

## *The Seventh of October*

### *British Desperation*

General Burgoyne's general order for October 3 opened with words calculated to sustain his men's morale even as he reduced their ration:

There is reason to be assured, that other powerful Armies are actually in cooperation with these Troops; and although the present supply of provisions is ample, it is highly desirable to be prepared for any circumstances in the field that the King's service may require, without the delay of bringing Forward further stores for those purposes; the ration of Bread or Flour is, for the present fixed at one pound.<sup>1</sup>

Desperation caused Gentleman Johnny, normally unusually solicitous of his troops' well-being and morale, to dissemble. The other powerful cooperating army was still in New York City, and the Americans had severed his supply line from Canada. Only the labors of foraging parties supplemented the diminishing stores. And time favored his enemy: with every passing day the disparity between the armies' strength in both men and materiel increased. The autumn nights and seasonal rains announced winter's too-early approach. And in spite of his attempts to shift the responsibility for occupying Albany to Sir Henry Clinton, Burgoyne knew that he could not delay past mid-month the decision to act—either aggressively or in retrograde.<sup>2</sup>

On October 4, the commander summoned Generals Phillips and von Riedesel and Brigadier Fraser to his headquarters above Wilbur's Spring for a council of war. Burgoyne knew Gates' right flank along the Hudson River was impregnable and that ordering a frontal assault against the numerically superior, strongly entrenched Americans would be conspiring in the slaughter of his men. He therefore proposed a solution that earlier, greater captains had employed: an enveloping movement—this one around the American left flank. Except for an 800-man camp guard, he would commit his entire force to an attack on Gates' left and rear. A later report of this council by von Riedesel to the Duke of Braunschweig described the dilemma the Europeans faced and somehow had to resolve:

On the 4th of October General Burgoyne called a council of war...and asked our advice on what should be done in this affair, proposing we could by a roundabout way turn the enemy on his left flank and attack the rear. As by such a movement, however, we have to remove ourselves from the water at least three whole days, we would risk losing all of the batteaux and provisions, and then have nothing at all to live on, because it was not expected that two battalions could defend the riverbank. On this occasion, I attempted to present the danger of our situation...and to urge a retreat to Ft. Edward as soon as possible, especially on account of the only slight possibility of the early arrival of General Clinton. However, we waited, nourished by hope.<sup>3</sup>

On that tentative note, the council adjourned and the generals inspected their camp's left wing, which covered the artillery park, supply train, and bateaux, and decided that it could not be defended by an 800-man camp guard. Another council convened on October 5, during which von Riedesel proposed a retreat to the Battenkill, which he believed would place the army in a better position to await more precise news of Clinton's movements. Fraser supported that suggestion, but Phillips withheld comment.<sup>4</sup> Burgoyne rejected the baron's proposal, and returned to his own for an envelopment of Bemis Heights. He defended his decision in his narrative of the campaign, writing:

[O]n the second day after the action [of 19 September] I received intelligence from Sir Henry Clinton of his intention to attack the [Hudson] highlands about that time and I was hourly in expectation, I thought a justly founded one, of that measure operating to dislodge Mr. Gates entirely, or oblige him to detach a large portion of his force. Either of those circumstances, could have opened my way to Albany. In these circumstances, could the preference upon these alternatives admit a moment's reflection? To wait so fair a prospect of effecting at last the great purpose of the campaign, or to put a victorious army, under all the disadvantages of a beaten one, by a difficult and dangerous retreat; relinquishing the long expected cooperation, and in the very hour of its promise, leaving Sir Henry Clinton's army, and probably Sir William Howe's exposed, with so much of the season of campaign to run, to the whole force of Mr. Gates, after he should have seen me on the other side of Hudson's River.<sup>5</sup>

This was not John Burgoyne at his best. Claiming that he premised his decision to move against Gates on October 7 upon concern for Clinton and Howe was special pleading, as was his invoking the tortured "long expected cooperation" argument, also advanced in an October 25 letter to Sir Henry. In that message he attributed his defeat to the absence of cooperation, adding that "I saw the desperate state of things and that nothing but a successful action could enable me to advance or retreat."<sup>6</sup> The theme that the alleged inflexibility of his order to advance to Albany robbed him of the power to make discretionary decisions was central to Burgoyne's shifting responsibility for his campaign's failure onto the government and fellow generals.

Special pleading aside, his situation was clearly desperate, and his resistance to the idea of retreat reflected that fact. He had to fear not only pursuit by Gates' larger army, but also the Americans he knew to be active along the route to Ticonderoga. Between them, those two forces could destroy a retreating army by either massed attack or decimation in detail. That reality and, probably, his sense of duty made trying to fight his way past Bemis Heights the lesser of two bad alternatives. General Burgoyne had no illusions that resorting to that alternative would be easy.

Hubbardton, Bennington, Fort Stanwix, and finally the battle of September 19 had demonstrated American combat capability. His objective was, as it had been on September 19, to get Gates' army off Bemis Heights, the last good defensive position north of Albany available to the Americans.

### *British Intentions*

For all his desperate boldness, a tentative imprecision characterized Burgoyne's description of the action he planned. That imprecision has led students of the campaign to interpret his tactic in different terms, such as a "reconnaissance in force," or a move to gain ground from which to attack the fortified troops on Bemis Heights. After briefly discussing possible motives, Hoffman Nickerson dismissed the subject by concluding that "The whole thing was vague."<sup>7</sup> The general contributed to the confusion when he wrote a letter dated October 20 to Lord George Germain. "[W]hen no intelligence having been received of the expected cooperation, and four or five days for our limited stay in camp only remained," the general explained, "it was judged advisable to make a movement to the enemy's left, not only to discover whether there were any possible means of forcing a passage should it be necessary to advance, or of dislodging him for the convenience of a retreat, but also to cover a forage of the army which was in greatest distress on account of the scarcity."<sup>8</sup>

