

**An ‘Exceedingly Fortunate Campaign’, as  
described by Capt. J. MacDonald, 84<sup>th</sup> Regiment**

*By Brian McConnell\**

Recently I received a transcribed copy of a letter sent on March 18, 1778 by Captain John MacDonald, Officer in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 84<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot. The letter is part of a collection held by family relatives. (1) I was very interested to read how he explained the conduct of the war in America. It was sent from Halifax, Nova Scotia to his sister Helen (Nelly) in Prince Edward Island. At the time Halifax was the Headquarters of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 84<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot, also known as the Royal Highland Emigrants.



After explaining the events and military engagements he writes *“Upon the Whole you may see that the Campaign has been exceedingly fortunate everywhere.”*

At the start of the American Revolution, John MacDonald, eldest son of Alexander MacDonald, 7<sup>th</sup> Laird of Glenaladale, had been involved in assisting other highland scots to settle on lands received in Prince Edward Island near Scotchfort. When he was offered an Officer’s commission in the Royal Highland Emigrants he accepted and traveled to Halifax with others to form a Company. He was involved in recruiting throughout the Maritimes including a trip to Newfoundland. In 1778 he was stationed in Halifax. (2)

His time spent in Halifax was not all easy work nor to his liking. He notes that recently on *“ St Patricks night when the whole town is unruly & in uproar & I had Charge of it on Guard. I am sleepy & wearied, & cannot possibly give you More Satisfaction.”*

The defeat of General John Burgoyne in New York province at the Battle of Saratoga is described by him as not due to any incompetence or poor judgement by the British but rather due to having insufficient numbers. After leading an invasion army into the Champlain Valley from Canada, Burgoyne met with resistance from American troops and surrendered on October 17, 1777.

*“General Burgoyne’s ruin was that half of his force was left in Canada, & are these now idle viz 5000 men, while himself went with only 6000 expecting that he would have been assisted from New York, & the half even of this Number was left here & there to Garrison every place he took, until his Numbers were at last reduced to little more than 3000.*

*He ventured on farther than he would if he had not expected a greater diversion from New York, & so he was at last overtaken in a place where he could get no Provisions nor could he extricate himself since the Smallness of his Numbers had induced About 20,000 of the New England Militia to Surround him, of whom he Killed prodigious Numbers, until his Army became at last fatigued, and wearied with down right bayoneting the rebels, & yet there were enough of them remaining. In the time of this difficulty General Burgoyne being Surrounded did not Know that General Howe had Sent General Clinton with Assistance for him from New York, & that he was within Sixty or Seventy Miles of him, Otherwise he would have Stood it out. But the Rebels knew it, & they were anxious to get quit of Burgoyne on Any terms before Clinton should come up, therefore they gave Burgoyne the most honorable terms that ever were Granted on such an Occasion. (illegible) Provisions to have stood it out twenty days longer, the rebels beginning (to) run short of Ammunition & Provisions would have been Obligated to go home in a fortnight.*

*Probably what induced General Howe not to have sent up (illegible) Assist Burgoyne sooner, may have seen the notion that a greater Number of the Canadian Force (I mean the Army, that was in Canada) would have been with Burgoyne, in which case it would not indeed have been so necessary with (illegible) on the part of this last, tho in all events it were much to be wished. When General Maclean, commanding at Montreal, heard that Ticonderoga was invested, he went over the Lakes, drove back the Rebels, & offered to the Senior Officer, General Powell, to go, if Powell would Give him leave, with 3000 men which he had, & believe (illegible) be content to lose honor, life, or his Commission; but unfortunately for some other idle reason Powell did not permit him, otherwise it is certainly thought he would have done it. Burgoyne’s army, that capitulated, will supply the place of the like Number in Britain that may be sent out in their place, So that all the loss is, the Spirits it has given the rebels, & the Expence of transporting other troops in their place, for you’ll have heard that the Condition of the Surrender was that he & his Army Should be Allowed to pass to Great Britain.*

