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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

ASCENT OF THE DARK EAGLE

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Executive Summary

Title: *Ascent of the Dark Eagle*

Author: Major Andrew J. Murray, USMC

Thesis: Benedict Arnold was a rebel, a patriot, a supremely brave battlefield commander, and George Washington's most favored general. Beyond those accolades Arnold was "no bit actor but a marquee performer in establishing the conditions that ultimately brought victory to the American cause." Benedict Arnold was key to American success in the Revolutionary War.

Discussion: Benedict Arnold will always be known for his treasonous acts during the American Revolutionary War. But he should also be remembered for his significant accomplishments during that war. From Fort Ticonderoga to the Battles of Saratoga, and many points in between, Benedict Arnold's contributions to the Revolutionary cause were noteworthy.

Conclusion: Benedict Arnold's *name* will always be synonymous with that of *traitor*, but his ultimate *contribution* should be remembered as that of "key to the success of the American Revolution".

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Ascent of the Dark Eagle



The Dark Eagle comes to claim the wilderness. The wilderness will yield to the Dark Eagle but the rock will defy him. The Dark Eagle will soar aloft to the sun. Nations will behold him and sound his praises, yet when he soars highest his fall is most certain. When his wings brush the sky, then the arrow will pierce his heart.

Natanis, Chief of the Abenaki Tribe
on first meeting Benedict Arnold.

Forward

I chose to entitle this paper with a reference to the "Dark Eagle" because I believe that title most accurately reflects the true nature of the enigma that was Benedict Arnold. Despite the fact that this paper will claim and support that Benedict Arnold was indeed key to American success in the Revolutionary War, this paper will not attempt to whitewash the darker side of Benedict Arnold's personality, or his actions.

Benedict Arnold - a tragic hero turned traitor - was also endowed with tragic flaws. He was vain, he was possessed by the trappings of fame and success, he was brash and irascible, and he was incapable of self-examination. Though there were many contributory factors to these tragic flaws, I believe their wellspring was his father's alcoholism. As a young man Benedict watched his very successful, respected father squander his personal wealth and the Arnold family reputation. This was too much for a man of Benedict's psychological makeup to accept. It was this experience that cast the shadow over Arnold. And so when he did finally "soar highest," the Dark Eagle's fall was indeed pre-destined.

I. Treason at West Point

As early as the spring of 1779, Major General Benedict Arnold embarked on a path of treason that nearly eighteen months later would lead to his defection to the British side, and near capture of the American Fort at West Point. Long considered a keystone to the American defense of the upper Hudson River by both Washington and Arnold, the loss of West Point would have been detrimental to the American revolutionary effort. After opening correspondence with British Major John André in May of 1779, Arnold continued to provide information and intelligence to the British for almost a year and a half. At the time this treasonous correspondence began Arnold, by order of General Washington, was serving as Military Commander of the city of Philadelphia. Arnold's co-conspirator, Major John André, was then serving as Adjutant General of the British Army and as General Sir Henry Clinton's intelligence chief. ¹

Through the early months of this treasonous relationship Arnold clandestinely provided both military and political intelligence. This intelligence consisted primarily of information concerning troop dispositions, locations, and destinations. Arnold established that he expected to be paid handsomely for his service to the British; in return General

Clinton expected the surrender of a sizable American force. In a coded message to André dated July 11, 1779 Arnold outlined that whether the war ended by the sword or by treaty, he expected to be paid 10,000 British pounds. As further evidence of his continued cooperation in this endeavor Arnold offered additional valuable intelligence concerning American troop strength, militia turnout, and army supply depot locations.²

What was it that drove Benedict Arnold to treason? By numerous accounts he was an accomplished battlefield general, a visibly brave leader who led from the front, and a polished tactician. Few American leaders had the skill or experience of Arnold, and fewer still were held in higher regard by George Washington, the Commander-in-Chief. So what caused Benedict Arnold to turn to the British? Most sources that address Arnold's treason provide numerous contributory reasons for his actions. Throughout all of these accounts there are two that are consistent and most accurate; the need for money to maintain his lifestyle, and the personal slights and affronts dealt Arnold by contemporary and senior officers as well as the Massachusetts Congress, the Continental Congress, and the Council of Pennsylvania. These were the two

¹ Billias, George. *Washington's Generals and Opponents* (New York: DeCapo Press, 1994), 186.

² Randall, Willard Stern. *Benedict Arnold: Patriot and Traitor*. (New York: Quill/Morrow, 1990), 474.

primary causal factors that motivated Benedict Arnold the traitor.

That Arnold needed money to maintain his lavish lifestyle there was no doubt. While Commandant of Philadelphia he had met and married Peggy Shippen, daughter of a prominent local jurist. He had also purchased the home of General Sir William Howe, ninety-six acre Mount Pleasant.³ And lastly, Arnold was known for extravagant entertainment and a taste for the finer things in life. All of these things required money, money that he did not readily possess.

More significantly however, Benedict Arnold truly believed that he was the innocent victim of numerous personal and professional slights and affronts. From his early expedition to Ticonderoga where he incited Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys, to Saratoga where he needled and provoked General Horatio Gates, and to Philadelphia where he was court-martialed, Arnold appeared to have a knack for attracting these slights and affronts. But Arnold could never admit that his irascible, provocative personality might be at fault. In fact, personal introspection was not Arnold's strong suit. Eventually, his habitual avoidance of introspection became pathological. He would admit no failing and take no

³ Arts and Entertainment Video. *Benedict Arnold: Triumph and Treason*. (New York A&E Television Networks, 1996).

responsibility for his problems.⁴ The most significant affront to Arnold, however, came from the very pen of the Continental Officer he most respected, his Commander-in-Chief. On April 6, 1780 Washington issued his own verdict on Benedict Arnold (resulting from a court-martial for his inappropriate conduct while Military Commandant of Philadelphia)⁵, publishing it in his general orders for the day, to be distributed throughout the army and picked up by newspapers:

The Commander-in-Chief would have been much happier in an occasion of bestowing commendations on an officer who had rendered such distinguished services to his country as Major General Arnold; but in the present case, a sense of duty and a regard to candor oblige him to declare that he considers his conduct in the instance of the permit a peculiarly reprehensible, both in a civil and military view, and in the affairs of the wagons as improvident and improper.⁶

Though there were many contributory factors that Arnold allowed to push him toward treason at West Point, none was greater or more profound than this open reprimand by George Washington. It was this pronouncement that sealed Benedict Arnold's fate. By late spring of 1780 Arnold had decided to defect to the British side, and had set his sights

⁴ Brandt, Clare. *The Man in the Mirror: A Life of Benedict Arnold*. (New York: Random House, 1994), 113.

