The Last Battle

The French were on the verge of retaking Quebec. Then the ice broke on the St. Lawrence River — and all hope for New France sank. *by P. G. Smith*

The winter of 1760 had been particularly harsh. In the settlement of Quebec, almost half of the British soldiers, Scottish Highlanders, and American Rangers that made up the five-thousand-man garrison were unable to stand duty. Nearly seven hundred had died from disease since the British victory of September 1759. No one knows how many of the civilian colonists had also succumbed to dysentery, scurvy, or other illnesses brought on by frigid temperatures and insufficient food supplies.

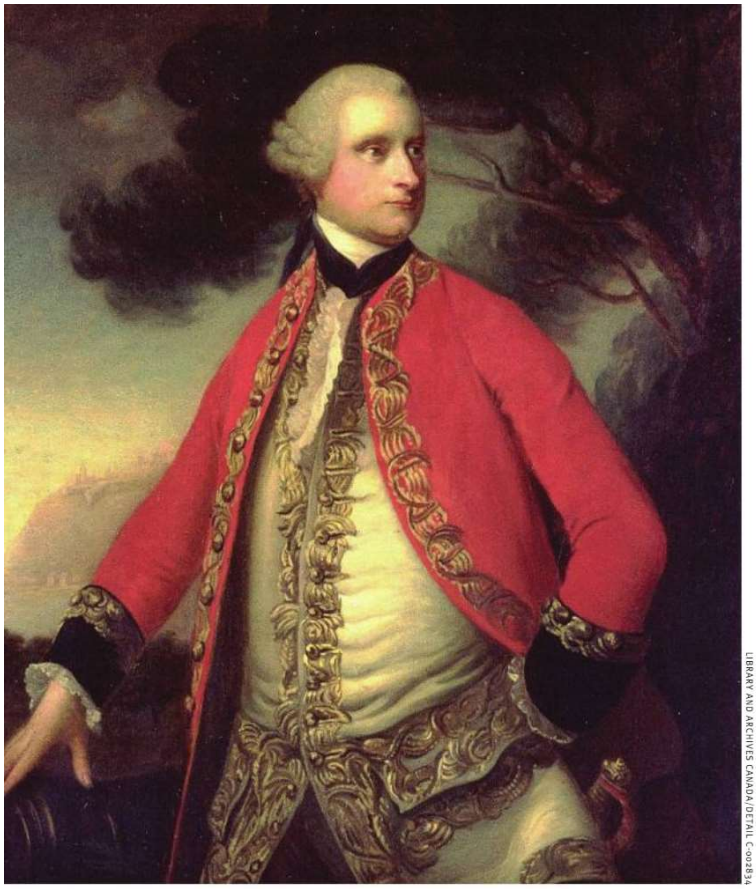
Spring was late that year and heavy snowdrifts covered the ground during the last week of April 1760. Brig.-Gen. James Murray, commander of the Quebec garrison, anxiously scanned the St. Lawrence for the approach of British ships that would bring relief for his suffering troops. However, instead of signs of the long-awaited convoy, the river brought news of a different sort.On the morning of April 27, British sailors carried a half-dead French artilleryman to Murray's quarters. The Frenchman had been rescued from the icy river after his boat capsized in the darkness. The shivering captive warned Murray that a massive force of French, Canadiens, and their First Nations allies would soon arrive from Montreal to attack Quebec.

Murray quickly assembled about a thousand troops and ordered that ten cannon be pulled along by their crews, since the horses that would ordinarily haul the gun carriages had long ago been eaten by the famished garrison.

Perhaps the promise of a decisive battle was welcome to soldiers after a long and anxious winter of sleeping in their boots. Clerk John Johnson of the 48th Regiment described the conditions in *Memoirs of the Siege of Quebec and Total Reduction of Canada in 1759 and 1760*: "From our first entrance in the Town of Quebec, our orders were every

Above:
The Battle of Sainte-Foy, **watercolour by George B. Campion (1796–1870).**

Left:
A view of the church of Notre-Dame-de-la-Victoire, Quebec City, **painting by Dominic Serres, 1760.**



LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA/DETAIL C-002834

Above: ***Brig.-Gen. James Murray,*** **painting by an unknown artist, circa 1770.**

Right: Brig.-Gen. François-Gaston, Duc de Lévis, commander of the French army in North America. Artist and date of painting unknown.

night repeated, to lye on our arms: No officer, or soldier, unless he was sick, was allowed to undress, or go to bed; nor were we on any pretence, allowed to put off our accoutrements during the night."

