

# *Introduction*

## *The Long Road to Saratoga*

America's northern strategy in the early period of the War for Independence was dominated by the matter of Canada. The Continental Congress was obsessed with making it the fourteenth member of the revolutionary coalition, but the American invasion to achieve that end failed at Quebec at the close of 1775, exacting in return a heavy cost in men, treasure, and political credibility. In spite of that campaign's tragic record, Congress remained committed to driving the British out of North America before reinforcements could strengthen General Sir Guy Carleton, the British commander in Canada, and General Sir William Howe, the British commander in the middle colonies.

Congress received the shocking news of the death of the American commander, General Richard Montgomery, on January 17, 1776. Throughout the early months of that year, Congress struggled to redeem American fortunes in the North. Its immediate reaction was to order recently-raised Pennsylvania regiments to march north within ten days and to direct New Hampshire, New York, and Connecticut to raise additional regiments to reinforce units already in Canada. The plan did not proceed as smoothly as Congress hoped it might.<sup>1</sup>

Various American generals' attempts to salvage the situation failed in the face of Guy Carleton's superior professional leadership, the impact of disease, a lack of medicine and supplies, and appalling morale. The defining combat took place at Trois Rivieres on June 8, when Colonel (later Brigadier) Simon Fraser defeated troops from New Jersey and Pennsylvania. By the first days of July 1776, the pox-ridden, impoverished, defeated wreck of the army that ten months earlier had departed from Crown Point on Lake Champlain in upstate New York on the crusade to add a fourteenth American state staggered back to where the campaign had begun.

The American defeat in Canada had complex and important results. An immediate one that contemporaries did not recognize was that it saved the Americans from having to try to hold what they would have won—an undertaking far exceeding their resources and capabilities. A more apparent result, as mentioned, was the great loss of men, materiel, money, and political capital.<sup>2</sup> The American invasion also roused the British to turn to more forceful plans to put down a stubborn rebellion that had proved itself to be aggressive in its attempts to spread its virus, while at the same time delaying William Howe's intended campaign against New York

City.

During the winter of 1775-76, even as the American invasion dwindled down through its last fitful stages into a disappointing withdrawal, Guy Carleton was already preparing to exploit American discomfiture and dissension by launching a counter-invasion from Canada that, if successful, would carry the British into the rebellion's interior.

In May of 1776, the American commander-in-chief, General George Washington, received disturbing intelligence that Britain had concluded treaties with German princes. The agreements provided some 17,000 German soldiers for employment in America, most or all of whom would be available to sail that April. He also learned that fifteen British regiments were probably already at sea. The combination meant approximately 30,000 enemy soldiers would be available to employ against the rebellious colonists by the end of June 1776.<sup>3</sup>

The previous failure in Canada and limited resources at New York City precluded an American initiative in response. The most the American political and military leadership could do was to try to make a stand in Canada, preferably at the mouth of the Richelieu River, and do all in their power to keep Carleton out of New York. By enlisting additional members into the Continental army, calling upon the colonies to mobilize 30,000 militiamen to defend the interior, and encouraging friendly Indians to threaten Detroit and Niagara, they might distract the British from New York.<sup>4</sup>

While these deliberations were under way, the Canadian situation continued to deteriorate. A new commander, General Horatio Gates, reached Albany on June 25 to take over the northern army.<sup>5</sup> Daunting problems awaited him. After the army had suffered its decisive defeat at Trois Rivieres in Canada on June 8, the American commander on the scene, General Benedict Arnold, had wisely retreated to St. Johns, Canada, with 3,000 invalids. By the time Gates arrived at Albany, the force he was to command had retreated from Isle aux Noix to Crown Point in New York state. That put the command back into the Northern Department of the American military structure, commanded by General Philip Schuyler of New York.

Fortunately for the various American generals and the cause they served, Sir Guy Carleton faced a critical problem: his chance to advance successfully depended upon his regaining control of Lake Champlain. He had anticipated that necessity, and months earlier requested the boats, naval stores, and artificers needed to assemble a flotilla. But Sir William Howe's more urgent need for landing craft to use in taking New York City, scarce building materials, and too few skilled workers kept the British government from providing all that Carleton required. The most it could manage were some small gunboats armed with one small-caliber gun each, and flat-bottomed bateaux for transporting men and supplies. Carleton had to undertake construction of a fleet with whatever men and materials he could find.<sup>6</sup>

The Americans were doubly fortunate in that the British went about building their flotilla without a sense of urgency, while leaving their enemy virtually unmolested. In contrast, while the Americans lacked important martial qualities, dilatoriness was not among their salient faults. They worked diligently strengthening and extending the works at Fort Ticonderoga, the main American fortress in the north, and adding to the size of their own three-boat flotilla. As part of their defensive plan, Schuyler and Gates decided to abandon the old ruined works at Crown Point. Gates put Arnold in charge of shifting the men from Crown Point to Ticonderoga, leaving a small garrison under Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Hartley of the 6th Pennsylvania Battalion.

