

BATTLE OF THE THOUSAND ISLANDS

**The Last Naval Battle For
The North American Continent
Between The French And The English**

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Embodying Writings by C.H.J. Snider

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I – THE LAST BATTLE

The last battle in the conquest of Canada was a naval battle, a freshwater battle fought by twelve thousand men in the Islands of the St. Lawrence River. With the sounds of the great river's first rapids in the background, came the crash of a thousand cannon shots, rendering timbers, splintering of oars, tearing of canvas, screaming of shells, crackling of musketry and banging of howitzers spread over seven days and nights.

Montcalm was dead. The fortress of Louisburg, DuQuesne, Kingston, Niagara and Quebec had been captured by the British. Vaudreuil, the last French Colonial Governor was penned up in Montreal.

A French naval force, commanded by René Hypolite Pepin LaForce², still *Commandant des Batiments sur le lac Ontario*, literally Admiral of Freshwater, consisted of two large vessels and three or four shallops or tenders, which could be rowed or sailed. The two large vessels were classified by the French as corvettes³. LaForce's own vessel the *Iroquoise* was rigged as a schooner with square topsails and the *L' Outaouaise*⁴ rigged as a brig with square sails on two masts, the heroine of this tale, emerging from this battle wreathed in two shot-torn flags, French and English. Both vessels were of 10 gun armament.

This is what was left to defend the French empire in North America after the fall of Fort Niagara. Not a port was left for any of the French vessels on lake Ontario. They lurked in the River St. Lawrence in this their second and last year, kept alive by hunting and fishing and what stores they could obtain from the rude post at Point au Baril, (now Maitland Ontario) some 60 miles below

Frotenac , where the corvettes had been built early in 1759, and Abbe Picquetet's scalp factory, sawmill, and mission at La Presentation, a few miles farther down. The British called both of these places Oswegatchie, respectively the New and the Old.

From where Lake Ontario empties her lakeborn flood into the St. Lawrence River, to the City of Brockville there is 50 miles (80 km) of placid river meandering through the masses of nine hundred and ninety of the Thousand Islands. Below Brockville the protean St. Lawrence (before the building of the Seaway) changed. It tossed two of the remaining eyelets over an ample shoulder, and for a dozen miles became a regatta course, wide pleasant and modern. Prescott, Ontario, with it's windmill, bullet scared from the Patriot War, is at the end of the straightaway. Opposite Prescott is Ogdensburgh N.Y., then called La Présentation by the French. Beyond (down river) were islets and rapids. On both sides were mildly indented shores running parallel, a mile or more apart, separated by blue waters. The current is unnoticeable and as persistent as the International border line which places the north shore in Canada and the south shore in the United States.

It was upon this straightaway, and among the dimples of the huddled islands at the head of the Galop rapids which terminated the smooth regatta course, that the last battle in the contest for Canada between France and the British was fought in August of 1760. It was in the seventh year of bitter wilderness warfare between the British and the French in North America and it took seven days and seven nights. It sealed the fate of an empire and the destiny of a continent.

II – THE STRATEGEM

After two years of patient plodding, succeeding impatient blunders and bungles by others, Major General Jeffery Amherst, commander in chief of British Forces in North America⁵, had the old French regime in Canada herded into an area between Montreal and Ile aux Noix on Lake Champlain. His genius alone had accomplished this. General Wolfe had given his life to cut off new France from the old by taking Quebec. Amherst's stratagem was that he would personally lead a force down the St. Lawrence River towards Montreal, while Brigadier General Murray led a force up the St. Lawrence from Quebec towards Montreal, and Brigadier General Haviland led a force from Lake Champlain toward Montreal. Three armies advancing from three different points, hundreds of miles apart without means of communication, attempting to meet at Montreal at the same time for the final showdown with the French.

To position his troops, Amherst had to travel from Schenectady by way of the Grand Travelling Place to Oswego. Timing was the key to the success of the operation in order to prevent an escape route for the French Amherst dispatched a messenger from Oswego to Colonel Haviland ordering him to start from Crown Point on the tenth of August, 1760. Another courier was sent to direct Murray to sail up the St. Lawrence from Quebec on the same date.

On the tenth of August, Amherst himself left Oswego started down the St. Lawrence with 10,142 men behind him. In whaleboats and batteaus and light-draught sloops Amherst had Highland regiments, Artillery, Lord Loudon's Royal American regiment of foot, Regulars, and Provincial troops raised by various American colonies. These men could row as well as they could shoot. He also

had a thousand more watermen in canoes, row-galleys, and shipping large and small, including Bradstreet's veteran boat brigade.

At reoccupied Oswego two thousand Indians from all over had been palavered by Sir William Johnson into expressing preference for the British cause. Seven hundred of them actually took the watery warpath with Amherst for the prospect of rations and plunder. The others, more realistic, took their preliminary feasting, and its accompanying presents and speeches and went home.

The British navy had two large vessels begun by the French at Niagara in the preceding year, and completed and armed with 8-pounders. They were renamed to gratify their Indian allies, the *Onondaga*, which had 22 guns and the *Mohawk* which had 18 guns. These vessels were Snows, a word pronounced to rhyme with "cows" not with "crows". This was a small sailing vessel resembling a brig, carrying main and foremast with square sails and a supplementary tri-sail mast set close behind the mainmast. These vessels were the then forerunners of what was to become the Provincial Marine.⁶

Amherst had sent Captain Joshua Loring, R.N., of Boston, Massachusetts colony, who was the British Commodore of the Lakes and Rivers, to clear the way to Montreal by capturing the two surviving French men-of-war, led by René La Force, and then conveying the floating British army down the river to the point of no return, the first of the St. Lawrence rapids.

Unfortunately Captain Loring could not catch the French and could not find his way down the river. Because timing was so essential to the overall plan Amherst's expedition started without Loring who was still trying to grope his way out of maze of the Thousand Islands.

Amherst's anabasis⁷ was methodical. Scout canoes went ahead. The little sloops and schooners and specially designed row galleys, five of which had been recently built at Oswego, each with a 12-pounder mounted, formed flanking lines. In the lane between moved 800 whaleboats and batteaus filled, but not overloaded, with men, tents, guns, munitions, and rations.

Helped by a moderate current and wind, (when sails and in some cases blankets hung on poles could be spread), the expedition moved as fast as an army could march on good roads. When the sun sank low they beached or moored in chosen positions, cooked supper and bivouacked for the night. Sometimes they landed guns to protect their camp, or at a passage that seemed to invite ambush. Had either of the vanished French Vessels been able to attack under favourable conditions the expedition might have been wrecked. But they did not.

Despite the disparity in men and armament, which was 2 to 1 in the British favour, the remnant of the French navy might have overwhelmed Loring had his predicament been known. The French thought he was waiting at an rendezvous to convoy the expedition. A night attack with St. Luc de Corne's detachment of bushrangers and Indians, such as wrought the ruin of Oswego in 1755, might have carried both British snows by boarding them, or cut their cables and stranded them in flames among the islands in which they were entangled. But the five nations (Iroquoise) were now leaving the French. La Corne's patrol was farther down the river. La Force did not know how slow the Boston commodore was, - and something happened which left La Force quite as immobile as was his opposite number.