Burgoyne's letter lends credence to the "reconnaissance in force" interpretation. But the general was not finished explaining his purpose. The other school of interpretation could find support in his narrative's statement: "[C]onfident I am, upon minute examination of the ground since, that had the other idea been pursued [i.e., had Gates received the attack in his fortifications], I should in a few hours have gained a position, that in spite of the enemy's numbers, would have put them in my power."<sup>9</sup>

Students have not been alone in their confusion. Von Riedesel wrote to his sovereign that "it was decided on the 7th of October to undertake a reconnaissance against the left wing of the enemy, and if it was found invulnerable to consider retreat." That described the move as being both a reconnaissance made in sufficient strength to take the offensive and as a probing action to determine whether to attack or retreat.<sup>10</sup>

More useful in determining the British commander's intent is examining the force he committed to the effort. The size and composition of the probing force reflected both the tentative nature of its mission and Burgoyne's tactical vulnerability. In officers and men, it included 1,700 of his best troops. The 1,500 regular soldiers and 100 Provincials comprised slightly more than twentytwo per cent of his 7,183-man army. Burgoyne's commitment of his best troops make it very probable that he contemplated something more serious than a reconnaissance of the American lines or a cover for foraging parties.

An even better clue to his intentions was his deployment of ten pieces of artillery. Cannon could be moved through the rough, wooded country only with great effort. One artillery officer observed that "Once a 12 pounder is removed from the Park of artillery it was gone." The deployed guns included six 6-pounders, two 12-pounders, and two 8-inch howitzers, the last being especially useful against entrenchments.<sup>11</sup> That commitment argues strongly that Burgoyne intended to attack Gates' left.

If that was his purpose, why were his orders so ambiguous? Perhaps experience had taught

him that Gates was quick to divine an invading army's intentions—witness the former British major's correct analysis of the Burgoyne campaign's route and objective, in which Generals Washington and Schuyler had failed, and his foiling of Burgoyne's attempt to lure him out of his works on September 19. Another explanation for Burgoyne not identifying an objective on October 7 was the fear of failure that had been growing in his mind after the repulse of the nineteenth. He may have concealed his real objective because, realizing the mounting odds against success, he feared that failure to gain it would destroy the morale of soldiers already on reduced rations and deserting in growing numbers. Employing terms such as "reconnaissance" might reduce the impact of failure.

The position in which Burgoyne was most interested was a low north-south ridge 800 yards west of the angle formed by Gates' entrenchments on John Neilson's farm. Possessing it would enable William Phillips' experienced gunners to deliver enfilade fire into the Americans' camp. Equally important, it would provide the base for a flanking attack against its left and rear that, if successful, would force the Americans off Bemis Heights, realizing Burgoyne's goal of "forcing a passage and dislodging the enemy."

Gates and engineering officer Thaddeus Kosciusko were not blind to the ridge's importance and had begun entrenching along its military crest. Lieutenant William C. Wilkinson's map depicts an eastward-facing work labeled "Intrenchment which was only begun."<sup>12</sup> Contemporary sources do not reveal whether the British knew that its construction was underway. Wilkinson prepared his drawing after the surrender, when he could visit the site. Scouting parties may, however, have observed the work, and Burgoyne may have decided to act before the position became so strong as to foreclose any opportunity for a turning movement.

While the immediate objective was to seize the ridge, possessing it was to be preliminary to further action. Whereas the British generals later unanimously agreed that an attack on the American left and rear was to follow, von Riedesel subsequently cast the purpose in more tentative terms.<sup>13</sup> Because he was certainly party to the decisions taken and was recording impressions of events, not pleading an official interpretation, his accounts merit special, though not uncritical, attention.

After describing the conference of October 4, opining that the decision to entrust the camp's left wing to an 800-man guard was infeasible, and recording Burgoyne's rejection of the baron's proposed retreat to the Battenkill, the German general wrote that Burgoyne initially refused to entertain any suggestion of withdrawal. But after reconnoitering,

[h]e said that on the 7th, he would undertake another great reconnoitering expedition against the enemy's left wing to ascertain assuredly his position and whether it would be advisable to attack him. Should the latter be the case, he intended to advance on the enemy on the 8th, with his entire rmy. If an attack was not advisable, he would, on the 11th, retreat back to the Battenkill.<sup>14</sup>

The baron was describing a probing expedition preliminary to deciding to attack or withdraw. Because a general assault would not be launched until the next day, the probing column was to be the aforementioned especially strong force of 1,500 men, eight field pieces, and two howitzers. If an attack seemed "advisable [ratsam]," they would occupy and hold the ridge until, on the eighth, the entire 7,183-man army joined them in a turning movement.

Lieutenant William Digby of the 53rd Regiment's grenadier company corroborated von

Riedesel's account when he wrote in his journal that a "detachment of 1500 regular troops with two 12 pounders, two howitzers and six pounders were ordered to move on a secret expedition and to be paraded at 10 o'clock."<sup>15</sup> He later learned that Burgoyne's "intended design was to take post on a rising ground, on the left of their camp—the 7th—with the detachment, thinking they would not have acted on the offensive, ... and on that night our main body was to move so as to be prepared to storm their lines by day break on the 8th...."<sup>16</sup>

If Digby's version is reasonably accurate, General Burgoyne's tactic was more the product of desperation than mature judgment. If 800 men could not secure the British left, with its stores, bateaux, and artillery park, against an advance upriver from the American right, committing the "entire" army to an assault on Gates' left and rear on the eighth was risking everything on a gamble against overwhelming odds.

Burgoyne was betting that his probing force could gain and hold an advanced enfilading position against the Americans' strong, well-entrenched left where, according to Digby, he expected them "to not have acted on the offensive." After remaining in that exposed position overnight, he believed he could launch a general flank attack, all the while leaving the equally strong American right wing free to attack the vulnerable British camp and/or engage the attacking army's left. That was, indeed, taking council of desperation.

