

## = Battle of Valcour Island =

The naval Battle of Valcour Island , also known as the Battle of Valcour Bay , took place on October 11 , 1776 , on Lake Champlain . The main action took place in Valcour Bay , a narrow strait between the New York mainland and Valcour Island . The battle is generally regarded as one of the first naval battles of the American Revolutionary War , and one of the first fought by the United States Navy . Most of the ships in the American fleet under the command of Benedict Arnold were captured or destroyed by a British force under the overall direction of General Guy Carleton . However , the American defense of Lake Champlain stalled British plans to reach the upper Hudson River valley .

The Continental Army had retreated from Quebec to Fort Ticonderoga and Fort Crown Point in June 1776 after British forces were massively reinforced . They spent the summer of 1776 fortifying those forts , and building additional ships to augment the small American fleet already on the lake . General Carleton had a 9 ,000 man army at Fort Saint Jean , but needed to build a fleet to carry it on the lake . The Americans , during their retreat , had either taken or destroyed most of the ships on the lake . By early October , the British fleet , which significantly outgunned the American fleet , was ready for launch .

On October 11 , Arnold drew the British fleet to a position he had carefully chosen to limit their advantages . In the battle that followed , many of the American ships were damaged or destroyed . That night , Arnold sneaked the American fleet past the British one , beginning a retreat toward Crown Point and Ticonderoga . Unfavorable weather hampered the American retreat , and more of the fleet was either captured or grounded and burned before it could reach Crown Point . Upon reaching Crown Point Arnold had the fort 's buildings burned and retreated to Ticonderoga .

The British fleet included four officers who later became admirals in the Royal Navy : Thomas Pringle , James Dacres , Edward Pellew and John Schank . Valcour Bay , the site of the battle , is now a National Historic Landmark , as is USS Philadelphia , which sank shortly after the October 11 battle , and was raised in 1935 . The underwater site of USS Spitfire , located in 1997 , is on the National Register of Historic Places .

## = = Background = =

The American Revolutionary War , which began in April 1775 with the Battles of Lexington and Concord , widened in September 1775 when the Continental Army embarked on an invasion of the British Province of Quebec . The province was viewed by the Second Continental Congress as a potential avenue for British forces to attack and divide the rebellious colonies , and was at the time lightly defended . The invasion reached a peak on December 31 , 1775 , when the Battle of Quebec ended in disaster for the Americans . In the spring of 1776 , 10 ,000 British and German troops arrived in Quebec , and General Guy Carleton , the provincial governor , drove the Continental Army out of Quebec and back to Fort Ticonderoga .

Carleton then launched his own offensive intended to reach the Hudson River , whose navigable length begins south of Lake Champlain and extends down to New York City . Control of the upper Hudson would enable the British to link their forces in Quebec with those in New York , recently captured in the New York campaign by Major General William Howe . This strategy would separate the American colonies of New England from those farther south and potentially quash the rebellion . Lake Champlain , a long and relatively narrow lake formed by the action of glaciers during the last ice age , separates the Green Mountains of Vermont from the Adirondack Mountains of New York . Its 120 mile ( 190 km ) length and 12 mile ( 19 km ) maximum width creates more than 550 miles ( 890 km ) of shoreline , with many bays , inlets and promontories . More than 70 islands dot the 435 square mile ( 1 ,130 km<sup>2</sup> ) surface , although during periods of low and high water , these numbers can change . The lake is relatively shallow , with an average depth of 64 feet ( 20 m ) . Running roughly from south to north , the lake 's waters empty into the Richelieu River , where waterfalls at Saint Jean in Quebec mark the northernmost point of navigation .

The American strongholds of Fort Crown Point and Fort Ticonderoga near the lake 's southern end protected access to uppermost navigable reaches of the Hudson River . Elimination of these

defenses required the transportation of troops and supplies from the British @-@ controlled St. Lawrence Valley 90 miles ( 150 km ) to the north . Roads were either impassable or nonexistent , making water transport on the lake the only viable option . The only ships on the lake following the American retreat from Quebec were a small fleet of lightly armed ships that Benedict Arnold had assembled following the capture of Fort Ticonderoga in May 1775 . This fleet , even if it had been in British hands , was too small to transport the large British Army to Fort Ticonderoga .

= = Prelude = =

During their retreat from Quebec , the Americans carefully took or destroyed all ships on Lake Champlain that might prove useful to the British . When Arnold and his troops , making up the rear guard of the army , abandoned Fort Saint @-@ Jean , they burned or sank all the boats they could not use , and set fire to the sawmill and the fort . These actions effectively denied the British any hope of immediately moving onto the lake .

