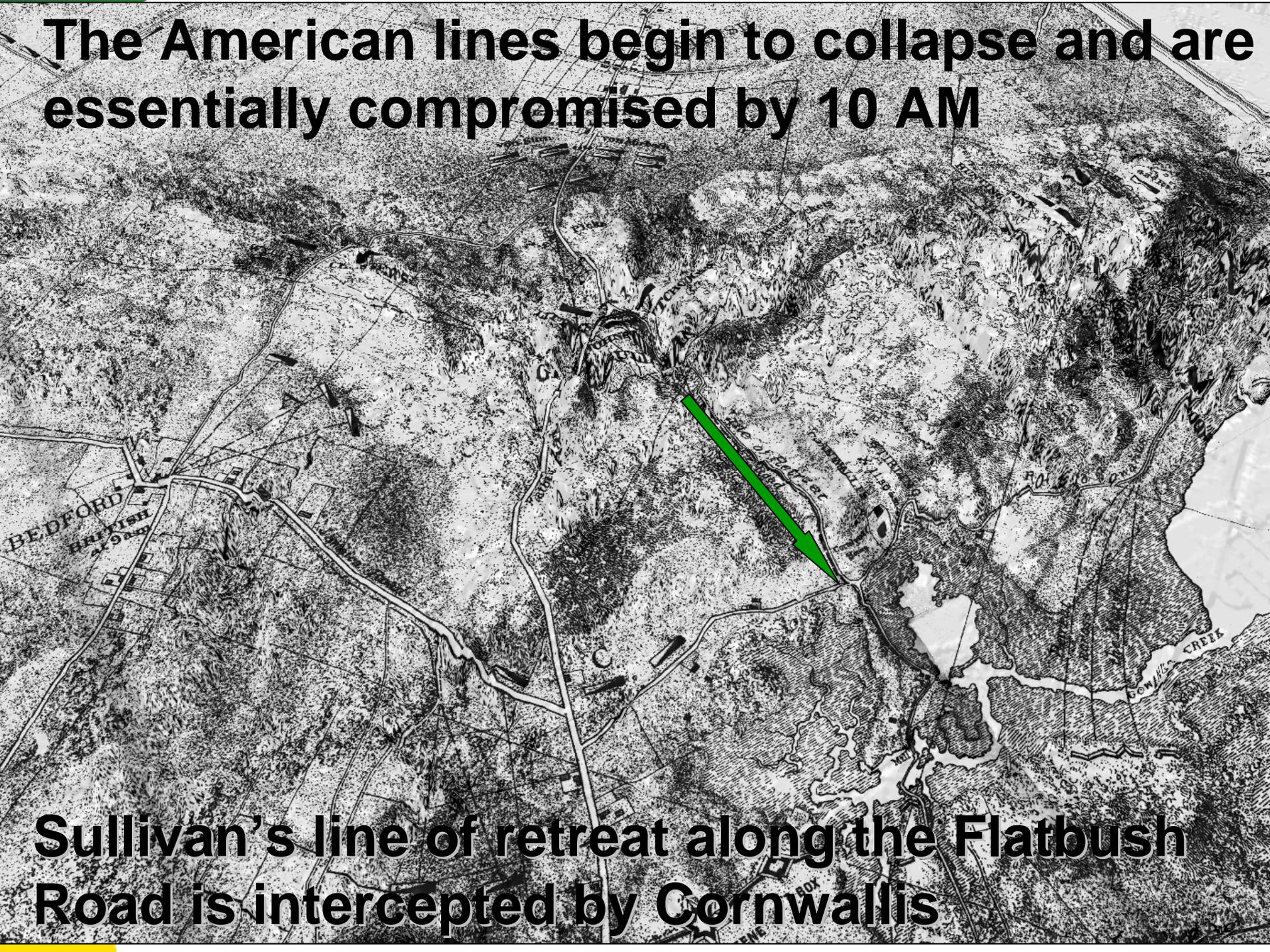


Heister's frontal assault

Sullivan

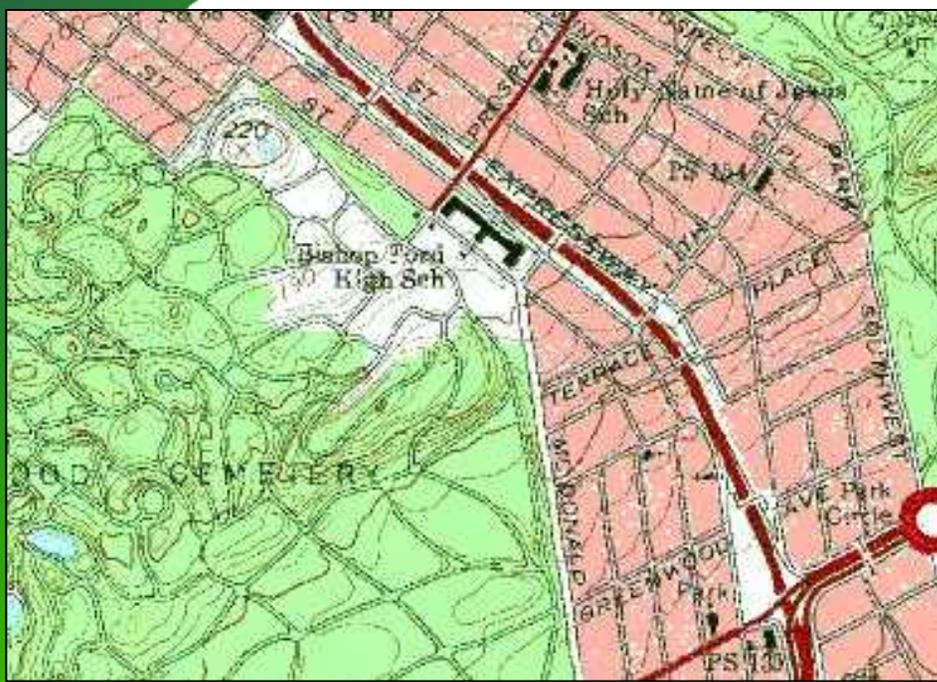
Parsons  
Stirling

**The American lines begin to collapse and are essentially compromised by 10 AM**



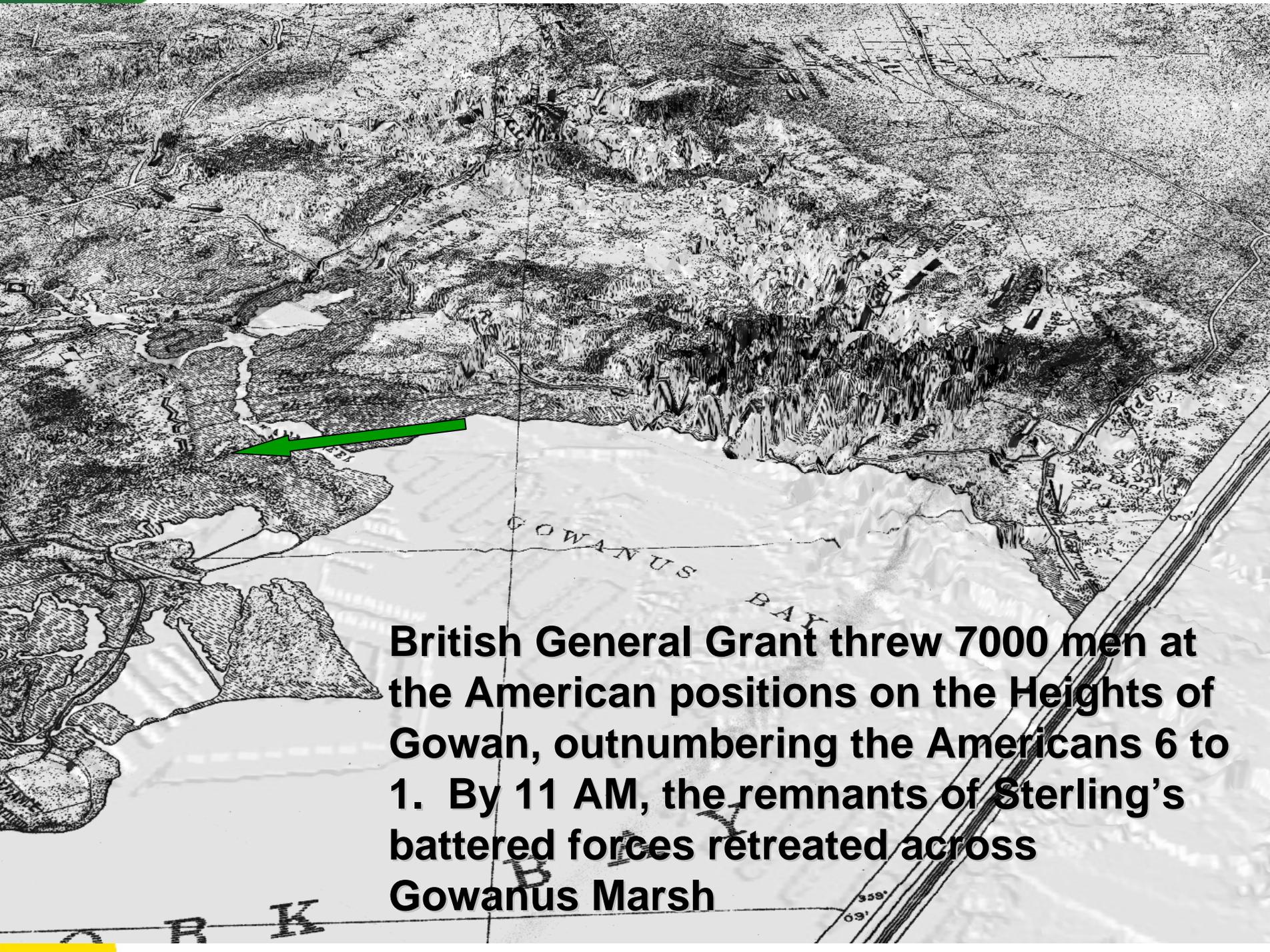
**Sullivan's line of retreat along the Flatbush Road is intercepted by Cornwallis**

# Battle Hill



- At an elevation of 220 feet Battle Hill is the highest point in Brooklyn, now occupied by Greenwood Cemetery in Sunset Park
- This is where where the sacrifice of the **Maryland 400** occurred during the Battle of Long Island. Only 2 men managed to return to the American lines.
- By holding their positions and sacrificing their lives the Maryland regiment bought time for Washington's army to retreat and fight another day.
- The **Delaware Regiment** fended off a much larger British force and protected the Continental's right flank.





**British General Grant threw 7000 men at the American positions on the Heights of Gowanus, outnumbering the Americans 6 to 1. By 11 AM, the remnants of Sterling's battered forces retreated across Gowanus Marsh**



- On August 27<sup>th</sup>, the British lost 63 killed and 337 wounded and missing, while the Americans lost about 970 men killed, wounded or missing, and 1,079 taken captive.
- **The Continental Army had lost almost a quarter of his entire strength.**



- Alerted to the attack, **Washington** crossed over to Brooklyn around 9AM on the 27<sup>th</sup>. he remained cool and confident, as the battle raged out in front of his position, in the Brooklyn forts.
- The next day he ordered additional troops brought across the East River, giving him a force of 9,000 men against a British and German force of 14,600.
- The British now occupied the high ground, allowing them to look down slightly on the American forts in Brooklyn.



