

Major General Richard Montgomery Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

Richard Montgomery, America's first National hero, was born in Dublin, Ireland. Richard was well educated, having graduated from Trinity College in Dublin. He entered the 17th Regiment as an Ensign on August 1756. His regiment was ordered to Nova Scotia where in 1758 he took part in a siege of the fort at Louisburg. He was promoted to Lieutenant because of his bravery during the action. In 1759, he saw action in the capture of Fort Ticonderoga, then Crown Point and following up with a successful assault on Montreal. He was promoted to Captain in 1763 for successful campaigns against Martinique and Havana.

At the end of the Seven Years War, which we call the French and Indian War, he was stationed in New York. He received permission to return to England in 1773. In the English Army of the day, promotion was more in line with social and political connections than with service. Montgomery having been passed over for promotion by numerous officers who had seen little or no combat service made him embittered, where he sold his captain's commission and returned to New York in 1773. He bought a sixty acre farm in Westchester County and settled down to be a gentleman farmer. Montgomery married Janet Livingston (sister of Robert Livingston) who was a member of that influential New York family.

After being a delegate, from Dutchess County, to the Provincial Congress in New York City, Montgomery was promoted to Brigadier General in 1775. He was assigned to general Philip Schuyler as his second in command. General Schuyler suffered from rheumatic gout. As a result, Montgomery assumed command for the invasion of Canada. The expedition was undertaken with more optimism than proper preparation. Montgomery led his force to Whitehall, New York then to Fort Ticonderoga which had been captured by Colonels Ethan Allen and Benedict Arnold.

At this point, Major General Sir Guy Carleton was organizing a naval force on the northern shores of Lake Champaign to deny Americans access to the St. Lawrence River. Carleton knew he developed a plan of delaying actions, rather than retreat to Montreal and Quebec. This tactic permitted the Americans to capture outpost after outpost, but this took time and winter was approaching and this is precisely what Carleton was counting on.

On November 2nd, 1775, the strategic Fort at Saint John's fell after a lengthy siege. Among those 500 regulars captured was Captain John Andre. But this very difficult winter campaign brought the British valuable time and eventually saved Canada for the British. Montgomery next captured Montreal but not before Carleton was able to evacuate most of his troops and retreat to the fortress city of Quebec. As a reward for his leadership, Montgomery was promoted to Major General.

On December 3rd, Montgomery joined forces with Colonel Benedict Arnold. Arnold's men did not have the proper clothing and supplies in the cold harsh winter elements. So as Colonel Benedict Arnold stood at attention in front of his ragamuffin regiment and saluted this turncoat hero (in the eyes of the British and some Americans), he not only turned over his troops and his command to Montgomery, but was eclipsed in the eyes of many of his men. One of the first officers to switch was Arron Burr, who asked Arnold for a letter of recommendation so he could leave Arnold and become Montgomery's aide-de-camp. Now, Montgomery announced that "every soldier would receive a gold Spanish dollar from the Continental Congress, a new British winter uniform, warm and heavy fur lined blanket coat, hat, leggings, shoes and snowshoes", all captured from British transports at Montreal. Montgomery's manner and generosity dazzled Arnold men. Private Morris of Arnold's regiment said, "General Montgomery was born to command." Richard Montgomery was Benedict Arnold's model of what a soldier should be, and by the end of December 1775, the two were like brothers.

The Americans tried to get the British to surrender Quebec but realized a siege was out of the question as they lacked artillery. So, the only course of action was a direct assault to a well-fortified city. On December 31, 1775, leading the 1st New York (during a snow storm), Montgomery moved within 50 yards of the British defensive barrier and shouted, "***Men of New York, you will not fear to follow where your general leads!***" He raised his sword and attacked. The defending British held their fire until the Americans were within point blank range and then opened fire. The hail of gun fire and cannon ball devastated the Americans. Montgomery and eleven of his men were killed instantly. Only Captain Arron Burr and two other soldiers survived. Aaron Burr tried to carry Montgomery's body to safety but he sank in the snow as he carried the General's much larger body away. It became clear his efforts would be futile and Burr fled to escape capture.

General Carleton ordered Montgomery's burial with full military honors but keep it simple and quiet.

On January 25, 1776, Congress approved creation of a memorial for Montgomery – the first monument ever commissioned by the United States. Benjamin Franklin, who would oversee the monument's construction in France, was advanced 300-pound sterling to cover the costs. It was erected in 1788 on the Broadway side of St. Paul's Chapel, where it stands today.

The War of 1812 brought a renewed interest in Montgomery's story. In 1818, Montgomery's widow Janet persuaded the New York State legislature to authorize moving Montgomery's remains from Quebec to a tomb below his monument at St. Paul's Chapel. July 8, 1818, amidst great fanfare, Montgomery's remains were re-interred there.

General Montgomery can safely be called the first true American Hero.

A few years later, the Montgomery Guard was organized in Richmond in honor of Major General Richard Montgomery.