**The Battle of Saratoga – Part III: Bemis Heights**

The Battle of Bemis Heights is the final part of the overarching Battle of Saratoga. Here we'll see Benedict Arnold act without orders to lead his units to victory, a victory which would cause John Burgoyne to surrender over 5,000 men.





As the month of September carried on, American Commander Horatio Gate’s luck continued to increase. Two months prior, in July, the murder of Jane McCrae (which we talked about in part I of our discussion on Saratoga) was one of the single largest events that fueled patriotism in the north. If you haven’t listened to part I yet, the short version is that a Native American that was part of the British unit in the area had murdered and supposedly scalped a young American woman.

Volunteer s began pouring into Gate’s camp on Bemis Heights and General Lincoln’s camp in Vermont. The new recruits came in their civilian clothes, each with the family musket, and often with their own ammunition. By the end of September, General Lincoln had arrived at Bemis Heights and merged his forces with Gates, which brought militia strength up to 4,300 men. By the end of the first week of October, Gates’ total strength was around 11,000 men, with only 2,700 of that being Continentals, the rest were militia.

Gates possessed personnel, but he also possessed a personnel problem — Benedict Arnold. Two more divergent personalities seldom clashed than these two did after Freeman’s Farm. John R Elting in his work The Battle of Saratoga describes the situation as follows: “the two men were utterly different personalities, but their quarrel undoubtedly had its beginning somewhere in Gates’ enigmatic character. A man who could display the ‘frowsy manners of an ill-bred boor’ on reliving Schuyler..would not likely to tolerate an aggressive, independent subordinate as Benedict Arnold”

Arnold’s righteous anger at Gates for refusing to support him at Freeman’s Farm was followed by other incidents. First Gates transferred Morgan and Dearborn from ARnold’s to his own personal command. There was also the case of ‘misassignment’ of three New York militia regiments which ARnold had been assured would go to Poor’s brigade in his division, but instead went to another.

The real rift between the two came when Gate’s letter to COngress reporting on the battle of 19 September failed to mention Arnold or even Morgan or Dearborn. If you’ll recall from our last episode it was Arnold’s aggressiveness that first engaged and bloodied the enemy, not Gates’s hesitation. Always super sensitive to slights against his character or reputation, Arnold was enraged. When Arnold protested Gate’s response was to bait the furious ARnold by expressing doubt that ARnold really held a commision in the Continental ARmy. Gates also hinted that command of the left wing — until then nominally Arnold’s — was to be given to General Lincoln. Gates pushed even further, In a general order dated 25 September, he appointed Lincoln to command the right wing while Gates assumed personal command of the left, leaving Arnold with no c ommand at all.

Throughout the whole affair there had been “an exchange of quibbling and foolish letters” that had only served to build up rancor on both sides. In Isaac N. Arnold’s words, in his work The Life of Benedict Arnold “Gates was irritating, arrogant and vulgar; Arnold indiscreet, haughty and passionate” After the issuance of the order on 25 September, Arnold stayed in his command post, a general without command or any other function.

While Gates and Arnold pulled out rulers and had a measuring contest, Burgoyne was busy organizing and constructing entrenchments across his front from the Hudson to the high ground northwest of Freeman’s Farm. A system of redoubts with extended trenches covered the army’s two and a half mile front. The so-called great redoubt anchored the left (east) rear. A little over a half mile to its front, other entrenchments, outposts, were constructed near the river and south of the Great Ravine, protecting the stores and bateaux as well as securing the army’s left. Farther west, the Balcarres redoubt had been built just south of Freeman’s Farm. Still farther west, the extreme right of Burgoyne’s line curved back around a low hill northwest of the Balcarres redoubt. There a U-shaped fortification called the Breymann redoubt, facing generally southwestward, secured the army’s right.

The gap between the two redoubts was covered only by some Canadians occupying two fortified cabins in a clearing (check the maps on the website for more information)

On the American side there had been only one significant fortification addition, the high ground of Fort Neilson, Burgoyne’s main objective in his advance on 19 September was entrenched and occupied. Thus a potential threat from the direction of that terrain had been eliminated.

Burgoyne called a council of war on 4 October, and there were certain aspects that he and his generals did not need to discuss, they all understood it already:
For some time now the only food had been flour and salt pork

Only the day before, 3 October, food rations had been cut in half…again
Horses were dying due to lack of forage

Desertions added to battlefield losses and reduced the armies effectiveness from 8,000 to 5,000
The American’s were giving Burgoyne and his men little time for rest – in Burgoyne’s own words: “not a night passed without firing and sometime concerted attacks, at our advance picquets…it was the plan of the enemy to harass the army by constant alarms and their superiority of number enabled them to attempt it without fatigue to themselves”
Despite all of this, Burgoyne had devised a bold plan of action that he begain to lay out before Phillips, Riedesel, and Fraser.