⁵ Arnold was accused of inappropriate issuance of passes, and misuse of government property for personal use/gain.

on West Point as the vehicle for that defection. On August 1, 1780 Washington offered Arnold command of the left wing of his Army⁷, yet Arnold did not accept the gracious offer; instead he pushed for command of West Point. Two days later Washington ordered Arnold to proceed to West Point to take over command there.⁸

The die had now been cast. Not only was Arnold prepared to defect to the British side, but he was also in command of West Point and most of the territory along the Hudson south to New York City – this was truly enticing bait to the British. As Arnold set about weakening the defenses of the fort, Major André departed from New York on 20 September to meet with Arnold and finalize their plans for the fort's surrender. Forced by unforeseen events to return by foot to the British lines, André was captured and turned over to American authorities when he was found with a pass, signed by Arnold, and documents for Clinton written by Arnold. Arnold, crafty and lucky as ever, was warned of André's capture and escaped in time to board the same sloop, "Vulture", which had carried André to their meeting. Major André was subsequently

⁶ Randall, 494.

⁷ Washington's Army in the New York-New Jersey area.

⁸ Randall, 517.

hanged as a spy, and Benedict Arnold defected to serve the British.⁹

II. Introduction and Thesis

From September of 1780 and his failed attempt to surrender West Point to the British, the name Benedict Arnold has been synonymous with "traitor". American legend, historical accounts, and even school textbooks are replete with stories of Benedict Arnold's dastardly treasonous deeds. And all of these accounts are true, or at least based in truth. Benedict Arnold was a traitor – the most infamous traitor in American history. Arnold was compensated well for his treasonous act; the British commissioned him a Brigadier General, but even they never truly trusted him. George Washington, Arnold's greatest champion in success, became his greatest detractor after his treason; he decreed that the name Benedict Arnold would never be mentioned again in anything written about the Army or the country.¹⁰

And so, Benedict Arnold's many contributions to the cause of American Independence have been overshadowed by his treason and that unfortunately has become his legacy. Yet there is so much more to Benedict Arnold's legacy that predates his

⁹ Billias, 187.

¹⁰ A&E Video.

treason at West Point – so much more that is deserving of proper attention. Biographies, histories, and legend fail to account for Arnold's positive contributions. At best they grudgingly admit that, though foreordained to become the American Judas, Arnold was able to contribute, if only in a minor way, to the cause of independence. According to historian Willard Wallace, in an essay entitled "Benedict Arnold: Traitorous Patriot":

Until his (Benedict Arnold's) act of treason, men were always divided in their opinions of him; after it, his countrymen were unanimous in condemning him. Because of the disgrace into which he fell, his contributions to the patriot cause have often been forgotten or ignored.¹¹

This paper is not intended to be an Arnold apology, nor is it intended to condone or mitigate Arnold's treasonous acts. Either would be impossible, and dubious acts of scholarship at best. Neither will this paper attempt to bury Arnold's treason in and amongst examples of patriotism or battlefield generalship. The account of his treason was thoughtfully and purposefully placed up front, for it was and is the single-most studied aspect of Benedict Arnold's life. But now that it has been exposed and commented on, it will not be mentioned again.

What has been lost, misconstrued, or ignored since September 1780 are the significant contributions that Benedict Arnold made to the cause of the American Independence. From his Captaincy in the Connecticut Militia in 1775 to his promotion to Major General after chasing the Redcoats from Danbury, Connecticut, Arnold was one of the keystones of the American cause. He was a rebel, a patriot, a supremely brave battlefield commander, and George Washington's most favored general. But beyond those accolades, Benedict Arnold was "no bit actor but a marquee performer in establishing the conditions that ultimately brought victory to the American cause."¹² Benedict Arnold was key to American success in the Revolutionary War.

III. Early life of a Patriot

Benedict (from Latin meaning "blessed") Arnold V was born January 14, 1741, to Benedict Arnold III and his wife Hannah. Benedict was one of only two Arnold children that survived childhood; four other Arnold siblings died at birth, or shortly thereafter. In fact Benedict Arnold V was named for an earlier Benedict who had died in infancy. Young Benedict V was also named for his father and he was the hope for

¹¹ Billias, 163.

¹² Martin, James Kirby. *Benedict Arnold: Revolutionary Hero*. (New York: NYU Press, 1997), Preface.

fulfillment of his father's worldly ambitions. Little did his father suspect, or ever come to know, how ironically his hopes would be realized.¹³

Throughout his childhood and early adult life at study, work, and play young Benedict Arnold would learn many of the lessons that would stand him in good stead as a revolutionary hero. First and foremost young Benedict learned the precepts and teachings of his parents' Puritan Church, and the rules of acceptable behavior. When Benedict's father, "Captain Arnold", was not at sea or working his mercantile business, he was actively engaged in raising and rearing his children. When he was absent, his wife was the primary instructor. Hannah Arnold taught young Benedict to "keep a steady watch over your thoughts, words and actions," and to "be dutiful to superiors, obliging to equals, and affable to inferiors if any such there be. Always choose that your companions be your betters, that by their example you might learn."

