

The Second Battle of Saratoga: Burgoyne's 'High Water Mark'

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On October 7, 1777, the main body of Lieutenant-General John Burgoyne's British Army from Canada reached the "high water mark" of its ill-fated drive to Albany on an abandoned wheat field just south of today's Schuylerville, New York. After Burgoyne's devastating defeat at the Second Battle of Saratoga (i.e., the Battle of Bemus Heights), never again would the Continental Army's Northern Department be threatened by the British from the North. But only months earlier, Burgoyne had been thoroughly confident that his plan to sever New England from the other errant colonies by securing the Champlain-Hudson corridor would result in a swift victory for the crown. Both King George III and his Secretary of State for the Colonies George Germain had enthusiastically endorsed the strategy which had included a plan for Burgoyne's army to ultimately join forces with the main British Army in North America commanded by General William Howe and thus end the war in short order. Indeed, when Burgoyne's "Thoughts for Conducting the War from the Side of Canada" had been submitted to the king in early 1777, Howe's army had already secured New York City, captured both Forts Washington and Lee, and were in hot pursuit of Washington's army which had retreated through New Jersey across the Delaware River into Pennsylvania.¹

But Burgoyne's plan was curiously vague on exactly how and when he was to "effect a junction with General Howe" and seemed to depend on what would become a virtually non-existent communication and coordination between the two British armies in North America. Additionally, the impossible task of having Germain micromanage the American campaign from 3,000 miles away resulted in even more complications and confusion. These and other apparently small but ultimately crucial considerations would doom Burgoyne to the infamy of

¹ Kevin Weddle, *The Complete Victory: Saratoga and the American Revolution*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 59.

commanding the first British Army to ever surrender in world history, and to its own “colonies” at that.²

The Campaign of 1777

Even though he was supposedly in command of the entire North American theater, Sir William Howe was relatively unconcerned with Burgoyne’s operation, choosing instead to only focus on his own campaign. Perhaps this explains why Howe unexpectedly and without approval from the crown altered his 1777 plans and decided to advance on Philadelphia by sea via the Chesapeake Bay rather than taking the agreed upon overland route through New Jersey. This, of course, would delay an attack on the American capital by several weeks or more, making any connection with Burgoyne highly unlikely during the 1777 campaign.³ When informed of the change of plans, Germain still insisted that Howe carry out the Philadelphia operation “in time for you the co-operate with the army ordered to proceed from Canada.” Incredibly, Germain never bothered to inform Burgoyne of Howe’s deviation from the original plan which would ultimately delay the taking of Philadelphia until August.⁴ The tragic reality was that the two largest armies ever to fight on American soil seemed to have little idea or concern about what the other was doing! To make matters worse, Burgoyne seriously misjudged both American combat capabilities as well as the difficulty of maintaining supplies for his army while advancing through uncharted wilderness. A large part of this miscalculation was the mistaken belief that as the Army from Canada advanced toward Albany, American loyalists would turn out in droves to alleviate supply shortages as well as provide additional militia support, none of which happened

² Don Troiani and Eric Schnitzer, *Campaign to Saratoga-1777* (Lanham, MD: Stackpole Books, 2019), vii.

³ Troiani and Schnitzer, 209-10.

⁴ Richard Ketchum, *Saratoga: Turning Point of America’s Revolutionary War* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 104.

as expected. Combined, these misconceptions served to instill a measure of brash overconfidence that resulted a dangerous lack of urgency and caution.

