**The Battle of Saratoga – Part I**

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The Battle of Saratoga would result from Burgoyne's maneuvering of his troops in an advance on Albany NY, but in his way stood Horatio Gates, who had just recently relieved Phillip Schuyler of his command.

Howe’s defeat of Washington at the Battle of Brandywine was only a piece of a much greater plan. If you’ll recall from our episodes leading up to that battle, Howe’s maneuvers were part of a larger expedition, Howe was a part of it as was well as a large force under the command of John Burgoyne and it’s southward movement, with an ultimate goal of joining forces with Howe for a final push on the American capital. This episode will jump back in time just a few weeks, but it’s important to understand the backstory. In the past few episodes we’ve been focusing on Washington and his maneuvers, now we’ll focus on what was going on at the same time, to his north.

George Bernard Shaw in his play The Devil’s Disciple describes Lieutenant General John Burgoyne as “a man of fashion, gallant enough to have made a distinguished marriage by an elopement, witty enough to write successful comedies, aristocratically-connected enough to have had opportunities of high military distinction”

Burgoyne’s campaign from Canada toward Lake Champlain had captured Fort Ticonderoga and was continuing its advance towards Albany. At the end of the letter Burgoyne had written describing the plan for his campaign, he stated that he “must never lose the view of their intended junctions with Sir William Howe as their principal objects”

Burgoyne’s regular troops were hardened, disciplined men and a formidable fighting force. Their officers were all professionals and the generals were competent veterans. General Phillips, the second in command, was a fine artilleryman and a noted strategist. Baron von Riedesel, the major general commanding the left wing, was a twenty-year veteran with a splendid record of campaigning under the duke of Brunswick in the Seven Years’ War. He was noted for his tact, good judgement, and coolness in the heat of battle. At thirty-eight he was in his prime, strong and in good health. He was accompanied by his blue-eyed baroness and their three children.

Burgoyne’s irregular forces, did not fare as well. Instead of the 2,000 Canadian militia that he expected, only 150 had joined up, most of them Frenchmen who had fought for Montcalm under the French flag. Of the 2,000 Indians expected to join the expedition, only about 400 showed up for duty as scouts and guides. Last, only 100 Loyalists enlisted, but Burgoyne was counting on most of the loyalist population in New York and other provinces rallying to his cause as his army moved through to “liberate” them.

Something that’s important to note, is that this illusion that the local populace would rally to their cause was a falsehood that many of the British commanders lived under. What they failed to realize however, is that even though the population may have started British, it was now truly American.

Burgoyne was also faced with the logistical problems of moving his force. There were insufficient horses to move the artillery, but the baggage train also lacked horses as well. Then too, the train had to be made up of 500 light two-horse carts, hastily built out of green lumber, they were transports that would not stand up under the rough usage of forest travel and warfare.

Burgoyne’s campaign would take Ticonderoga without a fight. We talked about this a few episodes ago. The American forces were in retreat with a makeshift flotilla on Lake Champlain. The British pursuit, was well planned: Fraser and Riedesel were to chase after American commander St. Clair, Burgoyne sent General Phillips with a division loaded on boats to go south on the water after the fleeing American flotilla, Burgoyne was to follow Phillips with several frigates and the fastest of his gunboats.

Once on land and in pursuit of the Continentals, Burgoyne was locked into a terrain that was a military nightmare. The “roads” if you could call them that, were no more than crude trails hacked out of dense forests and running every which way, without plan or reason. The undergrowth was dense and broken only by countless, fallen trees. In Christopher Ward’s words, from his work The War of Revolution: “it crossed no fewer than forty deep ravines over which high and long bridges had been built. There were also numerous swamps and bogs”

The military nightmare for the British was somewhat of a godsend for the retreating American forces, specifically General Philip Schuyler who sought to delay the enemy as long as possible so that he could gather and make ready his forces. He had his men use ever natural obstruction possible to slow the way of the British. He sent out a thousand axmen to fell trees across the route and Wood Creek. They rolled boulders down the hills into the creek to make it impassable to boats. Some woodsmen destroyed bridges, while others dug ditches that drained rainfall into a muddy nasty mess.