The two sides set about building fleets : the British at Saint @-@ Jean and the Americans at the other end of the lake in Skenesborough ( present @-@ day Whitehall , New York ) . While planning Quebec 's defenses in 1775 , General Carleton had anticipated the problem of transportation on Lake Champlain , and had requested the provisioning of prefabricated ships from Europe . By the time Carleton 's army reached Saint @-@ Jean , ten such ships had arrived . These ships and more were assembled by skilled shipwrights on the upper Richelieu River . Also assembled there was HMS Inflexible , a 180 @-@ ton warship they disassembled at Quebec City and transported upriver in pieces . In total , the British fleet ( 25 armed vessels ) had more firepower than the Americans ' 15 vessels , with more than 80 guns outweighing the 74 smaller American guns . Two of Carleton 's ships , Inflexible ( 18 12 @-@ pounders ) and HMS Thunderer ( six 24 @-@ pound guns , six 12 @-@ pound guns , and two howitzers ) , by themselves outgunned the combined firepower of the American fleet . In addition to Inflexible and Thunderer , the fleet included the schooners Maria ( 14 guns ) , Carleton ( 12 guns ) , and Loyal Convert ( 6 guns ) , and 20 single @-@ masted gunboats each armed with two cannons .

The American generals leading their shipbuilding effort encountered a variety of challenges . Shipwright was not a common occupation in the relative wilderness of upstate New York , and the Continental Navy had to pay extremely high wages to lure skilled craftsmen away from the coast . The carpenters hired to build boats on Lake Champlain were the best @-@ paid employees of the navy , excepting only the Navy 's Commodore , Esek Hopkins . By the end of July there were more than 200 shipwrights at Skenesborough . In addition to skilled help , materials and supplies specific to maritime use needed to be brought to Skenesborough , where the ships were constructed , or Fort Ticonderoga , where they were fitted out for use .

The shipbuilding at Skenesborough was overseen by Hermanus Schuyler ( possibly a relation of Major General Philip Schuyler ) , and the outfitting was managed by military engineer Jeduthan Baldwin . Schuyler began work in April to produce boats larger and more suitable for combat than the small shallow @-@ draft boats known as bateaux that were used for transport on the lake . The process eventually came to involve General Arnold , who was an experienced ship 's captain , and David Waterbury , a Connecticut militia leader with maritime experience . Major General Horatio Gates , in charge of the entire shipbuilding effort , eventually asked Arnold to take more responsibility in the effort , because " I am intirely uninform 'd as to Marine Affairs . "

Arnold took up the task with relish , and Gates rewarded him with command of the fleet , writing that " [ Arnold ] has a perfect knowledge in maritime affairs , and is , besides , a most gallant and deserving officer . " Arnold 's appointment was not without trouble ; Jacobus Wynkoop , who had been in command of the fleet , refused to accept that Gates had authority over him , and had to be arrested . The shipbuilding was significantly slowed in mid @-@ August by an outbreak of disease among the shipwrights . Although the army leadership had been scrupulous about keeping smallpox sufferers segregated from others , the disease that slowed the shipbuilding for several weeks was some kind of fever .

While both sides busied themselves with shipbuilding , the growing American fleet patrolled the

waters of Lake Champlain . At one point in August , Arnold sailed part of the fleet to the northernmost end of the lake , within 20 miles ( 32 km ) of Saint @-@ Jean , and formed a battle line . A British outpost , well out of range , fired a few shots at the line without effect . On September 30 , expecting the British to sail soon , Arnold retreated to the shelter of Valcour Island . During his patrols of the lake Arnold had commanded the fleet from the schooner Royal Savage , carrying 12 guns and captained by David Hawley . When it came time for the battle , Arnold transferred his flag to Congress , a row galley . Other ships in the fleet included Revenge and Liberty , also two @-@ masted schooners carrying 8 guns , as well as Enterprise , a sloop ( 12 guns ) , and 8 gundalows outfitted as gunboats ( each with three guns ) : New Haven , Providence , Boston , Spitfire , Philadelphia , Connecticut , Jersey , New York , the cutter Lee , and the row galleys Trumbull and Washington . Liberty was not present at the battle , having been sent to Ticonderoga for provisions .