- During the afternoon of the 27th the **weather turned sour**. A serendipitous downpour made further British attacks unlikely.
- American troops found it hard to cook their food or to keep their powder dry (open pan flintlocks).
- But, unfavorable northeast winds also prevented Admiral Howe from moving his ships into New York Bay into the mouth of the East River, preventing encirclement.





- Reeling from the American's embarrassing and lopsided defeat, **Washington realized that he was now trapped between General Howe's forces and Lord Howe's fleet.**
- He had split his troops between Manhattan and Long Island, with the Hudson River, East River, and Long Island Sound all controlled by British warships.



- **Admiral Richard Howe, the brother of General Howe, could cut off Washington's forces if he moved his ships from the New Jersey Shore to the East River.**



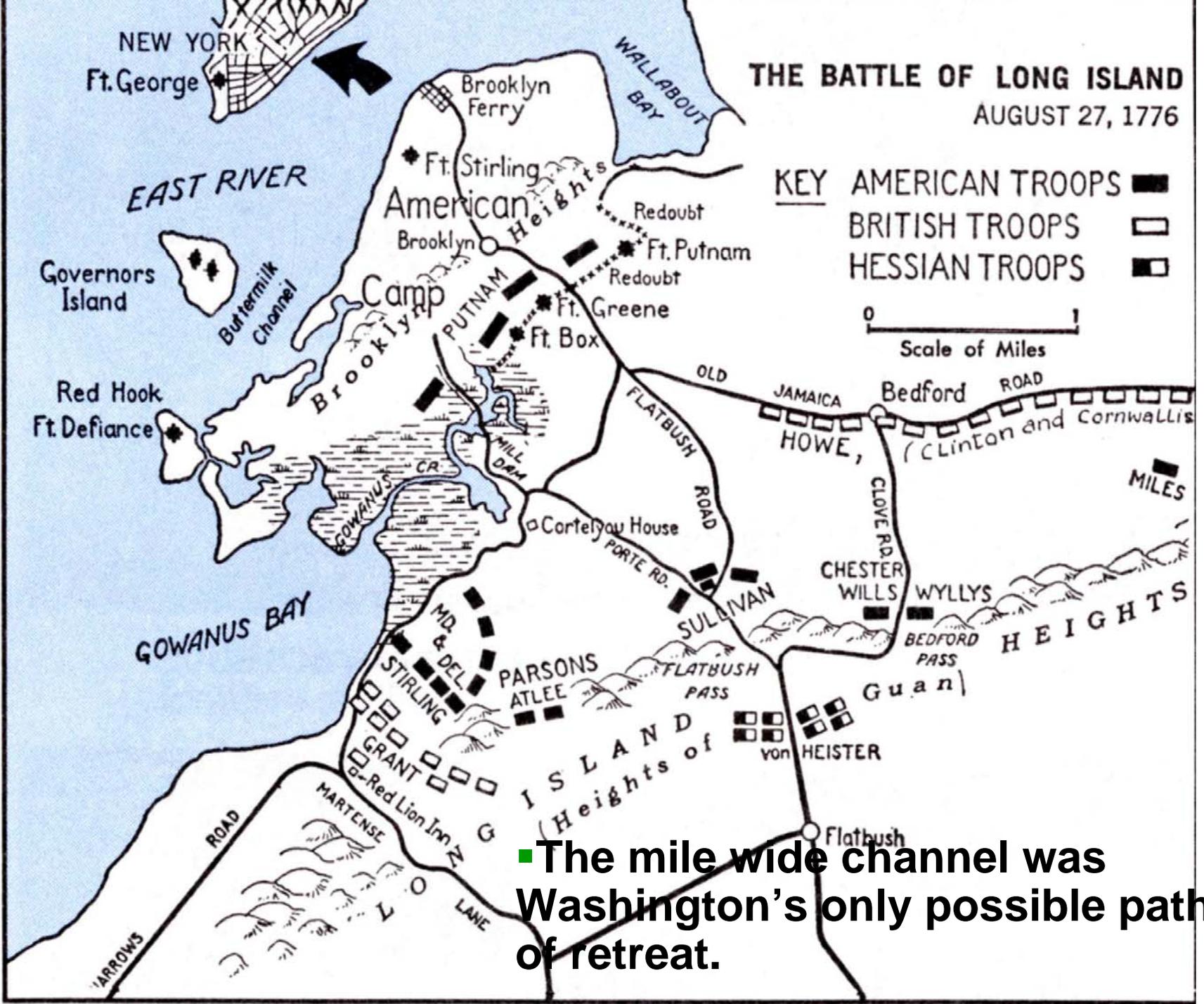
Lord Howe was known as "Black Dick" because he seldom smiled.

