

AMERICA'S FIRST AMPHIBIOUS WARRIOR: BENEDICT ARNOLD AND HIS REVOLUTIONARY WAR BOATS

A well-known twentieth century British historian described Major General Benedict Arnold as “skilled beyond any other living man in the arts and practices of amphibious warfare”.¹ Arnold did achieve spectacular results on the inland waterways of America during the Revolutionary War with a variety of wooden boats that he used in unique ways for military purposes, both as an American, and then as a British general. Because of his attempt to turn over West Point to the British, his abilities as a military leader and his contributions to the American cause are mostly overlooked. His nautical skills were only used on inland waterways instead of engaging British warships at the helm of a large sailing ship, and as a result, his amphibious activities have been largely ignored. This article will show how Arnold’s unique skills enabled him to achieve extraordinary results in four different amphibious engagements during the Revolutionary War.

FORT TICONDEROGA

As soon as he heard about Lexington and Concord, Captain Benedict Arnold made his way to Boston and immediately approached the Massachusetts Committee of Safety to authorize an expedition to take Fort Ticonderoga in order to capture its cannons for use by the patriot army. After receiving the approval from the Committee of Safety on May 2nd, Arnold left Boston and was in the Berkshires when he heard about an expedition from Connecticut that had the same objective. Arnold, who had just begun to recruit his men, had the legitimacy of the Massachusetts Committee behind him, and ended up joining forces with the other competing group, led by Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys.

The combined force, which had agreed to a joint command by Arnold and Allen, decided to make their attack from Hands Cove, which was across the lake from Fort Ticonderoga. In order to attack the fort, the assembled men needed a way to cross the water, which they proposed to do at night. The word had gone out the day before that the company needed boats. Only two boats were made available and, therefore, many trips were necessary in order to get eighty-five attackers across the lake. By dawn, the task was complete and the attack was launched. Fortunately, the fort was inadequately manned and poorly guarded so the patriots met virtually no opposition from the British defenders. The fort was taken and its cannons were subsequently made available to Washington’s army in Boston. No contemporary description of the boats used in the attack has been found.

Prior to the taking of Fort Ticonderoga, an expedition had been sent to raid the Skeenesboro plantation of a local Tory, Phillip Skeene. At Skeenesboro, the patriots were able to capture a forty-one foot trading schooner, which they renamed *Liberty*.² Since he was the only officer who had experience sailing ships, Arnold took command of the *Liberty*, which he combined with some captured bateaux, and proceeded to sail down Lake Champlain to the Canadian fortress of St Jean on the Richelieu River. At St Jean, he discovered an inadequately guarded facility, and captured “the King’s Sloop of about 70 tons, with two brass 6-pounders”³ as well as four bateaux. The sloop was subsequently renamed the *Enterprise* and was used in the battle of Valcour Island.

The taking of Fort Ticonderoga was not a major amphibious operation. However, it was the first American amphibious attack against an established British position, and it was the first offensive operation of the Revolutionary War that resulted in the taking of a British fortification. It also initiated the military career of Benedict Arnold, who became the Revolutionary War’s leading practitioner of the art of amphibious warfare.

QUEBEC

Arnold rejoined the American army in Boston by early July of 1775, and began pressing the case for a Canadian expedition on General George Washington, who had recently been appointed commander in chief. The plan to attack Canada that was ultimately approved by Washington was to send an army of twelve hundred men, under the command of Major General Richard Montgomery, along Lake Champlain and then up the Richelieu River to Montreal. After taking Montreal, it was expected that by joining with the other expeditionary force they could jointly take Quebec and, thus control of Canada, in one easy campaign. A second force of eleven hundred men, under the command of newly appointed Colonel Benedict Arnold, would go up the Kennebec River, carry their boats to the Dead River, then go on to the Chaudiere River, and, finally, to Quebec where they would join up with Montgomery.

Since much of the route to be used by his force was on inland waterways, Arnold ordered a Maine shipbuilder to make him a fleet of 200 wooden “bateaux”. “The bateau was a flat-bottom, shallow-draft, all-purpose cargo boat. First appearing in the records as early as King William’s War, by the eighteenth century bateaux were the most common and most important cargo carrier found on the inland waters of colonial North America”.⁴ Arnold’s bateaux were long flat-bottomed boats with high, slanting sides and a raised, sharp point at each end.

