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## Victory...Impossible Without Schuyler's Direction

### By Abigail And Paul Stambach

Two hundred and thirty years ago this summer, one of the most important campaigns of the American Revolution was fought in upstate New York and Vermont. The action took place at Fort Ticonderoga, Whitehall, Fort Anne, Hubbardton, Fort Stanwix, Bennington and Schuylerville. The campaign culminated in the American victories at the battles of *Saratoga* in September and October 1777 when a mighty British army was defeated. As a result, France with its treasury, army and, more importantly, its naval fleet joined the American cause. Most historians believe that this French aid resulted in final victory for independence.

The American commander at the time of the climatic *Saratoga* battles was General Horatio Gates. Due to a combination of sectionalism amongst the states, class conflict, political intrigue and personal ambition, Gates received credit for the stunning victory. Major General Philip Schuyler, the architect of the victorious campaign, was condemned as a military incompetent, and possibly even a traitor, despite his acquittal from a court martial in 1778. In the last 30 years, however, historians such as Don Gerlach, Martin Bush and Richard Ketchum have begun to question the usual beliefs regarding Schuyler's generalship. Schuyler's contributions were vital to the American war effort during the campaign leading up to the critical battles of *Saratoga*, which took place on September 19 and October 7, 1777. Although Schuyler was no longer in command when the actual battles took place, nevertheless, his uses of the Fabian tactics of delay and evasion rather than direct confrontation were successful in stalling Burgoyne's troops as they marched from Canada into northern New York. [1] Also, Schuyler audaciously split his forces in the face of the enemy's main onslaught from the north to counter a British feint from the west along the Mohawk River valley. Without Schuyler's daring improvisations prior to the *Saratoga* battles, it is very possible that the campaign of 1777 would have turned out badly for the Americans.

Philip Schuyler was born in 1733 in Albany, New York, to a wealthy and influential Dutch family. [2] His father, John Schuyler Jr., died when Philip was young, and his mother was Cornelia Van Cortlandt, the daughter of the first lord of Cortlandt Manor. The Van Cortlandt family was another influential land-owning family of New York and as a result, Schuyler inherited a considerable amount of property when he came of age in 1754. [3] It has been estimated that Schuyler held between ten to twenty thousand acres of land in and around Albany, with the vast majority of his landholdings in the *Saratoga* area on the upper Hudson River. [4] Philip Schuyler settled tenants on his lands, built and operated grist and saw mills, and raised cash crops such as wheat and lumber. In 1755, he married Catharine Van Rensselaer, the daughter of John Van Rensselaer, proprietor of Crailo and the Claverack estates of about 60,000 acres, and first cousin to the Lord of the Manor of Rensselaerswyck. [5] Schuyler attained even more status in New York society via his marriage to Catharine, and the Van Rensselaer connections would assist him throughout his military and political career.

Schuyler's military experience began at the onset of the French and Indian War, when he was just twenty-two years old. In May of 1755, New York granted him a commission as captain of militia and he raised a company of men by July of that year. His company was sent to join Colonel William Cockcroft at Lake George but Schuyler was only present for a short period of time because he was called back to Albany in September in order to marry Catharine, who was pregnant at the time. As a result, Schuyler was not present during the Battle of Lake George, which took place a few days prior to his wedding. [6] Eventually, Schuyler returned to duty to serve as a Major under Colonel John Bradstreet who was the British Deputy Quartermaster General for the colony of New York. In this

position he learned logistics i.e. the equipping, supplying and transporting of troops. With his talent for business and family connections, Schuyler excelled at organizing military supplies, and "throughout 1759 and 1760...worked out of Albany collecting and forwarding provisions to Lord Jeffrey Amherst's forces. [7]

When Schuyler was appointed by the Second Continental Congress on June 19, 1775 to command the Northern Department of the Continental army, [8] he "literally had to create and supply an entire army, and a navy to move it." [9] Schuyler's first orders from Congress were to organize an invasion of Canada. Schuyler handled this formidable challenge efficiently, and the invasion of Canada commenced near the end of 1775. Montreal fell quickly and the Canadian campaign was initially a success, but the army began to break down as it approached Quebec. Schuyler was not in direct command because he fell ill and was brought back to Fort Ticonderoga before the troops had reached Canada. He relinquished field command to his second, General Richard Montgomery, who was killed during the abortive attack on Quebec on December 31, 1775. [10]

