The Battle of Quebec

Date: Sunday, December 31, 1775

Weather: ~31`F, Blizzard conditions

Location: Quebec City, Province of Quebec

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|  | Great Britain | The US colonies |
| Belligerents | Canadian militia, Great Britain | 1st Canadian Regiment, United States |
| Commanders | Captain William DeLaPlace, Sir Guy Carleton | Benedict Arnold, Daniel Morgan, Richard Montgomery |
| Casualties | Force: 1800Killed: 5Wounded: 14Captured: 0 | Force: 1200Killed: 48Wounded: 34Captured: 431 |

**Overview:**

The Battle of Quebec was an attempt on December 31, 1775, by American colonial forces to capture the city of Quebec, drive the British military from the Province of Quebec, and enlist French Canadian support for the American Revolutionary War. The British governor of Quebec, General Guy Carleton, could not get significant outside help because the St. Lawrence River was frozen, so he had to rely on a relatively small number of regulars along with local militia that had been raised in the city.

Richard Montgomery and Benedict Arnold led a force of about 1,200 American army forces and Canadian militia in a multi-pronged attack on the city, which, due to bad weather and bad timing, did not start well, and ended with Montgomery dead, Arnold wounded, and Daniel Morgan and more than 400 men captured. Following a somewhat ineffectual five-month siege, the American forces were driven to retreat by the arrival of ships from England carrying British troops in early May 1776. The battle was the first military defeat for the Continental Army.

In the battle and the following siege, French-speaking Canadiens participated on both sides of the conflict. American forces received supplies and logistical support from local residents, and the city's defenders included locally raised militia. Some of those that supported the American cause were subjected to a variety of punishments after the Americans retreated.

In September 1775, the Continental Army began moving into Quebec, with the goal of liberating it from British military control. Brigadier General Richard Montgomery led one force up Lake Champlain, successfully besieging Fort St. Jean and capturing Montreal on November 13. Colonel Benedict Arnold led a force of 1,100 men through the wilderness of Maine toward the city of Quebec.

Quebec's governor, General Guy Carleton, had been preparing the defense of the province against possible invasion since May 1775, following the capture of Fort Ticonderoga by Arnold and Ethan Allen, and Arnold's raid on Fort St. Jean on May 18. While Carleton concentrated the defense at Fort St. Jean, small British garrisons were located at Montreal and Quebec.

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**British Preparations:**

The British authorities had been aware of American invasion plans for some time, as they occasionally intercepted communications between Montgomery and Arnold. While Governor General Carleton was in Montreal seeing to the defenses there, Lieutenant Governor Hector Cramahé had in September organized a militia force of several hundred to defend the town, although they were "not much to be depended on", with estimates that only half the militia forces were reliable. He had also made numerous requests for military reinforcements. Each of these came to nought; several troop ships were blown off course, and ended up in New York, and Vice-Admiral Samuel Graves, commanding the fleet primarily occupied with the siege of Boston, refused to release ships to transport troops from there to Quebec, because winter was closing in.

When definitive word reached Quebec on November 3 that Arnold's march had succeeded and that he was approaching the city, Cramahé began tightening the guard and had all boats removed from the south shore of the river. Word of their arrival also increased enlistment in the militia, increasing the ranks to 1,200 or more.[7] Two ships arrived on November 3, and another the next day, carrying militia volunteers from St. John's Island and Newfoundland that added about 120 men to the defense. A small convoy headed by HMS Lizard also arrived that day, from which a number of marines were contributed to the town's defenses.

On November 10, Lieutenant Colonel Allen Maclean, who had been involved in an attempt to lift the siege at St. Jean, arrived with 200 men of his Royal Highland Emigrants. They had intercepted communications from Arnold to Montgomery near Trois-Rivières, and hurried to Quebec to help with its defense. The arrival of this experienced force boosted the morale of the town militia, and Maclean immediately took charge of the defenses.

Arnold's Arrival

For more details on how Arnold reached Quebec City, see Arnold Expedition. On November 9, the 600 survivors of Arnold's march from Boston to Quebec arrived at Point Levis, on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River opposite Quebec City. Despite the troops' terrible condition following their difficult trek, Arnold immediately began to gather boats so they could cross the river. Arnold was prepared to cross the river on the night of November 10, but a storm arrived, delaying the crossing for three days. After crossing the river, Arnold moved his troops to within a mile and a half (2 km) of the walls, on the Plains of Abraham.

Despite being outnumbered two to one, Arnold demanded the city's surrender. However, both envoys he sent were targeted by British cannons, signifying that the request was declined. Arnold lacked any artillery, each man had only 5 cartridges, and over 100 of his muskets were unserviceable.[13] Arnold concluded that he could not take the city by force, so he blockaded the city on its west side. On November 18, the Americans received news (which was in fact untrue) that the British were planning to attack them with 800 men. A council of war decided that they could not continue the blockade, and Arnold began to move his men 20 miles upriver to Pointe-aux-Trembles ("Aspen Point"), where they could find shelter.