Still, probing the American left, enfilading it and, if feasible, developing a turning movement made sense, even in spite of unfavorable odds, whereas undertaking the attack von Riedesel described did not. This conclusion is based, of course, on the proposition that the probe would have produced a decision to attack. If it produced a decision to follow the baron's advice and withdraw, Burgoyne had delayed too long and worsened the odds against a successful disengagement in the presence of a larger, stronger foe.

The truth was that by waiting until the second week of October to act, the only chance Burgoyne had of avoiding a catastrophic defeat was for Horatio Gates to lose his nerve and make an egregious tactical blunder. This hope was a fatal substitute for strategy.

### *The British Attack*

By October 6, General Burgoyne had determined to test his enemy, and he resorted to traditional methods to raise morale and prepare his men to risk their lives. To compensate for the recent reduction of rations he ordered that "On the next delivery of Provisions, two days fresh meat will be issued at the rate of one pound of beef per Ration, to each man." The soldiers would revert to salted meat for the next two days. To help prepare the men for renewed combat, he distributed amongst them twelve barrels of rum.<sup>17</sup>

The commander's solicitude confirmed the soldiers' suspicions that they were soon to test the enemy's mettle in another trial at arms and, fortified by four days' rations, they prepared for battle. The fighting of September 19 and daily harassment by American scouting patrols warned them that they faced a determined, battle-wise enemy who enjoyed a numerical superiority and both strategic and tactical advantages. But they were disciplined, experienced campaigners, and they trusted their officers and their own courage.

Accompanied by Phillips, Riedesel, and Fraser, Burgoyne led the probing force out of camp about noon. Generals Hamilton and Specht were left behind in charge of the troops posted on the high ground of the encampment's left flank, with General Gall responsible for the units positioned in the entrenchments extending from the Hudson River to Freeman's farm. Loyalist

Lieutenant Joshua Pell, Jr., left a description of how Burgoyne deployed his probing force:

The detachments mov'd according to order by the right in three Columns; Light infantry and 24[th] Regiment with Bremens [sic] Corps form'd the column of the Right with two 6 pounders, taking their route thro the wood on the right of Freeman's farm....The Grenadiers and the Regt. of Hesse Hanau [Pell included all German units under that heading], form'd the Center column with 2 12 pounders, and 2 eight inch Howitzers, marching thro the open field. The detachments of the Line, with the Canadian Volunteers and Provincials form'd the column of the left marching thro the wood, where the engagement of 19th September was fought.<sup>18</sup>

According to von Riedesel, a contingent of Indians and Loyalists deployed to the right to function as scouts and skirmishers.<sup>19</sup>

Divided into its three columns, the force marched southwestward to a low hill upon which the Barber family had a small, cleared farm. A fifty-man picket under Captain Joseph Blague of Cook's Connecticut Militia was already in position there. After driving the Americans out of the clearing, the European soldiers foraged in the fields while the generals pondered their next move.<sup>20</sup>

### *The Americans Defend—and Then Attack*

Horatio Gates' force on Bemis Heights was more formidable than it had been when Burgoyne had tried to dislodge it in September, having grown from around 9,000 to 13,064 men. As he had on the nineteenth, Gates kept a strong division committed to interdicting the road to Albany. That right wing under General Benjamin Lincoln, twenty-three regiments totaling 6,368 men, included the brigades of Glover, Nixon, Paterson, and Warner. Benedict Arnold's former division, now under Gates' personal command, had twenty regiments totaling 5,399 men and included the brigades of Poor, Learned, and Ten Broeck, Morgan's Corps of riflemen and light infantry (552 men), and Wolcott's Brigade of Connecticut Militia Cavalry (which formed Gates' headquarters guard). Three hundred sixty-five artillerymen under Major Ebenezer Stevens served twenty-two cannon. Colonel Jeduthan Baldwin's seventy-two man detachment of engineers and artificers was attached to headquarters.<sup>21</sup>

The Americans thus enjoyed a more than two-to-one superiority and a tactical and strategic advantage that could only be wrested from them by a military miracle. Miracles, however, are unreliable sources of victory. As he had attempted on September 19, Burgoyne on this day had to entice or drive Gates off Bemis Heights. Brave British and German soldiers could burnish their regiments' reputations, but they could not produce the miracle that would open the way to Albany.

Alerted by the sound of British signal guns, General Gates ordered the lines manned about 1:00 p.m.<sup>22</sup> The enemy's appearance on the Barber farm confirmed his expectation that Burgoyne would repeat his attempt to turn the American left. Knowing that time was running out for the Europeans and that their commander must soon retreat or fight his way past the high ground blocking his way south, Gates was in daily anticipation of action. His reliance upon a reactive tactic that was economical of manpower and resources was about to be tested.

“[O]n the afternoon of the 7th October, the advanced guard of the centre beat to arms; the

alarm was repeated throughout the line, and the troops repaired to their alarm posts,” wrote James Wilkinson in what is the most detailed record of the events that attended Burgoyne’s occupation of the Barber farm. No one has improved upon it. “I was at headquarters when this happened,” he continued,

and with the approbation of the General, I mounted my horse to inquire the cause, but on reaching the guard where the beat commenced, I could obtain no satisfaction but that some person had reported the enemy to be advancing against our left. I proceeded over open ground, and ascending a gentle proclivity in front of the guard, I perceived about half a mile from the line of our encampment, several columns of the enemy, 80 or 70 rods from me, entering a wheat field which had not been cut and was separated from me by a small rivulet; and without my glass I could distinctly remark their every movement.... After entering the field, they deployed, formed the line, and sat down in double ranks with their arms between their legs. Foragers then proceeded to cut the wheat or standing straw, and I soon after observed several officers, mounted on the top of the cabin. From which with their glasses they endeavoured to reconnoitre our left, which was concealed from their view by intervening woods.<sup>23</sup>

Wilkinson decided that the enemy did not intend to attack immediately and reported to Gates that “They were foraging and endeavouring to reconnoitre your left; and I think Sir, offer you battle...their front is open, and their flanks rest in the woods, under cover of which they may be attacked, their right is skirted by a lofty height. I would indulge them.” The general responded: “Well, then, order on Morgan to begin the game.”<sup>24</sup>

Morgan’s Corps had by this time moved north from its position near John Neilson’s house and formed in front of the entrenchments’ center. Wilkinson delivered Gates’ order and discussed with Morgan the enemy’s deployment on the Barber farm, which he described as being “formed across a newly cultivated field, their grenadiers with several field pieces on the left, bordering on a wood and a small ravine...their light infantry on the right, covered by a worm fence at the foot of the hill before mentioned, thickly covered with wood, their centre composed of British and German battalions.” Morgan knew the ground and proposed a circuitous approach that would post him on an elevation to the enemy’s right, from which he intended to commence his attack “as soon as our fire should be opened against their left.”

