

Invasion from Canada

Burgoyne Takes Charge of his Forces: The Good News

General John Burgoyne attended the royal levee at noon, Wednesday, March 26, where he had an audience with King George III. During the meeting, he received oral instructions from the King about his upcoming assignment in Canada. That same day, Lord Germain wrote a letter to Sir Guy Carleton containing the only written orders concerning his campaign Burgoyne ever received, and which Carleton would later turn over to him on June 10 when he formally invested him with the command of the Canadian Army.¹ On March 27, Burgoyne left London for Plymouth, where he dispatched a brief message to Sir William Howe advising him of the instructions he had received during his audience with the King, boarded the frigate *Apollo*, and after a moderately rapid crossing, arrived at Quebec on May 6. Six days later he traveled to Montreal to assume command of his army.

As of July 1, Burgoyne's army consisted of some 4,400 British troops and almost 4,700 German soldiers. The British contingent included 400 artillerymen, but was mostly made up of seven regiments of foot, each numbering between 500 and 600 men. The German contingent's equivalents were 100 artillerymen and five regiments of 500 to 700 infantry each, plus one regiment each of dragoons, grenadiers, and chasseurs, or jägers. In total, 8,671 infantrymen and 516 artillerymen, or 9,187 regulars, reduced by the retention in Canada of 343 British and 447 Germans to 8,177, were committed to the campaign to invade the northern colonies. By July 1, fifteen additional regulars and 886 auxiliaries joined him, giving Burgoyne a grand total of 9,078 white troops.²

An unusually large artillery train accompanied the army. The "Gibraltar of the North," Fort Ticonderoga, was the expedition's first major objective. Burgoyne had no intention of repeating General James Abercrombie's disastrous attack of 1758 when, because they lacked adequate artillery support, his men were slaughtered assailing the rock fortress. In 1776, Lord Germain dispatched a "huge battering train" to Canada for use in retaking Quebec from the Americans, but when the rebels did not occupy the city the cannon proved unnecessary. Sir Guy Carleton and General William Phillips had their choice of guns from that train, from which they selected 138

pieces: thirty-seven heavy guns, i.e., 12- and 24-pounders; forty-nine mediums, i.e., 3- and 6-pounders; and fifty-two howitzers and mortars. Phillips was officially tasked to serve as Carleton's chief of artillery, but Burgoyne, ignoring army regulations, made him second-in-command. The direction of the British artillery devolved upon Major Griffith Williams. Captain Georg Pausch commanded the German guns.³

Burgoyne organized the regulars into three divisions. As General James Lunt observed, "This was merely an instrument for organizing control, and there was nothing standard about the size or composition of a division."⁴ Brigadier Simon Fraser commanded the first division, or Advanced Corps; Major General Phillips of the Royal Artillery, the army's new second-in-command, had the Right Division consisting of two brigades; and the Left Division was entirely German, also consisting of a pair of brigades, under the command of Major General Friedrich von Riedesel, Freiherr zu Eisenbach.⁵ Lieutenant Colonel Heinrich von Breymann led the army's reserve, with Major Griffith Williams, as noted, commanding the Royal Artillery.⁶

In addition to the regulars listed above, two Canadian companies commanded by Captains Rene Amable de Bouchville and David Monin, together with the Indians brigaded with the Advanced Corps John Peters' and Edward Jessup's Provincial Battalions were assigned "out of the Line."⁷ These units, Burgoyne wrote Lord Germain on July 11, were "in embryo," but he expected them to increase in maturity when the army reached the part of the invasion route where loyalists were numerous. Some recruits for the 33rd Regiment, under Lieutenant George Anson Nutt, who were later brigaded with the provincials, were temporarily detailed for duty with Lieutenant John Schank's Royal Navy contingent.⁸

The invaders included British regiments rich in battle honors and tradition. Like their British counterparts, the German regiments included officers and men who had seen combat and earned honors during the Seven Years' War. The field and company grade officers were as competent as any who served in North America, including a remarkable number who survived to become generals in the British Army.⁹