He would leave 800 men to defend the army’s boats and supplies, and with the rest of the army he would move to turn the American left and attack it in flank and rear. To the three generals the plan seemed more than bold: it seemed desperate, without any guarantee of success.

Because of the dense woods and the enemy’s almost impenetrable security, they had no adequate intelligence of the American positions. Moreover to risk the army’s last stores to destruction or capture by an American threat while Burgoyne’s columns were entangled in the forest was unacceptable. Riedesel proposed an alternative: a retreat to their former positions at Fort Miller, where they could maintain a line of communication with Canada and at the same time be in position to act in conjunction with an advance by Clinton. Burgoyne rejected the idea of a retreat while they were still able to fight.

When Burgoyne reconvened the council he presented a new plan: this time for a large scale recon in force. His plan resembled that of the advance on 19 September — moving in three columns — but this time he would employ fewer than half the army’s rank and file: 1,500 regulars and some 600 auxiliaries. The main objective was that same magnet, the high ground to the American left, which would be “felt out” to determine whether a major attack could still be made from that direction. Apparently the thwarted British intelligence efforts had also failed to reveal that the Americans had by th en occupied and fortified that high ground.

Burgoyne’s intention was first to determine whether the Americans left was still assailable and if so to seize the high ground. Then he could launch a main attack, preceded by heavy artillery and break through or around the American left, Conversely if the reconnaissance revealed that a major attack was unfeasible, Burgoyne would order a withdrawal of the army northeastward to the Batten Kill.

This new plan was adopted and on the morning of 7 October the columns were forming up. Although the scarlet coats of the British line were faded and torn, and undoubtedly dirty, the overall turnout was indeed very soldierly and somewhat patriotic. Musket barrels and bayonets reflected the bright sun of a “very pleasant morning” as ranks were dressed before falling into column. Sometime after 10:00 AM the three columns marched out of the Balcarres redoubt near Freeman’s Farm, advancing three quarters of a mile to the southwest.

The right column, led by Major Balcarres, was made up of the light infantry companies. The center column, commanded by Riedesel contained picked detachments of Brunswickers (who would be wearing dark blue uniforms, not scarlet ones, for those keeping tabs at home) as well as Breymann’s jagers and the British 24th Regiment. On the right of Ridesel’s column marched Major Achland’s grenadiers. The force was followed by ten artillery pieces: six six pounders, two twelve-pounders and two howitzers.

When the columns reached the edge of Barbour’s wheatfield, they deployed into line on the gently sloping ground north of the main branch of Mill Creek. The infantry was then allowed to sit down in ranks, resting their muskets between their knees. The artillery went into positions which commanded the open ground in front of the infantry, and the gunners were at ease along with their infantry comrades. The line was about 1,000 yards long with excellent fields of fire to the front and both flanks surrounded by thick woods. While infantrymen and artillerymen rested, they watched foragers out to their front, busily cutting wheat for the starving horses. The senior officers were also watching, their attention devoted to focusing field glasses in efforts to make out the distant American positions. The trees and distance prevented their seeing anything.

So the British and Germans waited and rested.

It was this inactivity that American Major James Wilkinson, Gate’s aide-de-camp, observed when he was directed to check out the reports of outposts along Mill Creek. When Wilkinson reported the British situation, Gates was willing to listen to Morgan’s recommendation that his riflemen and light infantry attack the British right (west) flank. Gates directed Morgan to “begin the game” He also saw the opportunity to catch his enemy on both flanks, and ordered Poor to coordinate his brigades attack agaisnt the British left with Morgan’s. The overall plan called for both forces to slip through the woods and fall upon both British flanks at the same time. Morgan started first, since he would have to make a wide turning movement through the thick woods to get into his attack position.

Poor’s brigade, about 800 strong consisted of New Hampshire Continentals of Cilley, Hale, and Scammel, the militiamen of Livingston and Van Cortlandt, and Cook’s and Lattimers Connecticut militia. The brigades numbers included many veterans, for whom the shorter march and quiet deployment were easy going.

