

The Aftermath of a Battle and How it Helped Win a Revolution

Alexander Scheel

Grade 11

The Aftermath of a Battle and How it Helped Win a Revolution

The battle in question is actually two events which many historians call the Battle of Saratoga; the Battle of Freeman's Farm and the Battle of Bemis Heights. The first was fought on September 19, 1777 and the second on October 7, 1777. Both of these engagements were fought in an area nine miles south of Saratoga, New York. For our purposes, both events will be referred to as the Battle of Saratoga.

From the outset of the war with England, the fledgling United States knew it needed a strong ally to help it win the day. Congress turned to England's ancient enemy, France, for help. It sent Silas Deane to Paris to seek an alliance with the government of Louis XVI. Upon arrival in France, Deane learned that the French had already agreed to support the American cause secretly with supplies and munitions but were not prepared to openly announce their support. Congress later sent Arthur Lee and Benjamin Franklin to France to aid Deane in his efforts. The three formed a commission which was given power to make treaties. Franklin was an instant celebrity and one French paper wrote, "The celebrated Franklin arrived in Paris the 21st of December and has fixed the eyes of everyone upon his slightest proceedings."¹ No one was more fixed upon Franklin than the British Ambassador, Lord Stormont. He complained continuously to the French foreign minister, the Comte de Vergennes of Franklin's presence on French soil.

Part of the reluctance of France to enter a formal treaty with the United States was the lack of military success on the part of the Americans. Washington's defeat in New York in August and October of 1776 at the hands of General William Howe and his subsequent retreat to New Jersey in January of 1777 did not instill confidence in the military prowess of the fledgling United States. Fortunately, the British were about to enter upon a huge military blunder.

In 1777, General John Burgoyne, a leader of British troops in Portugal during the Seven Years War, was given command of an army headquartered in the province of Quebec, Canada. It was this army that would engage in the Battle of Saratoga.

This was not his first trip to North America. He had been in Boston but did not participate in the Battle of Bunker Hill. In fact, he returned to England before his troops evacuated the city in March, 1776. He returned from England later that year at the head of British reinforcements which relieved the siege of Quebec City by the Americans. The British dislodged the Americans and General Burgoyne blamed his commander, General Guy Carleton for timidity in not taking Fort Ticonderoga. He again returned to England and was able to convince the high command and King George III that he should be given overall command of the forces in Canada. He had a plan.

At this point in General Burgoyne's life, he is described as "...a vain, witty, and silly man."² At the very least, he was supremely overconfident. His plan was, from a base in Canada, to divide the New England "colonies" from the rest of the "colonies" by taking the city of Albany, New York and effectively close the Hudson River and Lake Champlain to the Americans. He thought this would bring a swift end to the war. Burgoyne had seemed to forget the lessons learned from the previous year's campaign under General Carleton.

A key piece of the puzzle for a successful military campaign was missing; that being the coordination with the other British armies in America. Burgoyne was counting on support from Generals Howe and Clinton as he proceeded down the Hudson River Valley. Orders from London did not specify the movement of additional troops and thus Burgoyne found, too late, that he was on his own.

Burgoyne set out from Canada in June 1777 with, "4,000 British, 3,000 Germans, 1,400 Indians, and a pleasing Mistress to cheer him along."³ Initially, he was successful. He took Fort

Ticonderoga and was preparing to move further south. However, this movement would require him to break communications and lines of supply from Canada. Without his line of supplies, Burgoyne sent a force of 700 mixed troops (British, German, and Indian) to Bennington, Vermont to forage for food and draft animals on August 16, 1777. Unknown to the British, General John Stark and 2,000 militiamen were already in the area. They surrounded the British at the town of Walloomsac, New York, about ten miles from Bennington. The entire force was killed or captured. As a result, the British were denied much needed supplies and many of the Canadians and Indians abandoned the army and returned home.

The Americans had been in retreat since the defeat at Fort Ticonderoga. Washington appointed General Horatio Gage to command the army and ordered General Benedict Arnold to support him. Unfortunately, Gage and Arnold never saw eye to eye on how to run things. General Gage was benefitting from a call-up of militiamen and his army was growing in strength daily. By the time of the Battle of Freeman's Farm, he had nearly 9,000 men under his command. On September 7, 1777, General Gage marched his army north from Stillwater, New York to a place called Bemis Heights just south of Saratoga.

On September 19, 1777, the two forces engaged in battle. An American detachment of militiamen and sharpshooters under command of General Arnold had successfully thwarted a British maneuver to turn the flank of the American Army. Fighting from the nearby woods, the Americans were able to kill several British officers. The battle ebbed and flowed throughout the day when at nightfall, the Americans retreated to their defensive works and left the field to the British. It was a costly "victory" for the British. The British suffered 600 casualties and the Americans close to 300.

The closing chapter of the Battle of Saratoga took place on October 7th when Burgoyne realized that he was not receiving support from Generals Howe and Clinton and decided to fight his way out of his situation. The battle was an utter defeat for the British who found themselves surrounded and surrendered on October 17, 1777. Over 6,000 British troops were captured and General Burgoyne was allowed to return to England, never to set foot in America again.

News of the British defeat reached Paris on December 3, 1777. Vergennes immediately set in motion an alliance between France and America before England could try to reconcile with her former colonies. The alliance was signed on February 6, 1778 and France had essentially entered the war on the side of the Americans. The ultimate American victory at Yorktown would not have been possible without the aid of French supplies and credit. But most important of all, as a result of the Battles of Saratoga, the French were the first to recognize the United States of America as a free and independent nation.

Word Count 1,172

Bibliography

Blum, John M., Bruce Catton, Edmund S. Morgan, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Kenneth M. Stampp, and C. Van Woodward. The National Experience. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968.

Creasy, Edward S. The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World: From Marathon to Waterloo. New York: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1908

Furneaux, Rupert. The Battle of Saratoga. New York: Stein and Day, 1971

Ketchum, Richard M. Saratoga: Turning Point of America's Revolutionary War. New York: Henry Holt, 1997

Luzader, John F. Saratoga: A Military History of the Decisive Campaign of the American Revolution. New York: Savas Beatie LLC, 2008

Perkins, James Breck. France in the American Revolution. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911

Weir, William. 50 Battles that Changed the World. Franklin Lakes N.J.: The Career Press Inc., 2004

Footnotes

¹ Perkins, James Breck. France in the American Revolution. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911) 132

² Blum, John M., et al. The National Experience. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968.) 113

³ Blum, John M., et al. The National Experience. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968.) 114