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July 1777

Written by Andrew Stough



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Burgoyne and St. Leger move south; Clinton stays in New York but where is Howe?

July 1777 arrived and with it the first anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. I find no references of any celebration on this first anniversary. After all, it was as yet only a statement of intention - not yet a statement of deliverance and actual independence.

There was little or no activity between General George Washington and British Commander-in-Chief William Howe. Washington was in both a defensive and offensive position, both the hunter and the hunted.

He was in a quandary as to what action to take. He wanted to defeat Howe but could not as long as Howe could not be lured out of New York. At the same time he had to hold onto the territory that he had.

There were some things that Washington knew and some that he could not know. Intelligence reports told him that British General John "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne with 8,000 men departed Quebec in June and was coming by way of Lake Champlain towards Fort Ticonderoga. Probably with the idea of seizing Albany. He knew too that British Colonel Barry St. Leger with a second force was coming from Oswego by way of the Mohawk Valley, probably to link up with Burgoyne in a drive to Albany and the Hudson. Howe was the unknown quantity. All that was known of Howe was that he was still in New York with a reinforced army and a large fleet of ships. What did it all mean? Surely, he would embark up the Hudson River to meet Burgoyne? Such a move, if successful would divide the colonies.

Washington didn't have an inkling of what Howe was up to. He was receiving no intelligence from inside the city and nothing was apparent to watchers outside the city. If he moved up the Hudson and was wrong he would be too far out of position to block a move on Philadelphia, should that occur.

To cover any eventuality he aligned his army in three forces. One army in the north near Albany, another in the south to protect Philadelphia. He remained in the center with the main army able to react in either direction.

On July 8th, Washington received word that Howe was loading transports and warships with supplies for 30 days and embarking 15 to 18 thousand men, including cavalry with their horses. Action, at last! Whatever it might be, this was what Washington was waiting for. Thinking this meant a move up the Hudson to Albany in support of Burgoyne, he moved his main army north to counter Howe. He was in a good position to block a movement up river but was caught flat footed, when, on July 23, Howe with a fleet of 260 transports and warships set sail. Not, up the Hudson to support Burgoyne but seaward.

Washington was confounded; had he stuck his neck out moving north? Or, was this just a ruse to draw his forces south while Howe would spend a few days or a week at sea, returning to sail up the Hudson to Albany unimpeded by Washington?

British General Sir Henry Clinton had remained in New York with 7,000 men. Washington did not consider him a threat as he could be countered by troops and militia based in New England. Howe was the real problem. Only if Howe sailed north to invade New England would Clinton be a threat. But, why would Howe load stores for thirty days to invade New England? It had to be Philadelphia!

Washington, guessing again, hurried south in case of a landing using the Delaware river. Days passed with no sign of Howe. Finally the fleet was sighted off the Delaware capes where it remained a few days and departed there on July 31st. Washington now wondered if he might have been lured there to leave both Philadelphia and the Hudson unguarded. But, which would it be?

While Howe was in New York he was watched inside the city by people loyal to the cause of independence, movements outside the city were watched and contested by local militia, minutemen and citizens. With Howe and the fleet at sea there was no way of watching his movements. Washington must depend upon coast

