

The Battle of Saratoga

Freeman's Farm

Overview:

In December General Burgoyne concerted with the British ministry a plan for the campaign of 1777. A large force under his command was to go to Albany by way of Lakes Champlain and George, while another body, under Sir Henry Clinton, advanced up the Hudson. Simultaneously, Colonel Barry St. Leger was to make a diversion, by way of Oswego, on the Mohawk river. In pursuance of this plan, Burgoyne, in June began his advance with one of the best-equipped armies that had ever left the shores of England.

Proceeding up Lake Champlain, he easily forced the evacuation of Crown Point, Ticonderoga, and Fort Anne. But, instead of availing himself of the water-carriage of Lake George, at the head of which there was a direct road to Fort Edward, he advanced upon that work by land, consuming three weeks in cutting a road through the woods and building bridges over swamps. This gave time for Schuyler to gather the yeomanry together, and for Washington to re-enforce that general with troops, under Morgan, from the southern department. Burgoyne also lost valuable time and received a fatal check by his disastrous attack on Bennington.

At length, finding his progress stopped by the entrenchments of Gates at Bemus's heights, nine miles south of Saratoga (Schuylerville), he endeavored to extricate himself from his perilous position by fighting.

Battle:

About 4 miles from Saratoga, on the afternoon of the 19th September, a sharp encounter took place between part of the English right wing, under Burgoyne himself, and a strong body of the enemy, under Gates and Arnold.

The conflict lasted till sunset. The British remained masters of the field. But the loss on each side was nearly equal (from 500 to 600 men) and the spirits of the Americans were greatly raised by having withstood the best regular troops of the English army.

Burgoyne now halted again, and strengthened his position by field works and redoubts. And the Americans also improved their defenses. The two armies remained nearly within cannon-shot of each other for a considerable time, during which Burgoyne was anxiously looking for intelligence of the promised expedition

from New York, which, according to the original plan, ought by this time to have been approaching Albany from the south.

At last, a messenger from Clinton made his way with great difficulty, to Burgoyne's camp and brought the information that Clinton was on his way up the Hudson to attack the American forts which barred the passage up that river to Albany.

Burgoyne had overestimated his resources and in the very beginning of October found difficulty and distress pressing him hard. The Indians and Canadians began to desert him. While, on the other hand, Gate's army was continually reinforced by fresh bodies of the militia.

An expeditionary force was detached by the Americans, which made a bold, though unsuccessful, attempt to retake Ticonderoga. And finding the number and spirit of the enemy to increase daily, and his own stores of provision to diminish, Burgoyne determined on attacking the Americans in front of him, and by dislodging them from their position, to gain the means of moving upon Albany, or at least of relieving his troops from the straitened position in which they were cooped up.

Burgoyne's force was now reduced to less than 6,000 men. The right of his camp was on some high ground a little to the west of the river, thence his entrenchments extended along the lower ground to the bank of the Hudson, the line of their front being nearly at a right angle with the course of the stream.

The lines were fortified with redoubts and field-works, and on a height on the flank of the extreme right a strong redoubt was reared, and entrenchments, in a horse-shoe form, thrown up. The Hessians, under Colonel Breyman, were stationed here, forming a flank defense to Burgoyne's main army. The numerical force of the Americans was now greater than the British, even in regular troops, and the numbers of the militia and volunteers which had joined Gates and Arnold were greater still.

General Lincoln, with 2,000 New England troops, had reached the American camp on the 29th of September. Gates gave him the command of the right wing, and took in person the command of the left wing, which was composed of two brigades under Generals Poor and Leonard, of Colonel Morgan's rifle corps, and part of the fresh New England Militia.

The whole of the American lines had been ably fortified under the direction of the celebrated Polish General Kosciusko, who was now serving as a volunteer in Gates' army. The right of the American position, that is to

say, the part of it nearest to the river, was too strong to be assailed with any prospect of success and Burgoyne therefore determined to endeavor to force their left.

