

Americans are defeated at the Battle of Quebec, Dec 31, 1775

On this day in history, December 31, 1775, the Americans are defeated at the Battle of Quebec, the first major loss for the Continental Army during the American Revolution. The Continental Congress launched an invasion of Canada in September of 1775, trusting that the largely French speaking population would rise up against their British oppressors and join the Americans in their rebellion.

The first wave of the invasion was a success as General Richard Montgomery captured Fort St. Jean and Montreal. As Montgomery's 1700 men marched up from the south, Colonel Benedict Arnold landed in Maine and began a march with another 1100 troops across the wilderness straight to Quebec City, the capital of the province. Arnold's march was heroic, but, lacking adequate supplies, starvation and disease set in and many troops deserted, leaving Arnold with only 600 men by the time he reached Quebec City. Arnold attempted to get British Governor and Major-General Guy Carleton to surrender the city, but he refused, causing Arnold to withdraw to await reinforcements.

When General Montgomery arrived in early December, he began to plan an attack on the city, although he was outnumbered, 1000 to 1800 men. Quebec City was one of the best fortified cities in America with its large, thick walls. Montgomery had little artillery, so he could not bombard the walls. Instead, he determined that he should wait for a snowstorm, when his advance would be hidden by the storm. On December 31st, a snowstorm hit and Montgomery made his move around 4am. Two companies led attacks on the western walls of the city as a feint, while the more serious invasion attempts would be made on the north and south of the city, one each led by General Montgomery and Colonel Arnold.

General Montgomery's men followed along the southern wall of the city and entered through a palisade, but were quickly cut off by cannon and gun fire from a blockhouse. Montgomery was killed

Americans are defeated at the Battle of Quebec, Dec 31, 1775

instantly with a shot through the head. A dozen others were killed as well, including several other senior officers. Only a few escaped, including a young soldier named Aaron Burr who would one day be Vice President. The remaining troops fled in disorganization after the senior officers were killed.

Colonel Arnold continued his attack on the north of the city. Arnold's men made it into the city as well, but Arnold was shot in the ankle, taken off the field and replaced by Captain Daniel Morgan. Morgan's men overtook the first barricade, but were soon surrounded and, after intense street fighting, forced to surrender. The battle ended by 10am. In all, about 80 Americans were wounded or killed and another 430 captured. The British lost only 5 dead and 14 wounded.

After the defeat, Benedict Arnold continued the siege on the city for another 5 months, sending word to the Continental Congress for reinforcements. Although a few reinforcements arrived, the remaining troops were so devastated with disease and poor conditions during the winter that General John Thomas, who replaced Arnold in April, ordered a retreat. The Americans retreated upriver, attempting to burn Montreal, and successfully burning Fort St. Jean, as they withdrew. The invasion of Canada was a failure. The Continental Congress would not try again to persuade its Canadian neighbors to join them in the fight for independence.