

*ABSTRACT: A NAVAL ARMAMENTS RACE
(LIBERTY CORRIDOR – Chapter 8, #C)*

During the retreat General Benedict Arnold delayed the British invasion of northern New York by stubborn resistance, forcing British Major-General Guy Carlton to make time consuming preparations.

A NAVAL ARMAMENTS RACE

On the 25th of June, 1776, while Americans staggered south from Isle-aux-Noix on the Richelieu River to Crown Point on Lake Champlain, General Benedict Arnold received intelligence that the British had prepared for shipbuilding at St. Johns, Quebec. He notified General George Washington that the British would be masters of the lake, unless all effort was made to exceed them in a naval armament. Arnold took the next step by initiating naval shipbuilding for the American army. Ships carpenters from the New England coast and blacksmiths from nearby towns began to arrive at Skenesboro, at the head of Lake Champlain, where they built a fleet of gondolas, row galleys and sloops.

By July the able bodied in the American army joined forces at Fort Ticonderoga, Mount Independence, or went to Skenesboro to assist in the construction of the fleet. Colonel John Trumbull's letter to his father, the Governor of Connecticut, clearly showed the anxiety existing in the Champlain Valley.

Colonel John Trumbull to the Governor of Connecticut
Friday, 12 July 1776, Mount Independence

“How we shall maintain our naval superiority I must confess myself much at a loss. ‘Tis true we build a thing called a gondola, perhaps as much as one in a week, but where is our rigging for them, where our guns? We have, to be sure, a great train of artillery, but they are very few of them mounted on carriages, and our materials and convenience for mounting them are very slender.

We have carpenters, shipbuilders and mechanichs in plenty, but neither places for them to work in nor materials in that plenty we ought to have.

To oppose the enemy on the lake, we have a schooner of twelve carriage guns, a sloop of eight, two small schooners to carry four or six each and three gondolas--- (Sloops Enterprise and Liberty; schooners Revenge and Royal Savage).

The enemy we find are at St. Johns repairing the works at that place and building three schooners and two sloops. They have, no doubt, everything ready to their hands, the rigging made, the guns mounted, and only the wooden work to perform”.

Arnold's contribution to the naval fleet on Lake Champlain included his vigor in finding supplies, crews and materials to fit out the new vessels. He dispatched work crews for lumber, and pressed for seamen to man the vessels. William Gilliland, a landowner in the Lake Champlain valley, provided additional men, food and material. Dr. Stephen McCrea, brother of the ill-fated Jane McCrea of Fort Edward, received orders to join Arnold as his fleet physician.

The results of Arnold's vigor were evident by early August. By August 5, three gondolas had sailed: the New Haven, Providence and Boston; the Spitfire completed and nearly rigged; and another gondola "The Philadelphia" finished but not rigged. On 24 August, the American fleet, under the command of Arnold, departed from Crown Point with the Royal Savage and Enterprise in the lead, followed by the gondolas New Haven, Boston, Providence, Spitfire, Philadelphia and Connecticut with the schooners Revenge and Liberty in the rear and a large number of bateaux.

In September LTC Hartley, in command at Crown Point, proposed to General Gates that the 2nd and 4th Pennsylvania Battalions be sent to Crown Point. Together with the 6th, he would defend the outpost. Orders arrived from Gates to burn and retreat if the British reached his location.

Journal of Dr. Lewis Beebe
Tuesday, 1 October 1776, Mount Independence

"After breakfast and waiting upon the hospital as usual, crossed to headquarters, took a view of the gondolas and rowgallies, two of which were just going to sail, in order to join the fleet; in which goes General Waterbury."

The Battle at Valcour Island came on 11-13 October 1776. Arnold waited for Carleton behind Valcour Island with his hastily built fleet of fifteen crude ships and some bateaux manned by soldiers. The fleet consisted of two schooners, the Revenge and the Royal Savage; one sloop, the Enterprise; one cutter, the Lee; three rowgallies, the Congress, Trumbull, and Washington; and eight gondolas, the Boston, Connecticut, New Haven, New Jersey, New York, Philadelphia, Providence and Spitfire. Arnold fought the superior British fleet to a draw on 11 October, and escaped in the night. In the two days following he sacrificed his fleet, burning part of it at Ferris Bay. He and his men made it back on foot to Crown Point. Upon Arnold's arrival in the early morning of 14 October, LTC Hartley ordered all the houses at and near Crown Point burned. The forces at the outpost then retreated to Mount Independence. The fighting withdrawal served its purpose in discouraging Carleton.

General Schuyler immediately sent dispatches to both Congress and General Washington reporting the news of Valcour. The battle provided for the British a tactical victory but a strategic defeat. By the time it took place in the middle of October it was too late in the season for Carleton to organize the naval and ground forces required to take Ticonderoga and Mount Independence, and march on to Albany. By the end of October, Gates and Schuyler had deployed a large army of 13,500 Continental troops and militiamen at Ticonderoga and Mount Independence. They were moved about as needed, repaired cannon carriages and earthworks, built redoubts and blockhouses, and, in general, so impressed Carleton, that he withdrew to Canada on 3 November 1776.

All of the original fifteen vessels present at Valcour eventually sank in Lake Champlain or the Richelieu River while the galley Washington was captured on 13 October and remained in British service until 1784. The Enterprise, Revenge, Trumbull and New York escaped the 1776 disaster and spent the following year in the area of Fort Ticonderoga. Most of them, however, sank to the bottom of the lake during the British invasion of 1777. The Revenge and Gates were set afire and blown up by their crews near Wood Creek Falls

For Benedict Arnold, the end result of the action at Valcour again proved disappointing. After virtually building a small naval fleet up from scratch, engaging a superior enemy force and making a miraculous escape, Arnold was once again slighted and passed over for a rightful promotion.

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