Gates approved Morgan’s proposal and ordered General Enoch Poor to commit his brigade to an attack on the British front and left flank while General Ebenezer Learned moved his brigade against the British 24th Regiment and the German units on line between Burgoyne’s right flank and the British grenadiers.<sup>25</sup>

Morgan immediately deployed his corps “to the left and ascend[ing] and advan[cing] in a direction to meet any part of the enemy that might be moving in that direction.”<sup>26</sup> Delayed by the circuitous nature of their movement, Morgan’s men could not attack Fraser’s 24th regiment and light infantry until about 3:00 p.m., when the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd New Hampshire Continentals from Poor’s Brigade came on line opposite the British grenadiers and guns of the Hesse-Hanau artillery.<sup>27</sup> The rest of Poor’s regiments deployed facing the drafts from the British 9th, 21st, and 62nd Regiments, and Alexander Fraser’s rangers and Provincials.

For about thirty minutes, fitful artillery and small arms fire echoed through the timber and open fields as American riflemen and advanced parties engaged components of the European

probing force. By 3:30 p.m., as the firing became general, Learned's Brigade, reinforced by Ten Broeck's Albany County Militia, deployed between Morgan and Poor.<sup>28</sup> Within a few minutes exploding black powder blackened men's faces and shrouded the firing line in smoke, reducing visibility and impairing fire discipline. Uncontrolled "firing at will" increasingly replaced volley fire as contending lines wavered, broke, and reformed. Cohesion of even veteran units was difficult to impose. Combat's endemic confusion compromised the effectiveness of linear tactics.

With the armies so engaged, Morgan moved to turn the British right. The commander of that flank, Simon Fraser, had already been mortally wounded trying to rally his outnumbered troops.<sup>29</sup> Enoch Poor's 1,600-man brigade overwhelmed the grenadiers and assailed the thin red line of the British left wing, driving it into retreat toward the Light Infantry [Balcarres] Redoubt on Freeman's farm. The six regiments of Learned's Brigade, reinforced by one of Jonathan Warner's Massachusetts Militia regiments, attacked Germans who, even with their flanks exposed, stubbornly fought them off. A renewed charge finally forced von Riedesel's heavily mauled men to join the general withdrawal into the fortification on the Freeman farm.<sup>30</sup>

Burgoyne's "reconnaissance in force" had within a relatively short time suffered more than 400 casualties and lost all of its field pieces. At least 8,000 Americans—including Paterson's Brigade and the 5th, 6th, and 7th Massachusetts regiments from Nixon's Brigade—were present on the field, although not all of them participated in the fighting.

### *Arnold Returns to the Field*

Sometime after Learned's Brigade launched its attack on the enemy's center, the most dramatic event of the day occurred when Benedict Arnold galloped from the camp on Bemis Heights onto the field and joined Learned's soldiers.<sup>31</sup>

Excluded from command by his threat to leave the Northern Department, Arnold had been riding about camp "betraying great agitation and wrath," remembered one eyewitness. His "ardent" and proud nature could not tolerate his former division dominating the battle without his personal participation. As soon as the Germans withdrew, Arnold, probably with some of Learned's men, joined elements of Poor's Brigade in forcing the enemy through the woods and across the fields of the Coulter and Freeman farms, overrunning a small outwork on "Bloody Knoll," and massing before the Light Infantry [Balcarres] Redoubt. That massive fortification, the strongest of the British line, measured some 500 yards long. The stronghold was "built of trees, some very large, with earth thrown between the trees and against the exterior to a height of from four to six feet," wrote Freiherr von Riedesel, "with four exterior sally-ports and eight interior entrances from the camp into the double-walled portion, which includes three-quarters of the work. There are embrasures for the cannon and a bacquet for the soldiers."<sup>32</sup>

Captain Georg Pausch confirmed the German general's observations: "The walls in some places were six feet high. Eight cannon—four light sixes, two light three-pounders, and two five and a half howitzers—were mounted at embrasures."<sup>33</sup>

The reinforced earthen redoubt now sheltered the more than 1,000 men who had retreated from Burgoyne's main line of resistance, plus seven battalion companies of the Regiment von Riedesel, bringing the number of its defenders to approximately 1,500 disciplined, determined soldiers.<sup>34</sup> From behind the redoubt's strong walls they could exact a heavy toll upon any



assailant, especially infantry who had engaged in a firefight and pursued a retreating foe across rough woods and a meadow.

The Americans threatening the redoubt numbered about 3,300 men— 1,400 of whom were fresh troops from Paterson's Brigade. Even without artillery—because they lacked linestocks, no one could fire the two pieces taken from the "Bloody Knoll" outpost—they could have neutralized the men in the fortification. Prudence dictated that Poor's soldiers, reinforced by Paterson, form a line behind the ridge parallel to the southern half of the redoubt, pin down the defenders with a heavy and steady fire, and await the development of a flanking movement around Burgoyne's right, which was defended by numerically weak German Jägers. But prudence was alien to Arnold's nature.