Following a rapid advance and the successful taking of Fort Ticonderoga, Burgoyne's army captured and destroyed the entire fleet of retreating American supply ships at Skenesboro. Instead of ordering his advanced guard under General Simon Fraser to immediately pursue and destroy General St. Clair's retreating Continentals, Burgoyne chose instead to loiter at Skenesboro for a *full eighteen days* in July. For purely subjective reasons, he also ordered the army's supplies to be moved south *overland*, as opposed to the much safer and faster water route down Lake George.⁵ These unnecessary delays allowed the Americans critical time to regroup and do everything possible to obstruct the roads that Burgoyne's army and supplies would now be advancing on toward Albany.⁶ In July and August, Burgoyne's army took a full thirty-one days to travel only thirty-nine miles, a pace so slow that even some of his own officers began to show concern.⁷

Perhaps the fatal turning point in Burgoyne's offensive came with the total defeat at the Battle of Bennington on August 16th resulting in a loss of a full 15 percent of his army. Desperate to replenish his dwindling supplies, Burgoyne had sent detached German units east where they unexpectedly met an American force of over 2,000 men commanded by New Hampshire Militia General John Stark whose regiments had been mobilized to provide for the joint defense of Vermont and New Hampshire from the invading British army. This stunning defeat was followed by even more bad news when British General St. Leger decided to retreat back to Canada on

⁵ Burgoyne was fearful that the slight movement northward to Ticonderoga to move supplies south along Lake George would cause consternation among soldiers and loyalists who might suspect that the British army was retreating back north. Ketchum, 239-40.

⁶ Ketchum, 248.

⁷ Weddle, 230-31.

August 24th after the bloody Battle of Oriskany. St. Leger, whose army of Indians and British regulars had advanced from Canada via lake Ontario and were to have ultimately joined up with Burgoyne at Albany, had decided to terminate his campaign due to the Indian's refusal to continue the bloody conflict with the Americans.⁸ After Bennington, Burgoyne had also lost most of his Indian allies as well, posing serious problems for the reconnaissance capabilities of his army.⁹ By the end of August, the otherwise smug Burgoyne began to have serious doubts about the further efficacy of his own campaign writing to Germain that "the bulk of the country is undoubtedly with the Congress," and that the afflictions of the Northern Army "hang like a gathering storm"¹⁰ Yet, despite whatever misgivings he may have had, Burgoyne moved his army across the Hudson River on September 13th and, with "all communication with Canada voluntarily cut off," continued south toward Albany.¹¹

Showdown at Saratoga

In stark contrast to Howe and Burgoyne's failure to communicate and maintain a strategic overview of the entire American theater, George Washington was in constant contact with all of his armies and generals ready to make troop adjustments and redeployments whenever necessary. Also, unlike the British government which was an ocean away, Congress was always within a few days distance from Washington's army for consultation. Assessing the changed strategic situation that had developed as a result of the Burgoyne invasion, Washington knew full well that New England militia units would be reluctant to join the New York-based Northern Army then under the command of General Philip Schuyler whom they despised. Accordingly,

⁸ Weddle, 214-15.

⁹ Weddle, 253-54.

¹⁰ John Ferling, *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 228-29.

¹¹ Ketchum, 242.

Washington wisely reassigned Generals Benedict Arnold and Benjamin Lincoln (both New Englanders) to the Northern Department. He also made sure that Schuyler was relieved of the northern command and replaced with Horatio Gates who enjoyed good relations with many New England members of Congress.¹²

By the second week of September, Polish engineer Thaddeus Kosciuszko had chosen the heights overlooking the Hudson near Stillwater, New York as the ideal location for Gates and the retreating American army to build fortifications in preparation for Burgoyne's advancing invasion force.¹³ It was largely due to Kosciuszko's well-armed and fortified heights over the Hudson that Burgoyne was now forced to abandon his advance along the river and move his army westward to try and flank the Americans on their left. From September 17-19, Burgoyne's 5,000-man army advanced west from the Hudson and then marched south into the area of a large farm about two miles from the river. Continental Army units led by Morgan's Rifles sallied out of the American lines to engage the British force. The Battle of Freeman's Farm lasted for several hours with heavy casualties on both sides. Finally, when General Friedrich Riedesel's German units made a surprise entrance into the battle late in day, Burgoyne's army successfully held the field as the Americans were forced to retreat back to their lines.

