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## The Battle of Oriskany

Written by Donald N. Moran



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*Editor's Note: This article was reprinted from the July 1985 Edition of the Valley Compatriot Newsletter*

Of all the battles fought in the American Revolution, few, if any were as violent as the Battle of Oriskany. In the Historical Archive article entitled "Divide and Conquer" we detailed the British plan for the dividing and conquering of the colonies. This was presented from General John Burgoyne's own plan of attack. It is obvious that Burgoyne was attempting to force General Philip Schuyler's Army of

some 1,000 men to abandon their positions along the Mohawk, opening the route to Albany. He selected Lt. Colonel Barry Saint Leger (1737-1789), to command the expedition. Click here to read the article "Divide and Conquer."

St. Leger was appointed temporary Brigadier General and left Montreal, Canada with a force of 340 Regular Troops from the 8th and 34th Regiments, about 100 Hesse-Hanau Jaegers (Hessian dismounted Cavalry), Sir John Johnson's Royal Greens, Butler's Tory Rangers, some Canadian Militia and about 1,000 Indians, on June 23rd, 1777. He arrived at Oswego, New York on July 25th and immediately started his campaign. His first objective was Fort Stanwix, which he reached on August 2nd. His train of artillery consisted of two 6-pounders, two 3-pounders and four small mortars. This proved to be totally ineffective against the strong fortifications of Fort Stanwix. St. Leger then began siege operations to reduce the Fort. This is the topic of the the Historical Archive Article entitled "Fort Stanwix".

There was great concern on part of the Patriot forces for the safety of the 750 man garrison at Stanwix, so General Nicholas Herkimer recruited 800 men to march to Stanwix's relief. On August 4th they left Fort Dayton and were only ten miles from Fort Stanwix the next evening when they made camp. Herkimer dispatched runners to Col. Gansevoort at Fort Stanwix to advise of his coming and to have the Fort fire a cannon shot signaling a sortie from the Fort to meet him. This tactic would trap any of the British Forces between them, thereby assuring the success of the relief effort.

The morning of August 6th, saw General Herkimer waiting for the signal from Fort Stanwix. Brigadier General Nicholas Herkimer's Command consisted of the Tyron County, New York Militia. In 1777 Tyron County covered the area that now embraces the Counties of Fulton, Montgomery, Tioga, Ontario, Herkimer and Hamilton. His force consisted of four Battalions. The First Battalion (Canajoharie) was Commanded by himself with Lt. Col. Ebenezer Cox as second in Command. The Second Battalion was Commanded by Col. Jacob Slock with Lt. Col. Johann Peter Wagner as second in Command. This Battalion was known as the Palatine. The Third Battalion, The Mohawk, was commanded by Colonel Frederick Visscher (sometimes shown as Fisher), with Lt. Col. Alan Fonda as second in Command, The Forth Battalion, the German Flats and Kingsland, was Commanded by Col. Hanyoost Herkheimer, with Lt. Col. Peter Bellinger as Second in Command. Brigade Major was John Frey.

Growing impatient with the wait, the Colonels Cox, Visscher, Bellinger and 2nd Lt. Isaac Paris confronted General Herkimer and demanded that the column move ahead to Fort Stanwix. Herkimer steadfastly refused. Finally the impetuous militia officers questioned his loyalty (his brother was known to be with St. Leger.) It appears that the normally cautious Dutchman permitted his personal sense of honor to override his concerns. He mounted his horse and led his little army toward Stanwix, as if to prove he was not a coward either, his sixty Onieda Indian scouts leading the way.

In spite of their alleged abilities, these scouts failed to detect any of the 1,000 men laying in ambush. However, the forest is so dense in that area of New York that a man could stand upright thirty feet away and not be seen.

Along with his eight hundred men, Herkimer had between 250 and 400 ox carts filled with supplies for the besieged Fort. The column was almost one mile long. General St. Leger seems to have listened to his subordinates Johnson and Brigadier General Butler, for the ambush was laid out in the best manner possible. The location selected by General St. Leger was perfect for an ambush. The place of the ambush is now known as "Battle Brook". It's about six miles from Fort Stanwix and is the midst of a bog. In order to cross the brook and surrounding bog you had to use a corduroy causeway (logs laid side-by-side). The ravine thru which Battle Brook runs is about 200 yards wide and extremely heavily wooded.

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Sir John Johnson's Royal Greens and Butler's Tory Rangers were placed on the west side of the ravine so that they could stop Herkimer's column. Joseph Brant and his Indians would attack from both flanks and the rear, thereby preventing a retreat. St. Leger and his remaining forces would continue the siege of Fort Stanwix.

At 10:00 A. M. on August 6th, General Herkimer's relief column entered the ravine. As expected, the narrow causeway forced the Americans to bunch as well as slow down the column of ox carts and militia crowded together.  
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Suddenly, a blaze of musket fire crashed down on the column from all quarters.