According to European combatants, he led Poor's and Paterson's men in a futile and costly attack against the stronghold. British and German sources agree on both the ferocity and futility of the assault. Burgoyne, in his letter of October 20 to Lord Germain, explained that his retreating soldiers "had scarcely entered the camp when it was stormed with great fury, the enemy rushing the lines under severe fire of grape-shot and small arms. The post of the light infantry under Lord Balcarres assisted by some of the line," he continued, "which threw themselves into the entrenchments, was defended with great spirit, and the enemy led by General Arnold was finally repulsed."<sup>35</sup>

In his *State of the Expedition*, the general paid tribute to American courage he faced at Saratoga:

And if there can be any person, who, after considering the circumstance, and the positive proof of the subsequent obstinacy, in the attack on the post of Lord Balcarres, and various other actions of the day, continue to doubt, that the Americans possess the quality and faculty (call it whatever they please) they are of a prejudice that it would be absurd longer to contend with.<sup>36</sup>

"I must here again, in justice to the army," Burgoyne summarized, "recur to the vigour with which they were fought by the enemy. A more determined perseverance than they showed in the attack upon the lines, though they were repulsed by the corps under Lord Balcarres, I believe, is not in any officer's experience."<sup>37</sup> Blunt Lord Balcarres tersely testified before the parliamentary inquiry that his fortification was "attacked...with as much fury as the fire of small arms can admit" and his cannon were "of great use" in repelling the Americans. German participants also commented on the ferocity of the assault, although noting that in the end it failed, and that "we held it until the next morning."<sup>38</sup>

Contemporary American accounts are strangely silent about this phase of the battle, and many years passed before memoirs of veterans of the October 7 fighting appeared. The earliest to appear in print is this brief entry by Wilkinson:

I then proceeded to the scene of renewed action, which embraced Burgoyne's right flank defence, and extending to his left, crossed a hollow covered with wood, about 40 rods to the entrenchments of the light infantry; the roar of cannon and small arms at this juncture was sublime, between the enemy behind their works, and our troops entirely exposed, or partially sheltered by trees, stumps, or hollows, at various distances not exceeding 120 yards.<sup>39</sup>

Wilkinson was describing not an aggressive assault led by Arnold, but a holding action. His version is very much at odds with those of the redoubt's defenders. His account of other, less dramatic actions is notably detailed, but about the assault on Balcarres' Redoubt, he was unusually reticent.

Samuel Woodruff, a loyal admirer of Arnold, wrote fifty years after the battle that although Arnold "had no command that day, he volunteered his services [and] was early on the ground and in the hottest part of the struggle at the redoubts."<sup>40</sup> Colonel Philip Van Cortlandt, commander of the 2nd New York Regiment of Poor's Brigade, was among the men who followed Arnold that day, and he left an "Autobiography" that was eventually published in *The Magazine of American History* in 1878. Van Cortlandt's description of the battle included this remarkable description:

I being yet with Poor's brigade and advancing, the British retiring towards their battery, as the Hessians towards theirs. General Arnold, now on the field and in sight of the nine gun battery [the Balcarres Redoubt] sent his aid [sic] to the right, ordering General Poor to bring his men into better order as we were pursuing. This order arrested our progress and prevented our taking the British battery in less than ten minutes; as we should have entered it almost as soon as the British, as Morgan did that of the Hessians, which Arnold discovered after sending the above order to General Poor, and as he had also sent another order by his aid, he now rode as fast as he could to counteract his own orders....<sup>41</sup>

The colonel's account describes a confused and contradictory sequence of actions that may have been closer to the reality of combat than later, more structured accounts of clear-headed leaders commanding men and events.

Major Henry Dearborn, because he was with Learned and Morgan on the extreme American left, did not have firsthand knowledge of what transpired in front of the Balcarres strongpoint and did not refer to it in his *Journal*. However, his "Narrative of the Saratoga campaign," written in 1815, contains this brief but intriguing statement: "Our troops pursued and after dislodging those who occupied their outworks [on "Bloody Knoll"], General Poor with his brigade advanced to the main works of Fraser's camp, while Arnold with the light troops and several Regts of the line, assaulted the German entrenched camp."<sup>42</sup> Dearborn did not place Arnold at the head of Poor's and Paterson's brigades in attacking the Light Infantry [Balcarres] Redoubt, but with the units attacking the so-called Breymann Redoubt (an event discussed in detail below).

No American participants in the battle described the attack on Balcarres' fortification as being either dramatic or especially significant. Nor do they credit Arnold with leading the assault. In fact, Van Cortlandt claimed that by directing Poor to "bring his men into better order," Arnold actually *prevented* the Americans from taking the position, and then riding "as fast as he could to counteract his own orders." Interestingly, Richard Varick, Arnold's vehement advocate during the quarrel with Horatio Gates, did not place his hero in the fighting.

Most writers thereafter limned a very different scenario, one in which, under Arnold's inspired leadership, Americans threw themselves against Burgoyne's strongest fortification and, in spite of its strength, engaged its defenders in furious hand-to-hand fighting. Following (perhaps) Isaac N. Arnold's biography of his kinsman, they attributed to Arnold's commanding

presence the most daring and decisive actions of the day, continuing the battle after the British withdrawal from the field, an interpretation Christopher Ward succinctly expressed when he wrote: “The fighting seemed to be over, and if Gates had commanded in the field it would have been over; but Arnold was of different stuff. He was not content with driving the enemy from the field, he wanted a smashing victory.”<sup>43</sup> Sir John Fortesque believed that Arnold’s superior military instinct led him to seize “the opportunity for a general attack upon the British entrenchments.”<sup>44</sup>

“Arnold and the Americans engaged, following the fugitives, arrived opposite Balcarres’ post and promptly attacked,” wrote Hoffman Nickerson, as always without bothering with sources. His account is the standard melodramatic version of events:

Although without artillery they pressed forward through the heavy fire both of musketry and grapeshot from the British cannon. Darting to and fro and raging like a madman, Arnold was a host in himself. It was said of him [by whom?] that he struck an officer of Morgan’s corps with his sword and wounded him in the head, remembering nothing of the incident afterwards and begging his pardon when told of it. Under his leadership the abatis in front of Balcarres’ lines was stormed and a determined attack made upon the breastworks themselves. Nevertheless their strength, together with the fact that Balcarres’ light infantry had been reenforced by the survivors of the reconnoitering detachment brought the assault to a stand....<sup>45</sup>

Captain Nickerson’s classic account synthesized the several traditional versions of the attack, including the improbable wounding of Morgan’s officer (improbable because Morgan did not participate in the fight for the Light Infantry [Balcarres] Redoubt). No known contemporary source describes Arnold’s “raging like a madman.” Never one to sacrifice a dramatic opportunity for pedestrian prose, Nickerson apparently relied on British accounts of the ferocity of the action and filled the evidentiary vacuum with stirring invention.

