The Battle of Rhode Island is lost, August 29, 1778

On this day in history, August 29, 1778, the Battle of Rhode Island is lost. Newport, Rhode Island was one of America's most important ports prior to and during the American Revolution. After capturing New York City in September of 1776, the British captured Newport in December, recognizing that its harbor would be an ideal staging ground for an assault on New York. Newport would be in British hands for the next three years.

Rhode Island's rebel government immediately sought to raise troops and supplies to retake Newport. In early 1778, Major General John Sullivan was given charge of the Rhode Island troops and ordered to assault the city in July. Meanwhile, France declared war on the British and allied with the Americans. The first French soldiers arrived in America with Admiral Charles Hector, the Comte d'Estaing. Unable to cross the bar into New York's harbor, D'Estaing sailed for Newport to assist Sullivan.

After news of the French involvement, Sullivan had great success in raising militia members to assist in the fight. The Marquis de Lafayette and General Nathanael Greene arrived to assist in the battle. The American generals had over 10,000 troops at their disposal.

D'Estaing's fleet arrived at Newport on August 8th and began unloading 4,000 troops on Conanicut Island the next day after consulting with the generals. Sullivan successfully ferried his 10,000 troops onto Aquidneck Island on the 9th. British General, Sir Robert Pigot, began fortifying Newport from within.

The tide changed when British Admiral Richard Howe arrived with reinforcements. On the 10th, Admiral D'Estaing quickly reloaded his troops and sailed out to do battle with Howe's fleet. As the two forces maneuvered, a great storm arose that tossed the fleets around for

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two days. Separated and damaged, both fleets had to regroup and sail to harbor for repairs. Howe's fleet sailed back to New York, while D'Estaing abandoned his mission to help in the attack on Newport and sailed for Boston.

The departure of D'Estaing greatly angered the Americans. Many in Sullivan's army deserted, thinking it impossible to capture the city without French help. By late August, and already surrounding Newport, Sullivan decided to abandon the attack, his force greatly depleted by desertion. On the 29th, General Pigot began pursuing and caught up to the Americans who were dug in on the northern tip of the island.

The Battle of Rhode Island began as the Americans shot at their pursuers. On the island's main east road, Brigadier General John Glover stopped the British advance. On the main western road, Colonel Christopher Greene's 1st Rhode Island Regiment, the Continental Army's only regiment made up entirely of African-Americans and Indians, repelled several Hessian attacks, inflicting so much destruction that the nearby creek was called Bloody Run Creek because it ran red with Hessian blood.

The next day, the entire American force was successfully ferried across to Tiverton and Bristol, bringing the Battle of Rhode Island to a close. The battle was the largest engagement of the war in New England in terms of men involved with nearly 17,000 fighting. It was a tactical tie, but Britain continued to hold Newport for another year, until it abandoned the city to focus its efforts on New York and a new campaign to take the southern colonies.