General Schuyler spent 1776 reorganizing his army and battling Horatio Gates and New England politicians in order to hold on to his position as Major General. He also had to contend with the British advance down Lake Champlain. Due to Schuyler's efforts to create a makeshift navy, his subordinate Benedict Arnold, was able to check the British fleet under the command of Sir Guy Carleton at the battle of Valcour Island on October 11, 1776. The American fleet consisted of 17 vessels "armed with a total of 102 guns, 176 Swivel guns and 900 men.." [11] The men, materials, and guns used to build this fleet at Skenesborough were procured through the efforts of Schuyler and his staff. Although the American fleet was destroyed, the British invasion plans were postponed until the spring of 1777. Schuyler and Arnold had bought the "rebels time to gather strength and resources that would be used at the Battle of *Saratoga*.." [12]

The campaign of 1777 began when General John Burgoyne and 8,000 British regulars and German soldiers arrived in Canada from England in May. [13] Burgoyne's mission "was to drive the rebels from Lake Champlain and Lake George and open communications with Sir William Howe...St. Leger would be moving...from the west to cut their supply line.." [14] This three-pronged strategy was meant to invest the Albany area and take control of the Hudson River, thus separating New England from the rest of the colonies, with each section of the country then conquered in turn.

General Burgoyne began his part of the campaign on June 20th when he started descending Lake Champlain to Crown Point on the west bank of the lake. From there, he marched to Fort Ticonderoga located at the juncture of Lake Champlain and Lake George. [15] Roughly 3,000 Continental soldiers under the command of General Arthur St. Clair garrisoned Fort Ticonderoga. [16] Most Americans regarded Ticonderoga as the gateway to Albany and saw the fort as key to the protection of the colonies against an invasion from Canada. "Fort Ticonderoga was regarded by the Americans as impregnable.." [17]

Schuyler, however, had long realized the fallacy of that belief. First off, the fort was poorly situated to resist an attack from the north, as it had originally been constructed by the French to resist an attack from the south (which it did gloriously in 1758.) [18] Secondly, the fort was in dire need of repair. Upon inspection in 1775, Schuyler was shocked at its condition and reported the garrison so lacking in alertness he could take it with just a "pen knife.." [19] Thanks to Schuyler's efforts at rehabilitation, the fort was in better shape than it was in the beginning of the Revolutionary War, but still, Schuyler always planned to abandon the post if necessary and informed Congress the same as early as June 1775. [20] Despite Schuyler's efforts, the fort's defenses remained inadequate in 1777. The powder magazine was rotted, and due to a lack of funds the majority of the garrison was either sick or lacked basic equipment, including guns. [21] But perhaps most disastrously, to the southwest of Ticonderoga is a hill called Mt. Defiance that provided high ground that could be used to bombard the fort. [22] Lt. Colonel John Trumbull, the future portraitist, had seen this flaw in the fort's defenses and drew up a report with a recommendation to fortify the position. He sent copies to Gates, Schuyler and the Continental Congress. Gates, perhaps disingenuously, said afterward that he was persuaded. Schuyler, however, "thought it wrong to throw away labor in preventing an evil that could never happen." [23] As a result, Mt. Defiance was not fortified. When the British reached the area, they immediately placed two 12-pound cannons at the top of the hill and had " 'the entire command of the works and buildings both of Ticonderoga and Mt. Independence...' "[24] St. Clair had no choice but to evacuate Fort Ticonderoga and retreat.