Carleton's arrival and British preparations for battle

In the wake of the fall of Fort St. Jean, Carleton abandoned Montreal and returned to Quebec City on November 19, passing Arnold's camp at Point-aux-Trembles. He immediately took command. Three days after his arrival, he issued a proclamation stating, in essence, that any able-bodied man within the town that did not take up arms would be assumed to be a rebel or a spy, and would be treated as such. Men not taking arms were given four days to leave. The result of this proclamation was that about 500 inhabitants (including 200 British and 300 Canadiens) joined the defense.

Carleton also set out to address the weak points of the town's defensive fortifications. He had two log barricades and palisades erected along the St. Lawrence shoreline, covering them with his cannons. He assigned his forces to defensive positions along the walls and the inner defenses. He also made sure the under-trained militia in his forces were under well-trained leadership.

**Montgomery's arrival:**

On December 2, Montgomery arrived at Pointe-aux-Trembles from Montreal. Montgomery brought with him 300 troops, as well as the 300 militia under the command James Livingston and Jacob Brown, as well as clothing, winter uniforms, ammunitions, provisions, and artillery that had been seized from the British. The commanders quickly turned towards Quebec, and put the city under siege on December 6.

Montgomery sent a personal letter to Carleton, demanding surrender. He used a woman as the messenger, but the request was declined, and the letter burned. Ten days later, he tried again, with the same result. The besiegers continued to send messages, primarily intended for the populace in the besieged city, indicating the hopelessness of their situation, and suggesting that if they rose to assist the Americans, conditions would improve.

American preparations for battle

On December 10, the Americans set up their largest battery of artillery 700 yards (640 m) from the walls. The frozen ground had prevented the Americans from entrenching the artillery, so they froze some snow, turning it into a solid wall. This battery was used to fire on the city, but the damage it did was of little consequence. Montgomery realized he was in a very difficult position. He did not have siege artillery, so he could not assault the city, and he could not dig entrenchments in the frozen ground. The enlistments of Arnold's men ended at the end of December, and no ammunition was on the way from the colonies. Furthermore, because British reinforcements were likely to arrive in the spring, he would either have to act or withdraw. Montgomery believed his only chance to take the city was during a snowstorm at night, when his men could storm the walls unnoticed.

While planning the attack on the city, Christophe Pélissier, a Frenchman living near Trois-Rivières, came to meet with Montgomery. Pélissier, who was politically supportive of the American cause, operated an ironworks at Saint-Maurice. Montgomery discussed the idea of holding the provincial convention with him. Pélissier recommended against holding a convention until after Quebec City had been taken, as the habitants would not feel free to act in that way until their security was better assured. The two did agree to have Pélissier's ironworks provide munitions (ammunition, cannonballs, and the like) for the siege, which he did until the Americans retreated in May 1776 (at which time Pélissier also fled, eventually returning to France).

A snowstorm arrived on the night of December 27, but it died down, and Montgomery was unable to attack. A Rhode Island sergeant deserted, and carried the plan of attack to the British, so Montgomery was forced to change his plan. The new plan called for two feints against Quebec's western walls, to be led by Jacob Brown and James Livingston, which would converge with attacks that would be mounted on the lower town. Arnold would lead an attack and smash through the walls at the north end of the lower town. Montgomery would follow along the St. Lawrence and break through the walls of the lower town, and meet up with Arnold, and they would then launch a combined assault on the Upper Town. The new plan was only exposed to the senior officers.

**Battle:**

**Montgomery's Attack**

John Trumbull's 1786 Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on QuebecA storm broke out on December 30, and Montgomery once again gave orders for the attack. Jacob Brown led 100 militia men, and Livingston 200, as they headed to the northern gates. Montgomery commanded a force of about 300 New York men, with Arnold leading the largest force of about 600, along with a six-pound (2.7 kg) cannon, against the lower town. When Brown was in position, sometime between 4 and 5 am, he fired flares and his men began to fire on the Cape Diamond Bastion while Livingston's opened fire on the St. John's Gate. Montgomery and Arnold, seeing the flares, set off for the lower town.

Montgomery led his men down the steep, snow-heaped path towards the outer defenses. The storm had turned into a blizzard, making the advance a struggle. Eventually, Montgomery's men arrived at the palisade of the outer defenses. The advance party contained carpenters, who sawed their way though the wall. Montgomery himself sawed the second Palisade, and led 50 men down a street. Montgomery and his storming party saw a two story building and began to charge at it. Fire broke out from this blockhouse, which in fact housed a small contingent of defenders armed with muskets and cannons, and Montgomery was instantly killed, shot through the head by a burst of grapeshot. The rest of the men fled back towards the palisade. Most of the storming party was killed or wounded; only Aaron Burr and a few others escaped unhurt. One of the uninjured officers led the few remaining men back to the Plains.