At 2:30 PM, Poor attacked attaining complete surprise. His men had to attack uphill in the open, but they swept up the slope without firing. Major Acland’s grenadiers loosed off a hurried volley, which was followed by an artillery volley with grapeshot. Both British volleys swished over the heads of Poor’s men, who came on without hesitating. Acland ordered his men to “fix bayonets and charge the damned rebels” but before they could charge, Poor’s men, who had held their fire until it’s effects would be murderous at a short range, fired. Scores of redcoats were mowed down, among them Acland, who took rounds in both legs. The whooping Americans, carried away with their success were unstoppable, Infantrymen surrounded a twelve pounder, whipped it around and turned it on the fleeing British. Acland, lying helpless was taken prisoner.

As Poor’s attack went in, Morgan unleashed his riflemen on the opposite flank at Major Balcarre’s rear. Morgan had made a wide sweep through the wood and his attack had come on with such suddenness and viciousness that it unnerved the British, and delivered a crushing blow that was timed beautifully with that of Poor’s. Major Balcarre’s was in the act of shifting his light infantry companies to repel the attack when Dearborn came up in time to deliver a smashing volley at such close range that the British light infantry fell back with their formations shattered. The gallant Balcarre rallied enough of his men to make another stand along a fence line, but in a manner of minutes Morgan and Dearborns men were sweeping around both flanks and coming over the fence. The British infantry finally broke and fled in confused disarray back to the Balcarres redoubt. The artillerymen had joined the flight, leaving behind their guns for the Americans.

Now it was Riedesel’s turn, holding the middle of the three groups, he could see the flanks around him being swept away. He looked around, saw that no British support was coming from flank or rear and he had received no orders to retreat, so he would stand firm and hold his ground.

And while Riedesel had not received orders, it didn’t mean that orders hadn’t been given. Buryone had indeed sent Sir Francis Clarke with orders for a general withdrawal after learning that the left and right flank had been broken. BUT Clarke was seriously wounded and captured before he could deliver the orders to Riedesel.

To his immediate front Riedesel could see an American force advancing to the attack. When it came closer the German general could see an American general on a tall brown horse was leading them, shouting and waving his sword to rally his men forward.

It was none other than Major General Benedict Arnold, who held no formal command and had decided to act 100% on his own. Gates had learned of Arnold’s leaving to the battlefront and had ordered Major Armstrong to order Arnold to stand down and return to camp, but all Armstrong ever saw of Arnold was a cloud of dust and the rear end of a big brown horse.

Arnold galloped past cheering Connecticut regiments, then passed the flank columns of Learned’s brigade. When he came to the head of the brigade, Arnold placed himself in the front of the foremost regiment and called out “Follow me!” And follow him they did, across Mill Creek, up the facing slope to run head-on into Colonel Specht’s waiting Brunswickers. The steady German regulars stood fast, firing disciplined volleys until the Americans broke and fell back. The Germans continued to hold their position against renewed American attacks spurred on by Arnold. His presence among the cheering troops was increasing the pressure on the Germans, and it became evident that they would be cut off. Fortunately for them, the order finally came for a withdrawal, and they fell back to the cover of the entrenchments.

Arnold, riding back and forth to observe the action, caught site of his opponent, British General Fraser doing the same thing. Arnold saw that Fraser was the heart of a stiffening British defense. Fraser had led the 24th regiment up to reinforce the light infantry companies he had rallied and with them he was reforming into a new line. Arnold called on his old friend Morgan, saying: “That man on the gray horse is a host in himself and must be disposed of” — Yes, Benedict Arnold just gave a kill order on an enemy general.

Morgan called up Tim Murphy, one of his best marksmen. Murphy was a noted Indian fighter and was known along the frontier for his famous double-barreled rifle. Murphy climbed a tree and sighted down on the British general. His first two shots were near misses, both almost grazing Fraser’s horse. One of Fraser’s aides saw that his general was a target and suggested he move out of range. Fraser, a rugged Scott and a veteran of a dozen battles disagreed. His presence had already proven it’s worth and he knew where he was most needed.

Murphy’s third shot felled Fraser; the bullet passed through his body, mortally wounding him. When the word of Fraser’s fall spread through the British infantry, the line that Fraser had tried so gallantly to restore collapsed, and the British ran to take cover behind their entrenchments.
At this point in the battle, a lesser general would have been content for his troops to pull back, reorganize, and remain masters of the field. If Horatio Gates had commanded on the field, we can speculate taht things would probably have ended with the withdrawal of the last British units to safety. But Gates was not on the field, Benedict Arnold was, and it was that fact that would turn Bemis Heights into a decisive victory. As Sir John Forescue in his work A History of The British Army put it: “With true military instinct Arnold seized the opportunity to order a general attack upon the British entrenchments”

Arnold then personally led the assault on the Balcarres redoubt. The Americans were met with such a fierce fire that at first it seemed they would be stopped in their tracks. Arnold got the leading ranks into and almost through the tangled abatis, but they took such severe losses that they were forced to pull back. When he had time to survey the situation, Arnold saw that nothing was to be gained in mounting another bloody assault on the front of the redoubt. While he was looking around in preparation for his next move, he spotted Learned’s brigade heading northwest toward the British right.