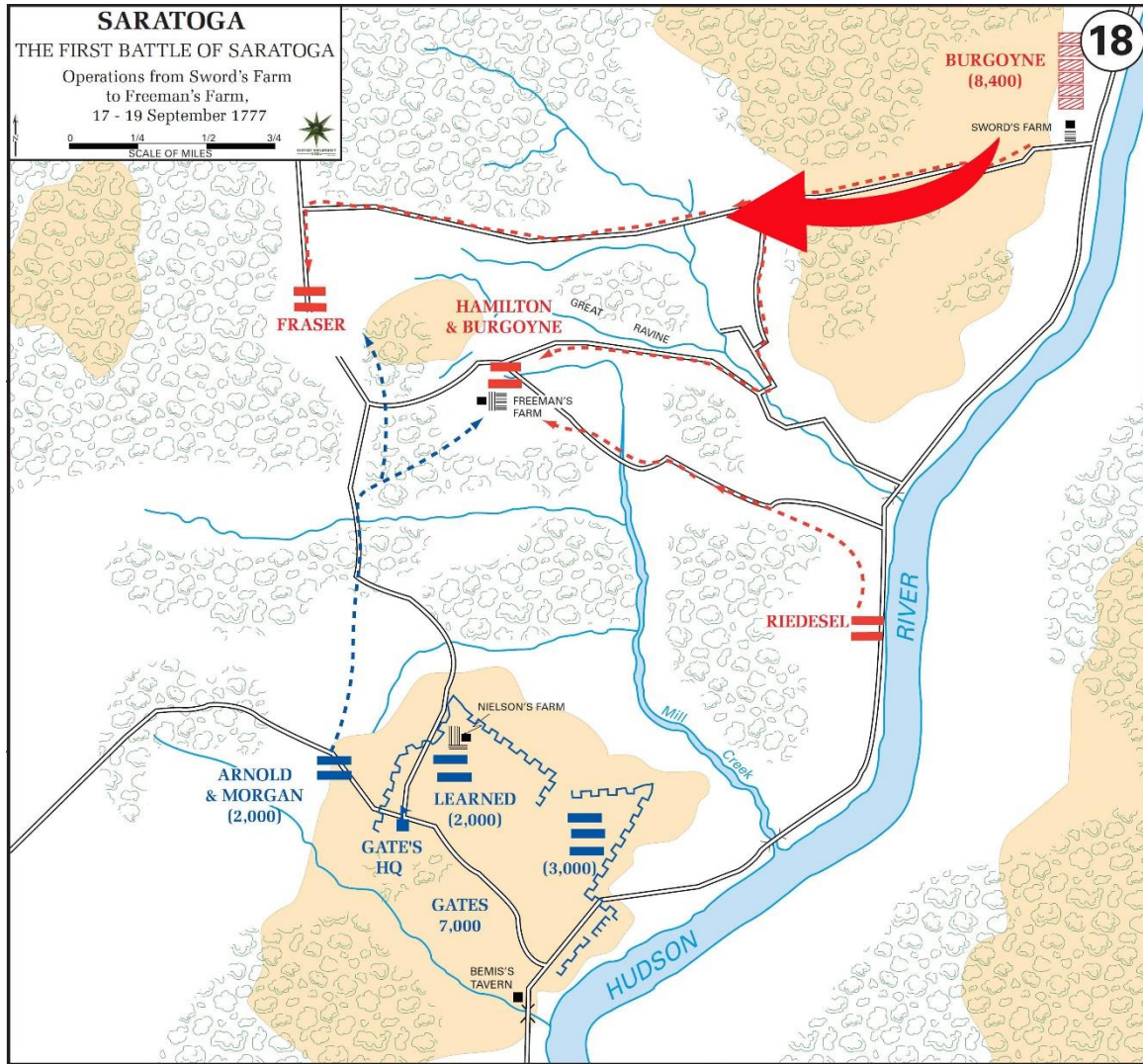
Although British casualties took a full 10 percent of the remaining Army from Canada out of action, Burgoyne was generally pleased with his "victory" at Freeman's Farm and contemplated the next move.¹⁴ That move was unexpectedly determined by an encrypted message received two days later from General Henry Clinton who had been assigned to the defense of British occupied New York City. In it, Clinton wrote to Burgoyne that he intended to

¹² Weddle, 165-67.