Young Benedict's parents taught him to respect his place, yet they also encouraged him to aim high in seeking the favor of patrons who might recognize his merits and assist him in advancing to truly honorable stations.¹⁴ And this last statement would come very close to describing many of Arnold's early patrons and later senior officers - none more so than

¹³ Martin, 18.

General George Washington. Despite what has been lost or stricken from factual historical account, revolutionary leaders such as General Horatio Gates, Philip Schuyler, and George Washington, all recognized Benedict Arnold's merit and did help to advance his career at particular stages.

Beyond that described above the three most important characteristics that Benedict Arnold learned in his early life in Norwich Town and New Haven, were bravery, leadership, and seamanship. These three characteristics would be hallmarks of Arnold's brief career as a revolutionary patriot and hero.

Bravery was literally thrust upon Benedict Arnold; it was not something he needed to learn from books and lessons. Growing up in New England in the mid-seventeenth century any young boy was faced with numerous threats; Benedict was no exception to this. From within, his family was beset by personal and professional hardship. As mentioned earlier, he and his sister Hannah were the only two of six Arnold children to survive numerous diseases and illnesses. At the age of twelve, while he attended private school at Canterbury, Arnold's entire family was stricken with yellow fever. By the following year two of his three sisters had died. When Benedict was thirteen his father's mercantile business, which

¹⁴ Martin, 19.

had been faltering for a decade, finally collapsed.¹⁵ The end results of these family hardships were several: the Arnold family could no longer afford Benedict's education at Canterbury; his father, "Captain Arnold" lapsed into severe alcoholism; and Benedict became more rebellious and visibly bolder and braver.

As Benedict grew bolder and braver, local legends were replete with accounts of his deeds: sneaking aboard a local ship, climbing the rigging and diving into the water; jumping onto the blades of a spinning waterwheel at the mill above the town falls and riding it as it plunged underwater; running and jumping over loaded wagons on Norwich Town's main street; and stealing barrels of tar from the local waterfront and setting a Thanksgiving Day bonfire blaze. Upon being caught by the town constable for setting the bonfire, young Arnold challenged him and threatened to thrash him, until he was subdued.¹⁶ All of these above accounts help describe Benedict's bold, reckless, and brazen young nature. As well, they were evidence of his bravery and athletic prowess. Yet beyond the stunts of a young teenage boy there was little other opportunity or outlet for Arnold's bravery.

Arnold's first real opportunity came in 1751 when French led Indians invaded the Champlain Valley and raided south,

¹⁵ Randall, 24-28.

capturing Fort William Henry and massacring its garrison of fifteen hundred. Benedict joined Norwich troops who marched in support of the fort. But by the time the troops arrived at Fort William Henry the alarm was over. Despite seeing no action Arnold had received his first taste of Army life and he found it much more interesting than life in Norwich Town. This early enthusiasm led Arnold to twice again head off and enlist to join British efforts against the French in northern New York. It was during these enlistments that he first saw Fort Ticonderoga and Albany from a soldier's perspective. While there, he impressed his fellow soldiers with his abilities of shooting, wrestling, and marching without fatigue.¹⁷

Throughout these early years, the art of leadership was also bred into Benedict Arnold. As a boy and young man he was bigger, stronger, and more athletic than most of his compatriots. This made him a natural leader. From the local Indians, he learned the skills of the forest, which also contributed to his leadership development; he learned to hunt, fish, paddle a canoe, and to stalk forest wildlife. He even learned to slip into Indian garb and to adopt their habits.¹⁸ All of these skills would serve him well as a leader in the

¹⁶ Randall, 29.

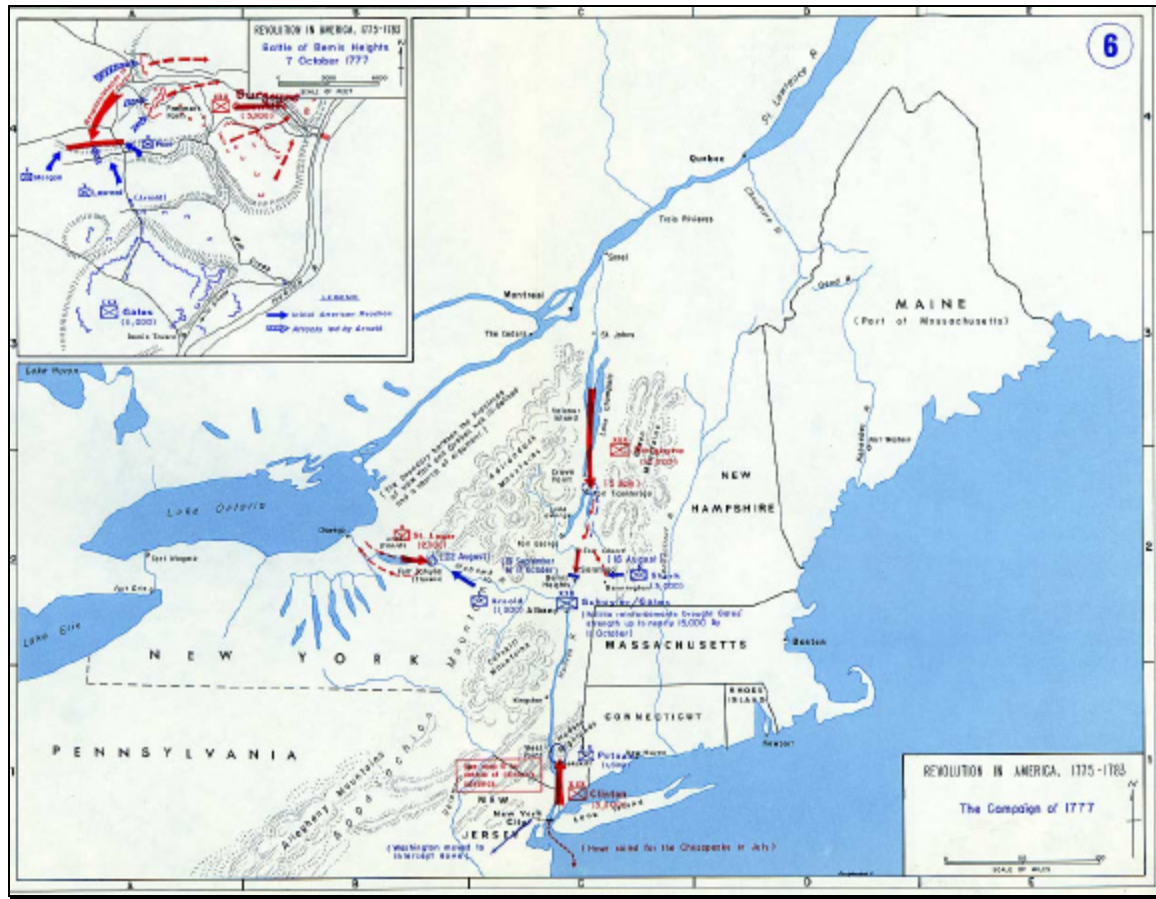
¹⁷ Randall, 33.

