



The Dawn's Early Light: The Defense of Fort McHenry and Courage

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

The War of 1812 began after Congress declared war on Great Britain for repeated violations of American sovereignty. The British were stopping American ships and impressing U.S. sailors into the Royal Navy. The war was primarily fought at sea and in Canadian and American territory around the Great Lakes. In August 1814, however, a British fleet sailed up the Chesapeake Bay and disembarked 4,000 British redcoats, who routed the Americans in an embarrassing defeat at Bladensburg, Maryland. This opened the way for the British to enter Washington, D.C. and burn the U.S. Capitol and White House in retaliation for the American burning of York (modern-day Toronto) in Canada.

The British forces then plundered Alexandria, Virginia before sailing off to leave American shores. British Admiral Alexander Cochrane was reluctantly persuaded by his officers to next assault Baltimore. In the early morning hours of September 12, the British troops disembarked at North Point on the Patapsco River for a fifteen-mile march on Baltimore led by General Robert Ross. The Royal Navy detachment meanwhile prepared to sail up the river, level Fort McHenry in Baltimore Harbor, and contribute to the bombardment and burning of Baltimore. On September 13, the British naval forces moved against the garrison at Fort McHenry, and the British redcoats marched on Baltimore. Both were dedicated to defeating the Americans and burning the city. The courageous Americans prepared for the assault.

NARRATIVE

At 6:30 in the morning of Tuesday, September 13, 1814, as the sun was rising over Baltimore Harbor, Major George Armistead and Captain Joseph Nicholson peered through their spyglasses at five British bomb ships swinging into position one and a half miles from Fort McHenry. Armistead was the commander of the fort, and Nicholson was the commander of the Baltimore Fencibles, a volunteer artillery company who joined in the defense. The 1,000-man garrison comprised of army regulars and volunteer troops was up and preparing the 36 guns for the defense of the fort and Baltimore. They sweated due to the heat of the late summer day, and their nerves were stretched to the limit.

Suddenly, the British ship *Volcano* fired its massive mortars, lobbing 200-pound explosive shells into the fort. The other four bomb ships joined in, as did the rest of the fleet. Houses in the vicinity began to shake as the ground rumbled. Screaming rockets were launched from *Erebus*, adding to the deafening cacophony. The men in the fort covered their ears and took what little cover there was. "From such a rattling and whistle Good Lord forever deliver me," prayed one private.

NARRATIVE

The Americans were not shaken for long. Major Armistead mounted a parapet and ordered the soldiers to return fire. Several cannonballs scored direct hits on British ships. “Every heart was gladdened,” said one soldier. They gave three cheers while the fifer and drummer played Yankee Doodle to encourage their hearts and patriotic spirits. They gave a celebratory cheer when the British withdrew because the American bombardment was unexpectedly severe.

After a short while, the American shots were falling short and kicking up large spouts of water. The British had moved out of range of the American guns, but their bomb ships could still hit the fort. Armistead thought this was a “most distressing” disadvantage for the men in Fort McHenry. Still, they kept at their post until Armistead ordered them to take cover in a moat because of the “tremendous shower of shells.”

The Americans were frustrated that they were being bombarded and suffering casualties but impotent to return fire. An escaped slave in the army had his leg blown off, and another soldier was killed by a direct hit while shaking uncontrollably from shell-shock. Everyone was terrified and waiting to be blown to smithereens when a shell crashed through the roof of the magazine where 300 barrels of gunpowder were stored. Miraculously, it did not explode. Even though they felt like “pigeons tied by the legs to be shot at,” they courageously endured the barrage and were eager to fire at the enemy.

Armistead ordered the men to remove the barrels from the magazine and reposition them behind the rear wall. Hundreds of shells continued to rain down on the fort every hour while the Americans passively endured the assault. Sergeant John Clemm was a “young man of most amiable character, gentlemanly manners and real courage” who was killed when a two-inch chunk of shrapnel from an exploding shell ripped through him. One direct hit killed another man instantly and wounded four. Still, their courage held under fire.

In the early afternoon, the sun disappeared behind a large bank of clouds. Suddenly, a deluge of rain from a nor'easter pummeled both sides. Several lowered the American flag and raised a storm flag due to the rain. The Americans gained a brief respite as the torrential rain ruined gunpowder and fuses. The British compensated by moving the fleet closer to fire broadsides from several other warships. The Americans gave a cheer and quickly fired their own guns. “The balls now flew like hailstones,” reported one observer. The *Volcano* immediately suffered five hits and withdrew. The *Devastation* received a blow that caused her to take on water. As the British fleet again retreated out of range, the *Erebus* was damaged and had to be towed back.

However, the British onslaught from the bomb ships continued “more furiously than before.” The downpour continued all afternoon as well and certainly impeded the effectiveness of the bombardment of the fort. As the darkness of evening arrived, British Admiral Alexander Cochrane had to admit that things were not going according to plan. He had boasted to his men that the fleet would reduce the walls of the fort and force a surrender in less than two hours, thereby leaving Baltimore vulnerable to a coordinated land-sea assault. However, the walls stood firmly, the inhabitants of the fort clearly had no intention of surrendering, and he was forced to remain a safe distance from the fort’s guns.

NARRATIVE

The shelling continued through the night. One witness stated that “Such a terrible roar of cannon and mortars I never heard before, and never wish to hear again.” Another said, “The portals of hell appeared to have been thrown open.” During the night, several British barges attempted to slip past the fort and raid Baltimore. The barges were sighted, and the fort aimed its fire at them, scoring direct hits and sinking a couple as they ran the gauntlet of fire from the fort back to the fleet.

The British fleet and Fort McHenry exchanged intermittent fire as the dawn approached, and the exhausted men on both sides struggled to stay awake. They had very different outlooks on the situation, however. The British navy had failed to reduce Fort McHenry. The army withdrew before launching any major attack against the defenses that protected Baltimore because the promised naval bombardment never came. Both the army and navy withdrew to safety some distance from American lines.

Francis Scott Key was observing from a ship in the harbor when rays of sunlight illuminated the storm flag waving in a slight breeze. The men in the fort gave a great cheer as the fifer and drummer played Yankee Doodle loudly in celebration so that the British might hear. A group of men raised the immense star-spangled banner as the others stood at attention. Meanwhile, Key pulled a letter from his pocket and started to jot down some words and notes for a song that came to mind. “O say can you see by the dawn’s early light . . .” it began, and ended with “The land of the free, and the home of the brave.” The courageous men who defended Fort McHenry proved the veracity of Key’s lyrics.