The bateaux used by Arnold’s expedition were not specifically described in detail by any of the participants. However, a contemporary description of a bateau can be found in the journal of Charles Carroll, who was one of three members of a

Congressional Committee that visited Canada in the spring of 1776. The committee traveled across Lake George in a bateau that Carrolton described as being “ 36 feet long and 8 feet wide...and carry 30 to 40 men...They are rowed...[and] have a mast fixed in them to which square sail or a blanket is fastened”.⁵

Because of the green wood used in the building of the bateaux, they soon began to leak and come apart. Arnold also quickly realized that the 1761 journal of Lieutenant John Montessor, which was his source of information about the route up the Kennebec River to Quebec, had not accurately described the conditions that the expedition would face. The route turned out to have a number of rapids and waterfalls that necessitated the portage of the boats, so the movement of the men with their green wood boats became a terrible ordeal. Arnold described his problems in a letter to Washington, “we have had a very fatiguing time, the Men in general not understanding Batteaus have been obliged to wade & hall them more than half way up the River”.⁶

After running into unusually cold and rainy weather, the expedition almost starved to death. It was through Arnold’s force of will and exemplary leadership that the expedition had finally made it to a French town on the Chaudiere River, where they obtained needed food and supplies. By the time Arnold’s men reached the Chaudiere, their green bateaux were either lost or had fallen apart, and were considered by the men to be good riddance.

On December 1st, Arnold met up with Montgomery’s force. Due to expiring enlistments, Arnold and Montgomery had to make a move against Quebec by the end of December. They ended up attacking the city on the night of December 31st in the middle of a snowstorm. The attack on Quebec failed, and in the course of the battle Montgomery was killed and Arnold was wounded in the leg and carried off the field. The invasion of Canada was the first major amphibious operation of the Revolutionary War and Arnold’s expedition through the uncharted Maine wilderness with a band of untrained soldiers facing every kind of adversity is unsurpassed in modern military history.

BATTLE OF VALCOUR ISLAND

Although much has been written about this important naval engagement, its significance remains largely unknown, probably because of its association with Arnold. The fact remains that Arnold’s ability to build a small fleet of boats with a largely inexperienced labor force in a relatively short period of time, and then to mount an effective challenge to the British advance from Canada, ranks as one of the seminal accomplishments of the Revolutionary War. As Lord Mahan has said, “The little American navy on Champlain was wiped out; but never had any force, big or small, lived to better purpose or died more gloriously, for it saved the Lake for that year”.⁷

As soon as the American army left Canada in June of 1776, the British commander in Canada, General Guy Carleton, began building a fleet of boats for a British advance from Canada down Lake Champlain and along the Hudson River to New York City, which would, if successful, cut the thirteen colonies in half. Under Arnold’s leadership, the Americans initiated an intensive boat building effort that involved recruiting experienced ship builders and artisans from the seacoasts of the northern colonies. Arnold’s desire to stop the British advance on Lake Champlain resulted in the building and outfitting a fleet of fifteen vessels in the space of three months against formidable odds.

By early September of 1776, Arnold had completed his fleet, which consisted of two schooners, one sloop, one cutter, eight gondolas and three galleys.⁸ Arnold had beaten the British on the lake and sailed north from Ticonderoga to find the best spot from which to establish his defensive position. He settled on a position next to Valcour Island that would hide his vessels from the British as they came down the lake, and give him an advantage when the British discovered him and attacked his fleet. Arnold’s choice was a good one and he was able to surprise the British, who sailed past his fleet and had to reverse their course and sail up wind to attack his position.

The battle began on the morning of October 11th and lasted for seven hours. Arnold was on board the *Congress* galley, where he personally directed the cannon fire on the British vessels. In the resulting battle, the Americans lost three boats, had been hit in almost every remaining vessel, had sixty men killed or wounded, and seemed to be hemmed in by the British fleet with almost certain destruction when fighting resumed the next day.⁹

Arnold held a council of war that evening in his cabin on the *Congress* galley, and convinced his officers that the only alternative was to attempt an escape. Later that night, Arnold led the entire American fleet around the British vessels and escaped down the lake to Schuyler Island, which was seven miles to the south.¹⁰ When the British looked out at the field of battle early the next morning, they were stunned to see that the American fleet had vanished. The British caught up with the retreating American fleet on the 13th, and they engaged in a running battle with Arnold. Some more American vessels were destroyed before the British finally ran Arnold and his four remaining vessels into Ferris Bay, near present day Panton, Vermont. Realizing that his vessels were severely damaged and that he faced an overwhelming disadvantage, Arnold gave the order to burn his remaining boats, and then led the remainder of his men overland to Fort Ticonderoga, barely missing the Indian allies of the British who were trying to intercept them.

Arnold’s valiant defense of Lake Champlain caused the British commander, General Guy Carleton, to decide that it was too late in the season to attempt a major attack on American defensive positions. Arnold had saved the day for the Americans, and by delaying Carleton’s advance, had won at least a years reprieve. Without Arnold’s extraordinary performance in both aspects of his assignment, it is almost certain that the British would have been able to capture an important American fortification in the fall of 1776 and change the course of the war.