¹⁸ Randall, 28.

forests and woods of New York, Vermont, Maine and Canada. Later, in 1775, Benedict Arnold would join the Connecticut Militia and be elected as Captain of the New Haven Company.

Lastly, and not least important, young Benedict Arnold would learn the skills of seamanship from his father "Captain Arnold." Throughout his formative years he spent much time on the waters around Connecticut. With his father, during the summer months, he would learn the skills of the sea. He loved those summer voyages and all his life he would prefer the danger and freedom of shipboard life. These skills would serve him well as a successful merchant, during which times he sailed back and forth to the Caribbean in the south and north to Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, the St. Lawrence River, Quebec (City), and Montreal. These northern cities and rivers that he came to know as a merchant sailor, he would later come to know well as a revolutionary soldier and leader.¹⁹

With these primary traits of bravery, leadership, and seamanship, as well as many other experiences, Benedict Arnold was well prepared for a leadership role in the Revolutionary War. And so, when the first shots of the war rang out at Lexington and Concord, Captain Benedict Arnold, of the Connecticut Militia was more than ready to do his patriotic part.



**Map #1, New York and surrounding Area
at the time of the Revolution**

IV. North to Ticonderoga, Canada and Valcour

Ticonderoga

In the year 1775 it did not take Benedict Arnold long to employ his patriotic services in support of the American Revolution. As mentioned earlier, in the spring of that year he was elected a Captain in the Connecticut Militia. More

¹⁹ Randall, 28 and 41.

specifically, he commanded the Governor's 2nd Company of Guards. When word of the exchange at Lexington and Concord reached Arnold he quickly called together his militiamen and prepared them to march to Massachusetts. However, the town council of New Haven, having voted for temporary neutrality on this issue, was not prepared to issue gunpowder and other needed supplies to Captain Arnold and his men. After several attempts to gain the keys to the local powder magazine, Arnold exclaimed to Colonel Wooster and all within earshot, "None but almighty God shall prevent my marching!"²⁰ And with that he obtained the key to the magazine, supplied his men, and set out for Massachusetts.

Upon reaching Boston, Arnold and his men found things surprisingly inactive for American troops around the siege lines of the city. Knowing that the young army was in need of artillery with which to engage the British, and anxious as ever to get involved, Arnold petitioned the Massachusetts Committee of Safety. From his earlier enlistments and activities in northern New York he was well aware of the state of Fort Ticonderoga. He knew that the Fort was well equipped with artillery and other supplies, and that it was lightly defended. He petitioned the committee and asked that he might lead an expedition to capture the fort and its artillery. On

²⁰ Martin, 63.

2 May his expedition was authorized and he was named a Colonel in the Massachusetts service.²¹

Though Arnold's plan to take Ticonderoga was a bold and sound one, he was not the only patriot with Ticonderoga in his sights. By the time Arnold had recruited men to head north with him, a group from Connecticut, under Captain Edward Mott had also been commissioned. And when both of these forces neared Ticonderoga, on the Vermont side of the New York-Vermont border, they also found Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys ready to take the fort. Despite possessing authority from Massachusetts and a Colonel's commission, Arnold could not wrest command of the expedition away from Ethan Allen. Allen was keen to lead the expedition himself, and the "Green Mountain Boys" would not fight under Benedict Arnold, or anyone other than Allen. Attempting to placate the fuming and duly commissioned Arnold, Allen invited him to take a place at the head of the column as a volunteer officer. Having come so far and determined to participate, Arnold agreed to do so. He would join the attackers, but only to see to the execution of his primary mission to secure the artillery and material for the patriot army back in Massachusetts.²²

²¹ Martin, 65.

²² Martin, 69.

On 10 May the expedition set out to attack Ticonderoga. By all accounts, it did not take long for Allen and his men to secure the fort, with Benedict Arnold looking on. In fact most estimates were that it took less than half an hour to secure the fort. To add to the success at Ticonderoga, on 12 May Seth Warner, one of Ethan Allen's subordinate leaders, seized the British Fort at Crown Point.

Though the expedition had not worked out as Benedict Arnold had planned, he had seen to his mission's accomplishment. Despite wrangling over command and unprofessional treatment and disrespect at the hands of the Green Mountain Boys, Ticonderoga and Crown Point were in American hands. Together these two forts yielded approximately 200 artillery pieces, 100 of which were in fully usable condition. Eventually fifty-seven of these pieces would be hauled back to Boston and emplaced by George Washington at Dorchester Heights, overlooking Boston from the south. The ominous presence of these weapons convinced the British Army to evacuate Boston and retreat to Canada in the spring of 1776.²³ In this way Benedict Arnold, at least indirectly, had contributed to force the British Army to retreat to Canada. It would not be the last time that Arnold would accomplish this feat, helping to save the young

Revolution from premature failure. In fact, the next time Arnold would accomplish this feat would be later in the coming months of 1776, as winter approached northern New York and Lake Champlain.