The British had an excellent start to their campaign, and after the fall of Fort Ticonderoga they continued to move southwards towards Albany via Lake Champlain. In three weeks after leaving Canada, the British had covered over one hundred miles and captured the most important American post, with its nearly irreplaceable 128 guns. The British were only forty miles from Albany and were in far stronger shape than the Americans. [25] The evacuation of Fort Ticonderoga without a fight was a bitter disappointment to Schuyler and he knew his reputation would be sullied. At this point, the Northern Department was in desperate straits. St. Clair and his forces had gone missing after the retreat from Fort Ticonderoga, all of their artillery from Ticonderoga was gone, supplies were minimal and manpower was low. In one of the many letters sent to his superiors, Schuyler described his troops as, "boys and men to aged for Field." Many had taken the field poorly armed, inadequately accoutered, naked and without blankets, yet these were the only men raised for continental service [26] Schuyler simultaneously needed to stall Burgoyne's advance and improve the state of the department. Richard Ketchum states, "If ever a man had a full plate, laden with ingredients for indigestion, it was Major General Philip Schuyler." [27] It looked as if the British were going to sweep through to Albany in a matter of days, and at this point, Schuyler and the Americans could only hope that Burgoyne would make a mistake that would buy them time. Incredibly, Burgoyne obliged.

General Burgoyne was faced with a decision of what route to take from Fort Ticonderoga to Albany. His choices were either by land or by water. The route that he chose was very important because it "would determine the direction and organization of his supply line, on which everything depended." Prior to this point, the British troops were moving so rapidly that they had started to outrun their provisions and artillery. Therefore, they had to choose their route carefully. [28] Burgoyne eventually chose to go by land, which meant that they would march from Skenesborough to Fort Anne and another sixteen miles from Fort Anne to Fort Edward. When Burgoyne made the critical mistake of advancing towards Fort Anne rather than backtracking to the northern end of Lake George and using that water route, General Schuyler made the decision to start destroying the roads and trails turning his route "into a nightmarish jungle." [29]

Burgoyne would be marching through the wilderlands of northern New York, an area described as "an unforgiving country, no place for an army to travel—gloomy, forbidding, the swamps throbbing with the sounds of insects, the air stifling, dark little streams and meander that seemed to go nowhere." [30] This route would be difficult but Schuyler and his men made it even more so. Using Fabian tactics and putting numerous obstacles in Burgoyne's way, Schuyler and the Continentals "sent trees crashing down in tangles across the roadways, broke up bridges, diverted streams and impeded the invader's path with water and boulders." [31] The British had to drag trees away from the middle of the road and build wagons, reconstruct bridges and causeways in order to cross creeks and marshes. As Burgoyne reported, " 'The country was a wilderness, in almost every part of the passage the enemy took the means of cutting large timber trees on both sides of the road so as to lay across and lengthwise with the branches interwoven. The troops had not only layers of them to remove in places where it was impossible to take any other direction, but also they had above forty bridges to construct and others to repair, one of which was logwood over a morass, two miles in extent.' "[32]

It should also be kept in mind that most of the men under Schuyler's control were militiamen. Even the Continental soldiers were not professional soldiers such as the experienced British and German regiments. Schuyler made perfect use of men far more suited to hard labor than to combat. Richard Ketchum captures this idea perfectly when he states "A man who had cleared acres of forest to create a farmstead, who had built his own home out of timber he cut and hewed, and whose sole source of heat in winter comes from his stack of firewood gets to be uncommonly handy with an axe. And when hundreds of such fellows are put to work at what they do best, the results are likely to be prodigious, as the British and Germans were about to learn." [33] By utilizing the strengths of his inexperienced troops, Schuyler's scheme for slowing down the British was very successful. It took Burgoyne twenty-four days to cover just twenty-three miles in order to reach Fort Edward. [34]

On top of the delaying tactics, Schuyler also ordered a scorched earth policy. Crops were destroyed and any livestock was scared away by the Continental soldiers. In the eighteenth century, it was a common practice for an army to live off the land, so the scorched earth policy meant that Burgoyne had to rely solely on his lengthy supply lines for provisions. Burgoyne's lines were already very long, and as one German general pointed out "The best way to supply the army on the march...was to

collect cattle from abandoned homesteads, as his fellows had been doing around Castle Town, and to buy beef animals from friendly farmers, at the same time acquiring draft animals by the same methods." [35]

