

article

DEFEAT INTO VICTORY: ESCAPING THE TRAP AT VALCOUR ISLAND

Although it took place on Oct 11 through 13, 1776, the Battle of Valcour Island really began with the capture, by militia forces under Colonel Benedict Arnold and Ethan Allen, of a schooner owned by ex-British Major Philip Skene of Skenesborough, New York (now Whitehall). The capture of Skene's schooner occurred about the same time as the capture of Fort Ticonderoga was taking place on May 10, 1775. Skene's captured schooner, ably commanded by Benedict Arnold and being uncontested on Lake Champlain, then sailed north to the British fort of St Johns on the Richelieu River in Canada. There Arnold's men surprised a small British garrison force and captured a sloop that they renamed *Enterprise*, and the unfinished frame of another vessel, which they sailed south to Fort Ticonderoga and renamed the *Lee*. These three vessels served as the foundation upon which twelve of the seventeen vessels that were on Lake Champlain in Benedict Arnold's fleet in 1776 were constructed.

Arnold was relieved of command at Fort Ticonderoga shortly after the British vessels were captured and did not see Lake Champlain until he returned with the vanquished American Army from Canada in late June of 1776. In the meantime, two additional British vessels were captured in October of 1775 at St Johns by the American forces under Brigadier General Richard Montgomery on their way to invade Canada. The vessels captured by Montgomery increased the American Champlain fleet to five vessels being the first additional vessels added to the three captured by Arnold. It is noteworthy that these first five vessels were captured British ships that were reused by the Americans.

After the devastating failure of the American army to attain victory at Quebec in the winter and spring of 1775-76, the British found themselves in control of Canada again and decided to press their advantage when they realized that the American forces were in a state of disarray and despair after the disastrous retreat to Fort Ticonderoga. Therefore, they commenced to build a fleet of boats at St Johns in order to retaliate by sailing south on Lake Champlain to attack the Americans in the north and split the colonies in two. Major General Horatio Gates had recently replaced Major General Philip Schuyler as the commander in the north and realized that he did not have the necessary experience to build a fleet of vessels and then to lead it in opposing whatever British fleet might advance up Lake Champlain to press the attack. Fortunately, a highly experienced seaman was at hand to help, and in June, Gates assigned Brigadier General Benedict Arnold to head up the American effort to build the vessels and then to command the fleet.

When Arnold took over, there were only the five vessels mentioned above on the lake. Arnold spearheaded the building of an additional eight gondolas and four galleys at a newly constructed boatyard at Skenesborough. The British at St Johns and the Americans at Skenesborough were engaged in a competitive race to see which side could complete their proposed vessels sooner giving them the advantage in the coming campaign. The gondolas being constructed by the Americans were approximately 53 feet in length and had one mast and three cannons. The galleys were bigger at 72 feet in length with two masts and eight guns. Given the lack of experienced boat builders, the short time frame

and inadequate materials and supplies, this was the best that the American army at Ticonderoga could realistically achieve. In fact, when the Battle of Valcour Island was fought, the *Gates* galley was still on the blocks being constructed at Skenesborough and did not participate in the battle.

The first newly constructed vessels began joining Arnold's in late July, and in early September Arnold moved his fleet north from Ticonderoga to establish a position from which he could most effectively meet the British advance. He selected Valcour Bay, a narrow strip of water between Valcour Island and the New York shore about twenty miles north of Crown Point and twenty-five miles south of St Johns. On September 3rd, Arnold's fleet reached Valcour Bay and he formed his fifteen vessels in a line reaching across Valcour Bay. Arnold's position was the best available because if the British fleet sailed past his hiding place, they would have to attack the fleet against the wind. It would also be impossible for the British fleet to outflank the American fleet due to the limited space between the island and the New York shore.

Arnold's fleet was still in Valcour Bay when the British fleet with more and bigger vessels, more men and more and bigger guns finally sailed south to attack the Americans. They did sail past Arnold's fleet on October 11th and did have to attack against the wind. The battle raged the entire day with neither side gaining a decisive advantage, but at the end of the day one British vessel was disabled and six American vessels were either disabled or destroyed, including the now famous *Philadelphia* gondola, raised by Lorenzo Hagglund in 1935 and donated to the Smithsonian Museum in 1961. As the night settled in, Arnold was still in the bay with his remaining vessels, some of which were badly damaged but could still be sailed. That American fleet was facing almost the entire British Champlain fleet in front of them. With their superior numbers, the British were confident that the next morning they would be able to finish off the rest of the American fleet.