Invasion of Canada

To the Americans, under the military leadership of General George Washington and the political leadership of the Continental Congress, the invasion of Canada seemed a sound idea. Though they had failed politically to gain the support of the French in Canada previously, a military invasion would eliminate a British base of operations at the head of the familiar invasion route along the lake and river chain joining the St. Lawrence and the Hudson Rivers. In late June of 1775, the Continental Congress instructed Major General Philip Schuyler, head of the American Northern Department in Albany, New York, to take possession of Canada. With a force of 2,000 men recruited from New York and Connecticut, Brigadier General Richard Montgomery (Schuyler's subordinate) set out from Fort Ticonderoga in September to take Montreal. To form a second prong of the Canadian invasion, Washington detached a force of 1,100 men under Colonel Benedict Arnold to proceed up the

²³ Martin, 73.

Kennebec River in Maine, and down the Chaudiere River to join up with Montgomery at Quebec.²⁴

To state that this invasion was a two-pronged attack implies a degree of coordination between Montgomery and Arnold that really did not exist. Though Washington had informed General Schuyler of Arnold's intended movements, there was no direct coordination between Arnold and Montgomery. This lack of coordination would eventually be demonstrated at Quebec.

Montgomery's force successfully, but slowly, advanced north over Lake George, Lake Champlain, and the Richelieu River. Seriously delayed by the British at Fort St. Johns, Montgomery captured Montreal on November 13. Meanwhile, Arnold and his force made its way through the Maine wilderness to the outskirts of Quebec. Arnold's march through the rugged wilderness was the stuff of legend and greatly contributed to his reputation for bravery and leadership. It was here and at Quebec that he first entered historical accounts as a revolutionary hero. His march, however, also had a detrimental effect on his force. Of the 1,100 troops he began the legendary march with, only 600 men crossed the St. Lawrence River on 13 November, encamping on the Plains of Abraham. British forces refused to accept battle in the open outside Quebec and walled themselves off inside the city.

²⁴ Center of Military History, U S Army, Washington, DC. *The War of the American Revolution*. 1992, 33.

Arnold's force withdrew to Point aux Trembles, to the south west of Quebec, and was joined there by Montgomery and 300 of his men.²⁵

At this point Arnold and Montgomery had to make a critical decision. They were now in the final month of 1775. As was customary practice in the Continental Army, yearly enlistments would end on 31 December. Fully half of their force was due to leave the Army at year's end. They had several options available to them. They could have made their way back down the St. Lawrence River to Montreal and awaited spring. They could also have retreated back to Fort Ticonderoga. Yet owing to the zeal and aggressive spirit of both officers they decided to attack Quebec at the first veiled opportunity. On the night of December 30, in a raging blizzard, Montgomery and Arnold attacked.

From the very start of the attack things went badly. First, an American deserter tipped the British off to the impending attack. Montgomery fell mortally wounded almost immediately, and his second in command failed to press the attack, and turned back. Arnold drove furiously against the British but went down with a bullet to the leg. Daniel Morgan continued on gallantly in his stead, but lacking the knowledge of the Quebec streets that Arnold had, he was eventually

²⁵ Center of Military History, 34.

forced to surrender.²⁶ Though Arnold's force continued to harass Quebec at his direction, they could not do so effectively. In June of 1776 Arnold's force retreated back to Crown Point.

Though in the end the invasion of Quebec was a failure, Benedict Arnold received great praise for his actions. As mentioned earlier, his trek through the Maine wilderness became a story of great legend, albeit perhaps somewhat exaggerated. From General Washington he received effusive congratulations and the offer of a new command. The Continental Congress unanimously promoted him to the rank of Brigadier General. And so, as early as January of 1776, Benedict Arnold was being extolled as a revolutionary hero, a brave leader of great renown, and a selfless patriot. Next, he was to gain acclaim on the waters of Lake Champlain.

Lake Champlain

As the remainder of the Canadian invasion force retreated back to Isle aux Noix and down Lake Champlain to Crown Point, the Northern Department leadership, including Generals Schuyler, Gates, and Arnold, considered General Carleton's possible courses of action. What they correctly surmised was that Carleton (Commander-in-Chief of British forces in Canada)

²⁶ Billias, 122 and 123.

intended to make his way south during the late summer and early fall. If Carleton were able to control Lake Champlain, and subsequently seize the forts at Crown Point and Ticonderoga, then he would have successfully set the stage for a junction with General Howe's forces moving north from New York City (General Howe was then Commander-in-Chief of British forces in America). In fact, as the future would prove, this was to become the crux of General Burgoyne's Northern Campaign of 1777. But Burgoyne's campaign was more than a year off. First, the rebel forces of General Schuyler's Northern Department had to deal with General Carleton and his intended movement south in the late summer of 1776.

General Schuyler and his subordinate commanders well understood the implications of Carleton gaining access to the Hudson River, south of Lake Champlain and the city of Albany. To avoid such a junction, Carleton had to be resisted, delayed and, if at all possible, stopped.²⁷ In order to accomplish this General Schuyler, with advice from his subordinate commanders, set about planning for a defense of the Lake Champlain-Hudson River region. Integral to this plan would be the newly promoted Brigadier General Benedict Arnold. Having proven himself a dauntless field commander to both Generals Schuyler and Gates through his efforts during the invasion of

Canada, Arnold was awarded two significant positions of responsibility for the coming actions. Having been placed in command of Fort Ticonderoga and its surrounding environs, General Horatio Gates quickly assigned Arnold as commander of his first brigade, and then subsequently also named him commander of the Lake Champlain naval fleet. As General Gates reported to Congress:

Arnold (who is perfectly skilled in maritime affairs) has most notably undertaken to command our fleet upon the lake. With infinite satisfaction, I have committed the whole of that department to his care, convinced he will thereby add to that brilliant reputation he has so deservedly acquired.²⁸

As Lord Germain's (British Secretary of American Affairs) instructions to Carleton would reveal, the Northern Department's leaders had surmised British intentions correctly. Germain had written Carleton that once the King's force had driven the rebel forces from Canada, Carleton was to "endeavor to pass the lakes as early as possible, and in your future progress to contribute to the success of the Army under General Howe."²⁹ And so, General Arnold at Skenesborough (near Ticonderoga) and General Carleton at St. Johns

²⁷ Martin, 225.

