

## = Battle of Oriskany =

The Battle of Oriskany , fought on August 6 , 1777 , was one of the bloodiest battles in the North American theater of the American Revolutionary War and a significant engagement of the Saratoga campaign . An American party trying to relieve the siege of Fort Stanwix was ambushed by a party of Loyalists and allies of several Native American tribes . This was one of the few battles in the war in which almost all of the participants were North American : Loyalists and allied Indians fought against Patriots and allied Oneida in the absence of British soldiers .

Early in the siege of Fort Stanwix , an American relief force from the Mohawk Valley under General Nicholas Herkimer , numbering around 800 men of the Tryon County militia , and a party of Oneida warriors , approached in an attempt to raise the siege . British commander Barry St. Leger authorized an intercept force consisting of a Hanau Jäger ( light infantry ) detachment , Sir John Johnson 's King 's Royal Regiment of New York , Indian allies from the Six Nations , particularly Mohawk and Seneca ; and other tribes to the north and west , and Indian Department Rangers , totaling at least 450 men .

The Loyalist and Indian force ambushed Herkimer 's force in a small valley about six miles ( 10 km ) east of Fort Stanwix , near the present @-@ day village of Oriskany , New York . During the battle , Herkimer was mortally wounded . The battle cost the Patriots approximately 450 casualties , while the Loyalists and Indians lost approximately 150 dead and wounded . The result of the battle remains ambiguous because the apparent Loyalist victory was significantly affected by a sortie from Fort Stanwix in which the Loyalist camps were sacked , spoiling morale among the allied Indians .

For the Iroquois nations , the battle marked the beginning of a civil war , as Oneida warriors under Colonel Louis and Han Yerry allied with the American cause and fought against members of other Iroquois nations . There were also internal divisions among the Oneida , some of whom went to Canada as allies of the British . The site is known in oral histories of the Iroquois nations as " A Place of Great Sadness . " The site has been designated as a National Historic Landmark and is marked by a battle monument at the Oriskany Battlefield State Historic Site .

## = = Background = =

In June 1777 , the British Army , under the command of General " Gentleman Johnny " Burgoyne , launched a two @-@ pronged attack from Quebec . Burgoyne 's objective was to split New England from the other colonies by gaining control of New York 's Hudson Valley . The main thrust came south across Lake Champlain under Burgoyne 's command ; the second thrust was led by Lt. Colonel Barry St. Leger and was intended to come down the Mohawk Valley and meet Burgoyne 's army near Albany .

St. Leger 's expedition consisted of about 1 @, @ 800 men , who were a mix of British regulars , Hessian Jägers from Hanau , Loyalists , Indians of several tribes , including the Mohawk and Seneca of the Iroquois , and Rangers . They traveled up the Saint Lawrence River and along the shore of Lake Ontario to the Oswego River , which they ascended to reach the Oneida Carry ( present @-@ day Rome , New York later developed here ) . They began to besiege Fort Stanwix , a Continental Army post guarding the portage .

## = = Prelude = =

Alerted to the possibility of a British attack along the Mohawk River , Nicholas Herkimer , the head of Tryon County 's Committee of Safety , issued a proclamation on July 17 warning of possible military activity and urging the people to respond if needed . Warned by friendly Oneidas on July 30 that the British were just four days from Fort Stanwix , Herkimer put out a call @-@ to @-@ arms . The force raised totaled 800 from the Tryon County militia ; it was composed primarily of poorly trained farmers , who were chiefly of Palatine German descent . Setting out on August 4 , the column camped near the Oneida village of Oriska on August 5 . While a number of the militia dropped out of the column due to their lack of conditioning , Herkimer 's forces were augmented by

a company of 60 to 100 Oneida warriors , led primarily by Han Yerry , a strong supporter of the Patriot cause . That evening , Herkimer sent three men toward the fort with messages for the fort 's commander , Colonel Peter Gansevoort . Gansevoort was to signal the receipt of the message with three cannon shots , and then sortie to meet the approaching column . Due to difficulties in penetrating the British lines , these couriers did not deliver the message until late the next morning , after the battle was already underway .

St. Leger learned on August 5 from a messenger sent by Molly Brant to her brother Joseph Brant , the Mohawk leader who led a portion of St. Leger 's Indian contingent , that Herkimer and his relief expedition were on their way . St. Leger sent a detachment of light infantry from Sir John Johnson 's Royal Yorkers toward the position that evening to monitor Herkimer 's position , and Brant followed early the next morning with about 400 Indians and Butler 's Rangers . Although many of the Indians were armed with muskets , some were not , and only carried tomahawk and spear .

