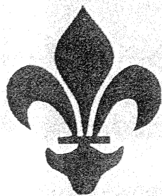
The Battle of Quebec

THE DAY FRANCE LOST NORTH AMERICA

General James Wolfe capped a three-month British siege in 1759 with an hour of fierce combat that would end French ambitions—and the lives of both commanders.

By Mitchell MacNaylor



By late August 1759, Maj. Gen. James Wolfe had reached a dead end: For two months the gaunt, red-haired 32-year-old commander and his army of some 8,500 soldiers had laid siege to the French city of Quebec without success. The British army had tried artillery bombardment, frontal attacks on French fortifications and raids on the surrounding countryside, all in an effort to lure the defenders into an open-field battle in which Wolfe could exploit his superior infantry. Seeking to break the deadlock, Wolfe formulated a bold plan: In mid-September, a portion of his army would board royal navy ships, sail upriver, stage a secret landing and then force the French to do battle on the Plains of Abraham, less than a mile west of Quebec.

This 1810 map of Quebec depicts the royal navy approach and the amphibious landing site at far left along the St. Lawrence. Generals Wolfe and Montcalm clashed on the Plains of Abraham, just west of the city.

A soldier since boyhood, Wolfe was no military dilettante: In an age when most officers rose through patronage, Wolfe rose through patronage *and* talent. He approached command in a professional manner, continually looking to improve tactics and training while looking after the welfare of his troops.

By the middle of the 18th century, the British had achieved proficiency at what contemporary commentator Thomas More

A Plan of the
RIVER St. LAURENCE, from Sillery to the Fall of Montmerenci, with the Operations of the SIEGE of QUEBEC; under the Command of Vice Adml. Saunders & Majr. Genl. Wolfe, 5th Sept. 1759.

J. Cary sculpt.

DEFENCES of QUEBEC.

Batteries.	No. of Guns.	Morters
A. The Citadel	9	0
B. The Clergy en Barbette	28	5
C. Sailor's leap	7	0
D. The Hospital	2	0
E. A New Battery over the Jetty pointed thro Pickets	2	0
F. Queens Batty. no Guns mounted	0	0
G. New Battery at the upper part of the King's Yard	3	0
H. New Batty. at the lower part of the Kings Yard	3	0
I. Royal Battery	10	0
K. Dauphin Battery	10	0
L. New Battery	7	0
M. New Battery	3	0

Molyneux called "conjunct expeditions." The term referred to the cooperation between the army and navy that allowed the British to project effective military power around the globe. The same amphibious capability that would finally bring success at Quebec in 1759 would also serve them well at Havana and Manila during the Seven Years' War and in the battles for control of New York City in 1776.

Geography determined the British approach. The two most significant French settlements, Quebec and Montreal, both lay along the St. Lawrence River. In peacetime, the river was the key commercial artery from the Canadian interior to the Atlantic and France. But in wartime, the St. Lawrence offered the British a highway to Quebec.

Several hundred miles inland, the fortified city was the strongest remaining French bastion in Canada. While it was not impossible to approach the city by land in the 18th century—as the American army of Richard Montgomery and Benedict Arnold would prove in 1775—the river offered the best option for an army on the move to remain well-supplied and maintain secure lines of communication and retreat. The British had closed the mouth of the river the previous year by capturing the Fortress of Louisbourg. Capturing Quebec would move the British closer toward their ultimate goal: conquest of the French empire in North America.

Opening the campaign on June 26, 1759, the British fleet dropped anchor in the St. Lawrence, and the British army set up base on Isle d'Orleans, in the middle of the river about four miles from the city. Three days later the army crossed to the south bank and established another camp, from which they could shell the city. Wolfe's 32-pounders and 13-inch mortars opened up on Quebec on July 12 and continued the bombardment for 68 days, burning much of the city. It marked Wolfe's first attempt to compel the French either to yield or to come out from behind their defenses.

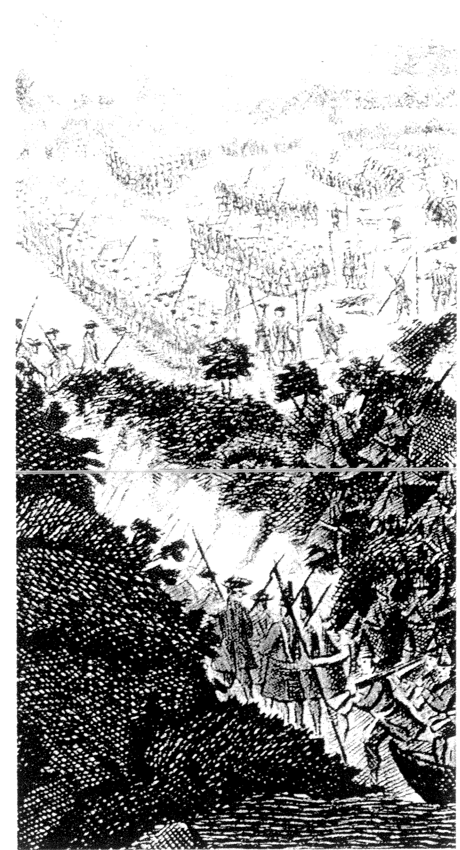
Those defenses were formidable. Opposing the besieging British forces were some 15,000 French soldiers, a mixed force of regulars and provincials. Lt. Gen. Louis-Joseph, Marquis de Montcalm-Gozon de Saint-Véran, a 44-year-old veteran of campaigns in Europe and America, commanded the garrison. Montcalm had successfully countered the British during the early years of the French and Indian War, leading the force that captured Fort William Henry on New York's Lake George in 1757—an action memorialized in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*.