Schuyler had seriously weakened Burgoyne's army. With his troops exhausted from the backbreaking work required to clear roads, and half starved due to the beleaguered supply lines, Burgoyne knew the stripped and burned land couldn't sustain his army. Receiving reports that there was a sizable store of unprotected flour and livestock in Bennington, Burgoyne sent a column of troops to retrieve these supplies. However, General John Stark and the New Hampshire/Vermont militia (reinforced with troops sent by Schuyler) [36] were in Bennington guarding the stores, and a fierce engagement took place outside Bennington that resulted in two hundred British killed and six hundred and ninety-six captured. The Americans, on the other hand, only suffered thirty dead and about fifty wounded. [37] This victory, viewed on the American side as a riposte to the fall of Ticonderoga, was important because not only did it reduce the size of Burgoyne's army, it also forced the British back on their tenuous supply lines. The Battle of Bennington was the first significant setback to Burgoyne's advancement except for the major difficulty Schuyler had created by forcing his slow movement of provisions, troops and artillery. [38]

Another blow to the British cause came when St. Leger was stopped at Fort Schuyler (formerly named Fort Stanwix.) Located on the important portage connecting Wood Creek and the Mohawk River, the fort had been besieged by St. Leger and his Indian allies since August 3rd. On August 13, Schuyler sent nine hundred men under Benedict Arnold to lift the siege. St. Leger was relying on Indians to wreak havoc in the area, but Arnold succeeded in freeing Fort Schuyler because he was able to get the Indians to abandon their British allies. Like Schuyler, Arnold's success relied more on wiles than firepower: by spreading a rumor about the great size of his army through Hon-Yost, a mentally defective man viewed as a prophet by the Indians, [39] Arnold got the Indians to desert in large numbers. The Indians broke into the British rum stores and abandoned St. Leger's works before Arnold ever reached Fort Schuyler, and the siege was lifted on August 23, 1777. [40] Stopping St. Leger was crucial to the Americans; had St. Leger been able to continue down the Mohawk River to join Burgoyne, the British would have had troops in the rear of the main American force. [41]

As the summer of 1777 went on, the situation for the Americans was getting better. Schuyler had succeeded in buying time to reorganize and prepare his army for an engagement, while Burgoyne's troops had become significantly weakened during their arduous advance. All the while, Schuyler was also working hard to increase the size of his army by requesting more troops from Washington and trying to convince New England leaders that their militia was needed. [42] By the time the first battle of *Saratoga* took place on September 19, 1777, Schuyler had procured thousands of troops and dozens of artillery pieces for the Northern Army. General Schuyler's strategy of not risking his army in a decisive action but working to weaken the invaders through the use of "scorched earth," delay and harassment was successful. In September 1777, neither the British nor the American armies were the same instruments of war as they were in July 1777.

Schuyler, however, was unable to enjoy the fruits of his ingenuous tactics. Even though he hadn't been in command of Fort Ticonderoga when it fell, he was blamed for the fort's uninspired defense and subsequent capture. General Gates, one of the most political generals in the American army, and New England representatives to Congress such as Sam Adams, had been working diligently all summer long to remove Schuyler from his position after the events at Fort Ticonderoga. Finally on August 4, 1777, Congress officially relieved Schuyler from command. Washington was originally asked to choose a successor but he declined, so Congress appointed General Gates as the new Major General of the Northern Department. Schuyler's removal wasn't just about his military record; it was also because of intersectional politics. There was long-standing enmity between the Dutch in New York and New Englanders stemming from the French and Indian wars, and New Englanders did not favor Schuyler because he was of Dutch ancestry. Also, as one of the largest and most successful landowners in the colonies, the so-called yeoman farmers of New England supposedly distrusted Schuyler and were reluctant to serve under his command. Finally, "his support for New York's claim to the disputed area of the New Hampshire Grants (now Vermont) against the powerful New Englanders had made him important enemies in Congress." [43] Even though he was discharged in early August, Schuyler remained at his post until Gates reached headquarters to replace him, which was not until August 19. [44] One month later the British and Americans met at the battle of Freeman's Farm. During the battle, the British were again heavily bled; Burgoyne lost about six

hundred men while the American casualties only totaled about four hundred.