That night, Arnold called his officers to a council of war where he proposed, and they all supported him, that the remaining vessels retreat through the British fleet during the night following in single file with no lights except a shielded light at the ___ of each vessel. It was a daring and bold move typical of Arnold's enterprising personality and there was a real chance for something to go wrong. However, the plan went off without a hitch and Arnold's fleet moved silently through the anchored British fleet on this dark and foggy night without discovery and then sailed up the lake to Schuyler Island.

One can only imagine what the British reaction was when they looked out on the bay the next morning to find that the American fleet had vanished. The surprise must have been almost overwhelming to see that a sure victory had been snatched away almost before their eyes. The extant British accounts make clear their astonished reaction and their expressed admiration for an opposing commander who was so audacious. The wind was against the British so they could not give chase until the morning of the second day. When the British caught up to the retreating American fleet, they engaged in a running battle with Arnold's remaining nine vessels. The *Washington* galley was badly damaged and when she found herself surrounded by three British vessels her officers, including Arnold's second in command General David Waterbury, agreed to surrender.

The British finally succeeded in running Arnold into Ferris Bay, near present day Panton, Vermont, with only his flagship, the *Congress* Galley, and four of his gondolas struggling and mostly disabled, but still in action. The remnants of Arnold's fleet faced seven British ships with much greater firepower and it was clear that they could not sustain the fight any longer. Recognizing the reality of his situation, Arnold gave

the order to abandon and burn his remaining vessels so as not to leave them for future use by the British. Arnold then led the remainder of his men overland the ten miles to Fort Ticonderoga, barely missing the British Indian allies who tried to intercept them.

Arnold's actions delayed the British in achieving their objective long enough that by the time Arnold reached Ticonderoga after destroying his vessels at Ferris Bay, the British Governor and fleet commander, Sir Guy Carleton, decided to return to Canada due to the approach of winter. While some have been critical of Arnold's actions and the fact that he lost almost all of his vessels, it is probable that any other action by Arnold would have resulted in defeat even sooner and might well have allowed the British to succeed on Lake Champlain that fall instead of the next year. Naval historian Albert T. Mahan summed up the battle in the now famous quote, "The 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."

It is the rare military action that does not stimulate controversy and the Valcour Island battle is no exception. One of the controversies involving the Battle of Valcour Island arose in the mid-nineteenth century over the most spectacular aspect of the battle, which was the escape route the Arnold fleet took in its flight from the British fleet on the night of October 11. The question is did Arnold's fleet escape by going south through the British fleet or by going north around Valcour Island. Until Winslow Watson's book in 1869, it had been taken for granted that the Americans escaped to the south. Watson claimed that his father, Elkanah, heard from local New York men who were in the battle that the route was north around the island. Watson was supported in his assertion by nineteenth century historian Peter Palmer in the first two editions of his History of Lake Champlain. In his 3rd edition, however, Palmer changed his mind and concluded that Arnold's fleet went "through them entirely undiscovered."

Although some modern day authors support the Watson position, the weight of original sources clearly supports a route south through the British fleet. This author has identified a number of original sources including two pension applications, five American journals, a letter from General David Waterbury to John Hancock and four British journals that support the movement south through the British fleet. The extant contemporary accounts are overwhelming in their support of the Americans going through the British fleet. There is no such account that mentions going north around the island. The fact that some sources argue that the escape through the British fleet would have been virtually impossible does not detract from the contemporary accounts which state the opposite. Based on the available first-hand accounts, there can be no doubt that the American fleet escaped south through the British fleet on the night of October 11, 1776.

Another controversy was the allegation by two British officers, Dr. Robert Knox, who was there, and Major General Friedrich Adolf Riedesel, who was not, that Arnold burned his vessels in Ferris Bay with wounded soldiers on them. This story was repeated and embellished by Max Von Elking in his comprehensive book on the Germans in the American Revolution. It should be noted that no American account mentions this nor do any of the other British accounts of the battle.

Art Cohn of the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum published an article in Vermont History citing a memoir of Squire Harris whose family lived next to the Bay which was named for them. Ferris' report indicates that by an error one body was blown up with the *Congress* even though Arnold had ordered it to be removed. Ferris describes Arnold as having "the greatest feeling upon the subject, and threatened to

run the gunner through on the spot.” Cohn concludes that it is possible that what Knox saw was a body fly into the air but that Ferris was “closer to what took place.” It is this author’s opinion that Cohn has it right and that the Ferris account is the accurate description of the burning of the *Congress*.