# THE BATTLE OF LONG ISLAND

AUGUST 27, 1776

**KEY**  
 AMERICAN TROOPS ■  
 BRITISH TROOPS □  
 HESSIAN TROOPS ◻

0 1  
 Scale of Miles



■ The mile wide channel was Washington's only possible path of retreat.



- Though threatened, the American position provided topographic screening of Brooklyn Ferry by enemy forces



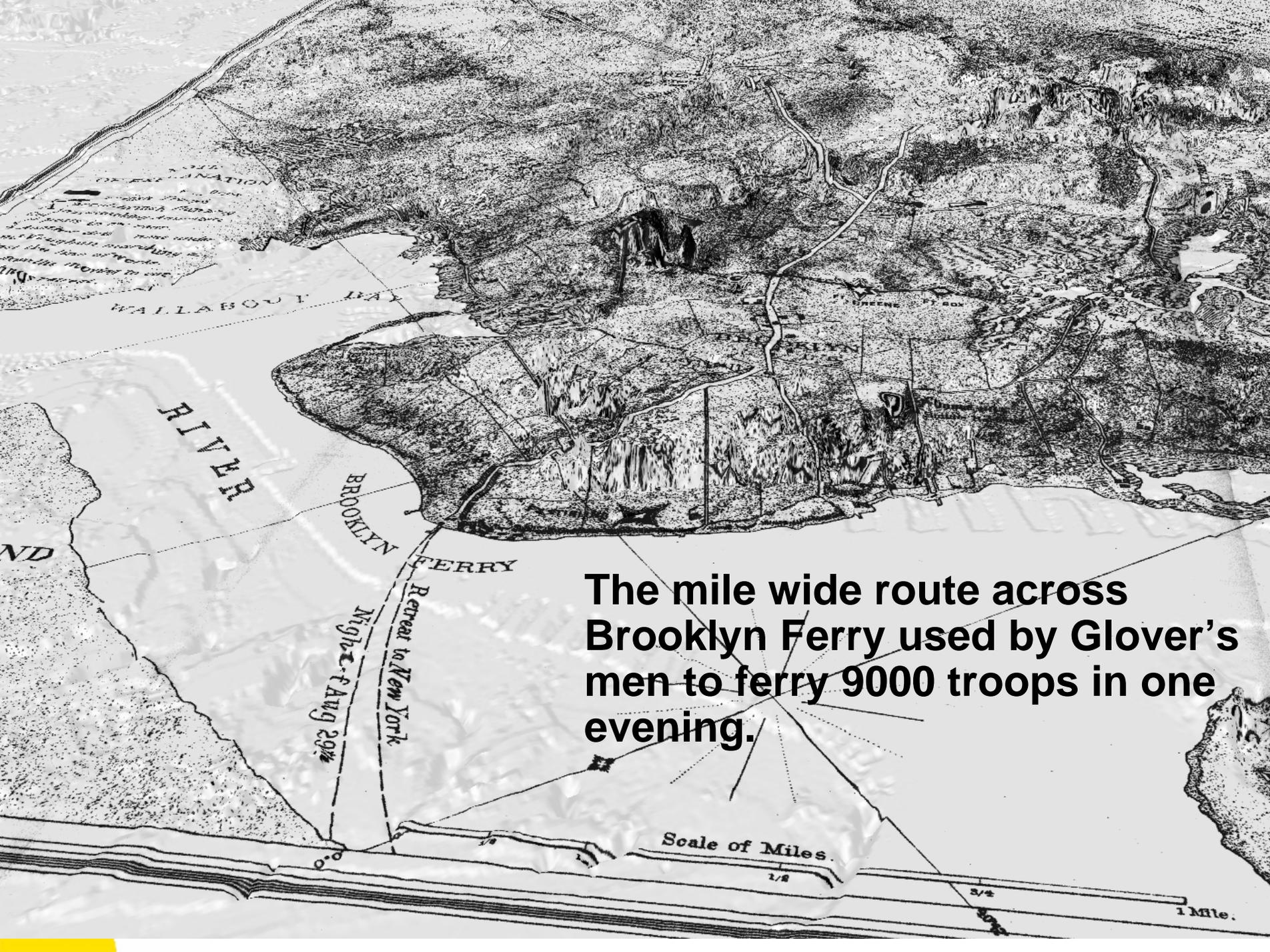
- **Rain, lightning, thunder and vicious winds continued intermittently throughout August 29th.**
- **The poor weather forestalled further attacks, and Howe's forces busied themselves digging approaches towards the American positions.**
- **That evening it began raining again, but with an unusual northeast breeze.**