"Montcalm needed to control the north bank of the river to keep Wolfe at bay, or at least to slow the pace of the siege"

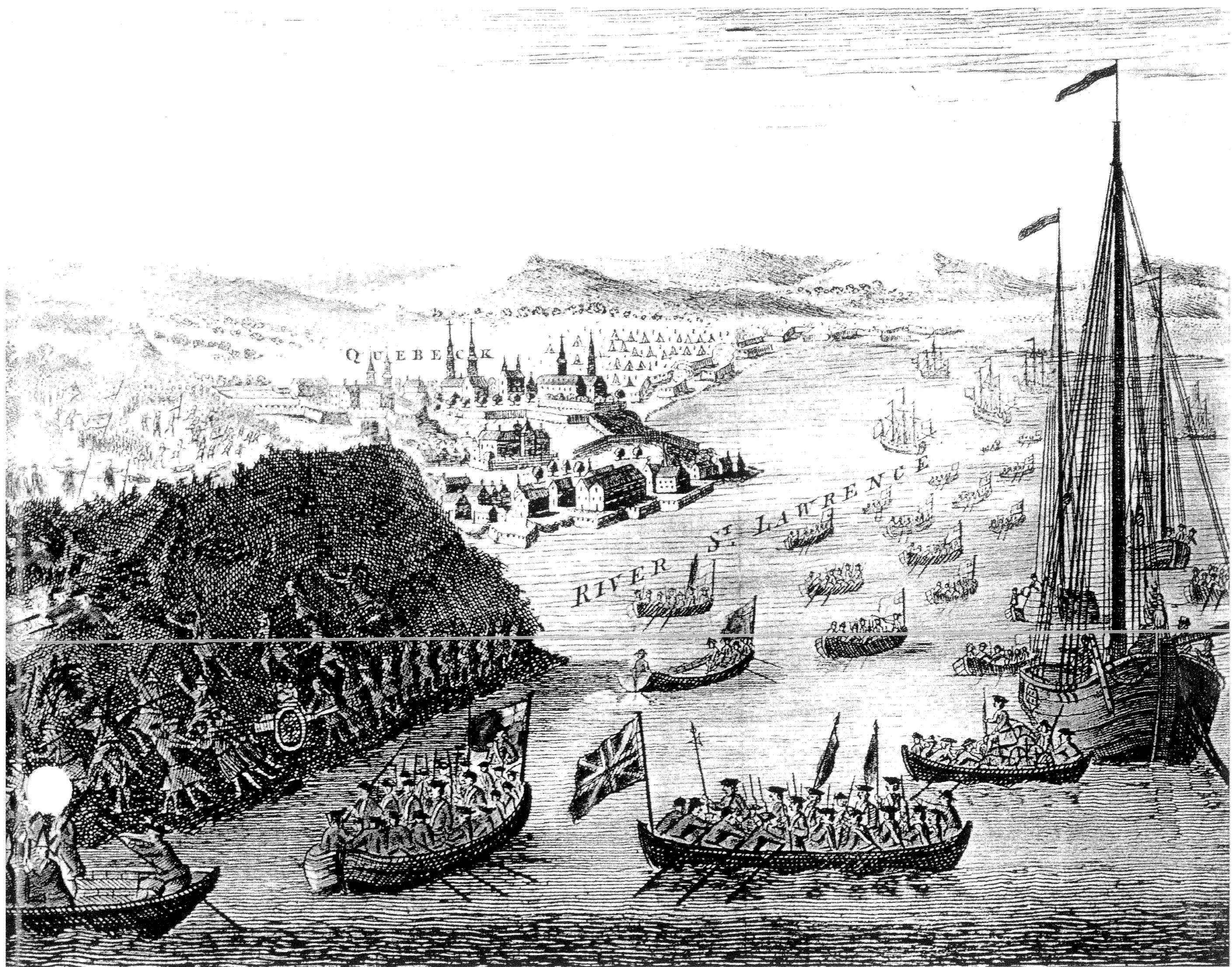
At Quebec, Montcalm faced the challenge of defending not just the city, but miles of riverfront. Simply withdrawing behind the battlements and ceding the surrounding area would have allowed the British to bring siege guns to bear directly on the city walls. Montcalm needed to control the north bank of the river to keep Wolfe's army at bay, or at least to slow the pace of the siege and delay the British until the onset of winter.