For this purpose he formed a column of 1,500 regular troops, with two twelve-pounders, two howitzers, and six six-pounders. He headed this in person, having Generals Phillips, Reidesel, and Frazer under him. The enemy's force immediately in front of his lines was so strong that he dared not weaken the troops who guarded them, by detaching any more to strengthen his column of attack.

Bemis Heights

It was on the 7th of October that Burgoyne led his column forward. And on the preceding day, the 6th, Clinton had successfully executed a brilliant enterprise against the two American forts which barred his progress up the Hudson.

He had captured them both, with severe loss to the American forces opposed to him. He had destroyed the fleet which the Americans had been forming on the Hudson, under the protection of their forts. And the upward river was laid open to his squadron. He had also, with admirable skill and industry, collected in small vessels, such as could float within a few miles of Albany, provisions sufficient to supply Burgoyne's army for six months.

He was now only a hundred and fifty-six miles distant from Burgoyne. And a detachment of 1,700 men actually advanced within forty miles of Albany. Unfortunately, Burgoyne and Clinton were each ignorant of the other's movements. But if Burgoyne had won his battle on the 7th, he must on advancing have soon learned the tidings of Clinton's success, and Clinton would have heard of his.

A junction would soon have been made of the two victorious armies, and the great objects of the campaign might yet have been accomplished. All depended on the fortune of the column with which Burgoyne on the eventful 7th October 1777, advanced against the American position.

There were brave men, both English and German, in its ranks. And in particular it comprised one of the best bodies of grenadiers in the British service.

Burgoyne pushed forward some bodies of irregular troops to distract the enemy's attention. And led his column to within three quarters of a mile from the left of Gates' camp and then deployed his men into line. The grenadiers under Major Ackland, and the artillery under Major Williams, were drawn up on the left. A corps of Germans, under General Reidesel, and some British troops under General Phillips, were in the center. And the English Light Infantry, and the 24th regiment, under Lord Balcarres and General Frazer, were on the right.

But Gates did not wait to be attacked, and directly the British line was formed and began to advance the American general, with admirable skill, caused General Poor's brigade of New York and New Hampshire troops, and part of General Leonard's brigade, to make a sudden and vehement rush against its left, and at the same time sent Colonel Morgan, with his rifle corps and other troops, amounting to 1,500, to turn the right of the English.

The grenadiers under Ackland sustained the charge of superior numbers nobly. But Gates sent more Americans forward, and in a few minutes the action became general along the center, so as to prevent the Germans from detaching any help to the grenadiers.

Morgan, with his riflemen, was now pressing Lord Balcarres and General Frazer hard, and fresh masses of the enemy were observed advancing from their extreme left, with the evident intention of forcing the British right, and cutting off its retreat.

The English Light Infantry and the 24th now fell back, and formed an oblique second line, which enabled them to baffle this maneuver and also to succor their comrades in the left wing, the gallant grenadiers, who were overpowered by superior numbers, and, but for this aid, must have been cut to pieces.

The contest now was fiercely maintained on both sides. The English cannon were repeatedly taken and retaken. But when the grenadiers near them were forced back by the weight of superior numbers, one of the guns was permanently captured by the Americans and turned upon the English.

Major Williams and Major Ackland were both made prisoners, and in this part of the field the advantage of the Americans was decided. The British center still held its ground but now it was that the American general Arnold appeared upon the scene, and did more for his countrymen than whole battalions could have effected.

Arnold, when the decisive engagement of the 7th of October commenced, had been deprived of his command by Gates, in consequence of a quarrel between them about the action of the 19th of September.

He had listened for a short time in the American camp to the thunder of the battle, in which he had no military right to take part, either as commander or as combatant. But his excited spirit could not long endure such a state of inaction. He called for his horse, a powerful brown charger, and springing on it, galloped furiously to where the fight seemed to be the thickest.

Gates saw him, and sent an aide-de-camp to recall him. But Arnold spurred far in advance and placed himself at the head of three regiments which had formerly been under him, and which welcomed their old commander with joyous cheers.

He led them instantly upon the British center and then galloping along the American line, he issued orders for a renewed and a closer attack, which were obeyed with alacrity, Arnold himself setting the example of the most daring personal bravery, and charging more than once, sword in hand, into the English ranks.

