THE BATTLE OF BUNKER HILL FROM A STRATEGIC POINT OF VIEW.

BY CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS.

NINE days ago, on the 14th of this month, commemorative services were held in Boston by the Bunker Hill Monument Association, in honor of Col. William Prescott, that being the centennial anniversary of Col. Prescott's death. An oration marked by a high order of eloquence and much valuable reflection was then delivered by Dr. William Everett. In listening to Dr. Everett, however, I waited curiously in expectation of one line of thought which apparently did not occur to him. A text for that line of thought might have been found in Chancellor Oxenstiern's famous remark as to "the little wisdom with which the world is governed"; or, in another remark made by Frederick the Great somewhere between the second and third Silesian wars, in which he announced that never again in his life would he voluntarily engage in warfare "even with a cat," because in the conflicts in which he had already been concerned, he had been led to notice how much the result depended on chance.

The battle of Bunker Hill was a marked illustration of the truth of both these remarks, affording, as it does, one of the most singular examples on record of what might be called the "balancing of blunders" between opposing sides. So far as the American, or what we call the Patriot cause, was concerned, it ought to have resulted in irretrievable disaster, for on no correct military principle could the operation be defended; and yet, owing to the superior capacity for blundering of the British commanders, the movement was in its actual results a brilliant

success, and, indeed, could hardly have been made more so had the American commanders controlled for that occasion the movements of both sides, and so issued orders to their opponents. Looking over the accounts of that battle and examining the maps of the ground upon which it was fought, it is difficult to understand how the Americans could knowingly have put themselves in such an absurd position; much more how the British should have so utterly failed to take advantage of the mistakes of their inexperienced opponents.

In 1775, Charlestown, including Breed's Hill, was a peninsula of limited size and hilly formation, connected with the mainland by a single narrow causeway, which was, at times of sufficiently high tide, itself overflowed. When, therefore, on the night of the 16th-17th June, Col. Prescott led his force across the causeway and established it upon Breed's Hill, he put himself and those who followed him in a trap where, with an enemy having complete control of the sea, and so commanding his rear and both flanks, it was merely necessary to snap the door and hold him utterly powerless either to escape or resist. He had literally thrust his head into the lion's mouth.

When, therefore, the guns of their ships woke up the British officers in Boston on the morning of the 17th of June, had there been any, even a moderate, degree of military capacity in their commander, he would have ejaculated his fervent thanks to Heaven that his enemy had thus delivered himself into his hands; and proceeded incontinently to bag him. All he needed to do was to move a sufficient detachment round by water to the causeway connecting Charlestown with the mainland, seize it under cover of the fire of his ships and floating batteries, there establish himself, and quietly wait a few hours for the enemy to come down to surrender, or come out to be killed. Probably it would not have been necessary for him to fire a gun; for his enemy had not even

placed himself upon the summit of Bunker Hill, which commanded Charlestown Neck, but had absolutely moved forward to the lower summit of Breed's Hill, between Bunker Hill and Boston, from which point, with a powerful and well equipped enemy in undisputed control of the water, he would have been unable to escape and powerless to annoy. In the position of a rat when the door of a trap is securely sprung behind it, for the Americans the only alternative to an ignominious surrender would have been a general engagement, in which, a mere mob, they must attack a well-armed and disciplined opponent, on ground of his own selection and covered by the fire of his fleet. Such an engagement, under the circumstances then existing, could, apparently, have had but one result. The patriot forces must have been routed and dispersed; for, hardly more than a partially armed militia muster, they were without organization or discipline, and only inadequately supplied with weapons, artillery or munitions.

The untenable position into which the patriots had blundered, and the course to pursue in dealing with them, were, from a military point of view, so obvious, that, in the council of war then held, it was at once urged, it is said, by a majority of the British officers with Clinton at their head. Instead of following it, a sufficient force of British was sent across to Charlestown, landed directly in the face of their enemy, and proceeded to take the American entrenchments by assault; finally, after great loss, doing so, and absolutely driving the rat out of the trap, of which the British commander had left the door wide open.

A more singular exhibition of apparently unconscious temerity on one side, and professional military incapacity on the other, it would be difficult to imagine.

Under these circumstances, it becomes somewhat curious to consider the actuating causes of the operations on that day. Who was responsible for what took place?

