

Military Episodes of the Revolutionary War

Burgoyne and the Hessians The British Secretary of State, Lord George Germain, was one of the most influential members of the British ministry, the body that formulated and coordinated the war effort in the American colonies. In 1776, they decided to divide the colonies into two parts by conquering the Hudson River Valley. After a year, all that had been realized of this plan was the conquest of Manhattan. All other lands north to the Canadian border lay in the hands of the American forces.

The British decided that 1777 was to be the year the military achieved the division goal. An army in Canada commanded by Lt. General John Burgoyne was to invade New York. From this army a detachment of 1,000 men led by St. Leger was sent by way of Lake Ontario, to land at Oswego and proceed inland, capture Fort Stanwix (east of Oneida Lake, near Rome and Utica) on the upper Mohawk River, come down the Mohawk Valley and re-join Burgoyne at Albany.

General Howe, the senior British officer in the area, was to move from the vicinity of New York City northward, destroying all colonial opposition that he met in the lower Hudson River Valley, and meet with Burgoyne at Albany.

The defeat of the British plan originated with a slip of memory on the part of Lord George Germain. He had sent peremptory instructions (Orders which must be carried out immediately with no possibility for debate.) to Burgoyne to proceed down the Hudson Valley and similar orders for Howe to proceed up the same valley. Germain was a stickler for detail, and whenever important documents were drawn up in those days, copies had to be made by clerks. Germain noticed an irregularity in the papers intended for Howe. He had scheduled a holiday excursion into the country, and left instructions for the clerk to re-make the copy of Howe's orders, which he would sign and send off upon his return from his holiday. The fact of the matter was that when he returned, he completely forgot about the orders awaiting his signature that were in a pigeon hole in his desk; several weeks went by before the oversight was discovered. The delay was fatal. When Howe finally did receive those orders in late August, he had already departed the New York area with his army via ships for the Chesapeake Bay, and was then proceeding northward with the intention of engaging General Washington's army at Brandywine, in Delaware.

The importance to the outcome of the American's struggle for independence hung upon the cooperation of Burgoyne and Howe, and the fate of the Revolution hung on the success or failure of this campaign.

Towards the end of June 1777, Burgoyne had a well-trained army of 8,000 men, and was sailing southward on Lake Champlain toward Fort Ticonderoga. 4,000 of these were British regulars, 3,000 were Hessian or German, a few were Canadian and 500 were Indians.

Burgoyne was a gentleman of culture and education, eloquent, generous and brave. He was a Member of Parliament, as were several of his officers. Baron Riedesel commanded the Germans.

The American commander in the north was General Schuyler, who had recently placed Arthur St. Clair in command of Fort Ticonderoga with a garrison of 3,000 men. Thus manned, the fort was considered to be impregnable. The problem was that the

Americans neglected to secure a round-topped mountain immediately to the south of the fort, and the British, realizing this, wasted no time in dragging cannon to the summit, from whence they could look directly down onto Fort Ticonderoga. St. Clair, thus compromised, saw his only option as the evacuation of his force by boat across Lake Champlain. He probably would have avoided detection had it not been for the light of a burning house, which backlit them, alerting the British forces that pursued and harassed them for several days. The Union Jack was flying over the fort that had been captured by Ethan Allen two years before.

At this point, a Colebrook resident might well ask why all this detail is given, and what relevancy does it have here. The answer lies within the psyche and attitudes of the colonists seeking independence from Great Britain. Much pride was felt in the exploits of Ethan Allen, a native son of Litchfield County, and a man of such dynamic character that many of his actions and sayings became the substance of legend and folklore during his lifetime. To have the fort that he had so dramatically captured given up without a fight that resulted in an apparent British victory, caused many men throughout New England and New York, and certainly our corner of Litchfield County to drop their plows or scythes and march off to join the Continental Army.

There is another interesting twist of fate in the abandonment on the part of the Americans and the subsequent re-fortifying by the British. The people of New England and New York were aroused as never before since the battle of Lexington. But the passage of the two years since Allen's dramatics had witnessed a change in military priorities, and the fort was now of no great importance; as a matter of fact, it was actually an impediment to its possessor, who had to station a considerable number of troops there to retain possession, when in fact they would be desperately needed elsewhere.

An air of overconfidence may well have further weakened the British. When news reached London that the citadel had fallen, King George rushed into the Queen's chambers clapping his hands and shouting, "I have beat them! I have beat all the Americans!"

In actuality, Burgoyne had done nothing to capture the Hudson Valley, but had instead, as later events were to prove, done himself harm by having to station a portion of his army at Fort Ticonderoga.