¹³ Weddle, 264-65.

¹⁴ Weddle, 284.

“make an effectual diversion in your favor.” The messenger, an American loyalist, also told Burgoyne that Clinton was planning an attack on Fort Montgomery fifty miles north of New York City which, Burgoyne surmised, might already be underway as Clinton’s message was dated September 10th.¹⁵ Burgoyne then sent a reply to Clinton to “Do it my friend directly” and decided to once again sit and wait.¹⁶



Burgoyne moves west from the Hudson River, September 17-19, 1777 resulting in the Battle of Freeman's Farm. (United States Military Academy)

¹⁵ Dean Snow, *1777-Tipping Point at Saratoga* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 149.

¹⁶ Troiani and Schnitzer, 212.

After holding the field at the Battle of Freeman's farm, the British now had an extended two-mile front to defend and fortify from the Hudson to their extreme right positions where they constructed two fortifications (redoubts). As the days went by, Burgoyne's ranks were further diminished by an increasing number of desertions. In one day alone, over two dozen British and German soldiers went over to American lines with the situation becoming so acute that Riedesel offered handsome rewards to his German troops for shooting their fellow soldier deserters.¹⁷ To make matters worse, loyalists and their families flooded the British camp seeking refuge putting an additional strain on Burgoyne's rapidly decreasing supplies.¹⁸ The Army from Canada had departed St. Johns on June 17th with an army of over 7,000 men, 138 artillery pieces and a bounty of supplies. The original force had now been reduced by one third with only a few weeks of supplies remaining. Meanwhile on the other side of the lines, militia and other units continued to arrive into the American camp swelling Gates' force to over 11,000 men.

As the situation continued to deteriorate, Burgoyne received word on October 1st of the devastating American raids on his rear supply lines along Lake George and at Fort Ticonderoga. The raids had freed 120 American prisoners and captured hundreds of British soldiers and a bounty of supplies. Two days later, Burgoyne issued a General Order cutting rations to the army by one third while, in the same order, reinforcing the idea that "powerful armies" were still on their way to provide assistance (unbeknownst to Burgoyne, Clinton had just *left* New York that same day). Many of his officers had the same expectations and guns and rockets were fired daily to alert the advancing reinforcements of the army's position.¹⁹ But despite this public display of

¹⁷ Snow, 233.

¹⁸ Troiani and Schnitzer, 225-26.

¹⁹ Weddle, 310.

propaganda to the troops, Burgoyne had concluded that his army was actually in the “greatest distress” and that “supply could only be maintained by movement of the army.”²⁰

Finally, on October 4th Burgoyne called an emergency council of war with his top officers Fraser, Phillips and Riedesel. Burgoyne put on the table a bold initiative to attack the American left with everything the army had, save 800 men who would be left behind to defend the British fortifications and supply bateaus along the Hudson. Both Riedesel and Phillips objected to the plan citing the lack of intelligence regarding the disposition of troops and fortifications along the American left west of Bemus Heights. The officers’ concerns were certainly legitimate as the loss of Indians after Bennington had hampered the Army’s ability to reconnoiter American lines and identify pickets and fortifications. The following evening the council reconvened. Burgoyne now insisted that either an offensive occur *now* or the army would have to retreat back across the Hudson. Burgoyne then purposed to personally “reconnoiter the enemy’s left wing as closely as possible to see whether it can be attacked or not” and only then decide on whether to attack or retreat back to the Batten Kill Creek where the army had originally crossed over the river on September 13th.²¹ Riedesel still protested the futility of such an action and would later complain bitterly that:

Burgoyne, by false or pleasant news, was prevented from retreating to the Battenkill at the only time in which it was possible to do so. This, it was his duty to have done under those circumstances, especially as the season was far advanced, and the distance to New York was so great, that a junction with an army coming from the city was more chimerical than probable.²²

²⁰ Weddle, 313.