On the British side the officers did their duty nobly. But General Frazer was the most eminent of them all, restoring order wherever the line began to waver, and infusing fresh courage into his men by voice and example. Mounted on an iron-grey charger, and dressed in the full uniform of a general officer, he was conspicuous to foes as well as to friends.

The American Colonel Morgan thought that the fate of the battle rested on this gallant man's life, and calling several of his best marksmen round him, pointed Frazer out, and said, "That officer is General Frazer. I admire him but he must die. Our victory depends on it. Take your stations in that clump of bushes and do your duty." Within five minutes Frazer fell mortally wounded and was carried to the British camp by two grenadiers.

Just previously to his being struck by the fatal bullet, one rifle-ball had cut the crupper of his saddle, and another had passed through his horse's mane close behind the ears. His aide-de-camp had noticed this, and said, "It is evident that you are marked out for particular aim. Would it not be prudent for you to retire from this place?"

Frazer replied, "My duty forbids me to fly from danger." And the next moment he fell.

Burgoyne's whole force was now compelled to retreat towards their camp. The left and center were in complete disorder but the light infantry and the 24th checked the fury of the assailants, and the remains of the column with great difficulty effected their return to their camp, leaving six of their cannons in the possession of the enemy and great numbers of killed and wounded on the field. And especially a large proportion of the artillerymen, who had stood to their guns until shot down or bayoneted beside them by the advancing Americans.

Burgoyne's column had been defeated, but the action was not yet over. The English had scarcely entered the camp, when the Americans, pursuing their success, assaulted it in several places with remarkable impetuosity, rushing in upon the entrenchments and redoubts through a severe fire of grape-shot and musketry.

Arnold especially, who on this day appeared maddened with the thirst of combat and carnage, urged on the attack against a part of the entrenchments which was occupied by the light infantry under Lord Balcarres.

But the English received him with vigor and spirit. The struggle here was obstinate and sanguinary. At length, as it grew towards evening, Arnold, having forced all obstacles, entered the works with some of the most fearless of his followers. But in this critical moment of glory and danger, he received a painful wound in the same leg which had already been injured at the assault on Quebec.

To his bitter regret he was obliged to be carried back. His party still continued the attack, but the English also continued their obstinate resistance, and at last night fell, and the assailants withdrew from this quarter of the British entrenchments.

But in another part the attack had been more successful. A body of the Americans, under Colonel Brooke, forced their way in through a part of the horse-shoe entrenchments on the extreme right, which was defended by the Hessian reserve under Colonel Breyman. The Germans resisted well, and Breyman died in defense of his post. But the Americans made good the ground which they had won and captured baggage, tents, artillery, and a store of ammunition, which they were greatly in need of.

They had, by establishing themselves on this point, acquired the means of completely turning the right flank of the British, and gaining their rear.

To prevent this calamity, Burgoyne effected during the night an entire change of position. With great skill he removed his whole army to some heights near the river, a little northward of the former camp, and he there drew up his men, expected to be attacked on the following day.

But Gates was resolved not to risk the certain triumph which his success had already secured for him. He harassed the English with skirmishes, but attempted no regular attack.

Meanwhile he detached bodies of troops on both sides of the Hudson to prevent the British from re-crossing that river, and to bar their retreat.

When night fell it became absolutely necessary for Burgoyne to retire again, and accordingly the troops were marched through a stormy and rainy night towards Saratoga, abandoning their sick and wounded, and the greater part of their baggage, to the enemy.

Before the rear-guard quitted the camp, the last sad honors were paid to the brave General Frazer, who expired on the day after the action.

He had, almost with his last breath, expressed a wish to be buried in the redoubt which had formed the part of the British lines where he had been stationed but which had now been abandoned by the English, and was within full range of the cannon which the advancing Americans were rapidly placing in position to bear upon Burgoyne's force.

Burgoyne resolved, nevertheless to comply with the dying wish of his comrade and the interment took place under circumstances the most affecting that have ever marked a soldier's funeral.