Arnold , whose business activities before the war had included sailing ships to Europe and the West Indies , carefully chose the site where he wanted to meet the British fleet . Reliable intelligence he received on October 1 indicated that the British had a force significantly more powerful than his . Because his force was inferior , he chose the narrow , rocky body of water between the western shore of Lake Champlain and Valcour Island ( near modern Plattsburgh , New York ) , where the British fleet would have difficulty bringing its superior firepower to bear , and where the inferior seamanship of his relatively unskilled sailors would have a minimal negative effect . Some of Arnold 's captains wanted to fight in open waters where they might be able to retreat to the shelter of Fort Crown Point , but Arnold argued that the primary purpose of the fleet was not survival but the delay of a British advance on Crown Point and Ticonderoga until the following spring .

= = Battle = =

Carleton 's fleet , commanded by Captain Thomas Pringle and including 50 unarmed support vessels , sailed onto Lake Champlain on October 9 . They cautiously advanced southward , searching for signs of Arnold 's fleet . On the night of October 10 , the fleet anchored about 15 miles ( 24 km ) to the north of Arnold 's position , still unaware of his location . The next day , they continued to sail south , assisted by favorable winds . After they passed the northern tip of Valcour Island , Arnold sent out Congress and Royal Savage to draw the attention of the British . Following an inconsequential exchange of fire with the British , the two ships tried to return to Arnold 's crescent @-@ shaped firing line . However , Royal Savage was unable to fight the headwinds , and ran aground on the southern tip of Valcour Island . Some of the British gunboats swarmed toward her , as Captain Hawley and his men hastily abandoned ship . Men from the HMS Loyal Convert boarded her , capturing 20 men in the process , but were then forced to abandon her under heavy fire from the Americans . Many of Arnold 's papers were lost with the destruction of Royal Savage , which was burned by the British .

The British gunboats and Carleton then maneuvered within range of the American line . Thunderer and HMS Maria were unable to make headway against the winds , and did not participate in the battle , while Inflexible eventually came far enough up the strait to participate in the action . Around 12 : 30 pm , the battle began in earnest , with both sides firing broadsides and cannonades at each other , and continued all afternoon . Revenge was heavily hit ; Philadelphia was also heavily damaged and eventually sank around 6 : 30 pm . Carleton , whose guns wrought havoc against the smaller American gundalows , became a focus of attention . A lucky shot eventually snapped the line holding her broadside in position , and she was seriously damaged before she could be towed out of range of the American line . Her casualties were significant ; eight men were killed and another eight wounded . The young Edward Pellew , serving as a midshipman aboard Carleton , distinguished himself by ably commanding the vessel to safety when its senior officers , including its captain , Lieutenant James Dacres , were injured . Another lucky American shot hit a British gunboat 's magazine and the vessel exploded .

Toward sunset , Inflexible finally reached the action . Her big guns quickly silenced most of Arnold 's fleet . The British also began landing Indians on both Valcour Island and the lakeshore , in order

to deny the Americans the possibility of retreating to land . As darkness fell , the American fleet retreated , and the British called off the attack , in part because some boats had run out of ammunition . Lieutenant James Hadden , commanding one of the British gunboats , noted that " little more than one third of the British Fleet " saw much action that day .

= = Retreat = =

When the sun set on October 11 , the battle had clearly gone against the Americans . Most of the American ships were damaged or sinking , and the crews reported around 60 casualties . The British reported around 40 casualties on their ships . Aware that he could not defeat the British fleet , Arnold decided to try reaching the cover of Fort Crown Point , about 35 miles ( 56 km ) to the south . Under the cover of a dark and foggy night , the fleet , with muffled oars and minimal illumination , threaded its way through a gap about one mile ( 1 @. @ 6 km ) wide between the British ships and the western shore , where Indian campfires burned . By morning , they had reached Schuyler Island , about 8 miles ( 13 km ) up the lake . Carleton , upset that the Americans had escaped him , immediately sent his fleet around Valcour Island to find them . Realizing the Americans were not there , he regrouped his fleet and sent scouts to find Arnold .

Adverse winds as well as damaged and leaky boats slowed the American fleet 's progress . At Schuyler Island , Providence and Jersey were sunk or burned , and crude repairs were effected to other vessels . The cutter Lee was also abandoned on the western shore and eventually taken by the British . Around 2 : 00 pm , the fleet sailed again , trying to make headway against biting winds , rain , and sleet . By the following morning , the ships were still more than 20 miles ( 32 km ) from Crown Point , and the British fleet 's masts were visible on the horizon . When the wind finally changed , the British had its advantage first . They closed once again , opening fire on Congress and Washington , which were in the rear of the American fleet . Arnold first decided to attempt grounding the slower gunboats at Split Rock , 18 miles ( 29 km ) short of Crown Point . Washington , however , was too badly damaged and too slow to make it , and she was forced to strike her colors and surrender ; 110 men were taken prisoner .