²¹ Snow, 223-24, 227-28.

²² Max von Eelking, ed., *Memoirs, Letters and Journals of Major General Riedesel*, (Albany, J. Munsell, 1868), 205.

The Second Battle of Saratoga: The Barber Wheatfield

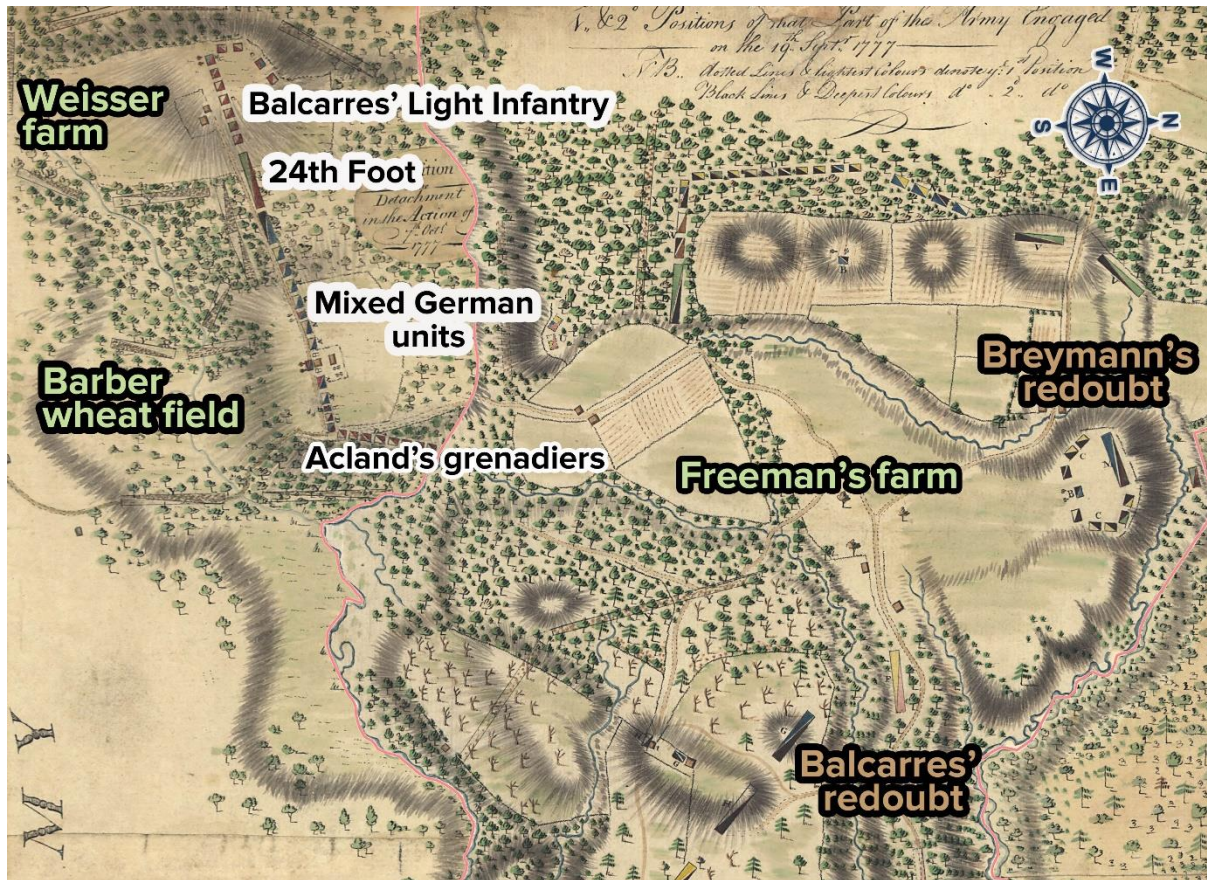
During the late morning of October 7th, Col. Alexander Fraser's Royal Rangers accompanied by Indians, loyalists, and Canadians advanced west in front of the 1,500-man reconnaissance force led by Burgoyne, Riedesel, Phillips and Fraser. Since this was to be a relatively low-risk reconnaissance mission, the bulk of the force would be composed of mixed units from General Simon Fraser's Advanced Corps which had spearheaded the British right wing throughout the entire campaign. This included Fraser's own 24th Regiment of Foot along with the Alexander Fraser's Royal Rangers and the British Light Infantry under the command of Col. Alexander Lindsay (the Earl of Balcarres). The balance of the force was Col. Breymann's Reserve Corps, which had been assigned to the redoubts on the British right, some mixed German units, and three artillery regiments, two British and one Hessian. The artillery regiments were equipped with ten pieces, including two twelve-pounders and two Howitzers, which could certainly do tremendous damage to the American fortified positions if an attack on those installations was determined.²³ Maj. John Acland's British grenadiers covered the left wing with four other British regiments spread along the rear across Freeman's Farm back to the redoubts.²⁴

