**The Battle of Saratoga – Part II: Freeman’s Farm**

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The first shots are fired at the Battle of Saratoga in a skirmish referred to as The Battle of Freeman's Farm, which will pit Benedict Arnold and Daniel Morgan against British Generals Fraser and Hamilton.







The end of our last episode saw British General Howe and the new American Commander in the North: Horatio Gates a mere four miles apart. The Americans have already established a strong position shaped like a 3 sided square or a U shaped (minus the curves): whichever is easier for you to visualize.

The center of Gate’s position was under the command of Brigadier General Ebenezer Learned and was made up of Learned’s own brigade of Continentals plus Col. Livingston’s New York regiment and the Massachusetts Continental regiments of Colonels Baily, Jackson, and Wesson. The right wing, which had a larger contingent of artillery compared to the other two was under comprised of Brigadier Generals Glover and Patterson’s units. This wing’s position dominated the ground sloping down to the river, and remained under the personal command of Gates.

The left wing was under the command of Major General Benedict Arnold. Arnold’s forces were comprised of the New Hampshire Continental regiments of Colonels Cilley, Hale, and Scammel, as well as New Yorkers under Colonels van Cortlandt and Livingston, Conneticut milita under Colonels Lattimer and Cook. Last, but not least was Colonel Daniel Morgan’s corp of riflemen.

Gates was deployed and on good ground. He knew it too. He was content to sit and wait on Burgoyne’s next move. Gate’s intelligence was also significantly better than that of Burgoyne’s, which we talked about in our last episode was in part due to his Indian scouts all leaving after the battle of Bennington.

Gates intelligence on Burgoyne’s movements were so good, that he quickly knew when they were making major movements. Historian Samuel W Patterson says of Gate’s intelligence “Wisdom favored General Gates decision to bide his time. He was strongly entrenched. His troops disposed to advantage – their morale never better. He kept a watchful eye and a listening ear at his headquarters”

By Thursday, 18 Sept. Burgoyne had completed his plans for the next day’s operations. His plan involved an advance upon his enemy’s position with around ¾ of his effective strength, roughly 4,200 out of his 6,000 men: deployed into three columns. The maneuver was intended to either be a reconnaissance mission or a three-pronged attacked, depending on the enemy’s position which Burgoyne had a decent, but all too clear idea of.

The British order of battle was based upon a center and two wings. The left wing was commanded by Riedesel, who was accompanied by General Phillips. The wing’s strength came to 1,100, composed mainly of three Brunswick infantry regiments, followed by Captain Pausch’s six six-pounders and two three-pounders of the Hesse-Hanau artillery. Six companies of the British 47th guarded the bateaux with the army’s stores. Riedesel’s mission was to move south along the river road and attack the American right.

The center force, was another 1,100 men under Hamilton, ws made up of all the battalion companies of the 9th, 20th, 21st, and 62nd British regiments. Their artillery support, under Captain Jones, included three six-pounders and three three-pounders. Burgoyne chose to accompany this force, which was to make a frontal attack in the center.

The right wing under General Fraser, had the mission of enveloping the American left by seizing the high ground to the west of the fort (Fort Neilson – a farm known as Neilson’s farm, that had been fortified by American forces.) If he was able to capture the fort, Fraser would be able to dominate the American fortifications with his artillery while it supported his assault against them. If successful, he could drive the Americans back against the river and envelop their rear. Fraser had a brigade of artillery for the job: four six-pounders and four three-pounders. The infantry of his wing included the light infantry companies of ten British regiments, plus the grenadier companies of the same ten regiments. In addition Fraser had the battalion companies of the British 24th, as well as Lt. Colonel Breymann’s Brunswick riflemen. Because Fraser commanded the advance corps, his wing also included 50 Indians about 150 Loyalists, 80 Canadians, and 50 British marksmen.

The early morning of September 19 was cool and foggy, but by 11:00 AM, the sun had broken through and it had become a fine September day. A signal gun boomed and started the British columns in motion. By about 1:00 PM the heads of Riedesel’s columns had slowly advanced southward until they were at a point about a mile and a half to the east of Freeman’s Farm.