Most writers who believed that Arnold inspired and led the attack approved of his decision and conduct, in spite of the attack’s cost and futility. Enough heroism was manifest to render reality nugatory. Blind American courage in the face of certain failure has a seductive appeal, redeeming the sacrifice of brave men. But 3,300 brave Americans could not overcome the 1,500 brave Europeans who defended Balcarres’ redoubt. They charged repeatedly, only to become entangled in the maze of fallen trees at the barricade’s base. Whatever Arnold’s role, most of the Americans who died on October 7 fell before the Light Infantry [Balcarres] Redoubt.

### *The Decisive Action: Breymann’s Redoubt*

A few hundred yards to the left and rear of the men contending for the Light Infantry (Balcarres) Redoubt, another American general, Ebenezer Learned, prepared for the battle’s most decisive action. With him was his veteran brigade, now regrouped after its assault on von Riedesel’s Germans, and Morgan’s Corps, reinforced by the 5th, 6th, and 7th Massachusetts Regiments of Nixon’s Brigade, a total of about 2,000 men.

The key to the American victory was not a direct attack on Burgoyne’s strongest post, but a turning movement directed against his right wing, where 200 Jägers of the German reserves under Lieutenant Colonel Heinrich Christoph Breymann manned a weak log redoubt. General

von Riedesel described the post's purpose: "The Reserve Corps of Lieutenant Colonel Breyman built their Emplacement beyond the Ravine to defend the right flank of the Corps of Brigadier Fraser en potence and at the same time cover the road that ran over the hill into the rear of the Army."<sup>46</sup>

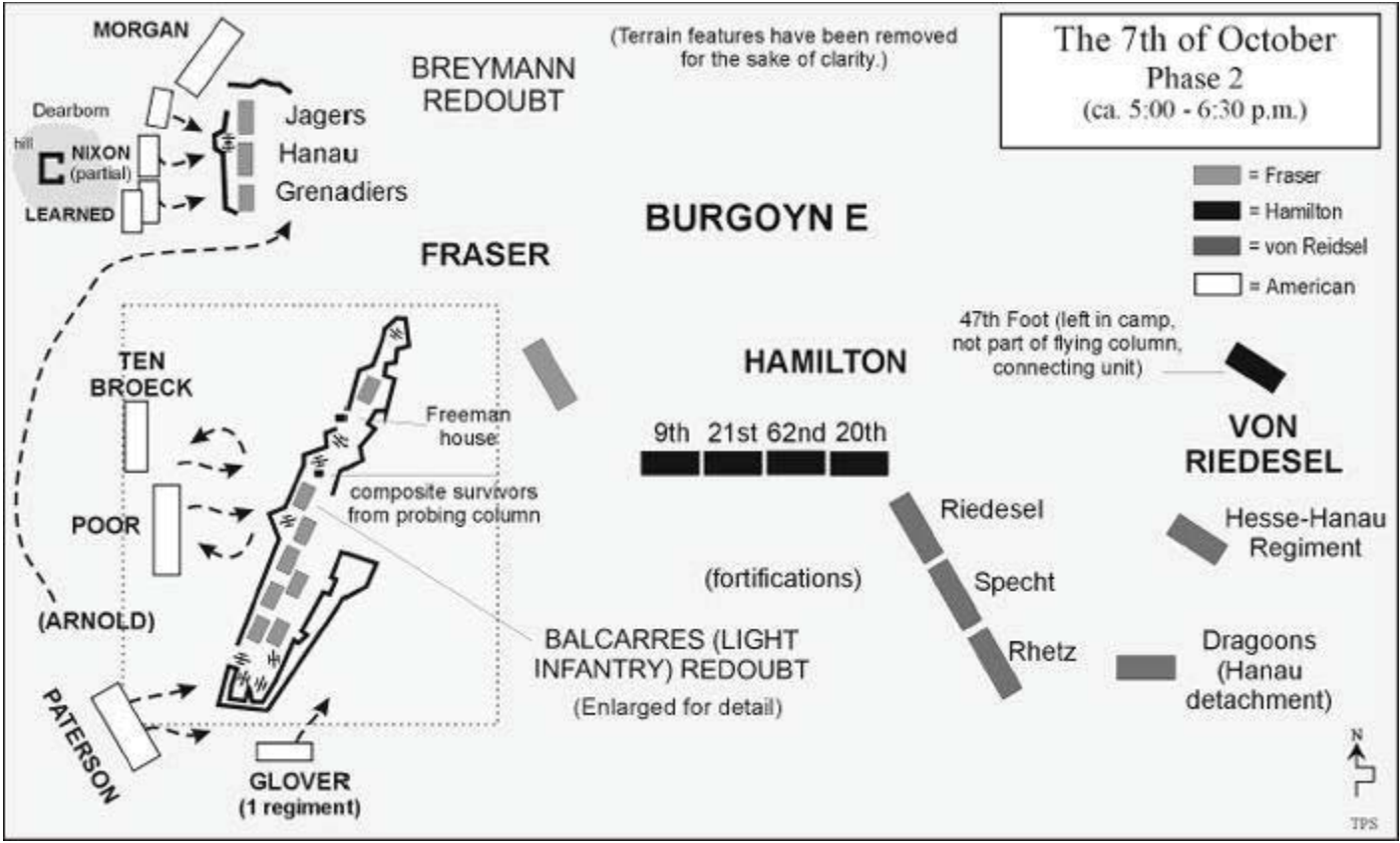
Embedded in James Wilkinson's egocentric *Memoirs* is an accurate description of the tactical situation Ebenezer Learned exploited:

I then proceeded to the scene of renewed action, which embraced Burgoyne's right flank defence.... The right flank defence of the enemy occupied by the German corps of Breyman, consisted of a breast-work of rails piled horizontally between perpendicular pickets, driven into the earth, formed en potence to the rest of his line, and extended about 250 yards across an open field, and was covered on the right by a battery of two guns. The interval from the left to the British light infantry was committed to the defence of provincials, who occupied a couple of log cabins [of the McBride farm]. The Germans were encamped behind the rail breast-work, and the ground in front of it inclined in a very gentle slope for about 120 yards, when it sunk abruptly, our troops had formed a line under this declivity, and covered breast high were warmly engaged with the Germans. From this position, about sunset, I perceived Brigadier-general Learned advancing toward the enemy with his brigade, in open column. I think with Colonel M. Jackson's regiment in front.<sup>47</sup>

The most straightforward account of this critical post's capture that has come down to us is from one of the men involved, Colonel Rufus Putnam of the 5th Massachusetts Regiment.

The 7th of October  
Phase 2  
(ca. 5:00 - 6:30 p.m.)

(Terrain features have been removed for the sake of clarity.)



The facts are as follows, in the front of these works was a clear open field bounded by a wood at a distance of about 120 yards. In the skirt of this wood I was posted with the 5th and 6th regiments of Massachusetts[.] [T]he right and left of these works were partly covered by this wood and the rear by a thick wood. The moment orders were given to storm, I moved rapidly across the open field & entered the works in front, I believe the same moment that the troops of Learned's Brigade (of which Jackson's regiment was) entered on the left and rear. I immediately formed the two regiments under my command & moved out of these woods [works] (which was not enclosed in the rear) into the woods toward the enemies [sic] enclosed redoubt [Balcarres Redoubt] in the rear of their main encampment.<sup>48</sup>

Another officer from Nixon's Brigade, Captain Benjamin Warren of the 7th Massachusetts, recorded this terse description of his regiment's role in the fighting: "We marched to the right of Col. Morgan's riflemen to the lines within ten rods of a strange fort; fought them boldly for better than half an hour when they gave way; left the fort and fled. Our people marched in and took possession of their cannon and 600 tents, standing with baggage etc. The fire was very hot on both sides."<sup>49</sup>

According to Wilkinson, "[G]eneral Learned...incline[d] and attack[ed] to his right...with great gallantry, the provincials abandoned their position and fled; the German flank was by this means uncovered, they were assaulted vigorously, overturned in five minutes, and retreated in disorder, leaving their gallant commander, Lieutenant-colonel Breymann dead on the field."<sup>50</sup>

As the men of Learned's and Nixon's Brigades, with Morgan's Corps, stormed Breymann's post, Arnold, having left the troops engaged in front of the Balcarres Redoubt, joined the assault. As usual with any historical re-telling involving Arnold, there are numerous (at least partly) conflicting versions. Here is Wilkinson's description of Arnold's role in what is now a legendary event:

...[Arnold] finding himself on our right, dashed to the left through the fire of the two lines and escaped unhurt; he then turned to the right of the enemy, as I was informed by that excellent officer, Colonel Butler [of Morgan's Corps], and collecting 15 or 20 riflemen threw himself with his party into the rear of the enemy, just as they gave way, where his leg was broke, and his horse killed under him; but whether by our fire or that of the enemy, as they fled from us, has never been ascertained.<sup>51</sup>

One of the key figures in the attack against Breymann's Redoubt was Henry Dearborn, commander of the light infantry of Morgan's Corps. Dearborn left a pair of accounts of the fighting. The earliest brief account appeared in his *Journal*, and is consistent with evidence offered by the testimony of contemporaries.<sup>52</sup> His "Narrative," written in 1815—after he achieved national prominence and became the object of criticism for incompetence as secretary of war—differs substantially from his *Journal*, as well as with the accounts of other participants. It made no reference to Arnold's leading the attack on the Light Infantry [Balcarres] Redoubt, indicating that General Poor commanded there, and fixed the time of assault on Breymann's position as somewhat earlier than the one against Balcarres' position.<sup>53</sup>

A third Dearborn version of events appeared in H. A. S. Dearborn's *The Life of Major General Henry Dearborn*, prepared in 1822. The younger Dearborn exaggerated his father's command role. Like his father, he depicted General Poor leading the attacks on the Light Infantry [Balcarres] Redoubt. Arnold made his appearance on the field where "Morgan and Dearborn had united their corps in front of the German camp, together with Weston's regiment and some other detachments," wrote the younger Dearborn. His account is valuable and worth reproducing at length. "Arnold," he continued,

came up to Morgan and Dearborn, who were conversing on the propriety of a forward movement, and clapping his hand on the shoulder of the latter, observed, with great energy and zeal, "within fifteen minutes we will carry those entrenchments." In reply to him, it was stated by Morgan and Dearborn, that the works appeared formidable against musketry; were well manned and that their troops were much fatigued and nearly exhausted. Arnold replied, with cheering confidence beaming on his countenance, "that the enemy were panic-stricken and would not fight: that he would take a small party and pass through the woods to the rear of the enemy's right, where there were no works; and when he opened fire on the right it was to be the signal for them to advance in front, and storm the works." The necessary arrangements were promptly made and, when it was discovered Arnold had gained the rear, the riflemen and infantry gave three cheers and pressed forward with spirit and impetuosity....When General Arnold entered, on the right of the rear of the camp, he ordered the [German] troops, which had suddenly faced about to receive him, to lay down their arms—but a platoon, directly in his front, fired, by which his horse was killed, and he wounded, in the same leg that was shattered in his attack on Quebec. The horse fell on the other leg, and Dearborn, having entered the front, at the same moment, ran up and extricating him, enquired if he was badly wounded; Arnold replied with great heat, "in the same leg that was wounded before; I never go into action without being shot; to be disabled at such a time - - - I wish to God the ball had gone through my heart....<sup>54</sup>

Besides omitting General Learned's and Colonel Brooks' important roles, and emphasizing Dearborn's, this account ignores the fact that the terrain precluded Arnold's entering the redoubt from the enemy's right because the fortification's right overlooked an embankment so steep as to preclude anyone's ascending it on horseback. Every other account had Arnold entering the rear of the post from the enemy's left—the only direction from which a flanking movement could be made.