The army's enlisted men hailed from Great Britain's social orders whose members did not possess resources to purchase commissions. Some accepted the King's coin unwillingly, swept up by recruiting parties or driven into service by economic desperation. Many had known grinding poverty with no promise of a better future, illiterate and unfit for productive lives in a pre-industrial economy. Through severe and often brutal discipline, noncommissioned and company-grade officers managed to turn most of them into brave and effective soldiers. They were the men who marched into battle in close-order formation and received enemy fire from large-caliber muskets and rifles at a time when a puncture wound to the head or torso usually proved fatal, one to a limb often meant amputation, and every wound was more likely than not to become septic. Poorly paid and subject to wretched living conditions in the field, most of them endured their plight with courage and loyalty. Man-for-man, they gave as good an account of themselves as any eighteenth-century soldier. Once the battle was joined, even the most competent or lucky commander could exercise little control, leaving success or failure at the tactical level to the company officers and enlisted men.

The campaign began under favorable circumstances. "I have reason to be exceedingly satisfied," was how Burgoyne began a letter from Montreal to Adjutant General and acting Commander-in-Chief Edward Harvey on May 19, 1777,

with all that has been done, and with most things that are doing: exertions have been made during the winter, which were remarkably favourable, in all the departments, and preparations are very forward; those that have been committed to the diligence of General Phillips have been executed with a diligence, precision, and foresight, that entitle him to the fullest praise. The troops are in a state of health almost unprecedented, and their spirits and general improvement are equally objects of great pleasure and promise. To this agreeable representation I have the happiness to add, that Sir Guy Carleton has received me, and the orders I brought, in a manner that, in my opinion, does infinite honour to his public and private character.¹⁰

Burgoyne was, perhaps, praising Sir Guy for his disinterested support somewhat more effusively than facts warranted.

Burgoyne's Forces: The Bad News

In that same May 19 letter to Harvey, Burgoyne predicted that his first major step would be to take Ticonderoga by siege (“for a siege I apprehend it must be”), though he ended with a nagging worry: “I had the surprise and mortification to find a paper handed about at Montreal, publishing the whole design of the campaign, almost as accurately as if it had been copied from the Secretary of State [Germain’s] letter.”¹¹ He feared, reasonably enough, that if knowledge of his plans was public property in Canada, they must be well-known among the Americans. Still, Burgoyne overestimated his enemy’s perspicacity. If they had agents operating in Montreal, as they almost certainly did, they proved singularly deaf and blind, or their employers were too occupied with preconceptions to credit the widely circulated intelligence. General George Washington believed the British were not strong enough to undertake the conquest of the Champlain-Hudson route to Albany, and so would undertake to join Sir William Howe by sea. General Philip Schuyler believed Burgoyne would reverse Lord Amherst’s 1760 route. Horatio Gates, as will be discussed in a later chapter, managed to divine Burgoyne’s objective, but how much he owed his analysis to operatives in Montreal is not apparent.

A small cloud on the strategic horizon appeared in Sir William Howe’s letter of April 5 to General Carleton, which the latter showed to Burgoyne. Sir William warned his colleague that because his army would be operating in Pennsylvania, he could provide the commander of the army from Canada with neither instructions nor more help than “a corps upon the lower Part of Hudson’s River sufficient to open the communications for shipping through the Highlands ... which corps may afterwards act in Favour of the Northern Army.”¹² Perhaps because he believed that Lord Germain had sent definitive orders to Howe to clear the valley south of Albany and actively effect a physical junction with Burgoyne, or because he was confident that he could reach that town without a major commitment from New York City, the letter from Sir William did not unduly worry Burgoyne. His response was “a second letter to Sir William Howe, wherein I reported that I was entrusted with the command of an army destined to march from Canada, and that my orders were to force a junction with his excellency.”¹³

