



Through the Wilderness to Saratoga



General "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne



The British Northern Strategy of 1777 required the coordination of three British Armies.

The plan was simple. All General Burgoyne had to do was lead his men from Canada to Albany. There, they would meet up with two other British forces. They would take control of the Hudson River and drive a wedge between New England and the rest of the colonies. The rebellion, Burgoyne assured his superiors, would soon be over.

Burgoyne set out down Lake Champlain with 9,500 men in June of 1777. He was sure he would be in Albany by the end of the summer. What he did not realize, however, was that his route of attack crossed lakes, swamps, mountains, and trackless forests. His splendidly equipped army was ill suited to fighting a war in such a wilderness.

At first, things went well for the British. They captured Fort Ticonderoga, thought to be the most difficult obstacle in the path of their army, with little opposition. Burgoyne was now supposed to continue southward by way of Lake George to the Hudson River. Instead, he chose to turn east and march overland to the Hudson. That decision proved to be a serious mistake.

Burgoyne's advance slowed to a crawl. The army took 24 days to cover 23 miles. Soldiers clothed in wool worked up to their chests in mud to build bridges and causeways across streams.

Mosquitos and "punkies," tiny insects with needle-sharp bites, rose from the swamp to attack the men. The Americans, called by Washington to assemble into their militias and oppose Burgoyne's advance, slowed British progress even more by felling trees and rolling boulders across trails. They diverted streams and turned Burgoyne's path into a swamp.

Burgoyne's exhausted army finally broke out of the forests in late July. Weakened and short on supplies, they clashed with the growing American forces several times.



Benedict Arnold's leg was broken by a musket ball during his assault on a key enemy redoubt during the Battle of Saratoga.

Burgoyne met the main body of the American forces in the area of Bemis Heights near Saratoga. In a risky gamble, Burgoyne tried to force a passage to Albany by launching a direct assault on the American lines. At first, Burgoyne's gamble seemed to work. The Americans were thrown back, but a brave counter attack led by American General Benedict Arnold ended the British efforts to break through their lines. More and more Americans poured into the area and joined the fight. Outnumbered by more than three to one, Burgoyne surrendered on October 17, 1777. All that remained of his force-5,700 men-became prisoners of war.



Surrender of General Burgoyne, an 1822 portrait by John Trumbull depicting John Burgoyne, a British Army general, surrendering to General Horatio Gates, who refused to take his sword. The painting presently hangs in the United States Capitol Rotunda.