Schuyler also encouraged local farmers to drive away their cattle, hide their foodstuffs, and burn their grainfields so that the British would have to advance across a wasteland when they were not struggling through the forest.

Schuyler was obstinate. Burgoyne was determined. He sent sappers, soldiers and Canadian woodsmen by the hundreds ahead of the army to clear the trails, drain the swamps, and rebuild the bridges – in short to undo all that Schuyler’s men had done. They even managed to build a causeway two miles long to pass the artillery and wagons. By the 29th of July, he was finally at Fort Edward. In the past 21 days, he had managed to move only 23 miles.

While Burgoyne’s men were making their slow, but steady progress through the wilderness, Schuyler’s delaying actions had bought him the time and reinforcements that he so badly needed. By 12 July he was joined by St. Clair with his main force and Colonel Long had brought his detachment from Skenesboro. Schuyler’s total strength at Ford Edward came to 4,500 men (2,900 being Continentals and 1,600 militia). But Schuyler was not about to defend such a run down fort as Fort Edward. The condition of the fort was so bad that he had told Washington that in order to enter it, he simply had to jump the ruined walls with his horse. He and his forces fell back down the Hudson to Saratoga and on August 3, back to Stillwater, twelve miles further south.

Despite the wisdom and cunning he showed in delaying Burgoyne, on 3 August he was relieved of command of the northern army: to be replaced by Major General Horatio Gates. The removal of his command was the culmination of months of factional fighting in Congress during which Schuyler and St Clair were accused of being traitors. If you’ll recall from a few episodes we talked about this, the locals thought that they had given up Ft. Ticonderoga to the British too easily, and were convinced that they were working with the British. In fact, there was even a ridiculous “silver balls” story that stated the Burgoyne had fired silver balls from his men’s muskets and cannon into Fort Ticonderoga, which St. Clair and Schuyler split as payment for their treason.

Schuyler received Gates when he arrived on August 19 to assume command by being a perfect gentlemen. He put himself at Gate’s disposal, beginning with detailed briefings to familiarize the new commander with all aspects of the situation he was inheriting.

By the time Gates had assumed his new command, Burgoyne’s troubles which had started with three weeks traversing adverse terrain, had been multiplying. His thrown-together supply wagon transport could not be depended on for the indefinite shuttling of supplies over miles of wilderness roads, and shortages were already being felt. A letter from Howe, had stated that he would soon be going all-out in his campaign against Philadelphia, and would certainly not be coming up the Hudson to join Burgoyne at this point in time. Burgoyne’s orders were to proceed to Albany, and with or without reinforcements from Howe, he was determined to do so.

Burgoyne’s orders also stated that his mission was “to try the affections of the people, to disconcert the councils of the enemy, to mount Riedesel’s dragoons, to complete Peter’s corp of Loyalists and to obtain large supplies of cattle, horses, and carriages.” In addition, and this is an interesting note, the commander could take hostages for the delivery of the above and further take prisoner “all persons acting in committees or any officers acting under the directions of Congress, whether civil or military”

Here, chronologically, we are at the events that I described in episode #33, the Battle of Bennington. If you haven’t listened to that episode yet, feel free to go back and listen.

After that battle, we see Burgoyne’s forces severely impacted. He’s had 207 killed or wounded, 700 captured, including dragoons. And his material losses were even worse: hundreds of muskets and jager rifles, four ammunition wagons, 250 swords, and four cannon.

The loss of almost 1,000 men pales in comparison to the supplies that he did NOT capture, as he had been counting on them to feed and supply his army. His most immediate need now was to feed his troops. He dispatched an order that stopped his troops and encamped them at Fort Miller, which is about four miles above Saratoga to allow for his supply wagons to be brought up.