By noon time, the bulk of the force had entered an area of two adjacent wheat fields separated by trees southwest of Freeman's Farm—the Weisser farm to the west and the Barber farm on the east. As the fields were flush with unharvested wheat, Burgoyne ordered a halt to the march and sent out foragers to begin cutting and collecting the wheat.²⁵ Meanwhile, Alexander Fraser's Rangers and some Indians had driven American pickets from a hill at the northwestern end of the Weisser farm in hopes of gaining a better view of the American lines. But the short

²³ Weddle, 311-12.

²⁴ Troiani and Schnitzer, 227-28.

²⁵ Troiani and Schnitzer, 230.



Detail with labels of the British period map "The encampment & position of the army under His Excy. Lt. G^l: Burgoyne at Swords's and Freeman's Farms on Hudsons River near Stillwater, 1777." (Library of Congress)

skirmish had also served as a warning to the American camp a mile away. According to eyewitnesses, Gates and General Benedict Arnold were apparently dining together when the shots were heard and the two were informed of the nature of Burgoyne's reconnaissance force. True to form, Arnold immediately requested permission "go out and see what is the matter." With Gates' approval, Arnold ordered Morgan's Rifles and Dearborn's light infantry to advance on the left "to meet any part of the enemy that might be moving in that direction." Gates also ordered Col. Alexander Hamilton's 3rd New Hampshire Regiment forward. Although Gates and

Arnold had been at odds with each other over the previous weeks, it was clear that by October 7th the two generals were working together with one overall objective in mind.²⁶

By now, the British reconnaissance force was stretched thinly across the two farms in a three-quarter of a mile front: Balcarres' Light Infantry and Fraser's 24th Regiment of Foot were on the right; the mixed German units (commanded by Reidesel, Erbprinz, Specht and Rhetz) stretched from the woods separating the two farms across the Barber farm in the center; and Acland's Grenadiers perched on some high ground on the extreme left at the edge of the Barber wheat field. The British cannons were distributed across the Barber wheat field line in four groups attached to various of the regiments as was the custom. As soldiers foraged the wheat, Burgoyne had convinced himself that Gates would simply stay inside his fortifications "determined to receive the attack in his lines."²⁷ But Arnold had ordered Morgan's Rifles and Dearborn's light infantry forward to probe the British right while Enoch Poor's New Hampshire regiments were deployed to attack the center across the open wheat field at the Barber farm. By early afternoon, the Americans emerged out of the woods on the southern side of the Barber wheat field and fierce back and forth fighting broke out between the New Hampshire regiments and the German units. Initially outnumbered, the Continentals were pushed back over 300 yards from one of their forward positions.²⁸ Meanwhile on the British left, Colonel John Acland's grenadiers (only 266 men) were quickly driven back by the New Hampshire Regiments with Acland being captured by the Americans and carried off the field shot in both legs. Surveying the state of affairs, Arnold rode back to the Nielsen House and briefed Gates that he believed that the British were ultimately driving to take the high ground on the extreme left of the American

²⁶ Weddle, 316-18.

²⁷ Snow, 239.