# A FEW GOOD MEN...



Colonel John Glover

- Washington turned to the seagoing soldiers of John Glover's 14<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts, known as **“the Marblehead Regiment”** to ferry the American troops across the East River to Manhattan that evening
- Troops were ordered to form up for a night attack, beginning at 9 PM on August 29th.



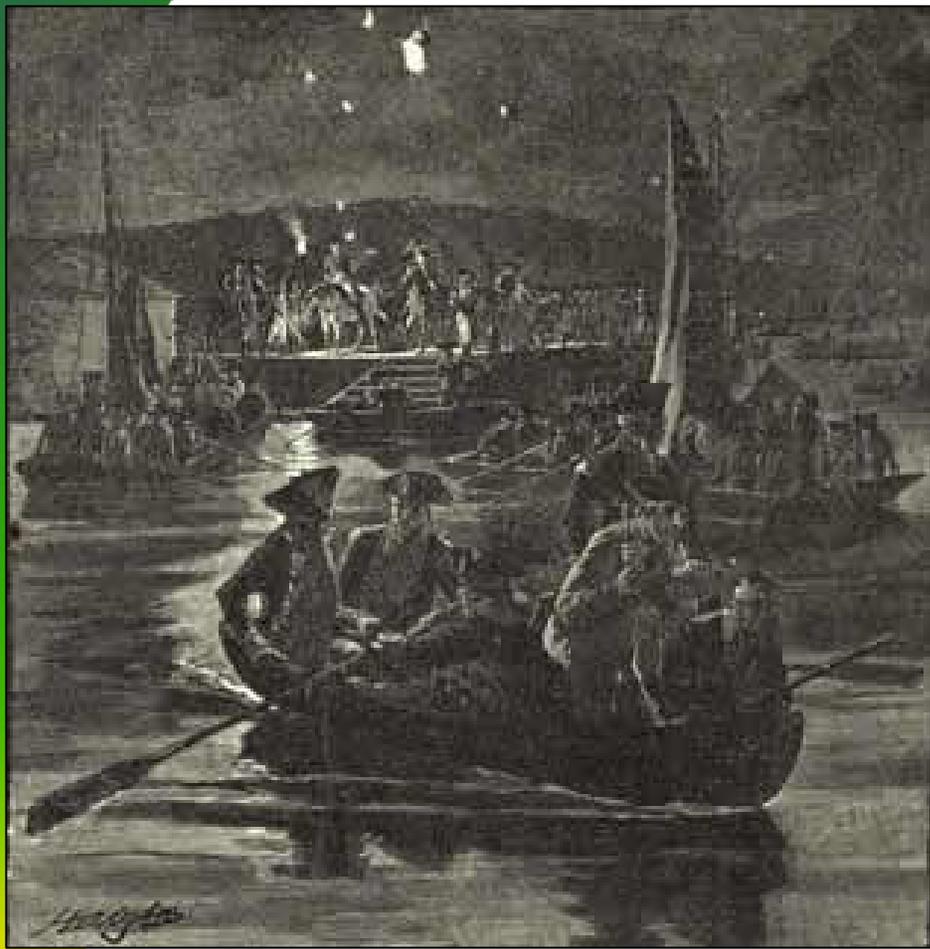
**The mile wide route across Brooklyn Ferry used by Glover's men to ferry 9000 troops in one evening.**