Arnold mounted his horse and rode directly across the field of fire, coming out unscathed to take command of Learned’s troops. Arnold’s quick eye saw the objective of his next attack. He led them clear of Balcarres redoubt, passing beyond its right to spring upon the two stockaded cabins between the Balcarres and Breymann redoubts. In one fierce rush the attacking Americans cleared the cabins and the area of the Canadians, and the way was clear for a breakthrough on the British right.

First however, Arnold saw the chance to destroy Breymann redoubt, at the extreme right of the British position. He found that Morgan had gotten his men around the British right and was ready to attack again. Arnold directed Morgan, reinforced by the regiments of Wesson and Livingston, to attack the redoubt in flank and rear, while he would personally lead an assault against the right rear of the redoubt. His assault force was already in hand, in the form of Brook’s Massachusetts’ regiment. He led them around the redoubt and forced his horse through a sallyport. As he made his entrance his horse went down from a bullet wound, and Arnold took a bullet himself, one that fractured the thigh bone of the same leg wounded at Quebec.

Almost comically as Arnold was being carried off the field, Major Armstrong finally caught up with him and delivered Gate’s order for Arnold to return to camp.

In the heat of the action, German commander Breymann fell, mortally wounded by one of his own men after using his sword on four others to drive them back into the fight. With Breymann’s death, the remainder of his small commanded gave up the redoubt to the Americans.

The way was open to the British right rear and the rupture of Burgoyne’s line that Arnold had foreseen was now possible. But there was no Arnold to organize and lead that final strike. Consequently, there was no continuation of the attack. It was getting dark and the only action that ended the day was a minor counterattack led by Colonel Spect at the head of some Germans in an effort to retake Breymann redoubt. Instead, Spect was taken prisoner.

So ended the Battle of Bemis Heights. British casualties for the afternoon totaled 600, the Americans around 150.

It was obvious even to Burgyone that his whole fortified line was no longer tenable. That night, the night of 7-8 October, he pulled his entire force back, in a well-controlled move, to positions north of the Great Ravine. There on the heights, behind well-fortified lines, he could reorganize while simultaneously protecting his supplies on the ground, his artillery train and the boats. On the following day the Americans moved forward to occupy the low ground along the river as well as the abandoned British campgrounds.

While Burgoyne appeared to be offering battle in his new position, that too appeared impossible, as American forces had begun moving up the east side of the river. What followed is best summarized in Sir John Fortescue’s A History of the British Army

“Burgoyne found himself compelled to retire up the river to Saratoga, abandoning some five hundred sick and wounded men to the enemy. The retreat itself was accomplished without hindrance; but so heavy was the rain and so severe the weather, that the men on coming into camp had not strength to cut wood or make fires but threw themselves down, old soldiers though they were, on the sodden ground to sleep. When the light came on the morning of the 9th it revealed the Americans in the act of entrenching the heights on the opposite side of the river, so as to prevent the British from crossing. Burgoyne therefore decided on the following day to abandon his artillery and baggage and to withdraw by a forced march to Fort Edward.

Scouts however came in to report that the whole of the fords on the road were beset, and that the Americans were strongly entrenched with cannon, between Fort George and Fort Edward. The British were in fact surrounded. Gates had by this time from eighteen to twenty thousand men; and there was no escape. For yet a few days Burgoyne waited in the vain hope of news from Clinton; but the message had been intercepted and the messenger hanged. The army was not only surrounded but starving, and on the 14th Burgoyne made overtures for a capitulation, which was finally concluded on the 17th. It was agreed that Burgoyne’s troops should march out with the honours of war, pile their arms, and be conducted at once to Boston for shipment to England, on the understanding that they should serve no more in America during the continuance of hostilities.”

And just like that 5,721 British soldiers, including 7 generals 27 cannon and some 5,000 firearms and all of the army’s other materials and ammunition had been taken out of the war. The fledgling American nation has been dealt a tremendous hand, will they double down and go for broke or fold? We’ll find out next week.