It is sometimes claimed that, so far as the Americans

were concerned, their object was to force the fight with a view to firing the colonial heart, and that the result entirely justified the calculation. This may be true. Nevertheless, on the other side, it is apparent that, unless the American commanders calculated with absolute certainty upon the utter incapacity of their opponents, by the precise move then made they placed the cause which they had at heart in most imminent jeopardy. If, instead of attacking the American line in front exactly at the point where it was prepared for attack and ready to resist, the British had operated by sea and land in their rear, it is difficult to see what could have saved the patriot cause from a complete collapse. If Colonel Prescott and his detachment had been obliged to surrender, and been marched prisoners into Boston, it would only have remained for Gage, by a vigorous movement from Charlestown in the direction of Cambridge, only two miles away, to have dispersed the patriot army, and made any further organized armed resistance practically impossible. It is quite out of the question to suppose that those who assumed to guide the patriot operations could have measured this risk, and then knowingly have taken it. There are limits to any amount of rashness, except that of ignorance.

While the course which should have been pursued by the British commander was thus apparent, the theory of the patriots is more difficult to explain. The action taken on the night of June 16 had been decided upon at a counsel of civilians and military officers held at Cambridge. In accordance with the recommendations contained in a report of the Board of Engineers, it was then deemed desirable to occupy Bunker's Hill. At the same time, however, provision was to be made for apparently a simultaneous occupation of Winter and Prospect Hills on the other, or land, side of Charlestown Neck. This plan of operations is at once intelligible. If, at the same time that Bunker Hill was occupied, Prospect and Winter Hills

also had been occupied, the patriot army would have commanded Charlestown Neck, and, by preventing a landing there, could have kept communication open between their army and the advanced force thrown out and in occupation of the Charlestown peninsula. To do this successfully, implied, it is true, the control of a body of artillery and munitions far in excess of what the provincial force had; but still, from a military point of view the plan was well conceived, and, if successfully carried out, would have compelled the immediate evacuation of Boston.

But, had this line of operation been pursued, it would have been quite needless to occupy Breed's Hill, inasmuch as that was commanded by Bunker Hill, and could have been seized at any time.

If such was the general plan of operations under which Colonel Prescott's movement of the 16th of June was ordered, the next question is, who was responsible for its failure? Its success involved two things,—first, the seizing of Bunker's Hill; and, secondly, and at the same time, the erection of works upon Prospect and Winter Hills, or the high ground at the base of those hills commanding Charlestown Neck and the adjacent water. It is impossible to ascertain who, if any one, was then in command of the left wing of the provincial army. If any one, it was Putnam. During the following day he was most active in all parts of the field, and seems to have been recognized as the general officer in command of the entire field of operations, while unquestionably Colonel Prescott was in immediate command of the detachment on Bunker's Hill. He occupied the position of a brigadier-general whose command was in action; while Putnam held the position of chief of the grand division of which Prescott's command was a part. Certainly, on the night succeeding the engagement, General Putnam was sufficiently active in holding and fortifying Prospect Hill, and was then recognized as in command of the left wing of Ward's

army. If, therefore, any one was responsible for the failure to carry out that essential part of the original plan of operations which included the fortification of the ground which commanded Charlestown Neck from the land side, it was Putnam.

But the truth probably is that no one was responsible. The lack of organization in the patriot army was then such, that no distinctive and recognized officer was in command of the left wing. Prescott had his orders direct from the headquarters at Cambridge; and the other officers with separate commands seem, throughout what took place, to have taken orders, or declined to take them, pretty much as they saw fit.

It is, however, useless to venture surmises on this head. The essential fact is that Prescott was ordered to march across Charlestown Neck and to occupy Bunker Hill; and did so, leaving his rear wholly unprotected. After that, on his own responsibility, he exposed himself to great additional risk by advancing from the summit of Bunker Hill, from which he overlooked both Breed's Hill in his front, and his single line of retreat across Charlestown Neck in his rear, to the lower summit before him, at which point he was helplessly in the trap, unless his opponent, by coming at him in front, drove him bodily out of the hole in which he had put himself. They did just that!

As I have said, the singular thing in all these operations, from beginning to end, is that, if the patriot army had been commanded by a military genius of the highest order, and gifted with absolute prescience,—having, moreover, the power to issue commands to both sides,—he could not, so far as the Americans were concerned, have bettered the course of events. The whole purpose of the move was to forestall the proposed operations of the British, who planned on the 18th, only a day later, to occupy Bunker Hill and Dorchester Heights preliminary to an advance on

the patriot lines at Cambridge. It was intended to draw their fire. If, in doing this, Prescott had, in obedience to his orders and as technically he unquestionably should have done, contented himself with seizing Bunker Hill and there intrenching, it can hardly be questioned that the British would then have landed on Charlestown Neck, immediately in his rear, and forced him to retreat precipitately as the alternative to surrender. His very reckless audacity in moving forward to Breed's Hill led to their attacking him squarely in front.