Scale of Miles.

1/2

3/4

1 Mile.



## A northeast wind, followed by calm, then a southwest breeze

- The river was too choppy to cross until 11 PM, when the northeast wind died down

- After an hour of calmness a gentle **southwesterly breeze erupted**, which allowed the Marblehead men to hoist sails, allowing transport of 4 times as many troops per hour.



- **The entire retreat was carried out in strict silence.** By this time the sky had cleared and the moon was shining brightly. British forces were close enough to see all the American defenders, but none of the British sentries noticed anything unusual!



- When first light appeared, the evacuation of 9,000 American troops was far from complete, **the oarsmen needed at least three more hours.** The soldiers occupying the front line trenches and huddled along the beach worried that they would be spotted or left behind
- Then, rising out of the wet ground and off the East River came a **dense fog**, and **the fog covered Brooklyn side of the river.** When the sun rose the miraculous fog did not lift!



- The fog began to disperse around 8 AM on the 30<sup>th</sup>.
- The entire Army was extracted, except for the heaviest caliber canon. Washington took the last boat across, just as the fog was lifting.
- It was seen as a miracle by the troops and providential by Washington. 9000 men had been saved from certain capture or destruction, and the American cause preserved.

# The British were astonished

- **When the British advanced on the American positions around 11 AM they could hardly believe their eyes.** There in the brilliant sunlight was the abandoned American fortifications and camp – totally deserted!
- **Some of the British soldiers ran down to the shore and shot at the last of the departing boats, but the Americans were safely out of range. Washington's army had escaped their grasps to fight another day.**
- **The unusual combination of darkness, fog, the northeast wind blowing down the East River, and bad weather immobilized Admiral Howe's fleet and blinded British sentries.**
- **Washington's cool and firm command exacted superb discipline from green troops, who remained quiet and disciplined throughout the ordeal.**

# One of the greatest retreats in military history

***“Those who are best acquainted with the difficulty, the embarrassment, noise and tumult which attend even by day, and with no enemy at hand, a movement of this nature (the crossing)...will be the first to acknowledge that this retreat should hold a high place among military transactions.”***