²⁸ Troiani and Schnitzer, 233.

fortifications. “It is late in the day but let me have men and we will have some fun with them before sunset,” Arnold told Gates. With Gates’ approval, Arnold then marched forward with the balance of Poor’s Brigade and Learned’s Brigade, later to be joined by Ten Broeck’s Brigade of Albany County Militia. Meanwhile, Morgan and Dearborn were ordered to scale the hill on the western side of the Weisser farm to outflank Balcarres’ Light Infantry on the British right which were now isolated at the bottom of the hill as the 24th Foot had been ordered left across the Barber farm to shore up the British lines in the center.²⁹

With the arrival of the additional American units, Burgoyne’s detachment was now outnumbered two to one.³⁰ The Royal and Hessian Artillery switched hands multiple times during the fray. With their left flank collapsing under the heavy attack by Poor’s regiments, the German units in the center began to fall back abandoning most of their guns in the process.³¹ Then, Morgan and Dearborn’s 700-man detachment launched a devastating assault on Balcarres’ Light Infantry. From the top of the hill on the western side of Weisser’s farm just to the rear of the British troops, the Americans “poured down like a torrent form the hill” on the British infantry.³² Cut off from the rest of the force, Balcarres’ men panicked and fell back in disarray. With both flanks folding and the center collapsing, Burgoyne decided that his reconnaissance force had no choice but to retreat back to their main defensive lines and sent out his aid-de-camp, Sir Francis Clerk, to convey the order. But Clerk was mortally wounded en route and Riedesel and Fraser were never informed of Burgoyne’s intentions.³³ With the British retreat now bordering on chaos, General Simon Fraser took the initiative of establishing a rear-guard line

²⁹ Troiani and Schnitzer, 232.

³⁰ Weddle, 324.

³¹ Weddle, 321.

³² Ketchum, 398.

³³ Weddle, 321.

with the 24th Foot and Balcarres's Light Infantry in order to protect retreating units escaping northeast to the redoubts. As Fraser was directing his troops, he was hit in the stomach with a ball and fell from his horse mortally wounded. British Lieutenant William Digby would later write that the impending death of Simon Fraser, Burgoyne's most trustworthy and competent commander, "helped to turn the fate of the day" leading to even more chaos in the disorderly retreat.³⁴

As the remnants of the reconnaissance force retreated to the redoubts, Benedict Arnold again seized the initiative by storming the northern most redoubt (i.e., Breyman's redoubt) and forcing what was left of its defenders to flee. By now, British casualties were devastating, totaling almost 20 percent of the remaining force as Burgoyne's army fled east and then north up the west side of the Hudson hoping to retreat back across the river at the Batten Kill. But the chance for that retreat which had been so strongly urged by Riedesel had come and gone. Surrounded after being cut off by John Stark's New Hampshire Militia, Burgoyne was finally forced to surrender his entire army to Gates on October 17th just south of today's Schuylerville, New York.

A turning point in history

In 1999, the *New York Times Magazine* published "The Best of the First Millennium" issue in which it chose the Battles at Saratoga as the most important battle fought in the world in the past 1,000 years.³⁵ After the British surrender at Saratoga, both France and later Spain understood that the proposition of an independent United States was more than mere fancy. France's entrance into the American War for Independence after Saratoga was a key ingredient that helped to ensure that the overextended military and naval forces of the British Empire would

³⁴ Weddle, 322-23.

³⁵ Troiani and Schnitzer, vii.

not be able to maintain the North American war. But the Saratoga campaign also illustrated a much larger conflict between two opposing methods of thinking and conduct. Howe and Burgoyne's haughty disregard for serious strategic planning and coordination betrays an imperial mindset of false pride and hubris resulting in a tragedy of their own making. On the other hand, Washington's willful decision to accept the awesome responsibility for the *entirety* of the American Revolution spawned the kind of humility and courage by which apparent miracles are made by men in history. In many ways, those two world views clashed at Saratoga with the latter taking the day, a day that would greatly alter the course of human history.

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