*But these false Spirits will soon evaporate by a few drubbings, & the Expence of transporting other troops in their place is Nothing to the British Treasury. After the Surrender of Burgoyne our Other Army under McLean, or rather Powell, after destroying the forts of Ticonderoga, Crown point & Mount Independence returned to winter in Canada, where there are now at least 5000 of them & As already said the Affair of Burgoyne lies before the Parliament, the Resolutions of which we expect in April or May.”*



**General Burgoyne's Surrender at Saratoga (3)**

Captain MacDonald was not at all discouraged by Burgoyne's defeat. He wrote: “ *The loss of Burgoyne, being no more than 3000 men, is no more to Great Britain, than a drop of water is to a Bucket full.*”

On September 11, 1777, a British army under the command of General Sir William Howe defeated General George Washington at the Battle of Brandywine Creek near Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. This was followed on October 4, 1777 by the Battle of Germantown at Germantown, Pennsylvania which was also a victory for the British over the Continental Army. Both Battles are described by Captain MacDonald as a victories with relatively small loss of men considering the gain of Philadelphia.

*“ For the news of the Southern army under General Howe I refer you to the news papers herewith sent. That of the 3<sup>d</sup> March gives an Account of a general & considerable Action he fought against them on the heights of Brandy wine wherein he was Successful, & killed Great Numbers of them, with the loss only on his own Side of 3 captains, 5 Lieutenants, 5 Serjeants, 68 private men killed, these were wounded 1 Lieutenant Colonel, 1 major, 16 captains, 21 Lieutenants, 5 Ensigns, 35 Serjeants, 4 Drummers, 372 private men, & 6 men missing. All this of the British troops. Of the Hessians or foreigners these were killed 2 Serjeants & 6 private men & there were wounded 1 Captain, 3 Lieutenants, 5 Serjeants & 23 men. A very small number indeed considering the loss of the enemy & the advantage gained by it. The Consequence of this Action was that we got Philadelphia for some few weeks thereafter there were Skirmishes & storming of forts, until the command of the River was obtained & every Obstruction was removed from the Sea to the town for 150 miles, in which the Navy bore a considerable part.*

*There was a considerable And general battle at Germantown some Miles out of Philadelphia wherein the rebels lost great Numbers, were beat, & it seems rendered sick of Giving any farther disturbance worth while in that quarter. It is described in the same Letter of General Howe’s in that Newspaper of the 3<sup>d</sup> March. Our loss was as small in proportion as in the Other battle being only of the British troops & Hessians 2 Lieutenant Colonels, 2 Ensigns, 7 Serjeants , 1 Drummer & 58 private men killed & there were wounded 2 Lieutenant Colonels, 6 Captains, 13 Lieutenants, 10 Ensigns, 24 Serjeants, 1 Drummer, 395 private men, & 1 Captain & 13 men were taken prisoners. The great Appearance that the Number of killed & wounded make in the papers is because their respective Regiments, Names, & Rank are particularly Sett down, but the total at the foot of both Actions is as I have mentioned. The Consequence of this Action was that General Howe got leisure to fortify himself in Philadelphia by a Chain of Forts between the Rivers Delaware & Sculkill across the neck above the town, for it Stands on a neck of land between these two Rivers. The rebels thinking it very Convenient for them to breath a while & keep quiet, excepting As to some Skirmishes with our foraging parties, which is all the News we have had of them Since, as by the Arrival lately of the Reasonable man of war.*

*The loss of Philadelphia will be much felt. It gives us the Command of the Lower Counties, & of that part of Maryland lying between Chesapeake bay & the Delaware. They also lost a great deal of effects & Resources in the Town. The Congress was obliged to refine, & our Army has over ran & destroyed A great part of the Country, on the Pennsylvania & Jersey Sides, Which we did Not pretend to Keep possession of. The Delaware was also a great Station for the rebel Shipping. The town was a Noble Magazine, & convenient for Conveying every where Provisions & every other requisite to the Northward & Southward, in so much as that since the forts Montgomery & others on the North River of New York have been destroyed, it is thought & reported that New England, which never raised bread for itself, enjoys at present a degree of famine that will daily increase, And that there was a rebel fleet sent with rice from South Carolina to relieve them, Which is now out at Sea, & ten to one but part of them will fall in with our Cruizer.”*

Based on these events Captain MacDonald is optimistic for the future. It may take longer than originally believed due to the loss at Saratoga, however, victory will be inevitable.