A matter that gave Burgoyne more immediate concern was the disappointing response by Canadians to British recruiting. He had expected to exploit their presumed skill in wilderness fighting, but not even Carleton could persuade many of the habitants that Britain’s cause was their own. They had developed their prowess in forest warfare in a setting of emotional loyalty

to France and hostility to Protestants. That military tradition collapsed in the climate created by British rule. Fewer than 150 Canadians joined Burgoyne's banner. The general voiced his disappointment in a letter to Lord Germain dated May 14. "I cannot speak with much confidence of the military assistance I am to look for from the Canadians," he cautioned the secretary. "The only corps yet instituted, or that I am informed can at present be instituted, are three independent companies of 100 men each, officered by Seigneurs of the country, who are well chosen; but they are not able to engage many volunteers." The men were largely drafted from the militia, Burgoyne continued, "according to a late regulation of the legislative council. Those I have yet seen afford no promise of use of arms—awkward, ignorant, disinclined to service, and spiritless." There were a host of reasons explaining "this change in the natives since the time of the French government," he continued. "It may be partly owing to the disuse of arms, but I believe principally to the unpopularity of the Seigneurs and the poison which the emissaries of the rebels have thrown into their minds..."¹⁴

Much more serious than the Canadians' reluctance to join the imperial fight was the shortage of wheeled vehicles and horses, a problem immediately apparent. On May 20, Burgoyne informed Carleton that he required up to 800 horses. When Sir Guy objected that the number was excessive, Burgoyne replied that, although he did not need that many before taking Ticonderoga, he would require them after that because he would become dependent upon land carriage after leaving Lake Champlain.¹⁵ Although he promised to collect the horses, Carleton failed to do so. The problem was unresolved when, on June 4, General Phillips wrote to his commander about his concern for what would happen when the army—and especially its artillery—had to leave behind transportation on the lakes and strike out overland. Phillips had been led to believe that more carriages and horses would be available once the army reached Albany—but what would be available for him to rely upon in between?¹⁶

Burgoyne responded the same day by asking Phillips "to give in your opinion the mode of procuring horses and carriages from the country, combining the considerations of dispatch, sufficiency, economy towards government; and I wish to know the opinion as soon as possible."¹⁷ As soon as possible was the next day, when Phillips reviewed for his commander the two possible modes of procurement: purchase and contract hire.

The former was problematical, Phillips noted, because it involved trusting too many procurers and inspectors who could be counted on to place monetary gain over the suitability of the animals for the King's service. Experience had taught him that purchasing animals nearly always failed to procure the requisite horses at a reasonable price, and that under the conditions prevailing in Canada it would cost between 20,000 and 30,000 pounds.

The second possible mode of procurement, advised Phillips, was "[t]he contracting for a certain number of horses at a fixed price for the hire by day, [which] reduces the whole to a very simple, and therefore generally a certain plan." Its success, he continued, depended upon "making as cheap, as fair, and just, [a] bargain, on the part of government, as can be: And, being so made, that the military and civil officers do their duty, by attending to the receiving of horses only as they are fitting for service..." Phillips believed that contractors would recognize that fulfilling the contracts would be in their interest, and that the "care of the government will be, that it be done honestly and completely."¹⁸

By his answer, Phillips proved himself a dedicated, honest servant to the flag under which he served. While awaiting Phillips' opinion, Burgoyne asked Commissary General Nathaniel

Day to calculate the number of horses and vehicles required to transport thirty days' provisions for 10,000 men, "together with 1000 gallons of rum."¹⁹

Acting upon the information provided by Phillips and Day, Burgoyne submitted a requisition on June 7 for "an expeditious supply of horses for the artillery, and 500 carts, with two horses each, for the other purposes." He concluded his request with this fateful paragraph:

Your Excellency will observe, that, in order to save the public expense as much as possible, I have reduced this requisition much below what would be adequate for the service, and I mean to trust to the resources of the expedition for the rest: 500 carts will barely carry fourteen days provisions at a time, and Major-General Phillips means to demand as few horses as possible, subject to whatever future augmentations future services may require: the present number wanted will be about 400; there will then remain unprovided for (for expeditious movement) the transport of bateaux from Lake George to Hudson's River, and the carriage of the tents of the army, and many other contingencies that I need not trouble your Excellency to point out to you.²⁰

Difficult as it would have been to accomplish, Burgoyne's failure to assemble adequate vehicles and horses had deleterious logistical and tactical consequences. He began his campaign with too few of either to manage an efficient transport of equipment and arms, and without mounts for his German dragoons, limiting them to functioning as infantry and depriving his army of a cavalry capability. The logistical implications became immediately apparent when, as the army moved to St. John's, "more than half of the Carriages were broken & we did not get to St. Johns 'till night."²¹ The logistical problem worsened with every advancing mile. The attempt to secure mounts for the dragoons led, that August, to the campaign's first disaster.

Burgoyne addressed a final dismaying issue in a letter to Adjutant General Edward Harvey, from his camp on the Bouquet River after he had already set out. Its opening paragraph, after briefly describing the difficulties attendant to getting his expedition underway, paid tribute to the men who overcame "the obstructions we have met with." The second paragraph is important for three reasons: 1) It explicitly states what he believed to be his objective; (2) It revealed a serious weakness in the government's failure to provide for a rational staff organization; and (3) It exhibited concern for the careers of the lieutenant colonels (Fraser, Hamilton, Powell) who, as "local" brigadiers, led his British soldiers. "I have been exceedingly distressed in regard to the brigadiers of this army," explained Burgoyne. "Sir Guy Carleton," he continued,

the day I took leave of him, put into my hands an extract of a letter from the Secretary of War [Lord Barrington], approving the appointment, but observing, that whenever any of them should lead their brigades out of the province of Canada, in order to join the troops under General Howe, there would be a necessity for their command ceasing as brigadiers, &c.

Were this to be put into execution, according to the letter of the order and the geographical limits of Canada, and supposing Major General Phillips at the same time to be employed solely in the artillery, I should find myself at the head of an army to undertake a siege, and afterwards pursue objects of importance, and possibly of time, without a single intermediate British officer between the lieutenant-general, commanding pro tempore in chief, and a lieutenant-colonel. It would be preposterous and impertinent in me to say one word more to you, as an officer, upon

the impossibility of methodising or conducting such an army with such a total deficiency of staff....