Before summarizing the evidence relating to the fall of Breymann's post, we should consult British and German sources for what they reported, and for their accurate assessment of the impact of the loss of that redoubt.

Freiherr von Riedesel penned two reliable reports of what to him was an especially tragic event. In his October 21 letter to the Duke of Brainschweig, he wrote that while the men in the Light Infantry [Balcarres] Redoubt were still under attack, a climactic assault carried the Breymann Redoubt. Here are his words, unmarred by the florid language that characterized the prose of many contemporaries when they corresponded with important people:

At the same time [as the attack on the Light Infantry Redoubt], the latter attacked the entrenchment of Colonel Breymann, which was held for a long time, but the latter was shot dead,

and the enemy came in the rear, in that manner the enemy captured the entrenchment, tents, and equipment. The larger part of the men, however, were saved. Colonel von Speth, who wanted to help Colonel Breymann, with forty men, was himself surrounded in the night by ten men and taken prisoner, and with that this unfortunate affair was ended.<sup>55</sup>

A more informative version of this affair appears in a draft manuscript of von Riedesel's "Reflections on the Campaign":

Another body at the time attacked the embankments of Breymann's division in front and on his left flank. The Grenadiers composing this corps fought bravely, but being only two hundred strong, and their commander—the chivalric Breymann—being shot dead, they were compelled to retreat. This latter misfortune resulted from the fact that the Canadian companies, belonging to the reconnaissance expedition, were absent from their place beside this corps, part of them being in the great [Balcarres] redoubt, and the others not having returned to their position. Had they been in their places, it would have been impossible to surround the left flank of Breymann.<sup>56</sup>

Burgoyne realistically assessed the loss of Breymann's stronghold when he wrote: "[U]nhappily the entrenchments of the German reserve, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Breymann, who was killed, were carried and although ordered to be recovered, they were never so, and the enemy by that misfortune, gained an opening on our right rear. The night put an end to the action."<sup>57</sup>

Excepting the testimony in the Dearborn "Narrative" and Dearborn's excessively reverent biography, the evidence supports Learned's and Morgan's initiating the assault on the German post and Arnold's leaving the units attacking the Light Infantry [Balcarres] Redoubt and riding between the fire of the two armies through the gap made by the capture of cabins to Breymann's left and joining a party of riflemen entering the German rear from their left.

### *Aftermath: American Satisfaction*

The fall of Breymann's Redoubt opened Burgoyne's line to attack from his right and rear. After Colonel von Speth's capture while trying to recover the fallen post, Burgoyne withdrew under the cover of darkness to the Hudson River valley, where the Europeans spent the next day under the protection of fortifications overlooking his artillery park, hospital, bridge of boats, and camp.

British Lieutenant Digby provided a succinct record of Burgoyne's move:

During the night we were employed in moving our cannon Baggage &c nearer to the river. It was done with silence and fires were lighted to cause them [the Americans] not to suspect we had retired from our works where it was impossible for us to remain, as the German lines commanded them, and were then in possession of the enemy, who were bringing up cannon to bear on ours at day break. It may be supposed we had no thought of sleep, and some time before day we retreated nearer to the river. Our design of retreating to Ticonderoga then became public.<sup>58</sup>



Gates' men had fought a well-coordinated battle that, except for the illconceived assault on the Light Infantry [Balcarres] Redoubt, was characterized by mutual support among units and very professional brigade, regimental, and company deployment. The result was an economical victory, gained with relatively few casualties—150 killed and wounded—in contrast to the enemy's 700 killed, wounded, and captured. Gates' strategy of forcing Burgoyne to try to dislodge him from Bemis Heights and fighting on American terms succeeded.

"I have the satisfaction to acquaint your excellency with the great success of the Arms of the United States in this Department," wrote Gates in his October 12 report to President Hancock about the day's achievements. He continued:

On the 7th last, the Enemy attacked our advanc'd Piquets upon the left which drew on an Action, about the same hour of the Day, and near the same Spot of Ground, where that of the 19th of Sept. was fought from 3 O'Clock in the afternoon, until almost Night, the Conflict was very warm and bloody, when the Enemy by a precipitate Retreat determined the Fate of the Day—leaving in our hands eight Pieces of Brass Cannon, the Tents and Baggage of their Flying Army, a large quantity of Fix'd Ammunition, Major Acland, who commanded the Corps of Grenadiers, Capt. Money, Q. M. General, and Sir Francis Clarke, principle aide to His Excellency General Burgoyne. The loss on our Side is not more than [blank] Killed and Wounded, amongst the latter is the Gallant Major General Arnold, whose Leg was fractured as by a Musket Ball, as he was Forcing the Enemy's Breast Work—Too much praise cannot be given to the Corps commanded by Col. Morgan, consisting of the Rifle Regiment and the Light Infantry under Major Dearborn; but it would be injustice to say that the whole Body engaged did not equally deserve the honour and Applause due to such exalted merit...<sup>59</sup>

This report reveals Gates in a very different light than the one in which many writers depict him. His account was business-like in an era too often marked by stilted language. It honored a brave enemy and was generous in attributing victory to all who served. Finally, it contained a gracious tribute to the man who had been an implacable enemy and whose insubordination had held the potential to jeopardize the cause they both served.

It is worth noting that in no surviving document, including his private correspondence, did Horatio Gates ever disparage Benedict Arnold's service in the Northern Department.

