

Johann Gottlieb Rall at Trenton

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At the time of the Battle of Trenton on December 26, 1776, Johann Gottlieb Rall had been serving in the Hessian military for over 26 years and was the Colonel of his own regiment. By all accounts, he had performed admirably in the earlier battles of 1776 at White Plains & Fort Mifflin and had been given command of a brigade when its General had suffered a stroke. Rall requested and subsequently was given the prominent and exposed post at Trenton.



COLONEL JOHANN GOTTLIEB RALL

Rall had taken defensive preparations by setting numerous guard posts on the outskirts of town and by ordering patrols along the roads to provide security, but plans for defensive redoubts for the cannons were not carried out. In letters to his superiors, Rall began to show signs of unease due to the imminent threat of an attack and by the bold enemy raids that were occurring daily. His men were becoming fatigued from the constant enemy harassment and all of the duties that were required of them. Every night, one of the three Hessian regiments had orders to sleep in uniform and according to one soldier's diary: "We have not slept one night in peace since we came to this place."

Contrary to popular myth, the Hessians had not been celebrating Christmas by drinking. However, there was a great deal of excitement in Trenton on Christmas Night, but not due to drunken revelry. It was caused by an unauthorized band of Americans attacking one of the guard posts and then disappearing into the night. Rall had been warned of a possible attack and he and the entire garrison turned out, patrols were sent out to investigate, but nothing unusual was found and the night passed quietly in Trenton. Meanwhile eight miles upstream General Washington and his Continental Army were crossing the icy Delaware River as a snowstorm roared in.

Due to the intensity of the storm, one early morning Hessian patrol had been canceled and another shortened by Major Dechow and as the battle began, the snow, sleet and freezing rain would cause the flintlock muskets to misfire. The Hessians would be forced from the town, but abandoning his post surely never entered Rall's mind, although it was most likely the only decision that would have saved them. Rall, however, would order a counterattack and fall mortally wounded. Surrounded, outnumbered, overpowered and leaderless and with the weather

affecting the musketry, the Hessians were left with no choice but to surrender. According to Lieutenant Piel “We had only Colonel Rall to thank for our complete misfortune. It never struck him that the rebels might attack us, and therefore he had made no preparations against an attack. I must concede that on the whole we had a very poor opinion of the rebels, who previously had never successfully opposed us.”

The Battle of Trenton was a shocking and humiliating defeat for the British and many believed that their Hessian mercenaries had let them down. Someone had to be blamed and Rall was the obvious choice. Few would come to Rall’s defense and in death he could not defend himself. Only Captain Ewald would lay the blame elsewhere and defend Rall, “As Colonel Rall lost his life in the fight and was therefore unable to defend himself... the blame will forever rest on him. His memory has been cursed by German and English soldiers, many of whom were not fit to carry his sword.”

The Hessian defeat at Trenton was not due to Rall’s incompetence or to the Hessians being drunk, but mainly due to an underestimation of the enemy and the poor weather that affected the musketry. The primary reasons for Washington’s victory was a successful undetected crossing of the Delaware and a vigorous attack with a superior force of men and cannon.



John Trumbull: The Capture of Hessians at Trenton, December 26, 1776