²⁸ Martin, 237.

(immediately north of Lake Champlain) diligently set about constructing naval fleets for the coming engagements on Lake Champlain. By late August both fleets neared completion. By this time the rebel fleet consisted of three schooners – *Royal Savage*, *Liberty* and *Revenge*, the sloop *Enterprise*, four large row galleys and eight or nine smaller gondolas – about sixteen or seventeen craft in all. In contrast the much more formidable British fleet then consisted of three schooners – *Maria*, *Carleton* and the *Loyal Convert*, the radeau *Thunderer*, twenty small gunboats and four longboats – twenty eight craft in all. Captain Thomas Pringle of the Royal Navy commanded the British naval contingent.³⁰

Despite the fact that his inexperienced fleet was ostensibly smaller than the British fleet, the bold and tenacious “Commodore Arnold” was to gain the critical element of surprise. Arnold’s plan was to engage the British fleet, in piecemeal fashion, from prepared and concealed positions west of Valcour Island. As the British fleet sailed south past the eastern edge of Valcour they would be forced to turn west and attack Arnold’s crescent shaped formation head-on. Arnold’s plan counted on the fact that he could engage the larger British fleet in piecemeal fashion rather than engage

²⁹ Martin, 272.

³⁰ Dupuy and Dupuy. *An Outline History of the American Revolution*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 56-57.

the entire fleet at once. It was a daring plan that minimized Arnold's weakness and placed Carleton's fleet at a disadvantage.³¹

Arnold set sail with his available vessels on 24 August and took up an initial position at Windmill Point, at the mouth of Lake Champlain. From there he would move to his intended positions west of Valcour Island. When Carleton learned of Arnold's presence at Windmill Point he hesitated. In fact, he did more than hesitate; he stalled his operation for an entire month. This would prove to be an invaluable delay for the rebel forces. Unsure of the decisive superiority of his forces, Carleton decided to keep his entire fleet at anchor until yet another vessel, the 180-ton sloop *Inflexible*, could be reassembled at St. John. Twenty-eight days later, on 4 October, well into the fall season in northern New York, Carleton and his fleet set sail from St. Johns. By this time, Arnold and his fleet were in place at Valcour and itching for a fight.³²

As Arnold had expected, the British fleet did arrive piecemeal. It was not until the lead vessels of the British fleet cleared the southern tip of Valcour Island that they discovered Arnold's waiting fleet. What ensued was a fierce

³¹ MHQ (Military Historical Quarterly): *The Quarterly Journal of Military History*. (Leesburg, VA, Winter, 2002), 91.

³² Martin, 274.

naval gun battle that would last most of the day of October 11. The larger British vessels were unable to turn against the wind in the direction of Arnold's fleet. The schooner *Carleton* and the British gunboats made their way to within about 350 yards of Arnold's force. Arnold concentrated American fire on the *Carleton* effectively and eventually it had to be towed from the fight. Late in the day *Inflexible* managed to make her way against the wind into close range, and devastated the American vessels with full broadsides. This was the turning point of the Battle of Valcour. Soon the British disengaged from the fight and anchored for the night across the channel.³³

That evening, taking stock of his situation, Arnold decided to take advantage of the ensuing fog, favorable winds, and a gap in the British anchorage, and quietly escaped south during the night with his remaining vessels. When the fog lifted in the morning *Carleton* and *Pringle* found the Valcour channel empty. *Carleton* then ordered immediate pursuit of the rebel fleet. On 13 October *Carleton*, *Maria* and *Inflexible* caught up to *Washington* and *Congress*. *Washington* soon struck its colors, but Arnold, aboard *Congress*, put up a valiant fight. For two hours *Congress* engaged the three British vessels off Split Rock. When Arnold could do nothing more, he

³³ Dupuy and Dupuy, 58.

shepherded his four remaining gondolas and *Congress* into Ferris Bay on the Vermont side of Lake Champlain. All five remaining vessels were beached and burned. Arnold then led the survivors overland to Crown Point and subsequently on to Fort Ticonderoga.³⁴

V. The Aftermath of Valcour

After Arnold returned safely to Ticonderoga, on 26 October General Gates placed him in charge of all forces assigned to the redoubts north of the fort, the point at which any ensuing British assault force would likely attack first.³⁵ That attack, however, never materialized. Due to the lateness in the year, and unsure of his ability to take Ticonderoga, Carleton decided to return his force to Canada, and departed up Lake Champlain by the beginning of November. Carleton could justifiably sail back to Canada comfortable in the fact that he had defeated the rebel navy on Lake Champlain. But, he had really accomplished little else.

