

This Day in History... October 11, 1776

Battle of Valcour Island

On October 11, 1776, the Continental Navy participated in one of its first naval battles of the Revolutionary War at Valcour Bay.

After the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, American forces attempted to invade Quebec because they believed the British would use it as a starting point to attack and divide the colonies. However, the British fought back their attack and launched their own offensive toward the Hudson River. Their goal was to capture Lake Champlain and the upper Hudson River to link their forces in Quebec with those in New York City.

In their retreat from Quebec, the American troops destroyed ships, sawmills, and forts in and near Lake Champlain to prevent their use by the British. Benedict Arnold remained behind with a small fleet of lightly armed ships. The British then sent a request back to Europe for prefabricated ships to be sent over to help them take the lake. In all, the British had 25 ships to the Americans' 15, armed with 80 guns compared to the Americans' 74 smaller guns. Some of these British ships were much larger and equipped with better weapons; they far outgunned the American ships.



Stamp issued for the 350th anniversary of America's commercial shipbuilding industry.

The Americans were also busy building ships for Lake Champlain. That area of upstate New York was an unusual place for shipbuilders, so the Navy had to offer high wages to bring skilled craftsmen from the coast. In fact, the shipbuilders on Lake Champlain were the highest-paid employees in the navy outside of the commodore. Major General Horatio Gates oversaw the American effort with support from several others, including Benedict Arnold. For his role in the shipbuilding, Arnold was placed in command of the fleet.

During the summer of 1776, Arnold began sailing his fleet on the lake in search of the perfect battle position. Upon learning that the British fleet was much more powerful, he chose a narrow, rocky area between the western shore of Lake Champlain and Valcour Island. The British reached Lake Champlain on October 9 and anchored 15 miles north of Arnold's position on the night of October 10.

The following day, the British sailed south, passing the northern tip of Valcour Island. Arnold sent two of his ships out to get their attention, but after a brief exchange of fire, they attempted to return. During the return trip, one of the boats ran aground and was captured by the British. The British then came under fire from the Americans. By about 12:30 p.m., both sides were fully engaged in the fighting, which would continue throughout the afternoon.

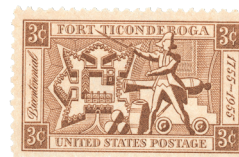
Around dark, the Americans began to retreat and the British halted their attack. By the battle's end, most of the American ships were damaged or sinking and they suffered about 60 casualties. Knowing he was unable to defeat the British, Arnold silently sailed his fleet past them overnight to retreat to Crown Point. The British pursued them the next day and the Americans came ashore in Vermont to make the rest of their trip on land, burning their ships before they left. Upon reaching Crown Point, Arnold decided it was not a suitable place to defend against the British and abandoned it, moving to Fort Ticonderoga.

The British occupied Crown Point the next day. However, winter was fast approaching and they decided to stay there for the winter. Though he had lost the battle, Arnold had succeeded in delaying the British plans for the upper Hudson River valley.

The site of the battle was later made a National Historic Landmark.



Stamp honoring the Continental Navy.



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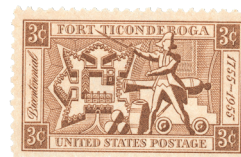
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