

The Sullivan Expedition of 1779 Battle of Chemung August 13, 1779

INTRODUCTION:

In our study of the Sullivan Expedition in 1779, and Capt. Anthony Selin's Independent Company's role during this campaign, interest often centers on the two major engagements that took place during the march. These would include the Battle of Newtown on August 29, followed by the ambush of Lt. Thomas Boyd's party while returning from a scout near Groveland on September 13.

Prior to these battles, however, General Sullivan's army also encountered the Indians and Tories in a brief skirmish that occurred on August 13 north of the Indian village of "New Chemung". Sometimes referred to as the "Battle of Chemung" or the "Chemung Ambuscade", this engagement cost General Sullivan the lives of several of his soldiers.

Using journals we have been able to piece together the following article that outlines this event and includes Capt. Selin's position prior to and during the engagement. Although we have yet to find Capt. Selin & Co. mentioned by name, fortunately Lt. Col. Adam Hubley of the 11th Pennsylvania Regiment left us with a detailed journal describing the troops involved, and how the battle unfolded and ended.

Units of General Hand's 3rd Brigade were those primarily involved in the Chemung skirmish. When describing the order of march and position of specific units, Lt. Col. Hubley cites several times "*the two independent companies*". The companies that he refers to are Capt. Selin's and the Wyoming Independent Co. under the command of Capt. Simon Spaulding.

August 11, 1779

On August 11, 1779 General Sullivan's army was encamped at Tioga (Athen's Pa) and started the construction of what would become Fort Sullivan at Tioga Point. With construction in progress, and while waiting for General Clinton's army to arrive, Capt. John Cummings of the 2nd New Jersey Regiment¹ was sent out with a small party to scout the Indian village of Chemung approximately 12 miles northwest of Tioga.

Lt. Colonel Adam Hubley of the 11th Pennsylvania Regiment wrote the following in his journal: "*Wednesday, August 11th- "...Since our arrival a scout of eight men was ordered up to reconnoiter Chemung, and endeavor to make discoveries of the number of savages, and their situation if possible.*"²

² Cook, Frederick, "The Journals of the Military Expedition of Major General John Sullivan 1779", Lt., Col. Adam Hubley, pp. 151-152.

August 12, 1779

Capt. Cumming's scouting party did detect Indian activity in the Chemung area. Upon their return and report, General Sullivan decided to send part of his army to Chemung to engage the Indians and destroy the village.

Lt. Hubley continues: "*Thursday, August 12th - Tioga Plain "...Captain Cummings with his scout (sent out last evening) returned this day 11 o'clock, a.m.; made several discoveries at Chemung; an Indian village twelve miles distance from this place; in consequence of which a council of war sat, and determined an expedition should immediately take place for the reduction of the same..."*"³

The army left Tioga the evening of August 12 at 8:00 and marched through the night. Several journals document that the night was very dark, and progress was slow.

Lt. Col. Hubley outlined the order of march from Tioga to Chemung in his journal entry of August 13: "*...the army having marched last evening in the following order, viz.: Light corps under the command of Gen. Hand, led the van, (this would have included Capt. Selin's Co.) then followed Gens. Poor and Maxwell's brigades, which formed the main body..."*"⁴

August 13, 1779

The Americans arrived at the Indian village of "Old Chemung" just before daybreak on August 13. Several accounts state it was foggy that morning, and would later turn very warm. They soon learned this was not the village they were looking for, as there were a few huts and they were vacated. They army moved from this site towards "New Chemung", which was a few miles north, and arrived there in about an hour.

General Sullivan wanted to surround the village and cut off the Indians if they attempted escape. He sent Lt. Col. George Reid of the 2nd New Hampshire Regiment/Poor's Brigade and the German Regiment/Hand's Brigade across the Chemung River to move up. General Hand was to lead the attack with the 11th Pennsylvania and the two Independent Companies (Capt.'s Selin and Spaulding) from the north side of the village.⁵

Upon arriving at New Chemung Lt. Col. Hubley continues his Aug. 13th entry; "*... Two regiments, one from the light corps, and one from main body, were ordered to cross the river and prevent the enemy from making their escape that way, should they still hold the town. The remainder of the light corps, viz., two independent companies, and my regiment (the 11th Pa.), under the command of Hand, were to make the attack on the town..."*"⁶

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Lt. Col. Hubley described New Chemung; “...*The situation of this village is beautiful; it contained fifty or sixty houses, built of logs and frame... on a most fertile, beautiful, and extensive plain...*”⁷

The Indians had left the village prior to the arrival of the army. While the main body of the army remained at the village, Gen. Hand advanced the light infantry under Capt. George Bush of the 11th Pa., and “...*the two independent companies...*” towards Newtown, the next Indian village up the trail. After about one mile, this party discovered fires burning, deer skins, and blankets.⁸