= = Battle = =

On the morning of August 6 , Herkimer held a war council . Since his force had not yet heard the expected signal from the fort , he wanted to wait . However , his captains pressed him to continue , accusing Herkimer of being a Tory because his brother was serving under St. Leger . Stung by these accusations , Herkimer ordered the column to march on toward Stanwix .

About six miles ( 9 @. @ 6 km ) from the fort , the road dipped more than fifty feet ( 15 m ) into a marshy ravine , where a stream about three feet ( 1 m ) wide meandered along the bottom . Sayenqueraghta and Cornplanter , two Seneca war chiefs , chose this place to set up an ambush . While the King 's Royal Yorkers waited behind a nearby rise , the Indians concealed themselves on both sides of the ravine . The plan was for the Yorkers to stop the head of the column , after which the Indians would attack the extended column . At about 10 am , Herkimer 's column , with Herkimer on horseback near the front , descended into the ravine , crossed the stream , and began ascending the other side .

Contrary to the plan , the Indians lying in wait near the rear of the column , apparently unable to contain themselves any longer , opened fire , taking the column completely by surprise . Leading the 1st Regiment ( Canajoharie district ) , Colonel Ebenezer Cox was shot off his horse and killed in the first volley . Herkimer turned his horse to see the action , and was very shortly thereafter struck by a ball , which shattered his leg and killed the horse . He was carried by several of his officers to a beech tree , where his men urged him to retire from further danger . He defiantly replied , " I will face the enemy " , and calmly sat leaning against the tree , smoking a pipe and giving directions and words of encouragement to the men nearby .

As the trap had been sprung too early , portions of the column had not yet entered the ravine . Most of these men panicked and fled ; some of the attacking Indians pursued them , resulting in a string of dead and wounded that extended for several miles . Between the loss of the column rear and those killed or wounded in the initial volleys , only about one half of Herkimer 's men were likely still fighting thirty minutes into the battle . Some of the attackers , notably those not armed with muskets , waited for the flash of an opponent 's musket fire before rushing to attack with the tomahawk before the enemy had time to reload , a highly effective tactic against those men who did not have bayonets . Louis Atayataronghta , a Mohawk warrior fighting with Herkimer 's men , shot one of the enemy whose fire had been devastating in its accuracy , noting that " every time he rises up he kills one of our men " .

Herkimer 's men eventually rallied , fighting their way out of the ravine to the crest just to its west . John Johnson , concerned about the militia 's tenacity , returned to the British camp and requested some reinforcements from St. Leger shortly before a thunderstorm broke out . Another seventy men headed back with him toward the battle . The thunderstorm caused a one @-@ hour break in the fighting , during which Herkimer regrouped his militia on the higher ground . He instructed his men to fight in pairs : while one man fired and reloaded , the other waited and then only fired if attacked . Ordered to fire in relays , the pairs were to try to keep at least one weapon loaded at all times , to reduce the effectiveness of the tomahawk attacks .

John Butler , the leader of the rangers , took time during the thunderstorm to question some of the captives , and learned about the three @-@ cannon signal . When Johnson and his reinforcements arrived , Butler convinced them to turn their coats inside out to disguise themselves as a relief party coming from the fort . When the fighting restarted , Johnson and the rest of his Royal Yorkers joined the battle , but one of the Patriot militiaman , Captain Jacob Gardinier , recognized the face of a Loyalist neighbor . Close combat , at times hand @-@ to @-@ hand fighting between neighbors , continued for some time .

= = = Sortie from Fort Stanwix = = =

When Herkimer 's messengers reached the fort around 11 am , Colonel Gansevoort began organizing the requested sortie . After the heavy thunderstorm passed , Lieutenant Colonel Marinus Willett led 250 men from the fort , and proceeded to raid the nearly deserted enemy camps to the south of the fort . Driving away the few British and Indians left in those camps ( who included women ) and taking four prisoners along the way , the Patriots collected blankets and other personal possessions from the Indian camps . They also successfully raided John Johnson 's camp , taking his letters and other writings ( including an intercepted letter to Gansevoort from his fiancée ) .