**- British military critic**



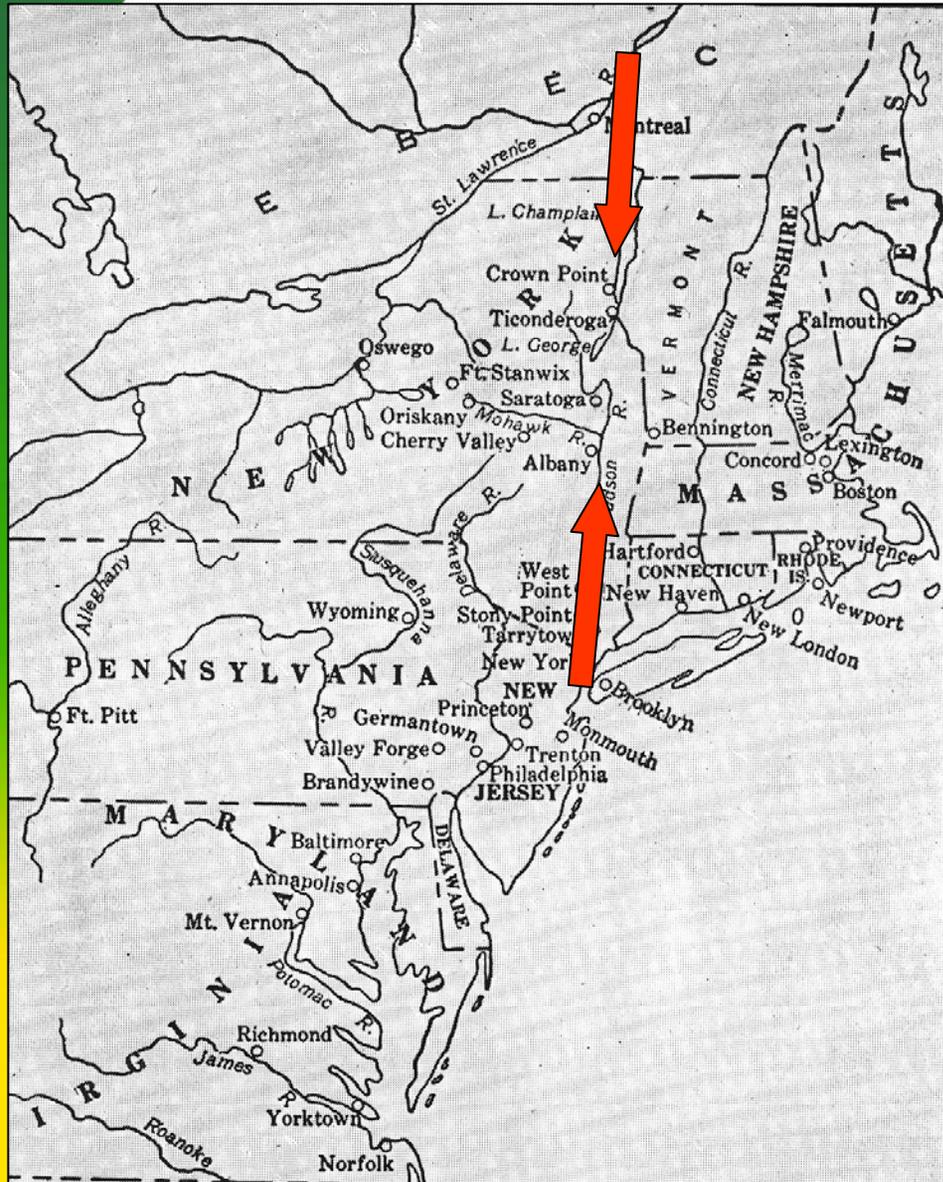
**COL John Glover's Marblehead Mariners also ferried Washington's forces across the Delaware River in one of the greatest surprise attacks in history up until that time.**

**Nearly 1000 Hessian soldiers surrendered after an hour of fighting, while the Americans Washington suffered only six wounded. The victory provided a much needed boost to the morale of the Continental Army.**



## British Strategy fails

- Washington's forces were soundly defeated by superior British forces attacking and occupying New York City in 1776, which they kept until 1783.
- But, British designs on severing the Colonies along the Hudson River Valley failed at Saratoga and Oriskany, where General Burgoyne was soundly defeated by Nathaniel Greene's American forces.
- Kosciusko's defense of the Hudson River at West Point succeeded in blocking the British advance upriver.



**This lecture will be posted at**

**[www.umar.edu/~rogersda/umrcourses/ge342](http://www.umar.edu/~rogersda/umrcourses/ge342)**

**Under heading “Revolutionary War”**

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