At Ticonderoga, Gates did what he could not only to improve the physical defenses but to

change the quality of the force he commanded, which was plagued by sickness, fatigue, and desertion. Morale depended upon his and Schuyler's receiving and transporting the materiel required to improve shelter, clothing, rations, and arms, and upon getting a handle on the ravages of smallpox. Gates attacked these problems decisively and effectively. The men's health and morale, as well as discipline in the units, steadily improved through the summer and fall.<sup>7</sup>

Arnold, meanwhile, proceeded to prepare the American flotilla to contest control of Lake Champlain. An inventory of the Northern Department's vessels revealed to Gates that those captured by Schuyler's men during 1775 included a sloop and three schooners, which he reported to Congress were unarmed and "solely employed in Floating Waggons [sic];" they went to Crown Point to be armed. Schuyler also had ordered construction of gondolas [gunboats] and row galleys in a makeshift boatyard at Skenesborough. Ignorant alike of boat building and naval tactics, and knowing that Arnold had experience in the West Indian trade, Gates directed him to take charge of the race to build and command the new vessels. The choice proved fortuitous, as results would eventually establish.<sup>8</sup>

Schuyler and Gates gave unstinting support to Arnold's undertaking, and the former's aide-de-camp, Captain Richard Varick, from his post in Albany, labored beyond duty's requirements to forward everything needed.<sup>9</sup> By dint of unselfish cooperation and Arnold's amazing energy, a sloop, three schooners, and five gondolas soon rode at anchor at Crown Point. The gondolas, the backbone of Arnold's motley fleet, resembled large whaleboats. Each averaged fifty-seven feet long with a seventeen-foot beam, mounted two 9-pounders amidships, and a 12-pounder in the bow. With only one mast and a square sail, they were clumsy and hard to maneuver. Oars provided critically needed mobility.<sup>10</sup>

Arnold joined his little lake flotilla on August 14, with orders to sail down (northward) Lake Champlain as far as the Ile de Tetes, where he would try to determine the enemy's strength and, if it exceeded his own, would withdraw without making an "unnecessary display of power" or taking any "wanton" risk.<sup>11</sup> Arnold wrote to Gates on September 18 that he intended to move to Valcour Island, where there was a good harbor, offering to return to Ile de Tetes if his commander disapproved of the move.<sup>12</sup> Gates replied on October 12 that Arnold's change of station pleased him. By that time, the flotilla included sixteen vessels: one sloop, three schooners, eight gondolas, and four row galleys, mounting a total of 102 guns and manned by 856 men.<sup>13</sup>

Carleton and his army were still strangely inactive while the Americans built their fleet and improved Ticonderoga's defenses. Aside from assembling twelve gunboats and 560 bateaux on Lake Champlain and 120 more bateaux at other Canadian sites, the British did nothing to develop the kind of inland navy needed to satisfy the projected invasion's needs.

But by the end of August, Sir Guy rejoined his army from Quebec, where he had been busy reestablishing civil government, and gave his attention to deploying a fleet on Champlain. His fleet consisted initially of four vessels: two schooners (one of twelve, and the other of fourteen, guns) which had been disassembled and portaged around the Richelieu rapids; a large sixteen-gun radeu; and a six-gun gondola captured from the Americans. The armament totaled seventy-two pieces.<sup>14</sup> Seven hundred officers and men manned the boats and guns. Ever cautious, Carleton delayed advancing until a square-rigged, three-masted vessel, *Inflexible*, mounting eighteen guns, could be dismantled and brought from the St. Lawrence River. The operation consumed only twenty-eight days—a remarkably brief but fateful period.

By October 4, when Carleton departed Isle aux Nois, the campaigning season was already drawing to a close. His plan to reach Albany, New York, from whence he would cooperate with William Howe, was hopelessly behind schedule. The most Carleton could realistically hope to achieve was to take Fort Ticonderoga, from which he could launch a new offensive the next year. Even that was a long shot that would depend upon the Americans' either losing their nerve or putting up a feeble resistance.

Advancing slowly southward up the lake, on October 11 he sighted Arnold's boats strategically anchored between the lake's western shore and Valcour Island. The outmatched Americans fought heroically against a skillful enemy able to deliver twice their firepower, but an advantageous position and heroism were not sufficient. Under cover of fog and darkness Arnold maneuvered past the British, who renewed the fight on the twelfth; Arnold lost his flagship, *Royal Savage*. On the thirteenth, he beached his wrecked vessels at Buttonhole Bay on the Vermont shore. With 200 men, he eluded an Indian ambush and joined the small garrison at Crown Point, where he found *Enterprise*, *Trumbull*, *Liberty*, and *Revenge*—all that remained of his heroic fleet that had delayed Carleton's inland thrust for weeks.<sup>15</sup> Colonel Hartley and Arnold abandoned and burned the old fort at Crown Point and marched to Ticonderoga, where they joined its garrison in improving the works and constructing an outpost on nearby Mount Independence.<sup>16</sup>

Fort Ticonderoga and its dependencies were objectives tempting to Carleton. Possessing them would provide a forward base when, as was fully expected, the British renewed their campaign for control of the Champlain-Hudson route into the American interior. This was the situation Carleton faced: at the end of September 1776, Gates commanded 6,221 "Present Fit for Duty & On Duty" at Ticonderoga.<sup>17</sup> By October 14, reinforcements (including 1,085 New England militia), brought the total to 8,594<sup>18</sup>; Carleton's army outnumbered the defenders by more than 4,000. But Carleton suspected that only a siege would capture the fort, a suspicion confirmed by probes launched on October 27 and 29. Even if the siege were successful, maintaining a garrison through the winter was a commitment the general would not undertake.

On November 3, the British evacuated Crown Point and withdrew to St. Johns. Arnold, Gates, Schuyler, and the soldiers they commanded had delayed the first British invasion of the northern frontier sufficiently to end it. The fate of the second British campaign in 1777—and indeed the independence of the United States of America—would turn on the pivotal Saratoga Campaign.

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