While encamped, his woes accumulated. His Native American allies were restless, there had been an incident involving a young woman named Miss Jane McCrae who was murdered and scalped by a Native American in July, in response Burgoyne had been forced to oversee and restrict the movements of his Indians to a much greater degree.

This didn’t sit well with a group used to its operational independence and then upon hearing about the events at Bennington, the group decided to head for home. In a few short days Burgoyne’s force of 400 Native Americans dropped to less than 40.

The final blow to Burgoyne was on 23 August, one week after the Battle of Bennington, when British commander St. Leger made his departure from Fort Stanwix along with some 350 regulars, 300 good Loyalist soldiers, and hundreds of Indians. A force that would have replenished most of Burgoyne’s recent losses. Now all of that was gone, along with any hope of bringing in neighboring counties and adjacent regions to the British cause.

While Burgoyne was drowning in his sorrows, Horatio Gates was counting his reinforcements. By the first week of September, Benedict Arnold had arrived bringing with him 1,200 men, also that same week another group of reinforcements, which just happened to be dispatched by Washington right before the Battle of Brandywine, arrived, and while it was only around 375 men, it was still a solid addition: it was comprised of Colonel Daniel Morgan’s corp of Virginia, Pennslyvannia, and Maryland riflemen.

Gates not only welcomed Morgan, no doubt having heard of his service in Quebec, (check back on my episodes covering the battle of quebec to learn more about that) but also added to his command Major Henry Dearborn, the veteran of Bunker Hill and Quebec, with 250 hand picked light infantry armed with muskets and bayonets. Gates had effectively created an elite corp of light infantry, with a solid commander.

By 9 September, Gates had reached an operating strength of 7,000 men and he was focused on looking for better ground on which to oppose Burgoyne’s advance. By September 12 he had moved his army to an area called Bemis Heights, where Arnold and the Polish engineer Kosciuszko had marked out the lines. IE: The had marked out where the various units in Gates army should deploy. The positions that they chose were ideal for defense.

A plateau with steep bluffs rising some 200 to 300 feet above the Hudson, Bemis Heights dominated the narrow defile of the river on its west side and with the heavily wooded terrain surrounding the bluffs, blocked the way to Albany. The dense forests were broken only by a few clearings and deep ravines formed by streams flowing into the Hudson. The greatest of these obstacles were Mill Creek and the Great Ravine to the north.

South of Mill Creek and it’s southernmost tributary were the lines of the American entrenchments. If you were to view the battle lines from above, it would resemble a three sided square with the rear open. When completed, the works consisted of trenches and breastworks of logs and earth running for about three-quarters of a mile along each side of the open square, with an artillery redoubt centered in each of the three sides.

At the northeast angle Farmer Neilson’s barn had been fortified and was dubbed Fort Neilson. The overall defensive position had one drawback… not far from it’s western side was a greater height which, if occupied by the enemy, could command the American position.

Meanwhile, in the British camp, on September the 13, resupplied and strengthened by the arrival of 300 regulars and more artillery, Burgoyne started crossing the Hudson river on a bridge of boats. The transfer was completed on the 14th and the boat bridge dismantled on the 15th. By the 17th they had marched southward and encamped around Sword’s Farm, north of Gate’s position. Although separated from Gates by only 4 miles, Burgoyne’s intelligence was so poor, that he was still unaware of Gates’ position. Part of his lack of intelligence was due to the lack of Indian scouts, which as we talked about a few moments ago, left after the Battle of Bennington.

Burgoyne’s first real knowledge of an American reconnaissance of his force came when an American patrol surprised a British foraging party in the act of digging potatoes on an abandoned farm. The patrol killed and wounded several British soldiers and camp followers and captured twenty prisoners. The incident jolted Burgoyne into pushing his limited intelligence means, and soon he became certain of Gate’s positions and had some idea of his enemy’s strength.

The stage is set. Our commanders are in position and the battle is about to begin. And we’ll continue our conversation on the battle of Saratoga next week.