

THE BATTLE OF VALCOUR ISLAND: AN AMERICAN NAVY ON LAKE CHAMPLAIN

After the devastating defeat of the American Northern Army at Quebec on the night of December 31, 1775, and its subsequent unsuccessful siege of the city resulting in the disastrous retreat from Canada in June of 1776, the Northern American Army was in disarray. The British Army was in control of Canada again and realized that the ranks of the American Army had been seriously depleted by a number of factors, including smallpox and sickness. They were determined to avenge the invasion of Canada by invading the American Colonies and, therefore, commenced to build a fleet of boats in order to sail down Lake Champlain to attack the Americans and split the colonies in two. Major General Philip Schuyler¹ had been the commander of the Northern Army since the summer of 1775 and was aware of the necessity of defending the lake and the adjacent forts in the north from an attack by the British. As a result of political maneuvering, Major General Horatio Gates,² a former British officer who had settled in America and had answered the call to arms after Lexington and Concord, was appointed by Congress in the summer of 1776 as commander of the Northern Army in Canada as a slap in the face to Schuyler.

Throughout June and July, American scouting reports indicated that the British were beginning a major boatbuilding effort at St. Johns. Canada. Gates, who was serving in a position for which he had no previous experience, realized early on that he needed an officer with experience in sailing and shipbuilding, and that he had such a person in Brigadier General Benedict Arnold.³ Gates requested Arnold to head up the American boatbuilding response to the British and then to command the fleet. Arnold agreed to serve and immediately began recruiting experienced shipbuilders from the New England coast and getting them to Skenesborough, New York,⁴ where the American shipbuilding camp was located next to a sawmill and a bay. Arnold was the major impetus for substantially increasing the stalled American construction operation and he was able to achieve a much better outcome than anyone could have anticipated.

Although Arnold was concerned about the reported size of the British vessels, he yielded to the reality of the available manpower, supplies and money and ended up constructing four row galleys and eight gondolas⁵ for the American fleet, which were in addition to the five vessels he already had in his squadron. Those five vessels were originally British vessels that were captured by the Americans in 1775.⁶ There is no doubt that the Americans did not have the same resources as the British, and therefore Arnold's fleet was not as extensive as he wanted it to be. By August 10, 1776, Arnold, whose "energy and audacity had preserved so far the lake to the Americans," assembled the beginning of his flotilla, which then consisted of three schooners, a sloop and five gondolas.⁷

Due to Arnold's vigorous efforts, the Americans were able to ultimately field a navy of seventeen vessels, consisting of three schooners, two sloops, one cutter, seven gondolas and four row galleys. Since two of the seventeen American vessels — the *Gates* galley, which was still being completed at Skenesborough when the battle occurred, and the *Liberty* schooner, which was at Fort Ticonderoga picking up supplies — were not in the battle, the Americans entered the fight with only fifteen vessels. The British ended up with more vessels and more firepower, including a ship, two schooners, a gondola, a radeau or ketch, thirty-one long boats and an unknown number of armed bateaux.⁸

Arnold took his fifteen-vessel squadron north on the lake in early September to find the right spot in which to face the superior British naval force. He found such a place at Valcour Bay, a narrow strip of water between the New York mainland and Valcour Island and located four and a half miles from present-day Plattsburgh, New York. This spot offered him the ability to anchor his fleet where it would not be visible to the British Navy as it came up the lake. On September 3, Arnold's fleet reached the Bay

and began to form a line stretching from the main shore to Valcour Island. Valcour Bay is an interesting location because it is approximately halfway between two important locales — it is about twenty miles north of Crown Point, a key American-held fortification, and about twenty-five miles south of St. Johns, Canada, the launching point for the British. Naval historian J. R. Spears described the location as “the strongest on the lake” for Arnold’s fleet.

The water behind the island was so narrow that he could stretch his fleet across it — the British could not enfold either flank ... If the British should divide their fleet to attack him from above and below, Arnold could hope to overcome one division before the other could pass around the island. And this hope was the stronger because the wind always blows from northward or southward on the lake — one division would have to work upward to reach him ... The American fleet was practically lying in ambush.⁹

The British came south on the lake on October 11 and initially sailed right past Valcour Bay without spotting the Americans. The American fleet was discovered about 10 o’clock in the morning when the British were south of the island. The importance of Arnold’s selection of his position was immediately apparent because the wind was blowing from the north. The surprise factor and the advantageous location caused the British to have to turn about and haul into the wind in order to attack. Therefore, what could have been a short battle and the fairly quick destruction of the American fleet became a real contest, at least in the early stages.

Confusion among the British reigned for a time and Arnold, recognizing a slight vulnerability, directed the forward vessels in his fleet to move to the attack. James Kirby Martin, in his excellent article on the Battle of Valcour Island, describes what Arnold did when his initial attack did not succeed.

