

# Saratoga 1777: The Crucible

James H. Hillestad draws inspiration from the turning point of the American Revolution to deploy W. Britain figures in a diorama

Text and Photos: James H. Hillestad

An invitation to a good friend's wedding last fall at Lake George, N.Y., expanded into a side trip to the Saratoga National Historical Park, which in turn inspired an American Revolutionary War battlefield diorama.

The focus was the pivotal clash at Freeman's Farm during the Battles of Saratoga.

I used 1:32-scale, matt-finished figures and scenic accessories from W. Britain to re-create the clash in miniature. The toy soldiers recruited for the scene included British 10th Foot Light Infantry pitted against Colonial militiamen and Continental Line Infantry of New York/New Jersey.

## BATTLE BACKGROUND

Sir Guy Carleton, the British governor of Canada, had attempted to invade the Province of New York from the north by way of Lake Champlain in 1776. His drive was blunted at Valcour Island by an American flotilla led by Benedict Arnold Oct. 11.

Less than two months later, Sir William Howe, the British commander in chief in North America, suffered defeats at the hands of American Gen. George Washington in the Battles of Trenton and

Princeton in New Jersey.

Responding to these major setbacks, British Gen. John Burgoyne, Carleton's second in command, proposed an ambitious plan to King George III and Lord Germain, the secretary of state for America. Burgoyne wanted to attack the Americans in a way that would isolate New England from the other colonies. He promoted his plan without either the knowledge or the concurrence of Howe.

## CAMPAIGN PLAN

"Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne's campaign plan called for a three-pronged invasion of New York by British armies operating along major waterways.

The major strike force, commanded by Burgoyne, would descend on Albany by way of Lake Champlain and the Upper Hudson River.

A smaller army, under the command of Brig. Gen. Barry St. Leger, would advance on Albany from Lake Ontario and the Mohawk Valley.

The third pincer would be elements of Howe's main army, which would proceed northward from New York City along the Hudson.

Burgoyne's plan called for the three British forces to link up at Albany and



"British 10th Foot Light Infantry Charging No. 1" (ref. 18014).

defeat the Northern Department of the American Army. He would then go on to invade New England and reoccupy Boston, the hotbed of revolutionary sentiment.

## THE PLAN UNFOLDS

All went well, at first.

American-held Fort Ticonderoga commanded the Lake Champlain/Lake George waterway corridor extending from the St. Lawrence River to the north to the Hudson River to the south. After Burgoyne's soldiers took command of high ground with artillery and nearly surrounded the Americans' defenses, fort commander Gen. Arthur St. Clair withdrew his 3,000 troops July 6, 1777.

Most of the American army escaped eastward to Vermont. There the Colonials suffered another defeat in the Battle of Hubbardton.

Meanwhile, the sick and wounded, together with the rebel army's baggage, fled down Lake George in a flotilla.

Burgoyne dispatched troops in pursuit. They captured some of the Americans at Skenesborough (Whitehall), N.Y.

Unhappily for Burgoyne, his good fortune had run out.

St. Leger's force met stiff resistance at Fort Stanwix (Rome, N.Y.), an American



Figures by W. Britain animate the First Battle of Saratoga diorama.



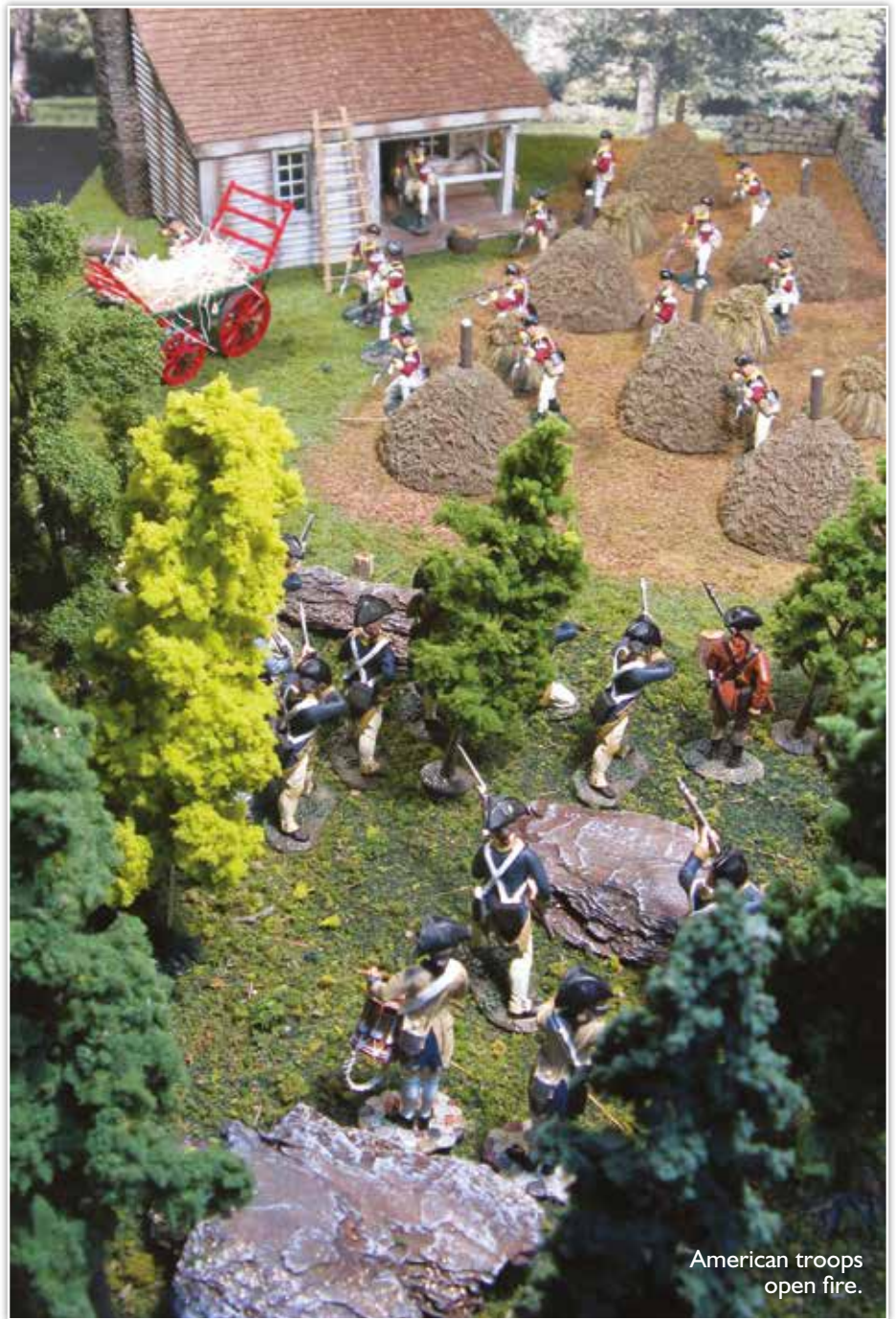
To cut off the Revolution's heart in New England, Burgoyne planned a three-pronged offensive aimed at Albany, N.Y., from the north, south and west.