One of the Indians who had stayed behind to guard the camp ran to the battlefield to alert fellow warriors that their camps were being raided . They disengaged with cries of " Oonah , oonah ! " , the Seneca signal to retire , and headed for the camps to protect their women and possessions . This forced the smaller number of German and Loyalist combatants to also withdraw .

= = Aftermath = =

= = = Patriots = = =

The battered remnant of Herkimer 's force , with Herkimer seriously wounded and many of its captains killed , retreated to Fort Dayton . The wounded Herkimer was carried by his men from the battlefield . His leg was amputated , but the operation went poorly and he died on August 16 . While the Indians retrieved most of their dead from the battlefield the following day , many dead and wounded Patriots were left on the field . When Benedict Arnold 's relief column marched through the scene several weeks later , the stench and grisly scene was , according to various accounts , quite memorable .

When General Philip Schuyler learned of the retreat from Oriskany , he immediately organized additional relief to be sent to the area . The siege at Fort Stanwix was eventually lifted on August 21 when a relief column led by General Benedict Arnold approached . While still at Fort Dayton , Arnold sent messengers into the British camp who convinced the British and Indian besiegers that his force was much larger than it was in fact .

= = = Loyalists = = =

Loyalist John Butler was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel for his role in the battle , and authorized to raise a regiment that became known as Butler 's Rangers . After the siege was lifted , some Loyalists returned to Quebec . Others ( including numerous warriors from various tribes ) joined Burgoyne 's campaign on the Hudson .

= = = Native Americans = = =

Brant and Sayenqueraghta , the principal Seneca chief , proposed the next day to continue the fighting by pursuing the Colonials downriver toward German Flatts but St. Leger turned their proposal down . This battle marked the beginning of the civil war in the Iroquois Confederacy . It was the first time that their peoples had fought against each other . Four of the Iroquois nations :

Mohawk , Seneca , Cayuga and Onondaga , were allied with the British , as were some Oneida . The Iroquois in St. Leger 's camp met in council and decided to send the rebel @-@ allied Oneida a bloody hatchet . Brant 's Mohawks raided and burned the Oneida settlement of Oriska later in the siege . In retaliation , the Oneida plundered the Mohawk castles of Tiononderoge and Canajoharie . They later raided the Fort Hunter Mohawk , prompting most of the remaining Mohawk in central New York to flee to Quebec .

According to a mid @-@ 19th century account , Brant 's Indians were said to have tortured and eaten some of their prisoners . However , modern historians dispute this . It is likely that some of the prisoners taken were ritually killed ( which to Europeans is extremely similar to torture ) ; there does not appear to be any evidence of cannibalism ( ritual or otherwise ) . John Butler reported that four prisoners held by the Indians " were conformable to the Indian custom afterwards killed . "

= = = Winners and losers = = =

The battle was , based on the percentage of casualties suffered , one of the bloodiest of the war . About half of Herkimer 's force was killed or wounded , as was about 15 % of the British force .

St. Leger claimed the battle as a victory , as he had stopped the American relief column , but the Americans maintained control of the battlefield after the withdrawal of the opposing Indians . The British victory was tempered by the discontent of the Indians after the battle . When they joined the expedition , they expected that the British forces would do most of the fighting . They were the dominant fighters in this action , and some suffered the loss of their personal belongings taken during the American sortie from the fort . This blow to their morale contributed to the eventual failure of St. Leger 's expedition .

= = Legacy = =

Blacksnake , one of the Indians at the battle , was interviewed many years afterwards . He recalled , " I thought at that time the Blood Shed a Stream running down on the decending [ sic ] ground . " A monument commemorating the battle was erected in 1884 at 43 ° 10.6'N 75 ° 22.2'W , and much of the battlefield is now preserved in the Oriskany Battlefield State Historic Site . The site was recognized as a National Historic Landmark in 1962 , and added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1966 .

Nicholas Herkimer was honored when the town of Herkimer and Herkimer County , New York were named for him .

= = Representation in popular culture = =

Colonial settlement and wars in the Mohawk Valley , including the Battle of Oriskany , were memorialized by Walter D. Edmonds in his 1937 novel , Drums Along the Mohawk and its film adaptation .

The battle was honored by the naming of the aircraft carrier USS Oriskany , launched in 1945 . The battle acts as the crux of Charles Fenno Hoffman 's 1840 novel Greyslaer .