Johnson's men opened fire with a telling effect! General Herkimer was hit, his white horse fell under him. His left leg was shattered and would cause his death. Colonel Ebenzer Cox fell dead, Captain John Eisenlord of the 1st Company, 4th Battalion died instantly. Ensign John Van Slyck of Col. Wagner's command fell dead as did a full dozen of the men leading the column. And this was the first volley!

Colonel Visscher's 3rd Battalion was the rear guard and suffered heavily in the first volley. His men seeing they were trapped, fought their way through Brant's Indians and retreated back toward Fort Dayton, leaving their brother soldiers in the trap. From the number of bodies found as far away as two miles, their retreat was to cost them dearly. On May 28th, 1778, charges of cowardice were preferred against Colonel Visscher and Lt. Col. Volkert Veeder. On June 20th, 1778 the consideration of these charges was postponed and apparently never taken up again.

Usually a successful ambush, and this had all the necessary ingredients, would result in an instant and complete rout, or the panic stricken men would bunch together on the narrow road and be massacred. But these were Tyron County Men - Indian fighters, men possessed of great personal integrity. They were going to sell their lives for a fearful price! They immediately, without orders, counter attacked! They rushed up the surrounding hills putting many of the surprised Indians to the bayonet. These few seconds, this moment of mass personal courage, saved the day. Now, behind cover, they were equal to their ambushers.

Herkimer, in great pain had his men carry him up the hill to a spot from which he could direct the fight. It was an exposed position and bullets rained all around him, His officers protested and he replied : "I will face the enemy". Herkimer realized that the battle had turned into a battle of individuals - every man for himself. The Indians were gaining the upper hand. As soon as one of the Tyron militia men fired his rifle, the Indians would charge and dispatch him with tomahawk before he could reload. Herkimer ordered his men to fight in pairs, one firing while the other reloaded. The effect was telling. The indian casualties mounted and soon they started to lose heart. The woodland indians rarely would attack a trapped enemy with direct charges, but rather, would pick off the entrapped one-by-one.

A sudden heavy shower stopped the fighting. Everyone's priming was wet. During this brief period, Herkimer reorganized his mauled command, forming a circle which could be defended. Although no record exists of his having mentioned rescue, we are

confident that he hoped that either a rescue force would come from Fort Stanwix, or that some of the men from Col. Visscher's Battalion would reach Fort Dayton and bring help.

St. Leger dispatched Major Stephen Watts with the remaining Royal Greens to reinforce the ambushers. As they approached the scene of the battle, Watts had his men turn their coats inside out, hiding the forest Green from which they drew their name, with the light colored inside, appearing like the traditional hunting shirts worn by the militia. The guise almost worked. Captain Jacob Gardiner recognized one of the Tories. He charged into their ranks with the fury of a wild man. Using his officer's spontoon (a short spear) he killed three of the disguised Tories. One of Colonel Wagoner's officers, First Lieutenant Andreas Dillenbagh, led his men into their ranks. Dillenbagh, using the butt of his rifle, smashed one of the enemy in the head, killing him instantly, a second he shot at close range, then ran his bayonet through a third. The men of the 2nd Battalion avenged themselves on these treacherous Tories who were soon fully routed, with severe losses.

The chief of the Oneida Indians, serving as scout, had brought his fifteen year old daughter with him. She picked up a musket and joined her fellow tribesmen in the fight screaming her war cry all the time.

It soon became obvious to St. Leger that he had done all he could at Oriskany. Further attempts to massacre Herkimer's men would be too costly.

The Indian allies of the British had had enough as well. They had suffered heavy casualties and began to retreat. This independent action caused the Tories to withdraw as well. Six hours of the heaviest hand-to-hand fighting of the war finally came to an end.

The outcome of the battle has been much debated. Both sides claiming victory, but in reality, neither side won. Fewer than 400 of Herkimer's men left the field on their own feet. Estimates as high as 160 Americans killed and fifty wounded seem to agree among all accounts. Brigade Major John Frey and Lt. Col. Peter Bellinger were taken prisoner, General Herkimer died ten days later after one of General Arnold's surgeons amputated the shattered leg and could not stop the bleeding.

The number of Indians killed is much debated. Some claim as many as 100, others say 70. If this is true, the fighting capability of the Indians has been slandered. But, the Indians lost all heart for fighting and were never

again an effective fighting force  
for the British.

General St. Leger's claim to victory in his letter to General Burgoyne of August 11th, 1777 was true enough. He had stopped the attempt to resupply and relieve Fort Stanwix. The Americans' claim that they still held the field of battle is an empty boast, as they did not achieve their goal. But, that they broke the back of St. Leger's fighting force and gave the British Indian allies something to think about was a true victory. Through their heroic defense, in the worst possible circumstances, they were truly the victors.

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