In contrast the army of the Northern Department, and Benedict Arnold more specifically, had accomplished much more than their intended mission. As discussed earlier, Arnold had resisted, delayed, and altogether stopped Carleton's movement

³⁴ MHQ, 93.

south, and delayed a junction with Howe's forces until at least the summer of 1777. But the intangible results of Arnold's efforts were much more significant. Despite the loss on Lake Champlain, Arnold's men had proven that they could be formidable opponents to the British. This gave great confidence to the soldiers and leaders of the Northern Department. This swell of enthusiasm would not, however, be limited to the Northern Department. In fact Arnold's exploits on Lake Champlain and the retreat of Carleton's fleet to Canada would greatly bolster the American recruiting effort for 1777. By the time Burgoyne's forces would sail down Lake Champlain in the late summer of 1777 they would meet a much more sizable, capable, and tenacious force at Fort Ticonderoga, and later at Saratoga. And finally, of course, Arnold's actions on Lake Champlain would only fuel the fire of his growing legend as an American hero and patriot. Combined with his exploits to come at Fort Schuyler (Stanwix) and Saratoga, Arnold's efforts in Quebec and on Lake Champlain would greatly contribute to the cause of American independence. Arguably, these contributions were greater than those of any other rebel leader, save that of George Washington himself.

³⁵ Martin, 285.

In February of the new year (1777) the Continental Congress met to vote on selection of Major Generals for the Continental Army. After his actions in Quebec and on Lake Champlain Arnold certainly should have been selected. By any criteria he was certainly one of the top two Brigadier Generals in the Army, and he and Brigadier General David Wooster, also from Connecticut, were the senior brigadiers. To both Arnold's and Washington's surprise Arnold was not selected for promotion to Major General. In response, Washington urged caution from Arnold and that he do nothing rash. But Arnold, wanting to preserve his good name and reputation, left for Philadelphia and Congress to attempt to correct the situation. He traveled to Philadelphia by way of New Haven, where he stopped to visit his sister Hannah and his three boys.

While he was in New Haven the British landed near Norwalk and raided a major American supply depot at Danbury. Despite his current wranglings with Congress and his own thoughts of resignation, Arnold helped to raise the local countryside and harassed the enemy's withdrawal. He lost one horse, had another wounded, and was almost captured and killed. For his selfless efforts Congress, on 2 May, promoted Arnold to Major General, but they did not restore his seniority. Because of this argument over seniority Arnold resigned his commission in

July. But on the day Arnold penned his resignation, Washington recommended Arnold to help General Schuyler (of the Northern Department) arrest Burgoyne's invasion of New York, from Canada. Arnold was only too happy for the opportunity – he suspended his resignation and headed north to fame and glory.³⁶



Map #2, General Area of Upstate New York Northern Department Battles during 1777

³⁶ Billias, 179.

VI. Relief at Fort Schuyler (Fort Stanwix)

In August of 1777 British General John Burgoyne's forces, after having taken Fort Ticonderoga with ease, were slowly marching toward Albany. There they hoped to affect a juncture with General Howe's forces moving up the Hudson from New York City, and Colonel Barry St. Leger's forces moving down the Mohawk Valley from Lake Ontario. Thus far Burgoyne's plan was being executed successfully. Though harassed every step of the way by Schuyler's hit and run delaying tactics, Burgoyne was making progress south.

St. Leger and his forces, a second prong of Burgoyne's attack plan, had placed Fort Schuyler under siege on 2 August. After Fort Schuyler had been under siege for two weeks General Schuyler received word of the siege. Not wanting to weaken his own forces in the face of General Burgoyne's advance Schuyler was hesitant to dispatch a relief force to Fort Schuyler. Yet Schuyler also knew that if St. Leger continued east down the Mohawk Valley to Albany, British forces from both the north and west would confront him. And so, against the advice of many of his officers, Schuyler decided to send a relief force. He queried his brigadiers for a volunteer. Always up to a challenge and seeing that no one else would volunteer, Major General Arnold stepped up to lead the relief

expedition. A number of volunteers - nearly a thousand - were eager to join the force under Arnold's able leadership.³⁷

On 23 August Arnold and his thousand-man column, reinforced by approximately one hundred Tryon County militiamen, departed Fort Dayton, east of Fort Schuyler. Only ten miles into the march Arnold received word from a messenger that a clever ruse he had employed had worked; that the siege of Fort Schuyler had been lifted, and St. Leger and his force had retreated back toward Lake Ontario.

Knowing that his force was certainly out-manned and out-gunned, and understanding the Indian mindset through much experience with them, Arnold had sent a well-known local half-wit and an Indian guide in advance to Fort Schuyler. In exchange for clemency from his sentence of death for inciting local British loyalist support, Arnold sent Hon Yost Schuyler and his Indian guide to warn St. Leger and his force of the marching relief column.

Hon Yost and his Indian counterpart fulfilled their obligation telling St. Leger and his men of the approaching, vastly superior relief column. Word that the column was "as numerous as the leaves on the trees" and led by none other than the "Dark Eagle" himself, St. Leger's Indians deserted

³⁷ Ward, Christopher. *The War of the Revolution*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), 489-490.

him. With little other choice left to him, St. Leger struck camp and headed back to Canada.³⁸

In causing St. Leger's force to flee the Mohawk Valley without a shot fired, Arnold had deprived General Burgoyne of one prong of his attack on Albany. Subsequently Arnold returned to the American camp north of Albany with his force of one thousand men completely intact.

VII. Saratoga - The Decisive Battle

Upon returning from Fort Schuyler Arnold was appraised that Burgoyne's German forces had been soundly defeated at the Battle of Bennington. He also found that his former patron, General Horatio Gates, had replaced General Schuyler as commander of the Northern Department. Though they had once worked well together it did not take long for trouble to develop between the defensive minded Gates and the aggressive and offensive minded Arnold. On 19 September, at the first battle of Saratoga, generally referred to as Freeman's Farm, Gates initially allowed Arnold to lead some troops on the left wing against the British and to engage them well forward of Gates' prepared positions. Arnold, along with Colonel Daniel Morgan's riflemen, took a heavy toll of British officers and

³⁸ Ward, 489-490.

men. As the battle progressed, however, Gates denied Arnold reinforcements and restrained Arnold's initiative by ordering him back to the main headquarters. Arnold was furious and believed that if he had received the requested reinforcements, he could have delivered a decisive victory that day.³⁹

After Freeman's Farm the lines remained stable and relatively quiet for approximately three weeks. On 7 October, unsure of American dispositions, General Burgoyne sent out an ill-fated "reconnaissance in force." On learning of the British reconnaissance mission General Gates sent out a detachment, including Colonel Morgan's skilled riflemen. What ensued was the second battle of Saratoga, commonly referred to as Bemis Heights.