The American commanding general, Schuyler, now took measures to thwart the obvious British attempt to control the Hudson Valley, and had all cattle and provisions removed for miles around, forcing Burgoyne to draw all his provisions from Canada or even England. Schuyler caused trees to be dropped across roads, destroyed all bridges and placed large boulders and tree trunks in the fords of the streams. At one point, Burgoyne was able to move his army only 26 miles in 24 days. Every day his army grew smaller and weaker through injury or sickness, while Schuyler's army grew daily with the arrival of militiamen and patriots from the entire region.

The date was now mid August 1777, and in the next two weeks British forces in this area would suffer two severe defeats in the battles of Oriskany and Bennington.

Oriskany was the bloodiest single conflict in the Revolutionary War. It took place near Fort Stanwix. At the end, when the British forces retreated, both sides had lost 1/3 of their men. (American forces, under Herkimer, who was killed, initially numbered about 800 men. The survivors of St. Leger's original 1,000 retreated into Canada.)

Burgoyne's army was now beginning to suffer from hunger. The patriots had assembled a supply of stores and ammunition at Bennington, and the British decided they must have them. On August 13th, 500 Germans and 100 Indians with 2 cannon were sent to capture them. The British committed a fatal error when they either didn't know or perhaps disregarded the fact that John Stark, veteran of Bunker Hill and other engagements, was in the immediate vicinity. If you don't know who Stark was, or other patriots mentioned here, make an effort to familiarize yourselves with them, for it was these men of leadership and charisma around whom our forefathers rallied.

The annals of victory, on the field of battle as well as the athletic field, are full of examples of speeches made by the commanding officer/coach in which a statement was made which became a part of cultural lore, and thus exerted far more influence than could have been anticipated at the time it was spoken. One such example is John Stark's speech to his men prior to their engagement with the British in what was forever afterwards known as the Battle of Bennington, in which he said, "They are ours tonight, or Molly Stark is a widow!" And so they were, and Molly Stark's husband survived the battle for 45 years. Stark was justly proud of his wife, who was highly respected by all who knew her. The British expeditionary force was utterly defeated, and Burgoyne's army continued to starve.

On September 19 1777, the engagement known as the first battle of Saratoga took place. Neither side could claim victory, but the advantage lay with the Americans. On October 9, the second battle of Saratoga was fought as the desperate Burgoyne sought to fight his way out of there and retreat back into Canada. This time the British army was soundly defeated, and on October 12 Burgoyne asked for a conference with General Gates. The number of men surrendered was 5,799, with all cannon, muskets and munitions. The entire number of British losses for the complete campaign exceeded 10,000. The lack of food and the conditions under which they had been forced to exist for the duration of this campaign, probably explain why so many seemed to die on the relatively easy trip from the Hudson Valley across New England. There seems to be hardly a town in this region that does not have legends of buried Hessians.

One result of the outcome of this battle, often downplayed in our current history books is that when the news reached England in February 1778, Lord North rose in the Commons and proposed that every point for which the Americans had demanded change at the outbreak of hostilities be yielded by Parliament. This humiliating act passed both houses and was signed by the king in March 1778. But it was now too late, and the Americans refused everything except total independence.

The agreement drawn up concerning the fate of Burgoyne's army called for them to be sent to the Boston area in small groups, and then to be repatriated back to the continent, thus the west to east route of the Hessians and other British components through Norfolk, Colebrook and New Hartford. For various reasons, this repatriation never came to pass, mainly because Congress found one excuse after another not to honor the pact. The march of one company of Burgoyne's defeated army is recorded in a journal kept by Oliver Boardman of Middletown, Connecticut, now in the possession of the Connecticut Historical Society. The first entry is on September 2, 1777, the last on October 27, 1777. On Monday, October 20, Boardman was one of 50 troops from his regiment to guard 128 prisoners of war to Hartford. On the evening of the 20th, they crossed the Hudson by ferry and put up at Greenbush, New York (this is 8 or 10 miles

south of Albany). On Tuesday, October 21st, they marched to Kinderhook, New York. On Wednesday, the 22nd, they reached Hillside, New York (about 5 miles west of the Massachusetts border). On Thursday, the 23rd, they marched to Sheffield, Massachusetts. On Friday, the 24th, they marched to Rockwell's in Colebrook Center. Saturday, the 25th, brought them to Simsbury (although in all probability it was in the section of Simsbury that broke off at a later date and became Canton). On Sunday, the 26th, they marched to Hartford and turned 123 prisoners over to the sheriff, five of the prisoners having died en route.

