

NOT SO FAST... WHO REALLY WON AT QUÉBEC IN 1759?

by Desmond Morton



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A view of the landing place above the town of Québec.

On 12 September 1759, a quarter-millennium ago, Major-General James Wolfe, a sickly, red-head, led his British army up a steep path to the Plains of Abraham and waited for the French defenders of Québec City to respond. They did so ‘in spades.’ Ignoring centuries of advice from ‘Monday-morning quarterbacks,’ not to mention almost half his available forces, the Marquis de Montcalm summoned his available troops – white-coated regulars from famous French regiments, and a more motley array of Canadian militia and aboriginal allies, and marched to meet the British at the Butte à Neveu, a rocky outcropping in front of Québec’s crumbling walls.

The two armies were roughly equal in number, but very different in training. An infantry colonel for most of his career, Wolfe had spent the summer training his soldiers to load their Brown Bess muskets as fast as they could, but to fire only at its ideal range, 25 yards. Meanwhile, Montcalm mixed his regulars with local militia but despaired of making real soldiers out of the scruffy and willful *Canadiens*. Never, throughout the entire summer, did militia and regulars train together. Faced with the British on that September morning, the militia wanted to do what *modern* soldiers would be told to do: throw oneself on the ground, crawl to a vantage point, and shoot to

kill. Militia caused a scattering of British casualties, among them General Wolfe, hit in his hand and his belly, but not mortally hurt (at least, not yet...). Both lines of regulars, true to the tactic of the time, stood looking at each other. Again and again, at Carillon, Oswego, Fort William Henry, and only a month earlier, at Montmorency Falls, the French regulars had overwhelmed the British. Why wait?

Ignoring a depressed and pessimistic Montcalm, the regulars began crowding down the Butte, firing as they advanced, although rarely hitting enemy soldiers at such a range. The rocks, trees, and brooks of the Butte dissolved their ranks until the French had split into three armed crowds, two heading north and one south, ignoring Wolfe’s centre. The British stood firm and silent, watching the gap between the two armies narrow. At 25 meters, shouted orders cut the air. The redcoats raised their muskets to their shoulders. “Fire!!!” Smoke and a roar burst from the British ranks. Six-pounder cannon on each flank added to the carnage. Soldiers drew ramrods, removed remnants of burning powder, rammed down a fresh charge and a lead ball, and prepared a second volley. Shaken by the gaps left by the militia, and now by victims of the British volley, French soldiers wondered what would happen next. Only one answer was obvious: they would die. Some turned to escape their fate. Panic in war is always contagious.

VIEWS AND OPINIONS

Montcalm's proud regulars dissolved. His side shattered by a British cannon ball, a fatally injured Montcalm was dragged into Québec through a jostling, panicked crowd of his soldiers. He would die before dawn.

His adversary was already dead from a third probably-*Canadien* bullet, at the moment of his astonishing victory. Four soldiers stood by their dying general, not the crowd carefully selected by the artist for Benjamin West's famous painting. Meanwhile, drawing their claymores at Brigadier-General James Murray's command,. Fraser's Highlanders raced to the Butte à Neveu to cut off the French Army's retreat.

For 250 years, military historians have claimed that Canada's fate was decided in about ten minutes. In his new history, *Northern Armageddon*, Peter MacLeod measured the battle at eight minutes. However, his book reveals a larger truth. Some people went on fighting. No one told the *Canadiens* or their aboriginal allies to run away. Because *Canadien* militia stopped Fraser's Highlanders five separate times, the French regulars could stop, catch their breath, form up, and begin their doleful march to Montréal. A few days later, prodded by starvation and the grisly fate of rape and murder guaranteed for the defenders and civilians of any city taken by storm, Québec's city governor, the Sieur de Ramezay, surrendered the city to Wolfe's successor, Brigadier-General George Townshend.

The war not over... In the spring, Montcalm's successor, the Chevalier de Lévis, brought the militia and the French regular battalions back to Québec. Because Québec was no more defensible in April than it had been in September, Brigadier-General James Murray, Wolfe's successor, led British forces, decimated by a brutal winter, to meet them at Ste-Foye. Weakened by hunger, frost-bite, and disease during that cold and hungry winter, the British were no match for the French. Leaving behind a thousand dead and wounded, the British fled back through the gates to Québec. *If* a French fleet had come up the St-Lawrence, the Battle on the Plains of Abraham would hardly now be worth remembering. Québec would again have been French. Instead, on 9 May 1760, a British sentry spotted a distant sail. As both sides waited, the ship approached. It was H.M.S. *Lowestoft*, the frigate that had received Wolfe's corpse on 13 September. A British fleet followed within hours. France had abandoned its valiant colonists to British mercy.

What choice did they have? When he prepared for the Seven Years War, the British Prime Minister had made a shrewd choice. Britain's navy was one of the best in the world. Its army was not. Strategists tell us to reinforce strength and Prime Minister Pitt did so. In the summer of 1759, Pitt's strategy paid off in two battles virtually unknown to Canadians. First, a British fleet destroyed France's Mediterranean squadron by drawing it into the Atlantic and down the African coast



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Major-General James Wolfe leading his army at the Battle of the Plains.



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Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham, 1759.



The Death of General Wolfe.



The Death of General Montcalm.

to Lagos, where it was driven ashore and destroyed. In a more conventional battle, Admiral Edward Hawke intercepted the French Atlantic fleet at Quiberon Bay on the coast of Brittany. The result was a decisive British victory. If the French navy had arrived to confirm Lévis' victory, it would have reversed history. It was no longer available. Two naval victories virtually unknown to Canadians transformed our history.

If this was not quite the story you learned in school or from the CBC, neither did Pauline Marois or Gilles Duceppe, who got any 2009 re-enactment of the battle cancelled to save Québeckers from humiliation. Why did no one tell them about their heroic ancestors? Thanks to Peter MacLeod, the Canadian War Museum historian who took his work seriously, all Canadians now have a more inclusive and more fascinating story of a crucial year in our history.

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