Had Prescott directed the assaulting column he would have ordered it to do just that. But his good fortune did not end here. Twice he repulsed the attacking force, inflicting terrible loss upon it; and this is his great claim for credit on that memorable day. Prescott was evidently a fighter. He showed that by his forward movement from Bunker to Breed's Hill; and he showed it still more by the way in which he kept a levy of raw ploughmen steady there during the trying hours that preceded conflict, and then, in face of the advancing line of regulars, made them hold their fire until he gave the word. This was superb, —it deserves unstinted praise. Again the luck of the Americans soared in the ascendant. Under the exact conditions in which they then found themselves, they had chanced on the right man in the right place,—and it was one chance in a thousand.

And then following yet more good luck,—indeed a crowning stroke. Twice did Prescott repulse his enemy. Had he done so a third time he would have won a victory, held his position, and the next day, in all human probability, been compelled to surrender because of properly conducted operations in his rear under cover of the British fleet. For it is impossible to suppose that Clinton's advice would not then have been followed. Fortunately for Prescott, his ammunition gave out before the third assault, and his adversaries then drove him out of his trap and into

the arms of his own friends. In spite of himself he was saved from ultimate disaster. Yet curiously enough, he does not even seem to have realized his luck; for, instead of going back to the headquarters of Gen. Ward, as well he might have gone, in a towering rage over the incompetence which had put him and his command in such a position, without reason or support,—a position from which he had escaped only by a chance in a thousand;—in place of taking this view of the matter, he actually offered, if a fresh force of 1,500 were put under his command, to recross Charlestown Neck and recapture Bunker Hill the next day,—in other words, to go back into the trap from which the stupidity of his opponents had forcibly driven him.

The original plan of operations matured by the Cambridge Council, including, as it did, the simultaneous occupation of both Prospect and Bunker Hills, was, therefore, bold, well conceived, calculated to produce the results desired, and entirely practicable; assuming always that the patriot army had the necessary artillery and ammunition to equip and defend the works it was proposed to construct. Such was not the case; but, doubtless under the circumstances, something had to be risked, and this move involved probably no more peril than any other which could have been devised.

This plan, thoroughly good as a mere plan, was, however, executed in part only, and in such a way as to expose the provincial army and cause to disaster of the worst kind. And yet, through the chances of war,—the pure luck of the patriots,—every oversight they were guilty of and blunder they committed, worked to their advantage and contributed to the success of their operations. They completely drew the British fire and forestalled their contemplated offensive operations, throwing them on the defensive; they inspired their own men with confidence in themselves, filling them with an aggressive spirit; they

fired the continental ardor; and, finally, the force engaged was extricated from a false and impossible position, after inflicting severe punishment on their opponents. For that particular occasion and under the circumstances Cromwell or Frederick or Napoleon in command would probably have accomplished less; for with the means at disposal, they never would have dared to take such risks, nor would they ever have thrust themselves into such an utterly untenable position.

To penetrate the mind and plan of an opponent,—to pluck out the heart of his counsel and to make dispositions accordingly, has ever been dwelt upon as one of the chief attributes of the highest military genius,—Hannibal, Cæsar, Gustavus, Marlborough, Frederick, Napoleon, all possessed it in a noticeable degree. Possibly, Gen. Ward and Col. Prescott may instinctively have acted in obedience to this high military quality on the 16th and 17th of June, 1775. If so they certainly developed a capacity for which the world has not since given them credit, and the immediate results justified to the fullest extent their apparently almost childlike reliance on the combined professional incapacity and British bull-headedness of Gen. Thomas Gage.

Forty years later another, and very similar display, was made of the same characteristics, with even more disastrous results. Gen. Jackson was almost as completely in the power of his antagonist before New Orleans in 1815 as was Col. Prescott on Bunker Hill in 1775. To assault his intrenchments in face was there an act of mere military folly. All the British commander had to do was to avail himself of his complete command of the water, and while he held his enemy by demonstrations on his front, to transfer a force to the right bank of the river, before the advance of which New Orleans would have to fall of necessity. It would only have remained for Jackson to come out of his intrenchments and assail his opponent protected

by the guns of his fleet, or to abandon New Orleans without a battle. Under these very similar circumstances Packenham in 1815 did just as Gage did in 1775. He butted against intrenchments.