Arnold then led many of the remaining smaller craft into a small bay on the Vermont shore now named Arnold 's Bay 2 miles south of Buttonmold Bay , where the waters were too shallow for the larger British vessels to follow . These boats were then run aground , stripped , and set on fire , with their flags still flying . Arnold , the last to land , personally torched his flagship Congress . The surviving ships ' crews , numbering about 200 , then made their way overland to Crown Point , narrowly escaping an Indian ambush . There they found Trumbull , New York , Enterprise , and Revenge , all of which had escaped the British fleet , as well as Liberty , which had just arrived with supplies from Ticonderoga .

= = Aftermath = =

Arnold , convinced that Crown Point was no longer viable as a point of defense against the large British force , destroyed and abandoned the fort , moving the forces stationed there to Ticonderoga . General Carleton , rather than shipping his prisoners back to Quebec , returned them to Ticonderoga under a flag of truce . On their arrival , the released men were so effusive in their praise of Carleton that they were sent home to prevent the desertion of other troops .

With control of the lake , the British landed troops and occupied Crown Point the next day . They remained for two weeks , pushing scouting parties to within three miles ( 4 @. @ 8 km ) of Ticonderoga . The battle @-@ season was getting late as the first snow began to fall on October 20 and his supply line would be difficult to manage in winter , so Carleton decided to withdraw north to winter quarters ; Arnold 's plan of delay had succeeded . Baron Riedesel , commanding the Hessians in Carleton 's army , noted that , " If we could have begun our expedition four weeks earlier , I am satisfied that everything could have ended this year . "

The 1777 British campaign , led by General John Burgoyne , was halted by Continental forces , some led with vigor by General Arnold , in the Battles of Saratoga . Burgoyne 's subsequent

surrender paved the way for the entry of France into the war as an American ally .

The captains of Maria , Inflexible , and Loyal Convert wrote a letter criticizing Captain Pringle for making Arnold 's escape possible by failing to properly blockade the channel , and for not being more aggressive in directing the battle . Apparently the letter did not cause any career problems for Pringle or its authors ; he and John Schank , captain of the Inflexible , became admirals , as did midshipman Pellew and Lieutenant Dacres . Carleton was awarded the Order of the Bath by King George III for his success at Valcour Island . On December 31 , 1776 one year after the Battle of Quebec , a mass was held in celebration of the British success , and Carleton threw a grand ball .

The loss of Benedict Arnold 's papers aboard Royal Savage was to have important consequences later in his career . For a variety of reasons , Congress ordered an inquiry into his conduct of the Quebec campaign , which included a detailed look at his claims for compensation . The inquiry took place in late 1779 , when Arnold was in military command of Philadelphia and recuperating from serious wounds received at Saratoga . Congress found that he owed it money since he could not produce receipts for expenses he claimed to have paid from his own funds . Although Arnold had already been secretly negotiating with the British over a change of allegiance since May 1779 , this news contributed to his decision to resign the command of Philadelphia . His next command was West Point , which he sought with the intention of facilitating its surrender to the British . His plot was however exposed in September 1780 , at which time he fled to the British in New York City .

= = Legacy = =

In the 1930s , Lorenzo Hagglund , a veteran of World War I and a history buff , began searching the strait for remains of the battle . In 1932 he found the remains of Royal Savage 's hull , which he successfully raised in 1934 . Stored for more than fifty years , the remains were sold by his son to the National Civil War Museum . As of March 2009 , the remains were in a city garage in Harrisburg , Pennsylvania . The city of Plattsburgh , New York , has claimed ownership of the remains and would like them returned to upstate New York .

In 1935 Hagglund followed up his discovery of Royal Savage with the discovery of Philadelphia 's remains , sitting upright on the lake bottom . He raised her that year ; she is now on display at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington , D.C. , and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is designated a National Historic Landmark . The site of the battle , Valcour Bay , was declared a National Historic Landmark on January 1 , 1961 , and added to the National Register on October 15 , 1966 .

In 1997 another pristine underwater wreck was located during a survey by the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum . Two years later it was conclusively identified as the gundalow Spitfire ; this site was listed on the National Register in 2008 , and it has been named as part of the U.S. government 's Save America 's Treasures program .

= = Order of battle = =