While Ridesel was moving southward, Fraser was making good time marching towards the west. His column head due west until it had passed the head of the Great Ravine, continuing on for another mile and a half until it reached a T-junction with the road running south toward Bemis Heights. Fraser made a column left at the junction, marched south, then halted on some high ground about a half mile west of Freeman’s Farm. There he waited, apparently for action in the center or word from Burgoyne.

Hamilton’s column in the center followed in the tracks of Fraser’s column for a little over a mile, then moved left – southward – on a road that eventually turned westward to cross the bottom of the Great Ravine over a bridge that was, miraculously, still intact. Miraculous, because as we learned: the American’s had decimated the countryside, chopping down trees over roads, burning farm fields, etc… Burgoyne, who was traveling with Hamilton and in overall command, halted the force at noon on the other side of the ravine to give Fraser time to get into position.

The movements of the British, in their scarlet colored uniforms, moving through the woods were spotted by the American scouts and patrols throughout the morning. All of which, was reported to Gates, who continued to sit tight. He wanted Burgoyne to come to him.

Benedict Arnold, however, didn’t agree with Gates plan. We’ve known Arnold in our other conversations about him, to be a man of action and daring. That’s at play here, but also Arnold understands what’s coming his way, he’s faced it before. He pleaded with Gates to take action, if not on all fronts then at least against the threat to the army’s left flank or left front.

Arnold’s arguments were logical. If Burgoyne was allowed to get a force with artillery on the height to the west of the American position, he could attack after an artillery preparation, and if he was successful in penetrating the defensive lines, he could drive the defenders into the Hudson River. On the other hand, if Burgoyne were to be attacked now, the battle would be carried to him where, entangled in the woods, his troops could not maneuver, nor would their artillery be effective. There the Americans, with superior firepower, would be at their best. According to Charles B Todd in his work The Real Benedict Arnold: “Arnold begged, stormed and entreated, but still he could get no orders. At length Gates consented to let Dearborn’s infantry and Morgan’s riflemen to go in” It also seems that Arnold was allowed to support Morgan with other units of his wing if the situation called for it.

Once he was in position British commander Fraser sent a detachment of Loyalists, Canadians and Indians to set up outposts in the area just south of Freeman’s Farm. The detachment, based upon what we know today, seems to have been haphazardly commanded. About 12:30PM after the mixed force of “picket” as it was called – arrived at Freeman’s cabin, the men arrived, and command disintegrated, they began to lie or stroll about in the open areas of the farm. Suddenly the woods near the farm erupted with the fire of Daniel Morgan’s riflemen, which if you’ll recall from our episode on rifles, were much more accurate than the standard issue muskets. Morgan’s men had set their sites on the unit’s officers. Every single officer was struck down, as were many of the men of the unit. The ones that were left took off in a panicked flight.

Morgan’s riflemen who had advanced on the enemy position in extremely disciplined silence, almost as if they were hunting game, instead of British soldiers could no longer be contained. They broke away from their firing line in a mad rush to pursue and slaughter the survivors. Hearing the firing and seeing the fleeing men pass his position, the Loyalist Major Forbes led his own detachment forward in an organized counterattack, and Morgan’s men, caught off guard with their units dispersed, were taken aback in their turn, and driven back to the rear.

Following in his accustomed place behind the center of his line, Morgan was dumbfounded to see his troops flee back past him. His surprise turned to instant rage as his notorious temper stepped in and overcame him. Soon he cooled down and began to rally and reform a fighting line at the south end of the clearing.

Morgan had Dearborn extend the line to the left (westward), which as Morgan quickly realized, was not far enough to cover the British front opposing it. The problem was soon solved, when the ever resourceful Benedict Arnold hurried up units to Morgan’s support. The New Hampshire Continentals of Cilley’s and Scammell’s regiments dashed up into line to the left of Morgan’s men.