**Arnold's Attack**

Arnold, unaware of Montgomery's death and his attack's failure, advanced with his main body toward the northern barricades of the lower town. They managed to pass the gates and the British gun batteries undetected. However, as the advance party came to a row of buildings, heavy fire broke out from the walls above them. It was impossible to return fire to the defenders on the walls, so Arnold ordered his men to run forward. Arnold and his men soon advanced down a narrow street, where they once again came under fire. Arnold was organizing his men in an attempt to take the barricade when he was shot in his ankle. After he was carried to the rear, Daniel Morgan, the noted rifleman who was then a lieutenant colonel leading one of Arnold's regiments, took command of the forces. Under his command, they captured the first barricade, but were stymied in their advance by the narrow twisting streets, and by damp powder. Morgan and his men holed up in some buildings to dry out their powder and rearm, but they eventually came under increasing fire as Carleton, having realized the attacks on the northern gates were feints, began concentrating his forces in the lower town. A British counterattack reoccupied the first barricade, trapping Morgan and his men within the narrow streets of the city. With no way of retreat and under heavy fire, all of Morgan's men surrendered. By 10 am, the battle was over, with Morgan surrendering himself and the last pocket of Continental resistance in the city.

Of Arnold's command, more than 30 of his men were immediately killed and about 350 prisoners were taken along with Morgan. Twenty more casualties were later found after the spring thaw and several more drowned while fleeing across the frozen rivers. At least 12 more colonists of Montgomery's brigade were killed or wounded on the southern riverbank after the attack. General Carleton reported his losses as one British naval officer and five French Canadian militia killed, with four British soldiers and 14 militia wounded.

**Siege:**

Following the battle, Arnold sent Moses Hazen and Edward Antill, two expatriate Americans, to General David Wooster, who Montgomery had left in command at Montreal, and also to the Congress in Philadelphia, to report the defeat and request support. (Both Hazen and Antill went on to serve in the American army throughout the war.) Arnold also refused to retreat; despite being outnumbered three to one, the sub-freezing temperature of the winter and the mass desertions of his men after their enlistments expired on December 31, 1775, he laid siege to Quebec. This siege had little effect on the city, which Carleton claimed had enough supplies stockpiled to last until May.

Carleton chose not to pursue the Americans, opting instead to stay within the fortifications of the city, and await reinforcements that might be expected to arrive when the river thawed in the spring. Arnold maintained a somewhat ineffectual siege over the city, until March 1776, when he was ordered to Montreal and replaced by General Wooster, who brought reinforcements to the siege. During these months, the besieging army suffered from difficult winter conditions, and smallpox began to travel more significantly through the camp. Those losses were somewhat offset by the arrival of some 400 reinforcements per month.

On March 14, Jean-Baptiste Chasseur, a miller from the southern shore of the St. Lawrence, reached Quebec City and informed Carleton that there was a group of 200 men on the south side of the river ready to act against the Americans. These men and more were mobilized to make an attack on an American gun battery at Point Levis, but an advance guard of this Loyalist militia was defeated in the Battle of Saint-Pierre by a detachment of pro-American local militia that were stationed on the south side of the river.

The arrival on May 6 of a small British fleet carrying 200 regulars (the vanguard of a much larger invasion force), was sufficient to cause the Americans to begin organizing a retreat. The retreat was turned into a near-rout when Carleton marched these fresh forces, along with most of his existing garrison, to face the disorganized Americans.

Aftermath

This was the first defeat suffered by the Continental Army. The Americans suffered a significant number of important casualties, on top of Montgomery's death. When Montgomery was killed, most of his immediate officers were also killed or injured. Much of Arnold's entire force (over 400 men) was captured, leaving the American force outside the walls significantly reduced, and still subject to the privations of winter and smallpox.

The defending forces suffered remarkably light casualties. Of the five killed, only one was an officer; the other four were militia, as were the injured.

**Political consequences in Quebec City:**

On May 22, even before the Americans had been completely driven from the province, Carleton ordered a survey to identify those Canadiens that had helped the American expedition in and around Quebec City. François Baby, Gabriel-Elzéar Taschereau and Jenkin Williams counted the Canadiens who actively provided such help, determining that 757 had done so. Carleton was somewhat lenient with minor offenders, and even freed a number of more serious offenders on the promise of good behavior. However, once the Americans had been driven from the province, measures against supporters of the American cause became harsher, with forced labor to repair American destruction of infrastructure during the army's retreat being a common punishment. These measures had the effect of minimizing the public expression of support for the Americans for the rest of the war.

Between May 6 and June 1, 1776, nearly 40 British ships landed in Quebec City.  They carried more than 9,000 soldiers under the command of General John Burgoyne, including about 4,000 German soldiers, so-called Hessians from Brunswick and Hanau under the command of Baron Friedrich Adolf Riedesel. These forces, some of which participated in the 1776 counteroffensive, spent the winter of 1776–1777 in the province, putting a significant strain on the population, which only numbered about 80,000.