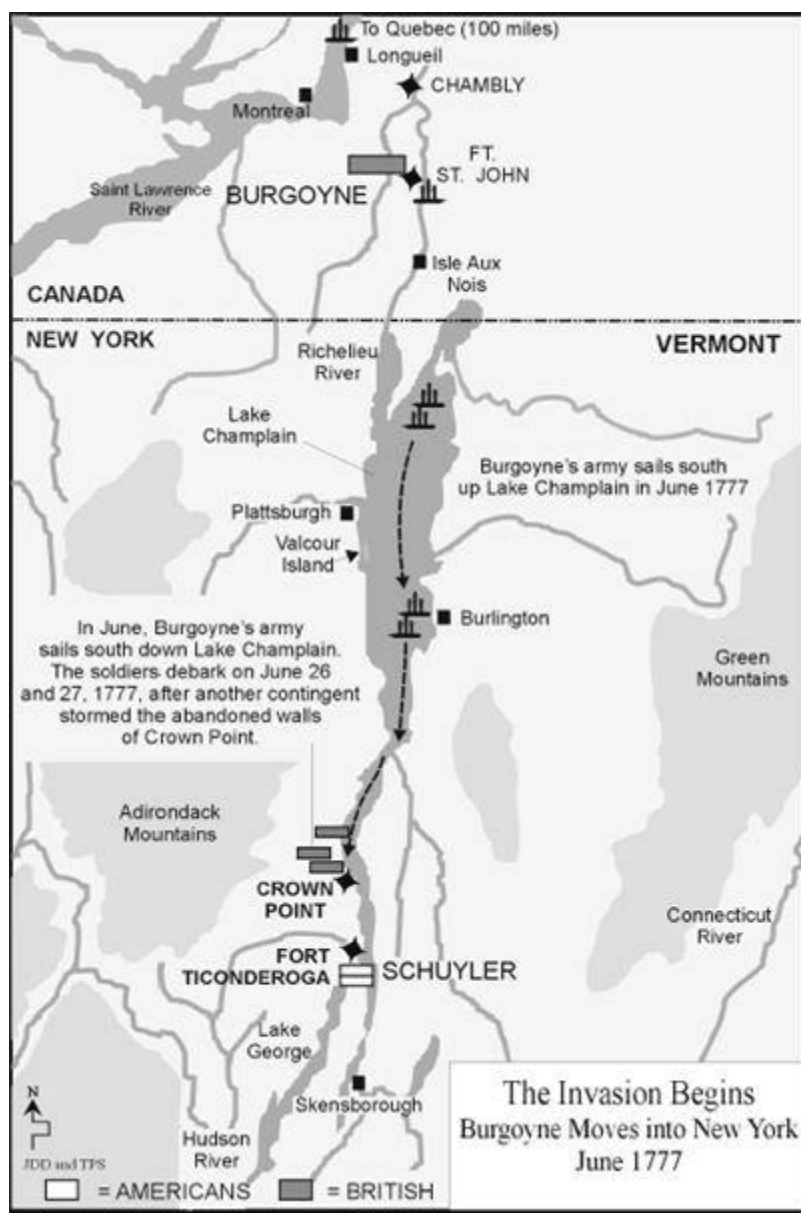
Burgoyne decided to solve the problem by keeping the acting brigadiers in that rank throughout his campaign as members of “the Canada army till such time as I am in communication with General Howe, so as to make part of his force.”²² He solicited Harvey’s support for what he intended to do. There was, of course, no time to await an assurance from the adjutant general of his approbation. The three officers functioned throughout the campaign as brigade commanders. Only two of them would survive the ordeals ahead, after which they would revert to their permanent rank when they rejoined their respective regiments.

The Battle for Hearts and Minds

General Phillips arrived at St. John’s on the 10th of June, with Burgoyne and Riedesel joining the main columns the next day. Burgoyne received his written orders from Carleton on June 10, and was now fully vested in his command. Carleton made his appearance on the twelfth.

On June 14, the Royal Standard was raised on the vessel *Radeau* and saluted by the guns inside Fort St. John’s and those within the flotilla. The standard had special symbolism. The square flag with the national arms covering the entire field without any supporting accessories normally signified the presence of a member of the royal family. In this case, according to the *Continental Journal* and *Weekly Advertiser* of Boston’s September 19, 1776 issue, “When all the troops that had gone out arrive in America, it is said that the Royal Standard is to be hoisted in three different parts of the country, when it is thought, many thousand people, friends of government, finding them selves likely to be supported (who were afraid before to take [sides]) will flock to it.”²³

When all was as ready as it would ever be, Burgoyne set out with his command to carry the war into the interior of the Northern Colonies. But even as he advanced against them militarily, Burgoyne decided that the time had arrived for him to address the benighted colonials and recall them to lawful allegiance with an awesome proclamation. The announcement to the people of New York and New England from his camp at Bouquet Ferry on June 20 opened turgidly, listing all of Burgoyne’s official titles, including commander of “an Army and Fleet on an expedition from Canada.” That army and fleet were “designed to act in concert, and upon a common Principle, with the numerous Armies and Fleets which already display in every quarter of America, the power, the justice, and when properly sought the mercy of the King.” The King’s cause, he continued, appealed “to the most effecting interests of the human heart.” In an effort to appeal “To the Eyes and Ears of the temperate part of the Public,” Burgoyne blasted the rebellion as “unnatural ... the completest system of Tyranny that God in his displeasure suffer’d for [a] time to be exercised over a forward and stubborn Generation.” After more in the same vein, and after vowing to extirpate the forces of that unnatural tyranny, Burgoyne concluded with a threat to devastate “the willful outcasts”:



In consciousness of Christianity, my Royal Master's clemency, and the honour of Soldiership, I have dwelt upon this invitation, and wished for more persuasive terms to give it impression; and not to be led to disregard it by considering the distance from the immediate situation of my Camp. I have but to give stretch to the Indian Forces under my direction, and they amount to thousands, to overtake the harden'd enemies of Great Britain and America (I consider them the same) wherever they may lurk. If not withstanding these endeavours, the sincere inclinations to effect them, the phrenzy of hostility should remain, I trust I shall be acquitted in the Eyes of God and Men in denouncing and executing the vengeance of the state against the willful outcasts. The messengers of justice and wrath await them in the field, and devastation, famine, and every concomitant horror that a reluctant but indispensable prosecution of military duty must exercise.²⁴

The next day Burgoyne surpassed even that bombastic declaration when he called his 400 Indian allies to a council at the falls of the Bouquet, about forty miles north of Ticonderoga. There, he delivered a true oratorical effusion, ascribing to the Indians satisfactory conduct, sagacity, faithfulness, incorruptibility, honor, restraint, affection, valor, and a burning desire to fight for justice, law, and the king. After an indictment of the rebels and a call to arms, the general delivered a fatuous exhortation to conduct the war against their common enemies according to the canons of civilized combat. "Should the enemy, on their part, dare to countenance acts of barbarity towards those who may fall into their hands," he concluded,

it shall be yours also to retaliate; but, till severity be thus compelled, bear immovable in your hearts this solid maxim (it cannot be too deeply impressed), that the great essential reward, worthy service of your alliance, the sincerity of your zeal to the King, your father and never-failing protector, will be examined and judged upon the test only of your steady and uniform adherence to the orders and counsels of those, to whom his Majesty has entrusted the direction and honour of his arms.²⁵

How faithfully the translator relayed that stilted piece of bombast, and how much of it the warriors understood, is questionable. It was traditional to attribute to the natives a particular responsiveness to oratory, so it is possible they enjoyed the general's performance without knowing or caring precisely what he said. Whatever their understanding, after consulting amongst themselves, an "old Chief of the Iroquois" rose and delivered a reply on behalf of all, in which he ascribed to his fellows attentiveness, approbation, affection, sincerity, bellicosity, obedience, and good wishes for the success of Burgoyne, the King, and everything they sought to do.²⁶ At least, that is the message Burgoyne attributed to the "old Chief." More credible is the report that after the council adjourned, the Indians, well-supplied with liquor, held a war dance. And well they should have: they were "having the white man on," while enjoying his speeches and libations.

Contemporaries and their descendants have found ridiculing Burgoyne's verbosity and purple prose easy. The rebellious Americans, naturally, found nothing in the words to admire, and Francis Hopkinson authored a parody, a fine piece of Americana that, widely circulated in both America and Britain in an age not yet numbed by sound bites, produced considerable mirth

at the general's expense.²⁷ Burgoyne's address to the Indians was even more roundly ridiculed than his proclamation to the New Englanders and New Yorkers. Simply put, the proclamations represented its author at his worst. Burgoyne was an articulate and intelligent man, but these were silly, and not worthy of him.