These reinforcements wasted no time in attacking the British right in an attempt to outflank it but was repulsed by “a tremendous fire” As Major Henry Dearborn recorded the action in his journal “I ran to his [Major Cilley’s] assistance with the Light Infantry, But he was Obliged to Retreat Before I came up — Colonel Scammell’s and Hale’s regiments then Came to our Assistance it was now about 2 o’clock pm, when a very heavy fire commenced on both sides”

The first part of the Battle of Saratoga – regularly referred to as the Battle of Freeman’s Farm had begun. Burgoyne and Hamilton were set to square off against Benedict Arnold’s tactical abilities and Morgan’s rifles.

The clearing at Freeman’s farm was roughly 20 acres in all. Hamilton had positioned his artillery in the center of the edge of the woods on the north side. He deployed his infantry regiments in line beside and behind the guns.

If nothing else, we can call Benedict Arnold a bold commander, he quickly sized up the situation and saw that a wide gap still existed between Fraser’s force and Burgoyne’s center at Freeman’s Farm. Quickly he decided to attack the British center and then, if he could gather enough forces, split the enemy in two and smash each piece in turn. He started forming his attack line as fast as he could rush his regiments into position.

Arnold’s regiments went forward to strike Hamilton’s center and left flank. Now began the fiercest fighting of the battle, which lasted about four hours. An American penetration of Hamilton’s position created a gap in the British line which forced the individual units to fight, at times in three directions – in front and to each flank. Fraser sent eight British companies, reinforced by riflemen, to support Hamilton.

The American assaults failed to break through and around Hamilton’s right, and the battle became an exchange of frontal attacks and counter attacks which surged back and forth: south to north, noth to south, the men rolled across the clearing of Freeman’s Farm. The fire on both sides was so continuous and intense that the British officers, who had seen & served in the greatest battles of the Seven Years War declared that they had never experienced so hot a fire.

Although the American rifle and musket fire was superior — and by superior, I mean tactically. Morgan (and other commanders of rifle units) had their men, with their more accurate and longer ranged rifle climb into trees and target (and kill) British officers and artillerymen.

This brings up an interesting point we should discuss: there is a myth, and I’m not 100% sure of it’s origin, that American’s won the war/it was part of their main battle plan to kill British officers. Few things about this: This probably shot up as a myth, because as we see, it did happen occasionally, but it was typically frowned upon. In an era of aristocracy and “gentlemen”, the commanders would typically have an air of respect for each other, and not intentionally try to kill each other, that’s what the infantry was for.

Did the American’s do it? In battle yes, we just saw it happen, and we’re going to see it happen again at Saratoga as well but it was Morgan’s troops doing it. So it wasn’t as if Washington, or Gates, or Arnold gave the order to kill officers. (Of course, maybe they did, and we just don’t have record of it, but going by what we know…they did not in this instance)
So the net/net you need to take from this. Was it an overall strategy from the top down? Most likely not. Was it something that happened? Absolutely.

Although Morgan’s rifles were strong, they were eventually beaten back by the British bayonets, and they were forced to fall back. When the British launched a full on counterattack – they were beaten back by the fierce fire of the Americans. THe British artillery pieces were taken and retaken. The American infantry’s fire drove the British back into the woods behind their guns, but the American’s could not turn the captured cannon on their enemy because the gunners carried their linstocks away when they fled. Now the linstock had nothing to do with moving the cannon, but it had everything to do with firing the cannon. The linstock was a long pole that held the match for lighting the cannon.

When British General Phillips, the veteran artillery man rode up after leaving Riedesel’s wing, he found only one artillery officer alive and unwounded, while 36 of 48 – 75% of the enlisted artillerymen were casualties. Phillips sent for reinforcements from Riedesel, who responded at once with four of Captain Pausch’s guns.

Phillips actions were not confined to artillery, the British 62nd regiment in the center was taking punishment far greater than the other three regiments in Burgoyne’s center. When it was thrown at the Americans in a bayonet attack, it drove deep beyond supporting distance and lost twenty five men as prisoners. Philips led a supporting attack in person, which freed the 62nd and allowed it to rally and reform. Before the day was over, the 62nd suffered losses of 83 percent. The other regiments of the center took casualties of 44 percent.

