The Battle of Quebec: 1759

In the spring of 1759, the inhabitants of Quebec watched the river with worried eyes. They waited anxiously to see whether the ships of the French, or those of the British fleet, would be the first to sail up the St. Lawrence River. At first, they cheered when a fleet of supply ships came in sight flying the French flag. However, following close behind was a British fleet with almost 200 ships. From these, a British army of about 8500 experienced soldiers landed on the island of Orleans in the St. Lawrence. The British took the high ground opposite the town, and then used their cannons to hurl fiery shells across the river into Quebec.

The British attack on the city in 1759 began the famous Battle of Quebec. Even though it was itself a very important battle, it was seen by both the French and the British as being really part of a larger war. Indeed, at that time, there was fighting between the two nations in various parts of the world. For this reason, they each made special plans for the Battle of Quebec, and these plans were decided according to how the war was going for them in the other parts of the world where they were fighting. Because the war in North America was going very much in their favor, the British made a firm decision to capture all of New France. Therefore, at this stage of the war, they felt that it was very necessary for them to take the city of Quebec, so they were determined to use their forces to win the Battle of Quebec. The French, however, decided to use their main forces in other places. Because of this, few of the regular forces shipped overseas from France were sent to Quebec. The French did this on the chance that New France would hold out until the end of the war, and because they were not getting much military assistance from the mother country. It was then left to be seen what would happen to the Canadians in New France.
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Ultimately the outcome of the battle would depend on the skill and courage of the soldiers. Thus, the result would be decided by the leadership of the commanding officers: the British General James Wolfe and the French Marquis de Montcalm. Each of these commanders decided on his own strategies to fight the battle.

General Wolfe saw that he had a hard task ahead of him. He realized that he faced a city that had very strong defenses, which he could survey from any of the good viewpoints on the river bank across from the city. One of these, Point Lévis, had a British camp nearby. (Look again at the map in your textbook.) This particular camp had been set up near Point Lévis so the British could get a fairly good view of Quebec's defenses while still being out of range of French cannons. From his observation point, what could Wolfe see?

• On the right along the Beauport shore was a trench; on its seaward side, the trench was protected by a broad bank of earth.

• At low tide, there were mud flats that stretched for hundreds of metres out from the trenches along the Beauport shore.

• Further to the right of the city, at the entrance to the Montmorency River, were steep cliffs.

• Turning back towards Quebec and going to the left, a long line of cliffs could be seen. These were impossible to climb except at a few places. Moreover, there was a good chance that these places would be heavily guarded.

• Running along the cliff, there was a road by which supplies were taken to Quebec.

• Quebec itself was a fortress town that was heavily protected by walls and cannons.

However, there was one point that was somewhat of a weakness. In the rear, by the Plains of Abraham, the walls were lower and thinner than those protecting the other parts of the city.
Along with what he could see, General Wolfe had other pieces of information about the French forces:

- The Marquis de Montcalm led a force that was larger than that of the British in this part of North America.
- Though the British forces were smaller in number, they had the advantage of being better trained than the French.
- Because the Marquis de Montcalm had doubts about how well his forces would fight, he would avoid head-on action with the British.

By putting together all that he knew, General Wolfe realized that he would have to land his soldiers on the Quebec side of the river, and thus force the Marquis de Montcalm to fight. To do this, General Wolfe planned to do the following. (Look at the map in your textbook again.)

1. Land on an area close to the Montmorency River, go across the river, and then advance on Quebec.

2. Begin an attack near Beauport and then march on Quebec.

3. Land at some point up the river, look for a place to climb the cliffs, and then take the guards by surprise.

Plans 1 and 2 did not succeed. In the Beauport landing, especially, the British faced great difficulties as their boats ran aground in the shallows. When this happened, the soldiers tried to wade ashore through the deep mud but came under heavy French fire. Because of this, the British were forced to retreat in late July of 1759.

For three months afterwards, the British batteries across from the city bombarded Quebec. (Check the map in your textbook for the position of the batteries.) Homes were destroyed and stones flew everywhere, but this was not enough to take the city. However, by September of 1759, Wolfe had decided to act on Plan 3 in a very special way. The idea was to attack by scaling the cliffs upriver from Quebec as Wolfe had noticed a place where this could be done. There was a narrow pathway that led up the cliff from a small cove which is now called Wolfe's Cove. He also noted that only a few French soldiers guarded the point where the path reached the top of the cliff. He hoped to prevent the French from finding out that the British were planning to scale the cliffs.
Wolfe very wisely decided to hide his real plan of attack in order to split the French forces. To do this, he would get British ships to make a mock attack on the Beauport shore. While this was happening, another group of ships would sail up the river. This area was patrolled by Montcalm's second-in-command, Bougainville. By sailing up the river, the British ships would lead Bougainville away from the real point of attack. While the French forces were kept busy by these two false moves, Wolfe would lead his army up the cliff from the cove.

The real assault was planned to take place on the night of September 12, 1759. Up river, well away from Wolfe's Cove, Wolfe and his men were aboard a group of ships. In the darkest part of the night, they got into landing barges and allowed themselves to drift downstream with the current. All was extremely quiet except for the sound of the oars and a command given to the men from time to time. When they arrived at the cove, it was still very dark. Even though they tried to be very quiet, their landing at the cove was heard by a French guard. Since he could not see them clearly in the darkness, he commanded them to say who they were. The British then tricked the guard by giving the proper password in perfect French. The password was repeated at other times while the British soldiers were climbing the pathway up the cliffs, and in the end, the small number of French guards were overcome. The British soldiers then poured up the pathway with their equipment. When morning came, on September 13, 1759, the French got a rather big surprise. Watchers from the town saw the British army all lined up for battle on the Plains of Abraham.

Montcalm was shocked and made a hasty decision to march his troops from the shelter of the walls of the fortress to attack the British in the open. This move proved to be Montcalm's big mistake. Within fifteen minutes, the battle was over; the French turned and fled because of the steady, accurate fire of the British. Both commanders died as a result of the wounds they received during battle. Wolfe lived long enough to know that he had won; Montcalm was carried back into the city and died there the next day.

Despite the British victory in the Battle of Quebec, all of the territory that was then known as Canada was not yet won for Britain. Indeed, the French turned out to be winners one last time. The British, in fact, suffered some hard times during the winter of 1759, living in the war-torn buildings of the captured city of Quebec. And in the spring of 1760, French forces came down river from Montreal and challenged the weary British troops that were then occupying the city. This time, just as the French had done in the September before, the British left the protection of the fort to fight the advancing French army on open ground. On this occasion, the French won the battle outside the fort. The defeated British army then hurried back inside the fort only to be held under siege by the French. Eventually, the British became the winner in May when they crushed the siege. They were helped by fresh troops that were brought up the St. Lawrence River by a fleet of British ships in the spring of 1760.
Later, in September 1760, the British marched on Montreal and the French surrendered the city without a fight. Although this really marked the end of French power in the region, there were still more skirmishes elsewhere in what is now Canada. These occurred as late as 1762, and the war only officially ended with the Treaty of Paris in 1763. In fact, this Treaty effectively ended the entire great French-versus-British conflict in North America. Moreover, the agreement had created British Canada. In addition to the St. Lawrence region, most of the lands that were once owned by France in North America came into the possession of the British. Together, these lands formed British North America. Nevertheless, French culture in Canada remained firmly planted in the region along the St. Lawrence River, and here, the French language and the Catholic religion would still be preserved.