For the next three weeks, the Americans and British strengthened their positions until the second battle of *Saratoga* took place on October 7. During this interval, the British were quite simply miserable. Their camp “stank of rotting corpses...about eight hundred sick and wounded lay in tents and roughly constructed huts, while the cries of the unrecovered others filled the darkness and mingled hideously with the cries of wolves who gathered to feed upon them or to scratch up the freshly buried dead.” [45] Supplies were running low and the battle on October 7 was a last ditch attempt on Burgoyne’s part to break through the American lines. Once again, the action was a disaster for the British, and Burgoyne had no other option but to surrender. Burgoyne’s army had been on the march since May of that year and his troops were surrounded and spent.

The question that needs to be asked is, who should be given credit for the victory at *Saratoga*, Philip Schuyler, Horatio Gates or Benedict Arnold? The answer is that all three deserve a fair share of the credit. Even though Schuyler was not the commander when the actual victory took place, he was responsible for a string of successes that eventually led to Burgoyne’s shattering defeat. Schuyler’s Fabian tactics broke the British army down during their overly long and miserable march from Fort Ticonderoga to *Saratoga*. Also, this delay contributed greatly to the outcome of the campaign because it gave the Americans time to gather their forces. The Northern Department was in chaos before Schuyler took charge of the summer campaign; there were few soldiers, practically no supplies, and Fort Ticonderoga, mistakenly believed to be an impregnable cornerstone of the American defenses, was in shambles. The army could not have successfully met any British engagement in June of 1777, but by the time Gates took command of the troops, the Continentals were much better equipped, experienced, and more numerous. All through the summer, Schuyler did “...everything in his power to strengthen the Northern Department with almost inexhaustible energy.” [46] By wielding all the resources at hand and playing to the strengths of his men, Schuyler completely altered the course of the campaign by engineering the twin British defeats at Bennington and Fort Schuyler, thus setting the stage for Burgoyne’s dramatic surrender. As General Nathanael Greene wrote of *Saratoga*, “The victory would have been impossible without [Schuyler’s] direction...General Gates came in just time to reap the laurels and rewards.” [47]

This article started out as a term paper by Abigail, a senior at Gettysburg College majoring in History. She works summers as an interpreter at the Schuyler Mansion State Historic Site in Albany, NY. Her father, Paul, enhanced the paper into this article. Paul was the manager of Schuyler Mansion and the Crailo State Historic Site in Rensselaer, NY during the 1970s. They encourage the reader to visit these sites to gain an understanding of what men like Philip Schuyler and John Van Rensselaer put at risk with their support of the war for independence.

## Footnotes

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3 Bush, *Revolutionary Enigma*, 6.

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8 Stuart R. Lehman, “This Patriot and Soldier: The Military Career of Philip Schuyler,” (paper written for Schuyler Mansion State Historic Site, Albany, NY, 1987), 23; *Journals of the Continental Congress*, Vol. 2, Library of Congress, 99.

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- 24 Robert Harvey, *A Few Bloody Noses: The Realities and Mythologies of the American Revolution* (The Overlook Press, New York, 2002), 246.
- 25 Hibbert, *Redcoats and Rebels*, 171.
- 26 Gerlach, *Proud Patriot*, 290.
- 27 Ketchum, *Saratoga*, 245.
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- 29 Ketchum, *Saratoga*, 248.
- 30 Ketchum, *Saratoga*, 250.
- 31 Gerlach, *Proud Patriot*, 260.
- 32 Harvey, *A Few Bloody Noses*, 248.
- 33 Ketchum, *Saratoga*, 248.
- 34 Gerlach, *Proud Patriot*, 260.
- 35 Ketchum, *Saratoga*, 241.
- 36 Gerlach, *Proud Patriot*, 268-272; Copy of Orders to Colonel Warner, Ft. Edward, dated July 15, 1777, *Proceedings of a Court Martial...of Major General Philip Schuyler* (Philadelphia, 1778), 50.
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- 39 Ketchum, *Saratoga*, 334; Harvey, *A Few Bloody Noses*, 253.
- 40 Bobrick, *Angel in the Whirlwind*, 262; Robert Harvey, *A Few Bloody Noses*, 253.
- 41 Bush, *Revolutionary Enigma*, 131.
- 42 Gerlach, *Proud Patriot*, 277, 289-290.
- 43 Harvey, *A Few Bloody Noses*, 261.
- 44 Gerlach, *Proud Patriot*, 303.
- 45 Bobrick, *Angel in the Whirlwind*, 274-275.
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