INVASION OF VIRGINIA IN 1781

After his valiant defense on Lake Champlain, Arnold participated in three important engagements during 1777, but none of them involved the use of boats.¹¹ In 1780, he decided to sell his services to the British, but the plot was discovered and he barely escaped to the British before being captured. The British commander in chief, Sir Henry Clinton, appointed him a brigadier general, and in December of 1780 assigned him to invade Virginia. The invasion of Virginia provided Arnold with another opportunity to demonstrate his skill at directing an amphibious operation, and he proved that he could be as effective for the British as he was for the Americans.

Arnold left New York with fourteen hundred men but, due to a storm, lost some of them on the way, and arrived in Virginia with eight hundred men. With barely any delay, he utilized captured American vessels and British warships to transport his troops up the James River, where his lightning movements enabled him to capture Richmond and then destroy the only cannon foundry in the state. Using his captured vessels, he made his way back down to an existing British fortification in Portsmouth.¹²

While in Portsmouth, Arnold continued to conduct raiding parties with the objective of harassing the American militia and destroying American supplies. Recognizing the vulnerability of his position, he embarked on a boat building effort in order to provide his command with an effective way to defend Portsmouth and to continue his small-scale offensive operations against the Americans. In a letter to Clinton dated January 23rd, Arnold indicated his intention to build fifty boats.¹³ Based on contemporary accounts, it seems likely that these boats were similar to the galleys he constructed on Lake Champlain because they were described as being big enough to carry eighty men.¹⁴ These galleys would have been large enough to carry most of Arnold's men in the "thirteen topsail vessels and twenty-three flat bottomed boats" that one observer reported.¹⁵

Even though Arnold remained substantially outnumbered, for two and a half months he managed to defend his position and to harass the Americans by his effective use of boats. During this period, Arnold successfully avoided an effort by Washington to trap him between the Continental Army and the French navy. The British command in New York finally seemed to recognize his vulnerability and on March 20, 1781, reinforcements commanded by Major General William Phillips arrived in Virginia to support Arnold's campaign.

Phillips and Arnold took their combined forces and conducted a raid on Petersburg on April 25th. Two days after capturing Petersburg, Arnold led a detachment of British troops to Osborne's on the James River. His surprise attack by land dealt Virginia a devastating blow by destroying nine ships of the Virginia navy that were anchored at Osborne's.¹⁶ The Osborne's action was the reverse of his usual practice of using boats to attack fixed positions on land.

CONCLUSION

Arnold's genius was in knowing when and how to use boats to defeat his opponent, and being willing to build them himself if he could not get them any other way. His previous civilian experience in the trading business gave him the basic tools for conducting amphibious operations, but he was consistently able to utilize men and boats to achieve his military objectives better than any other officer on either side. He truly was America's first amphibious warrior.

¹ Sir George Otto Trevelyan, *George the Third and Charles Fox* (London: Longmans, Green & Co.) 1914, 333.

² Russell Bellico, *Sails and Steam in the Mountains* (Fleischmanns: Purple Mountain Press) 1992, 117.

³ Arnold to the Massachusetts Committee of Safety, May 9, 1775, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, I, 364-7.

⁴ Joseph F. Meany Jr., *Batteaux and 'Battoe Men'*, *An American Colonial Response to the Problem of Logistics in Mountain Warfare*, NY State Div. of Military & Naval Affairs, December 8, 1998.

⁵ Allan S. Everest, ed., *The Journal of Charles Carroll of Carrollton* (Fort Ticonderoga, NY: The Champlain Upper Hudson Bicentennial Committee) 1976, 30-31.

⁶ Arnold to Washington, October 13, 1775, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, II, 431.

⁷ A.T. Mahan, *Major Operations of the Navies in the War of American Independence* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co.) 1913, 25.

⁸ See Table 1 for a list of boats involved in the Battle of Valcour Island that were under Arnold's command. Arnold directed the battles from the *Congress* galley which he finally sank in Ferris Bay.

⁹ Bellico, 142-45.

¹⁰ John R. Bratten, *The Gondola Philadelphia and the Battle of Lake Champlain* (College Station: Texas A. & M. University Press) 2002, 66-67.

¹¹ The three battles in which Arnold was involved in 1777 was the Battle of Ridgefield in May, the Relief of Fort Stanwix in August and the Battles of Saratoga in September and October.

¹² See Lieut. Col. J. G. Simcoe, *A Journal of the Operations of the Queens Rangers* (North Stratford: Ayer Company Publishers) 2000, 160-199, and letter from Arnold to Clinton, January 23, 1781, Clinton Papers, William L. Clemens Library for first hand descriptions of the invasion of Virginia.

¹³ Arnold to Clinton, January 23, 1781.

¹⁴ Arnold to Clinton, January 23, 1781.

¹⁵ Friedrich Kapp, *The Life of Frederick William Von Steuben, Major General in the Revolutionary Army* (New York: Mason Brothers) 1854, 425.

¹⁶ Ernest M. Eilers, *Chesapeake Bay in the American Revolution* (Centreville, MD: Tidewater Publishers) 1981, 196.

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