There were other aspects that did not go down easily. Employing "savages" did not sit well with many British consciences, including Burgoyne's. William Pitt and Edmund Burke bitterly condemned the practice, and the opposition in Parliament fixed upon the issue to level violent criticism against the ministry. Burke rose in the House of Commons to attack the policy and the general's address. He imagined a riot at Tower Hill, with the keeper of the animals housed there admonishing his charges before he loosed them upon the rioters: "My gentle lions, my humane bears, my sentimental wolves, my gentle-hearted hyenas, go forth: But I exhort you as ye are Christians and members of a civilised society, to take care not to hurt man, woman, or child." Horace Walpole wrote that fat Prime Minister Lord North found Burke's satire so funny that he "almost suffocated with laughter."²⁸

The Americans were, of course, outraged by the prospect of their foe's enlisting Indians in the war. The fear of native warfare was never far from their consciousness, and few things struck more terror into the whites than a threat of this nature. Many of the older families had memories of relatives or neighbors who had been victims of frontier fighting.

It remains easy to condemn using Indians to try to suppress the rebellion. But it is fair to note that failing to employ them, and every other legitimate resource available, would have meant the British government had fallen short of its obligation to exploit all potential resources to bring the war to a successful close. The Americans implicitly acknowledged that themselves by seeking to bring Indians into the war as allies against the Crown, with very limited success. Experience had taught the natives that Americans posed a greater threat to their interests than the imperial government, and they took counsel of that experience. British policy, as expressed in the Treaty of Easton and the 1763 Proclamation Line, as executed by John Stuart in the South and Sir William Johnson in the North, had been more humane than the conduct of the Americans, most of whom believed that the red man deserved expulsion or extermination.

High-flown and ridiculous, Burgoyne's address to the Indians represented an effort, however foredoomed, to regulate his allies' conduct and humanize an inhumane practice. He was less culpable than he was futile, and his proclamation was no more bombastic and pompous than the public utterances of some of his contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic. If Burgoyne had succeeded, his oratory would have been more favorably remembered—perhaps as a model of how to craft such words in such terrible times. Because he failed, however, it sounded then, and still sounds today, hollow and ridiculous.

In a final effort to overawe the locals, Burgoyne's fleet sailed southward up Lake Champlain in an incongruously brilliant display for a wilderness stage. The Indians—apparently recovered from the general's post-oration hospitality—the Loyalists, and the Canadians formed the vanguard in their canoes. The grenadiers of Fraser's Corps followed in gunboats, lending substance to the advance parties. The main column followed in bateaux, the British regiments on the right, the German on the left. Field grade and general officers stood erect in their pinnaces, and their commander, in full dress, was conspicuously visible aboard the *Maria*. Behind that brave spectacle glided the vessels carrying women and children, cooks, artificers, drivers, stores, live cattle, sutlers, and all the impedimenta that accompanied an eighteenth-century army on the offensive in hostile country. Over the water, martial music provided a quasi-operatic air

to the scene.²⁹ Despite the fanfare, the soldiers came ashore during June 26 and 27 to an anticlimactic debarkation, landing after Lord Balcarres' light infantry battalion had rushed Crown Point's abandoned and derelict walls.

On June 30, while still in his new camp at the old colonial fort, Burgoyne issued this oft-quoted order, perhaps as a final effort to overawe, or at least to encourage, his own forces:

The Army embarks tomorrow to approach the Enemy. We are to contend for the King and the Constitution of Great Britain, to vindicate the Law and to relieve the Oppressed. A Cause in which His Majesty's Troops and those of the Princes His Allies, will feel equal Excitement.

The Services required of this particular Expedition are critical and conspicuous. During our progress occasions may occur, in which neither difficulty nor labour nor life are to be regarded. THIS ARMY MUST NOT RETREAT.³⁰

But two days before that, on June 28, Burgoyne had issued orders intended to be operative for the campaign's duration. They prescribed signals to be used if it should become necessary to initiate a sudden embarkation, with baggage, etc., to be stowed in the boats, and also for a sudden departure by land, with baggage abandoned rather than loaded.³¹ Perhaps this merely reflected a preparation for the unexpected, surely suitable for any commander. Perhaps, however, it also reflected a particular awareness by Burgoyne of the tendency of his American opponents to carry off the military surprise.

In any case, the "War from the Side of Canada" opened as Ticonderoga's promontory and the fort that crowned it loomed athwart the invasion route.