*“Indeed the Spirit of the British nation is certainly too high to give it up. As for the Speeches of the Minority in favors of the Americans, & their disrespect of the King, as you will see in the same last mentioned paper, it is not to be minded, being only the Rhapsody of a faction discontented because themselves have not (illegible) manage (to) & they are but few, for in the votes of Parliament you will always See a prodigious Majority for the King & Ministry’s Measures, which while it continues to be the case, Matters will go as they ought. Besides this sort of Abuse is but common in the English parliaments minority even in times of peace, & it goes generally for nothing. Since then there is no reason to doubt but more effectual measures will now be Adopted, So there is (illegible) sort of reason for despondency.*

*The only method was to be followed from the beginning was Separating the Southern & northern Colonies, & reducing first the one & then the other by, destroying their Sea port towns, Coasts, landing with brigade here & there, burning the Country, then get on board & do the same in Another place, & besides these making a Strong & principal effort to penetrate into the Country in some one particular part. I should wonder indeed if this would not effectually root out their Shipping, & being to terms all those that are not greedy of their own (illegible) Burgoyne, but rather in a way that was inadequate. However there are More troops now than are sufficient to Keep what we have. Great Britain can fall on ways & Means to Send out thirty, forty, or fifty thousand more troops, any one of which Numbers is Sufficient for the Above purpose, & when they begin to Act, it will give ease & opportunity for taking out of garrison & sending on Active Service the one half of the troops we have out already.*

*The Expedition that Misgave in the hands of Burgoyne can certainly be repeated, for who will say the ups of 3000 men is sufficient to knock (illegible) have Now possession of Philadelphia, it is a Much more important Circumstance in our favors for attaining this view, than the loss of Burgoyne is Against us. Therefore it will Now be more practicable to us, & distressing to the rebels, than it was when Burgoyne began it. It may however take a longer time, because a great part of next Summer may be over before the fall And necessary Complement of troops can be Assembled on the Scene of Action.*

*You will perhaps say I have been A poor prophet hitherto, & that my assertions have fallen out other (partially illegible) To this give me leave, to Say that I have not been mistaken in what might have been done, ought to have been done & what would have been effectual, but I own I have been mistaken in Supposing it would have been done what I have Said, if Judiciously pursued will have certainly been effectual. Moreover Great Britain can effect it that she will do it is, one would think, apparent from the now more, than formerly, evident Necessity of doing it forth with without dallying any longer. If then She will not attempt it, or shall not have been Successful, it must be attributed to the Decree of Heaven for putting an end to her existence as a Nation.”*

Unfortunately for Captain MacDonald and others in the British service in America, France entered the war against Great Britain followed later by Spain. Captain MacDonald was unaware at the time of writing of this letter due to the time it took for news to travel by ship but France signed a *Treaty of Alliance* recognizing the United States of America on February 18, 1778. Spain officially entered the war on the side of America in 1779.

After France became an ally of the Continental Army fighting for independence for the American colonies, battles between the French and the British occurred from the Caribbean to India. Mounting costs to the British government led to increased pressure on it and in time a treaty to end the war was more acceptable to Great Britain than continuing with the conflict. Instead of sending more troops as Captain MacDonald had suggested could happen, the British government would agree to a peace in which it would lose American colonies but retain holdings in the Caribbean where it had vital financial interests.

**Notes:**

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(1) Thanks to Mary J. (MacDonald) Gallant of Prince Edward Island, relative of Captain John MacDonald, for providing me with a copy of transcribed letter dated March 18, 1778.

(2) See article “Captain John MacDonald of the Royal Highland Emigrants”, by Brian McConnell at <http://brian.mcconnell.tripod.com/JMac.pdf>

(3) Painting entitled “Surrender of General Burgoyne” at Battle of Saratoga by John Trumbull, 1822