Having been earlier stripped of his command after Freeman's Farm for openly arguing with and verbally accosting General Gates, Arnold sat sulking in his tent. Some accounts relate that Gates had confined Arnold to his tent and that perhaps Arnold had turned to the liquor bottle for comfort and reassurance. Be that as it may, the situation was too intolerable for a battlefield commander like Arnold to sit idly by as the battle raged on around him.⁴⁰

News of the indecisive battle infuriated Arnold; he ordered his horse prepared and rode off to the sound of the

³⁹ Billias, 181-182.

gunfire. His appearance first startled and then exhilarated the troops. Taking charge of a Connecticut brigade, Arnold led them in two furious assaults and broke the enemy's center. When the British rallied, Arnold led two more brigades against the enemy lines but the British held fast. Arnold next charged the Connecticut brigade again and swept a force of Canadians and Indians in front of a powerful German redoubt (Breyman's redoubt), guarding Burgoyne's right flank. Arnold then led Morgan's riflemen, with two regiments in support, against the German redoubt. Though the Germans fought hard, the redoubt finally crumbled under the force of Arnold's attack. At the moment of victory Arnold fell, severely wounded in the same leg he had nearly lost at Quebec. Perhaps more than any other single officer, Arnold had been responsible for the American victory that day.⁴¹

At Saratoga there stands a monument to Benedict Arnold's leg (see Figure#1 below), though the monument does not include his name, perhaps owing to George Washington's decree. The inscription on the monument reads:

In memory of the most brilliant warrior in the Continental Army who was desperately wounded on this spot, the sally port of Burgoyne's Great (Western) Redoubt, 7th October 1777 winning for his countrymen the Decisive Battle of the American Revolution, and for himself the rank of Major General.

⁴⁰ Center of Military History, 62.

⁴¹ Billias, 182-183.



**Figure#1. Monument to Arnold
at Saratoga**

The American victory at Saratoga on 7 October signaled the end of Burgoyne's campaign of 1777. On 17 October Burgoyne finally capitulated. In February 1778, France negotiated a treaty of alliance with the United States; an alliance that was tantamount to a declaration of war against England.⁴² For Benedict Arnold, severely wounded at Saratoga, his days of battlefield heroics and leadership had drawn to a close. After his recovery he would go on to serve, at the request of George Washington, as the military commandant of Philadelphia and later as commander of West Point.

VIII. Summary and Conclusion

In the words of Lieutenant General David Palmer (USA Retired), former Commandant of the US Military Academy at West Point, "if the bullet that has passed through Benedict Arnold's leg at Saratoga had passed through his heart, he would today be renowned as one of America's greatest heroes. There would be cities named for him, and a state called Arnold."⁴³

There is little doubt that Benedict Arnold was a revolutionary hero, but his legacy is not that of hero, or patriot; his legacy is that of traitor. Unfortunately, his treasonous acts at West Point have condemned him to such a fate for time immemorial. And yet a fair and honest assessment of Benedict Arnold's revolutionary exploits from Fort Ticonderoga in 1775 to Saratoga in 1777, inclusive of his actions at Quebec, Valcour, and Fort Schuyler, demonstrate that *he was in fact key to the success of the American Revolution.*

Though Arnold shared command of the invasion force with Ethan Allen, the seizing of Fort Ticonderoga in 1775 freed needed artillery pieces for the siege of Boston. It was those

⁴² Center of Military History, 62.

⁴³ A&E Video

artillery pieces, emplaced at Dorchester Heights in South Boston, that caused the British to retreat to Nova Scotia.

Despite utter tactical defeat in the naval engagement off Valcour Island in the fall of 1776, Arnold proved that the American men of the Northern Department could certainly fight. He also successfully delayed Carleton's force long enough (an entire month) to cause Carleton to retreat back to Canada in November 1776. It was that delay and subsequent retreat that proved to be a strategic victory for Arnold and the Northern Army. When Carleton turned and headed back to Canada in November, that provided the American Northern Department almost nine full months to prepare and recruit for the coming British Campaign of 1777. Without that time, it would have been impossible for either Schuyler or Gates to defeat Burgoyne's invasion force at Saratoga.

Though the relief of Fort Schuyler (Fort Stanwix) was accomplished without a shot fired, it was Benedict Arnold's creativity and ingenuity that won the day. In causing St. Leger to lift his siege and retreat back to Canada, Arnold deprived Burgoyne of a supporting prong of his invasion force. This left Burgoyne's force alone to attempt to take Albany and the northern Hudson Valley area, but as we have seen, the Battles at Saratoga would prevent that.

Lastly, the Battles of Saratoga were Arnold's crowning achievements. Despite being relegated to a secondary role by General Gates, Arnold was able to significantly influence the day's fight at Freeman's Farm. Later, at Bemis Heights, Arnold threw himself into the fight with almost reckless abandon, rallying the troops, and leading numerous attacks against the British positions. In leading the crucial attack on Breymann's Redoubt, Arnold's efforts "won for his countrymen the decisive battle of the American Revolution." The Battles of Saratoga were decisive in and of themselves, as they brought General Burgoyne's Campaign of 1777 to a close. However, they were decisive in a grander sense as they brought the French into the war against England. General Washington and other leaders dared to hope that a decisive American victory might bring the French openly into the war. That is what Saratoga finally accomplished; and so, through his exploits at Saratoga, Benedict Arnold was instrumental in bringing France into the war.

Benedict Arnold's *name* will always be synonymous with that of *traitor*, but his ultimate *contribution* should be remembered as that of **"key to the success of the American Revolution"**.

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