Still more interesting is the narrative of Lady Ackland's passage from the British to the American camp, after the battle, to share the captivity and alleviate the sufferings of her husband, who had been severely wounded, and left in the enemy's power.

The American historian Lossing, has described both these touching episodes of the campaign, in a spirit that does honor to the writer as well as to his subject. After narrating the death of General Frazer on the 8th of October, he says that "It was just at sunset, on that calm October evening, that the corpse of General Frazer was carried up the hill to the place of burial within the 'great redoubt'. It was attended only by the military members of his family and Mr. Brudenell, the chaplain. Yet the eyes of hundreds of both armies followed the

solemn procession, while the Americans, ignorant of its true character, kept up a constant cannonade upon the redoubt.

The chaplain, unawed by the danger to which he was exposed, as the cannon balls that struck the hill threw the loose soil over him, pronounced the impressive funeral service of the Church of England with an unflinching voice. The growing darkness added solemnity to the scene.

Suddenly the irregular firing ceased, and the solemn voice of a single cannon, at measured intervals, boomed along the valley, and awakened the responses of the hills.

It was a minute gun fired by the Americans in honor of the gallant dead. The moment the information was given that the gathering at the redoubt was a funeral company, fulfilling, at imminent peril, the last breathed wishes of the noble Frazer, orders were issued to withhold the cannonade with balls, and to render military homage to the fallen brave.

The case of Major Ackland and his heroic wife presents kindred features. He belonged to the grenadiers, and was an accomplished soldier. His wife accompanied him to Canada in 1776 and during the whole campaign of that year, and until his return to England after the surrender of Burgoyne, in the autumn of 1777, endured all the hardships, dangers, and privations of an active campaign in an enemy's country.

At Chambly, on the Sorel, she attended him in illness, in a miserable hut and when he was wounded in the Battle of Hubbardton, Vermont, she hastened to him at Henesborough from Montreal, where she had been persuaded to remain, and resolved to follow the army hereafter.

Just before crossing the Hudson, she and her husband had had a narrow escape from losing their lives in consequence of their tent accidentally taking fire.

During the terrible engagement of the 7th October, she heard all the tumult and dreadful thunder of the battle in which her husband was engaged. And when on the morning of the 8th the British fell back in confusion to their new position, she with the other women, was obliged to take refuge among the dead and dying, for the tents were all struck, and hardly a shed was left standing.

Her husband was wounded and a prisoner in the American camp. That gallant officer was shot through both legs. When Poor and Leonard's troops assaulted the grenadiers and artillery on the British left, on the

afternoon of the 7th, Wilkinson, Gates' adjutant-general, while pursuing the flying enemy when they abandoned their battery, heard a feeble voice exclaim 'Protect me, sir, against that boy.'

He turned and saw a lad with a musket taking deliberate aim at a wounded British officer, lying in a corner of a low fence. Wilkinson ordered the boy to desist, and discovered the wounded man to be Major Ackland. He had him conveyed to the quarters of General Poor (now the residence of Mr. Neilson) on the heights, where every attention was paid to his wants.

When the intelligence that he was wounded and a prisoner reached his wife, she was greatly distressed, and by the advice of her friend, Baroness Reidesel, resolved to visit the American camp, and implore the favor of a personal attendance upon her husband. On the 9th she sent a message to Burgoyne by Lord Petersham, his aide-de-camp, asking permission to depart.

"Though I was ready to believe" says Burgoyne, "that patience and fortitude, in a supreme degree, were to be found, as well as every other virtue, under the most tender forms, I was astonished at this proposal. After so long an agitation of spirits, exhausted not only for want of rest, but absolutely want of food, drenched in rains for twelve hours together, that a woman should be capable of such an undertaking as delivering herself to an enemy, probably in the night, and uncertain of what hands she might fall into, appeared an effort above human nature. The assistance I was able to give was small indeed. I had not even a cup of wine to offer her. All I could furnish her with was an open boat, and a few lines, written upon dirty wet paper, to General Gates, recommending her to his protection."