Though the French claimed numerical superiority, many of its troops were militia, and even the regulars were not up to par with their British counterparts, who were as well trained as any army in the world at the time. British control of the St. Lawrence delta made the delivery of reinforcements and supplies from France difficult, though not impossible. Additionally, while the British could concentrate their forces at points they wished to attack, the French had to defend all their towns.

On July 9 the British landed on the north bank of the St. Lawrence and established a camp east of Quebec, across the Montmorency River. That summer they made repeated attempts to draw the French into open-field battle. Wolfe's army struck the French defenses on July 31, hoping to turn their eastern flank in a complicated maneuver that called for a series of amphibious landings near the mouth of the Montmorency. But a poorly selected landing site and stiff French resistance thwarted the offensive, with the loss of over 400 British lives.



In August, Wolfe again attempted to provoke the French into battle by sending raiding parties to ravage the countryside around Quebec. After issuing two fruitless proclamations calling on civilians to withdraw support from the French forces, Wolfe turned to harsher measures: British forces moved through the countryside destroying farms and



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villages, burning hundreds of buildings and driving off livestock. They also engaged in continual skirmishing with Native American auxiliaries allied with the French.

By September it must have been clear to Wolfe that time was running out. His forces had repeatedly failed to bring Montcalm to battle, and wounds and disease plagued the besieging forces—including Wolfe himself, who experienced fevers and fatigue. Moreover, the royal navy could not linger very late in the year so far north. The onset of winter in Canada brought pack ice to the notoriously treacherous St. Lawrence, making navigation even more difficult.

Finally, Wolfe decided to lift the siege and send his army upriver to a sheltered cove at Anse-aux-Foulons, where they could ascend a steep bluff west of the city. Here Wolfe hoped to outflank the French defenses and—if the French would cooperate—bring them to battle on favorable terms. It was a perilous plan, though. If the battle were lost, the Redcoats could be captured or even slaughtered on the retreat to their boats.

Just past midnight on September 13, Wolfe and more than 4,000 soldiers, under orders to maintain silence, rowed upriver into battle. Legend has it that night Wolfe recited to British officers his favorite poem, Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." Wolfe's most recent biographer, Stephen Brumwell, discounts this anecdote as unlikely, since Wolfe knew better than anyone the need to keep quiet while on the river, lest he alert French defenders.

Wolfe's 4,441 troops landed at Anse-Aux-Foulons around 4 a.m. and began to scale the loose shale cliffs to the Plains of Abraham, as depicted in this English engraving completed the year after the battle.

Still, the image of doomed commander Wolfe reciting the lines

> *The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,*
> *And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,*
> *Awaits alike the inevitable hour:*
> *The paths of glory lead but to the grave*

remains irresistibly dramatic.

Despite their precautions, the British advance did not go unnoticed. As the boats moved upriver in the darkness, a French sentry challenged them. The attack hung in the balance. If the sentry

realized what happening and alerted the city defenders, the French could at least prevent the landing and perhaps pick off the British in their boats. But a quick-thinking multilingual British officer answered the challenge in French, convincing the sentry that the boats held cargo bound from settlements in the interior.

Around 4 in the morning, the Redcoats landed at Anse-aux-Foulons and set to scaling the 175-foot bluffs—no mean feat, as loose shale made such a scramble difficult even in daylight during peacetime. Colonel William Howe, who would later command British troops against General George Washington in the Revolutionary War, personally led the advance force up the cliff. They quickly secured the beachhead.

shend, who would succeed Wolfe in command, was 4,441 men under arms.

Eighteenth century battles required a great deal of stoic endurance from soldiers. Tactics of the time mandated that they stand in formation to maintain cohesion under enemy fire, and while contemporary weapons offered little in the way of precision fire, they produced gruesome wounds. The sight and sound of massed muskets firing at once could easily convince soldiers with poor training or low morale that they had urgent business elsewhere. Relentless drills and confidence in their officers helped mitigate fear among rank-and-file soldiers, but a land battle in the Age of Reason remained a terrifying spectacle of blood, smoke and death.