On the American side, Benedict Arnold was getting desperate, his original plan had called for a bold, powerful strike, that would split his enemy, he had yet to be able to deliver that decisive blow that would break through the center and right wing of the British. He called for reinforcements but none would come in time to decide the action in Arnold’s favor. Too late in the day, Gates finally released Learned’s brigade. Instead of supporting Arnold at Freeman’s Farm where he was so urgently needed, however, Learned made a half-hearted attack on Fraser’s wing and was driven off.

During the period before Learned had been sent into battle, another British general was acting to intervene decisively. Riedesel, having heard the sounds of continuous firing and sensing Hamilton’s perilous situation, decided to risk the loss of the vital supply train and bateaux at the river by taking part of his wing to the aid of Burgoyne’s center. He led off with two companies of the Regiment Rhetz, followed by the entire Regiment Riedesel and Captain Pausch with two six-pounders. The fat German general plunged forward to save the day for the British.

Riedesel urged the two Rhetz companies forward on a trial through the forest for the mile and a half between him and Freeman’s Farm, until he arrived at the top of a hill where he could see the clearing. What he saw made him all the more eager to get into action. The long, solid line of three British regiments had been reduced to small groups “surrounded by heaps of dead and wounded” and yet the unwounded were still firing. Riedesel saw that every minute counted and he attacked with his leading companies without waiting for his own regiment to come up. With his men shouting and drums beating, he fell on the American right flank that had rested on the North Branch of the Great Ravine.

Riedesel’s piecemeal attack caught the American’s by surprise and drove them back into the woods. The attack was soon supported by Captain Pausch’s two guns, which had basically been carried through the forest and up the slopes until they could be gotten into firing position. German jagers, aided by British soldiers and even officers, helped man the dragropes to get the guns up. Pausch opened fire with grapeshot (like buckshot) which quickly decided things. Regiment Riedesel came panting up and fired it’s first volley, Burgoyne then launched the whole force – Germans, British, whatever he had available – in a last desperate push. The Americans were able to resist at first, then began withdrawing. It was growing dark and the American hope of smashing the British had faded with the light of day.

The British still held the field, but at a massive cost. The overall loss to Burgoyne’s army was 600 killed, wounded, or captured. Of the 600, 350 came from the three British regiments in the center. American losses, out of forces outnumbering the British by two to one, were 65 killed, 218 wounded and 36 missing.

Burgoyne paid the price for dispersing his combat power in difficult terrain. Only Riedesels willingness to take a calculated risk saved Burgoyne’s center for complete destruction. On the American side, Gate’s indecisiveness lost the opportunity to smash his enemy on this first day of battle. As things add up, Benedict Arnold deserves credit not only for bringing on the battle, but for leadership in directing the American forces through the battle. If Burgoyne had continued to attack on the next day, 20 Sept. things may well have gone his way. The American units were in dire need of reorganization. Burgoyne actually wanted to attack the next day, but Fraser insisted that his light infantry and grenadiers needed a day’s rest before continuing an attack. In view of the relative inactivity of his wing when compared to those men in the center, it seems like a strange argument. Yet Burgoyne listened and agreed to hold up operations. ON the twenty-first of September, Burgoyne’s army w as ready to fall in and advance to the attack, but it’s commander was busy going over a dispatch received from Sir Henry Clinton, commanding in New York.

The letter dated 12 September, informed Burgoyne that Clinton was going to “make a push” northward against the American forts along the river. Gates might therefore be forced to weaken his forces on Bemis Heights in order to send a significant number southward thus enabling Burgoyne to advance again at the right time.

So Burgoyne called off his attack, and ordered his units to dig in along the same general lines that they had occupied, while awaiting the results of Clinton’s operations. It would prove to be a fatal decision, because in doing so Burgoyne gave up his last chance at maneuvering against his enemy or retreated back to Ticonderoga. He was pinned down with his supplies running out.

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