In the latter part of October 1777, a small group of Convention troops passed through Norfolk, where they camped on the green for a few days. One Hessian, by the name of Abram Si Hunchupp (pronounced "Sunchupp") was taken ill, and brought to the house of Capt. Michael Mills, where Mill's wife unsuccessfully attempted to nurse him back to health. He was buried at Loon Meadow, on the road from Norfolk to Colebrook in a lot that belonged to Mills. On an apple tree over his grave was carved "Here lies the body of Abram Si Hunchupp". Years later, a hired man, gathering firewood, chopped down the ancient apple, not knowing its history; thus the exact location of the grave was lost.

Also during that fall of 1777, a Hessian soldier by the name of Hendrich Bale deserted his company in Norfolk, where he remained and married a woman named Sara Hotchkiss.

No doubt there was a considerable flow of prisoners passing through our area for quite some time. Burgoyne's army, although greatly reduced in numbers, still consisted of some 6,000 men, don't forget, and if Boardman's account can be considered as representative, for every 3 prisoners, there was an American militiaman. I would venture to say that the locals saw this troop movement as one long disruption. It is hardly surprising that stories about Hessians still abound locally.

Some of those stories give any serious student of history cause for concern, however. One prevalent in Colebrook revolves around the Joseph Rockwell home (now 250 Smith Hill Road), which had a dwelling on its foundation in 1767. It was the second dwelling house built in town, the first being his brother Samuel's at the Center (now 561 Colebrook Road, across the road from the town hall). A great deal of building took place during the ten years following the construction of these two dwellings, not the least of which was Richard Smith's 11 building complex erected in 1770 about a mile east of Joseph Rockwell's house on the Old North Road (Smith Hill). Deer Hill Road, running downhill from the Old North Road to the forge and its supporting buildings, was built in 1772. The reason you are being given all these seemingly superfluous facts will become clear when the rest of the story reveals itself. The story goes like this: (and every one of us was taught that it was factual) "When Burgoyne's army was marching through Colebrook, the winter weather was terrible; snow lay deep and the temperature was bitter cold. As there were so few houses in town, these troops, through necessity, were housed wherever they could be accommodated. The severity of the weather caused several deaths to occur. Under those primitive conditions, with the frozen ground covered deeply by drifting snow, the only place that afforded unfrozen ground in which to dig graves was in the cellar of Mr. Rockwell's home." (Some accounts report 2, others as many as 6 Hessians buried in this cellar.)

When the Powell family purchased the property in the early years of the twentieth century, they were told this story, which was sworn to as being the gospel truth. In all this time, not a soul has questioned any part of this tale.

Let's sort out some facts here. We are talking about 1777, not 1767; there were plenty of buildings in this section of town. More importantly, the month is October. The ground certainly would not have been frozen, nor would it have been snow-covered. No concrete evidence has surfaced suggesting that any British prisoners of war, Hessian or otherwise, were ever buried in Colebrook. This is not to say that there aren't graves in the area; we have already read about those in Norfolk. In the notes of a town meeting of February 16, 1786, the Norfolk townspeople voted not to advise Deacon Humphry one way or the other as to what he should do with the bones of the Hessian (*sic*) soldier that he had dug up out of the burying yard. (My guess is that he reburied them just outside the boundary of the burying ground; after all, who is to say what religion he might have believed in – "He's not going to lie in repose in our hallowed ground, thank you!")

My advice to the residents of 250 Smith Hill Road is to rest easy on dark, stormy nights – no ghosts of Hessian soldiers are going to rattle their sabers in the murky corners of your cellar!

After being held a year near Boston, the prisoners were marched overland to Charlottesville, Virginia, the route taking them back through this area once again. It was this southward movement during the winter of 1778-1779 that Burgoyne Heights in New Hartford was named. The reason for this seemingly circuitous route was the need to give a wide berth to New York City, heavily garrisoned by British troops.

At the close of the war, most of the Germans remained in America. Burgoyne was permitted to return to England shortly after the surrender in 1781, where he resumed his seat in Parliament.

As a postscript to the battles that were fought during that crucial summer of 1777, and whose names are forever woven into the fabric of our nation, the following might be of interest:

In the era prior to nuclear powered warships, all U. S. aircraft carriers were named for battles or for famous warships. The U.S.S. Saratoga, CV-3, compiled an impressive record during the Pacific campaign of WWII, surviving the war only to be sunk in the atomic bomb tests at Bikini.

The U.S.S. Ticonderoga, CVA-14 had a long and honorable career.

The U.S.S. Oriskany, CVA-34 was one of the flagships for Task Force 77, which was the designation of the U.S. Navy's fighting group in Korea during that conflict. It is not known whether or not any Colebrook veterans served on her, but at least one served on the destroyers that protected her, thus extending our town's contribution to the preservation of our freedom.