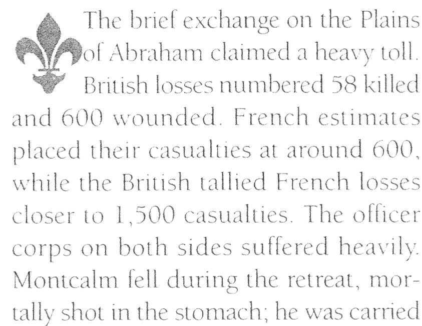
‘The British line vanished behind a cloud of smoke, and a wall of lead slammed into the French columns. Montcalm's columns wilted’

Once atop the bluffs, Wolfe deployed his troops on the Plains of Abraham in a line running parallel to the river, both to cover the landing and to defend against a feared French counterattack. Named for former landowner Abraham Martin, the plains offered a relatively level battlefield, no more than a mile wide.

In his opening action, Wolfe sent a detachment of light infantry to silence a French artillery battery that had opened fire on the British troops. The British line spanned a half-mile front composed of, from right to left, the 35th Foot, the Louisbourg Grenadiers and five other regiments, with the 48th Regiment held in reserve. Wolfe anchored the right of his line on the St. Lawrence, despite harassing fire from French and Native American sharpshooters. Three more infantry units arrived later and formed up on the left, perpendicular to the main line, to guard that flank against attack by French irregular forces. Wolfe deployed his troops two ranks deep, a departure from the usual three-rank-deep line, in order to cover the large area with his relatively small force. The official British strength on the field, according to Brig. Gen. George Town-

The French were slow to react to the British landing. Around 9:30 a.m., Montcalm began forming his force of some 4,500 regulars and militiamen into three columns, each six ranks deep. Columns offered notable advantages, enabling an attacking force to maneuver with ease and close rapidly with one's foe. Unfortunately for Montcalm's soldiers, columns also faced two significant disadvantages when engaging troops deployed in lines: First, given their comparatively narrow frontage, columns could not match lines in firepower. Second, the broader lines could fire on both the front and flanks of a column.

The Redcoats held their fire until the French had advanced to within 40 yards, each British soldier executing a quarter turn as they brought their 46-inch Brown Bess muskets to their shoulders. Then the British line vanished behind a cloud of smoke, and a wall of lead slammed into the French columns. Wolfe had ordered his soldiers to load their muskets with an extra ball, and his regiments likely fired by company. Montcalm's columns wilted in the face of such massed firepower. After less than 10 minutes of musketry, the British regulars ceased fire, fixed bayonets and charged the French line, which broke and retreated. Some French Canadians stood their ground to cover the retreat and exacted a price from their attackers, notably the Scottish Highlanders, who favored broadswords over bayonets. Reinforcements only arrived later in the day, by which time most French forces had fled back inside the fortified city.



The brief exchange on the Plains of Abraham claimed a heavy toll. British losses numbered 58 killed and 600 wounded. French estimates placed their casualties at around 600, while the British tallied French losses closer to 1,500 casualties. The officer corps on both sides suffered heavily. Montcalm fell during the retreat, mortally shot in the stomach; he was carried

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from the field to die of his wounds the following day. The British second-in-command, Brig. Gen. Robert Monckton, fell wounded at the height of the conflict.

The battle also claimed the life of the British commander, in dramatic fashion. One musket ball struck Wolfe in the wrist, while another sliced across his stomach. Then two more struck him in the right chest. The last of these wounds lay beyond the reach of 18th century medicine. (Large-caliber—.75-inch in today's terms—soft lead musket balls of that era created hideous wounds, akin to those delivered by a modern-day shotgun.) Assisted from the field by Lieutenant Henry Browne and Volunteer James Henderson of the Louisbourg Grenadiers, Wolfe soon succumbed to blood loss. He lived long enough to learn that his troops had carried the day, and to order a regiment to cut off the French retreat.

The Battle of the Plains of Abraham proved a stunning tactical success for the audacious British invaders. The records of *Lowescroft*, a royal navy ship supporting the attack, show that it dropped anchor at 7 in the morning, the battle erupted at 10 and Wolfe's body was carried onto the ship at 11. In less than an hour, Wolfe's Redcoats had shattered the French forces.

For all its tactical decisiveness, however, the clash did not instantly decide the fate of either Quebec or the French Empire. Most surviving French troops slipped away quietly to fight another day, while a small number of troops remained behind to hold Quebec. But the city would only hold out until capitulating on September 18, 1759. Another year passed before the final French battalions surrendered at Montreal, on September 9, 1760, marking the end of France's North American empire. MH

Four musket balls struck Wolfe during the fighting. The fatal shots drove into his chest. He lived long enough to learn the British had won the day. Benjamin West captured his last moments in a 1771 painting.

For further reading, Mitchell MacNaylor recommends: Paths of Glory: The Life and Death of General Wolfe, *by Stephen Brumwell;* Montcalm and Wolfe, *by Francis Parkman;* Quebec, 1759: The Siege and the Battle, *by C. P. Stacey; and* Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War *and the* Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754–1760, *by Fred Anderson.*