Upon this discovery, Lt. Col. Hubley cites: “...*the remainder part of the light corps, viz.: the two independent companies, and my regiment; under Gen. Hand’s command, were ordered to move some miles up the path, and endeavor, if possible to make some discoveries. We accordingly proceeded on in the following order, viz.: Captain Walker, with twenty four men, composed the van, the eleventh regiment, under my command, after which the two independent companies, the whole covered on the left by Tioga branch, and on the right by Capt. Bush’s infantry company of forty men. In this order we moved somewhat better than a mile beyond this place.*”⁹

After moving up approximately one mile the Indians and Tories, who had been concealed on a hill to the right of the advancing army, fired upon Capt. Andrew Walker and his men. In a letter from Col. John Butler (Tory) to Col. Bolton describing the battle, he stated that “...*Capt. Rowland Montour and about 20 Delawares...*” made up the party that fired upon the advancing Americans.¹⁰ (some journals cite 30 Indians involved in the ambush).

As the firing began, Capt. Walker’s men returned fire as the other units moved up. Lt. Col. Hubley writes: “... *We immediately formed a front with my regiment, pushed up the hill with a degree of intrepidity seldom to be met with, and under a very severe fire from the savages. Capt. Bush, in the meantime, endeavored to gain the enemy’s rear...*”¹¹

With the 11th Pa. and the Independent Companies moving up the hill, Capt. Bush of the 11th Pa. moved his company up the ridge in an attempt to maneuver around the Indians.¹² The army’s offensive movement up the hill had the desired effect as it dislodged the Indians and they began their retreat.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “The Sullivan-Clinton Campaign In 1779, Chronology and Selected Documents:; Letter from John Butler to Lt. Col. Bolton, pp.131.

¹¹ Cook, “Journals...”, Lt. Col. Adam Hubley, pp. 152.

¹² Williams, “Year of the Hangman”, pp. 249-150.

Lt. Col. Hubley continued his journal entry: “...*After gaining the summit of the hill, and dislodging the enemy, we marched by the right of companies in eight columns, and continued along the same line until the arrival of General Sullivan...*”¹³

With regards to losses of the Indians and Tories, the soldiers found no one killed or wounded. Col. John Butler reported only one man (killed) in this skirmish.¹⁴ American casualties were greater. Most of the losses were from the 11th Pa. Regiment, and although the numbers vary from journal to journal, Lt. Col. Hubley wrote that 6 were killed (*one sergeant, one drummer and four privates*), and 12 were wounded (*two captains, one adjutant, one guide and eight privates*).¹⁵

After a brief rest, they returned to Chemung and laid waste to the village and began destroying the crops. While the village was being destroyed, a group of soldiers from Col. Joseph Cilley’s 1st New Hampshire Regiment crossed the Chemung River and began the destruction of several cornfields. While doing so, they were fired upon by Indians who had remained in the area. One soldier was killed and approximately four wounded.¹⁶ (Again, in reviewing several journals, the numbers of wounded regarding the “cornfield” vary. All appear to indicate one soldier being killed, with 4 wounded seeming to be the average).

Upon the destruction of New Chemung, the army returned to Tioga. Lt. Col. Hubley, wrote that they arrived at Tioga at 8:00 p.m., “...*considerably fatigued.*” It had been a long day for the soldiers of General Hand’s 3rd Brigade, for as he concluded his journal entry for August 13, 1779 Lt. Col. Hubley wrote, “...*I had the dead bodies of my regiment carried along, fixed on horses, and brought to this place for interment. The expedition from the first to last continued twenty-four hours, of which time my regiment was employed, without the least intermission, twenty-three hours...*”¹⁷

Conclusion

In less than two weeks following the Chemung skirmish, General Sullivan’s Army would be retracing their steps along the same trail and meet the Indians and Tories at Newtown. We are fortunate and grateful that so many journals like Lt. Col. Hubley’s and others that endured this expedition survived.

Steve Collward
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¹³ Cook, “Journals...”, Lt. Col. Hubley, pp. 152.

¹⁴ “The Sullivan-Clinton Campaign...Selected Documents”, John Butler to Lt. Col. Bolton, pp. 131.

¹⁵ Cook, “Journals...”, Lt. Col. Adam Hubley, pp. 152

¹⁶ Williams, “Year of the Hangman”, pp. 250

¹⁷ Cook, “Journals...”, Lt. Col. Adam Hubley, pp. 152

Sources:

- 1.) Cook, Frederick, "The Journals of The Military Expedition of Major General John Sullivan 1779", Auburn, N.Y., 1887
- 2.) The Sullivan-Clinton Campaign In 1779, Chronology and Selected Documents", Albany, N.Y., 1929
- 3.) Williams, Glenn F., "Year of the Hangman", Yardley, Pa., 2005
- 4.) Wright, Albert Hazen, "The Sullivan Expedition of 1779", Ithaca, N.Y., 1943