A cold, steady rain began to fall as the British sallied forth from the walled city to gather in the light infantry detachments that were manning small outposts in the neighbouring villages of Ste. Foy, Sillery, and Cap Rouge. Murray could ill-afford the loss of any able-bodied men as he prepared to repel an onslaught from an enemy force more than twice the size of his sickly garrison.

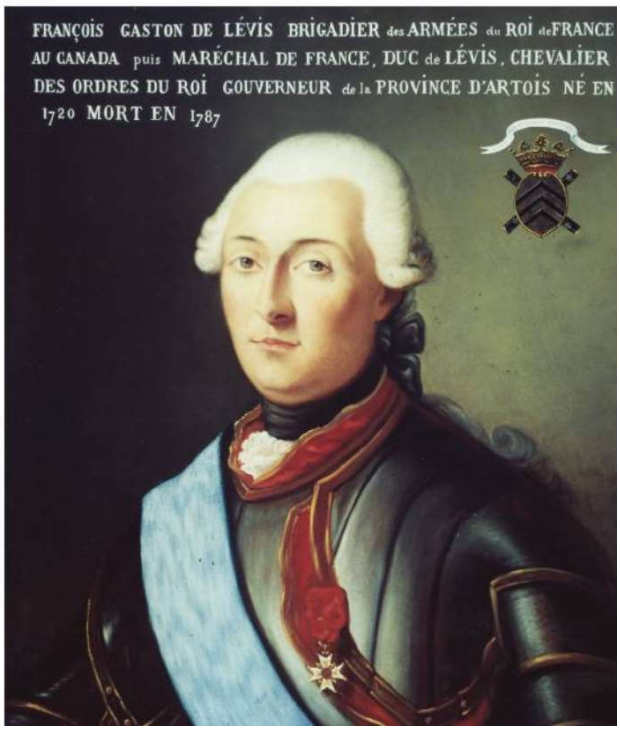
Meanwhile, Brig.-Gen. François-Gaston, Duc de Lévis, commander of the French army in North America, was positioning his nearly nine thousand troops beyond the forest near Ste. Foy. His force included regulars, militiamen, and First Nations warriors eager for a fight. Their mission was to retake Quebec from British control.

The sodden British army came under fire from French skirmishers as it approached Ste. Foy. Murray quickly deployed his infantry on a ridge and ordered his cannon to open fire on the woods that concealed the French. The smoke and shot effectively covered the retreat of the British light infantrymen as they scampered away from the outposts. After blowing up a church that housed an ammunition dump, the British retreated in good order to the fortress of Quebec. Murray was pleased with the conduct of his troops and ordered an extra ration of rum for the garrison that night. He knew they would need sustenance for the bloody business that was to come.

The rain stopped on the morning of April 28, but the ground was covered with soggy snowdrifts, pools of rainwater, and slippery mud. Again the British commander marched out from the walls of Quebec, this time with nearly three thousand troops and twenty-two cannon. In a later report, Murray described his strategy: "When I considered that our little army was in the habit of beating that enemy, and had a very fine train of artillery … I resolved to give them battle." The ragtag collection of soldiers — many of whom had risen from their hospital beds that morning — moved forward on the Plains of Abraham until the French were within range of their deadly cannon. The British then halted and let loose a deafening fusillade of cannon and musket fire. After initially charging the British lines, Lévis ordered his troops to take cover in the forest just beyond the village of Ste. Foy.

Mistaking the French withdrawal for a general retreat, Murray ordered his infantry forward to pursue the French force. In doing so, Murray lost the benefit of his position on the high ground. He also lost the advantage that his artillery gave him, because cannon cannot be fired at troops engaged in close combat. Moreover, the Canadien militiamen and First Nations warriors were now fighting from the forest, a type of warfare at which they excelled. The tide of battle soon turned. With the terrain covered with deep snowdrifts and sucking mud, Murray was forced to abandon most of his artillery, as well as many of his dead and wounded, and retreat behind the massive stone walls of Quebec.