Yet in one respect the battle of Bunker Hill was, in reality, epochal. Prescott did not occupy Breed's Hill and begin to throw up his intrenchments until midnight of the 16th-17th of June. Thus his men had but four hours in which to work before the break of day disclosed their whereabouts. Yet when, less than twelve hours later, the British stormed the field-works, they were amazed at their completeness and could not believe that they had all been thrown up in a single summer's night. It was something new in warfare.

Rather more than a year ago I passed a day on the field of Waterloo, and, immediately after, another at Sedan. While surveying the two battlefields I could not understand what the English in the first case and the French in the second had been at. My experience of active warfare was drawn from the campaigns of Virginia, and thirty years back; but in those campaigns nothing had been of more ordinary observation than the strength and perfect character of the field intrenchments which both armies habitually threw up for their protection. Such skill in the alignment and construction of these works did the ordinary soldier acquire that a few hours always sufficed to transform an ordinary camping ground into a well intrenched camp. In the case of Waterloo, the Duke of Wellington had long before selected it as his battle ground; had caused a topographical survey to be made of it; he arrived there from Quatre-Bras twenty hours before the battle of Waterloo began; he made all his dispositions at his leisure. Yet not a spadefull of dirt seems to have been thrown; and the next day, while his line was exposed to the full discharge of Napoleon's famous artillery, the French cavalry rode unobstructed in and out among the English squares.

It seems to have been just the same more than half a century later at Sedan. Strategically, the French were there in almost as false a position as the Americans at Bunker Hill. They were in a hole,—rats in a trap. Tactically their position was by no means bad. Sedan secured and covered their centre; while their two wings were free to work on the high grounds behind, sloping sharply to the river. They occupied the inside of a curve with perfect facilities for the concentration of force by interior lines. A better opportunity, so far as the character of the ground and country was concerned, for the rapid throwing up of intrenchments and field-works, could not have been desired. The facilities were everywhere. MacMahon's army, when surprised and cornered in Sedan, was, it is true, on its march to Metz, and all was in confusion. But they had twelve hours' notice of what was inpending, and they fought on the ground on which they had slept. As I looked the field over, I could not but ask myself in utter bewilderment,—what were the French thinking of or doing all those hours?

Judging by the record of Bunker Hill, and my own recollections of what I saw habitually ninety years later in Virginia, if an army of either Federals or Confederates, as developed in 1865, had held the ground of the British at Waterloo, or the French at Sedan, the lines and intrenchments which on the days of battle would have confronted Napoleon and Von Moltke would have given them pause. Before those temporary works they would have seen their advancing columns melt away as did Gage at Bunker Hill and Packenham at New Orleans.

The simple fact seems to have been that, until the modern magazine gun made it an absolute necessity, digging was never considered a part of the soldier's training. Indeed it was looked upon as demoralizing. In the same way, the art of designing temporary field-works and camp intrenchments was not regarded as belonging to the

regimental officer's functions. The whole thing was looked down upon as something unprofessional and savoring of cowardice. Often during our war, have I heard hide-bound old West Point graduates, high in rank, lament over the tendency of our men to protect themselves by intrenchments wherever they camped. They said it made soldiers cowardly. As the old military martinets expressed it, they wanted the rank and file to be made "to stand up and fight man fashion." How often, in the olden days, have I heard that expression used! Yet their idea of fighting was apparently that of Wellington at Waterloo, and of MacMahon at Sedan. At either of those places our veterans of 1865 would have protected themselves with field-works, though they had only bayonets for picks and tin dippers for shovels.

Putnam, therefore, showed a very profound insight when, on the eve of Bunker Hill, he remarked, that as a soldier, the Yankee was peculiar. He did n't seem to care much about his head, but he was dreadfully afraid of his shins; cover him half-leg high and you could depend on him to fight. The fact is, as a fighting animal the Yankee is unquestionably observant. Breastworks are in battle handy to the assailed; and breastworks admit of rapid and easy construction. Prescott taught that lesson on the 17th of June, 1775. He did not realize it, and it took almost a century for the professional soldier to get it into his head, but those light temporary earth-works scientifically thrown up on Bunker Hill, in the closing hours of a single June night, introduced a new element into the defensive tactics of the battle-field. Its final demonstration was at Plevna, a whole century later.