With the British acceptance of Arnold’s challenge, the Battle of Valcour Island commenced. Arnold thereupon ordered the row galleys and the *Royal Savage* to rejoin the carefully aligned patriot fleet. The galleys had no problem retreating. The square-rigged *Royal Savage*, hauling awkwardly into the wind, suddenly staggered as a British shot struck one of her masts and sliced through her rigging. As a result of what Arnold called ‘some bad management,’ the schooner fell away to the leeward and grounded on the southwest shore of Valcour Island. Some of Pringle’s gunboats, a few mounting 24-pounders, soon rowed into effective range and took deadly aim at the stranded craft. The rebel crew had to abandon ship but reached Arnold’s fleet almost without loss.¹⁰

The British realized that they had scored a small victory, and both sides continued to fire on each other. The most aggressive British vessel, *Carleton*, commanded by Lieutenant James Dacres,¹¹ was at the forefront of the British attack and her efforts did some damage to the American fleet. Eight men were killed and six were wounded on the *Carleton* during the attack. Arnold later described this period of the engagement as becoming “general and very warm.”¹² Understating as usual, Arnold’s statement does not emphasize how his fleet was taking serious hits and that he was losing ground to the superior firepower of the British. Despite this, Arnold did not falter and continued to fire upon the British. He reported to Gates after the first day’s battle that he had to personally “point most of the guns on board the *Congress*”¹³ during the battle.

At Arnold’s direction, the Americans focused their efforts on the *Carleton*. As a result of the American fire, the line holding the *Carleton* in place was severed and “she went adrift.” As the American fire continued, the *Carleton* was soon disabled and “a pair of longboats managed to tow the seriously damaged vessel, now burdened by two feet of water in her hold, out of the line of fire.”¹⁴ After the *Carleton* left, the fight continued “with a hot fire”¹⁵ until darkness began to fall and fighting could not continue. Arnold’s fleet suffered serious damage, including his flagship, the galley *Congress*, which

Arnold wrote sustained “Seven Shott between Wind & Water, was hulled a doz. Times, had her Main Mast Wounded in two places & Her Yard in One.”¹⁶ The galley *Washington*, where Arnold’s second in command, David Waterbury, was situated, was also full of holes and barely able to fight. The gondola *Philadelphia* was so broken and battered that she sank within an hour after the fighting stopped. The Americans reported that sixty men were killed or wounded in the first day of action. After the day’s battle ended, the British set fire to the deserted *Royal Savage*, which was still on the rocks.

Later that night a remarkable outcome was achieved for the American fleet, which was in the Bay surrounded by the entire British fleet. Arnold held a council of war that night in his cabin on the *Congress* galley, where the American commanders agreed that escape was both necessary and feasible. Later that night, Arnold conducted a masterful move under extreme circumstances. He directed the entire American fleet to pass through the British fleet with only hooded lights in the stern of each vessel. They managed to achieve this seemingly impossible result without being detected and they were then able to escape up the lake to Schuyler Island, which was seven miles to the south.¹⁷ 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 wind was against the British, so they could not give chase until the following day, catching up to the retreating American vessels on the third day, at which time they engaged in a running battle with Arnold, destroying more of his boats. The *Washington* galley was badly damaged and surrounded by three British vessels with no other American vessel able to assist. The commanders determined that she could not hold out any longer and she was forced to surrender. All of her officers — including General Waterbury — and crew were taken prisoner. By the afternoon of October 13, six of Arnold’s vessels — *Lee*, *New Jersey*, *New York*, *Royal Savage*, *Spitfire* and *Philadelphia* — had been sunk or abandoned and were no longer operative for the American side.

The British finally succeeded in running Arnold into Arnold’s Bay, near present-day Panton, Vermont, with only the *Congress* galley and four of his gondolas still in action. That remnants of Arnold’s fleet faced seven British ships with much greater firepower and it was clear that he could not sustain the fight any longer. Recognizing the reality of his situation, Arnold gave the order to abandon all of the remaining vessels (*Congress*, *Boston*, *Connecticut*, *Providence* and *New Haven*) and, with the presence of mind to make the best of his situation, proceeded to burn them in order not to leave any vessels for future use by the British.¹⁸

After destroying his vessels, Arnold took his men overland the ten miles to Fort Ticonderoga, barely missing the Indian allies of the British who had tried to intercept them. The American survivors reached Ticonderoga at four o’clock in the morning of the 14th, “exceedingly fatigued and unwell, having been without sleep or refreshment for near three days.”¹⁹

Four of Arnold’s vessels that were in the battle — the *Enterprise* hospital ship, the *Trumbull* galley, the *New York* gondola and the *Revenge* schooner — though damaged, managed to make their way back to Fort Ticonderoga and at least temporary safety. Combined with the *Liberty*, which was already there seeking supplies, and the unfinished *Gates* gondola, these six vessels were all that remained of Arnold’s Champlain fleet of seventeen vessels, fifteen of which had faced the British barely three days before.

Arnold’s valiant defense of the lake caused the British commander, Sir Guy Carleton, to delay any follow-up action to attack the American positions around Fort Ticonderoga. Carleton decided that it was too late in the season to attempt a major attack on Fort Ticonderoga and took his fleet and men back to Canada. The Americans were extremely vulnerable to attack at that point, but when the British left it was apparent that Arnold had saved the day and won at least a year’s reprieve.