The second battle of Quebec, or, as it has passed into the history books, the Battle of Ste. Foy, was a vicious two-hour struggle on April 28, 1760, that cost the British more than a thousand killed, wounded, or missing. The French had 800 casualties.



CHATEAU RAMEZAY MUSEUM/ MCR1998-1522

The fight took place seven months after Gen. James Wolfe's British forces defeated the army of Gen. Louis-Joseph de Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham. In that earlier battle in Septemer 1759, Lévis' forces had arrived too late and were forced to retreat to Montreal for the winter.

Now, with spring in the air, Lévis was poised to retake Quebec for France — so long as France came through with badly needed provisions. Lévis began a systematic siege. Lévis had plenty of cannon, but he was limited by his ammunition supply and the relatively small calibre of the guns, which were incapable of quickly breaching Quebec's walls.

Murray, unsuccessful as a field commander, proved himself to be an inspiring leader and a capable manager as he set about organizing the defence of Quebec. Fortifications were rebuilt, supplies reapportioned, and guard posts mounted. More importantly, Murray restored the fighting spirit of his starving, battered soldiers.

Meanwhile, the peculiar pleasantries of eighteenth-century warfare were not forgotten. Lévis had a wagonload of spruce boughs delivered to Murray, who had a fondness for spruce beer. Murray reciprocated by sending a Cheshire cheese to the French commander. Lévis and Murray would eventually come to be friends and maintained a cordial relationship throughout their lives.

In stark contrast to the genteel conduct of the commanders, British prisoners suffered unspeakable horrors at the hands of their First Nations captors. Large numbers of their scalps were found hanging from the trees — a gruesome atrocity for which the French were to be held responsible.

Two weeks into the siege, the ice dams of the St. Lawrence finally melted, and on May 8 a single ship was spotted on the river. Both armies watched in anticipation to see if the ship's mainmast bore the white pennant of France or the red cross of Great Britain. The spring breeze unfurled the flag and a cheer rose from the walls as the soldiers caught a flicker of red at the masthead. The British garrison of Quebec was saved.

In the days that followed, more British ships sailed into the harbour. Soon the British fleet was strong enough to sink or rout all of the French vessels that supplied Lévis' army. A frustrated Lévis complained that one French frigate could have saved the colony for another year. In a letter to Intendant François Bigot on May 15, Lévis wrote: "I truly fear that France has abandoned us. … We have done and are doing what we can. It is my opinion that the colony will be lost without resources. If no help comes, all that we can do is prolong the time, in the hope that peace can be made during this interval."

With hope of retaking Quebec lost, Lévis began a hasty withdrawal to Montreal on May 16, 1760. Murray quickly gathered his forces in pursuit.

Spring turned to summer and the British army slowly rolled up all French resistance as it approached Montreal. By autumn, Lévis found himself and the remnants of his army surrounded by an overwhelming British force. His request to surrender with the honours of war was refused outright by Gen. Jeffrey Amherst, the British commander in North America, who held Lévis responsible for the horrendous treatment of the British prisoners at Ste. Foy.

On the night of September 8, 1760, Lévis formed the remnants of his army on Île Ste. Hélène in Montreal harbour and ordered the standard bearers to hurl their regimental colours onto a bonfire rather than let them fall into British hands as trophies. The sparks rising up into the starry night sky over the St. Lawrence heralded the end of New France as they flickered and turned to ash. The morning would bring a new day for Canada.

CANADIAN FORCES JOINT IMAGERY CENTER/REC93-2207-7

Lévis encourages his French army at the Battle of Ste. Foy on April 28, 1760, in this painting by René Bombled. The title of the work is: *General de Lévis at the Battle Sainte-Foy in 1870.*

P.G. Smith is an educator, military officer and writer. He lives in Ashburnham, Massachusetts.

Et Cetera

Montcalm and Wolfe, by Francis Parkman. Little, Brown and Co., Boston, 1884.

Quebec Under Two Flags, by Arthur Doughty, Quebec News Company, Quebec City, 1903.