While some have been critical of Arnold's actions²⁰ and the fact that he lost almost all of his vessels in the action on Lake Champlain during October 1776, it is probable that any other action by Arnold would have resulted in defeat even sooner and might well have allowed the British to capture Fort Ticonderoga that fall. Historian A. T. Mahan summed up the battle in the now famous quote, "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."²¹

¹ Boatner, *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution*, 991-93.

² Boatner, *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution*, 412-14.

³ Benedict Arnold, who later in the war became famous because he changed sides, operated a successful and extensive trading operation in New Haven, CT prior to the war. His company quickly responded to the Lexington Alarm and he was then commissioned by the Massachusetts Committee of Safety as a Colonel and authorized to recruit men to take the British garrison at Fort Ticoneroga. In the summer of 1775, Washington selected Arnold to command the secret expedition through the Maine wilderness as a second prong to attack Quebec. Arnold had just returned from Canada when he was selected by Gates to the command on Lake Champlain. Best biography of Arnold is James Kirby Martin.

⁴ Skenesborough, New York was the site of the plantation of Philip Skene, a former British Army officer, who was given a grant of 1,000 acres of land in 1765. The land grant became the township of Skenesborough and by the time of the Revolution it included a saw mill. By the end of the Revolutionary War, its name had been changed to Whitehall, which is the name it is known by today. See brief history by Jim Millard at www.historiclakes.org/towns/whitehall_gallery.htm. For a description of Skenesborough in 1777, see Hoffman Nickerson, *The Turning Point of the Revolution*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928: 146-47, 154-56.

⁵ The American galleys were two masted with triangular sails and were called galleys because they were constructed with provisions for thirty-two oars. They were 72'4" in length and had eight cannons. The gondolas were smaller in length at 53'4", had one mast with a square sail and three cannons.

⁶ See Stephen Darley. *The Battle of Valcour Island: The Participants and Vessels in Benedict Arnolds 1776 Defense of Lake Champlain*. CreateSpace: 2013: 21-28.

⁷ Mahan, *Major Operations*, 18.

⁸ The British fleet consisted of an 80 ft vessel containing 22 guns; two schooners with 26 guns; a large floating raft called a radeau with the six of the largest cannons in either fleet, fourteen 18 pound cannons and four howitzers; a gondola with seven cannons; thirty-one long boats with either one or two guns; and bateaux, some of which were armed with one cannon. In terms of total guns, the British had a four to one advantage with a total of 417 guns to the Americans 91 guns. The source for the extensive number of British cannons were the transport vessels that brought the additional British troops to Quebec in June of 1776.

⁹ J.R. Spears, "Benedict Arnold, Naval Patriot," *Harper's Magazine*, Jan. 1903: 279.

¹⁰ James Kirby Martin, "The Battle of Valcour Island," in Jack Sweetman, ed., *Great American Naval Battles*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998: 18.

¹¹ Lieutenant James Dacres, who commanded the *Carleton*, seems to have earned the most positive review of any of the British vessel commanders who participated in the battle for his aggressive attack on the American fleet in Valcour Bay. He was knocked unconscious by flying debris while the *Carleton* was attacking the Americans.

¹² Arnold to Gates, October 12, 1776. *NDAR*, Vol. 6: 1235-36.

¹³ Arnold to Gates, Oct. 12, 1776.

¹⁴ Martin, "The Battle of Valcour Island": 19.

¹⁵ Arnold to Gates, Oct. 12, 1776.

¹⁶ Arnold to Gates, Oct. 12, 1776.

¹⁷ One of the controversies involving the Battle of Valcour Island, which arose in the mid-nineteenth century, involves the question of the escape route the Arnold fleet took in its flight from the British fleet on the night of October 11, 1776. All written accounts and all historians since the battle agree that Arnold's fleet successfully escaped the net that the British had them in, and that, to the surprise of the British, the next morning they were several miles up the lake. It was a clever and bold move by Benedict Arnold and its success created the controversy. The question is whether the American fleet escaped by going south through the British fleet or by going north

around Valcour Island. Based on the contemporary British and American accounts describing the route, there can be no doubt that the American fleet escaped south through the British fleet on the night of October 11, 1776.

¹⁸ Russell P. Bellico, *Sails and Steam in the Mountains: A Maritime and Military History of Lake George and Lake Champlain*. Fleischmanns, N.Y.: Purple Mountain Press, 1992: 158; Martin, "The Battle of Valcour Island": 22.

¹⁹ Benedict Arnold to Philip Schuyler, October 15, 1776. *NDAR*, Vol. 6: 1276.

²⁰ Paul David Nelson, "Guy Carleton versus Benedict Arnold: The Campaign of 1776 in Canada and on Lake Champlain," *New York History*, Vol. 57, July 1976: 339-66.

²¹ A.T. Mahan, "The Naval Campaign of 1776 on Lake Champlain," *Scribner's Magazine*, Feb. 1898: 158.