post guarding the western gateway to the Mohawk Valley, and the nearby Battle of Oriskany Aug. 6. The imminent arrival of a relief column commanded by Gen. Arnold decided the issue. The British retreated west to Oswego, N.Y., on the shore of Lake Ontario.

As for Howe, not having a vested interest in the overall plan, he opted to leave Burgoyne to shift for himself in the back country of the upper Hudson. Instead of completing his part of the plan, Howe embarked on a seaborne invasion of the Chesapeake. Philadelphia, the American capital, was his ultimate goal.

### PRELUDE TO SARATOGA

Despite these unpropitious events, Burgoyne elected to abandon his supply line to Canada. He captured a few enemy supply depots a bit north of where the



American troops open fire.



"Continental Line New York/New Jersey Standing Firing No. 1" (ref. 18016).

"British 10th Foot Light Infantry NCO No. 1" (ref. 18042).

"Colonial Militia Standing Firing No. 1" (ref. 18043).

"Continental Line New York/New Jersey Advancing No. 1" (ref. 18018).

## Special Section: Upstate N.Y. Battlefields



Hudson makes a sharp turn west. He spent the month of August at one of them: Fort Edward of French and Indian War fame.

Hoping to find supplies and badly needed horses for his dismounted cavalry, Burgoyne sent a contingent of about 800 of his German mercenaries toward

Bennington, Vt. Most of them were either killed, wounded or captured by American militia led by Gen. John Stark and Col. Seth Warner in the Aug. 16 Battle of Bennington. It actually took place about 10 miles west on the New York side of the border.

In early September, Burgoyne resumed

his southward advance on Albany. His troops marched along improvised wagon tracks bordering the west bank of the Hudson River. Boats were used to float many of his supplies down the river.

Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates, the new commander of the Northern Department of the American Army, had not been idle. He started entrenching his troops on Bemis Heights just south of old Saratoga (Schuylerville, N.Y.) Sept. 12. The ridge of bluffs in the Town of Stillwater, N.Y., is located southeast of today's city of Saratoga Springs.

The Patriot position on Bemis Heights overlooked a section of the Hudson and river road where the terrain created a natural and unavoidable bottleneck for the advancing British army to squeeze through. Gates' men built formidable defenses with 22 cannons. From their vantage point, they could strike both the waterway and the road through the narrow defile.



"British 10th Foot Light  
Infantry Standing Firing  
No. 1" (ref. 18026).



"British 10th Foot Light  
Infantry Advancing No. 1"  
(ref. 18048).

"Colonial Militia  
at Port Arms  
No. 1" (ref.  
18045).





British light infantry are called out.



Bemis Heights overlooking the Hudson River.



The battlefield's "Boot Monument" memorializes Arnold's wound and his heroism at Saratoga. His name, however, was omitted due to his later changing sides in the war.

### BATTLE JOINED

Burgoyne, with 6,000 men, would now be confronted by 9,000 Americans. The latter included Arnold's 1,200 Continentals, fresh from their victorious campaign against St. Leger.

There was also a detachment of 500 riflemen (described by Washington as "chosen men"), commanded by the legendary Col. Daniel Morgan. His men had earned Washington's sobriquet through years of fighting Indians along the frontier. Morgan was a remarkable figure -- a brawling, untutored frontiersman, who signaled his riflemen in battle with turkey calls!

On Sept. 19, Burgoyne divided his army into three columns to sweep around where he thought the Americans might be. He

accompanied the center column. The British general's local Tory and Indian scouts had deserted him, so like the mythical Argus, it was "all eyes and no sight."

His troops ran into Continentals and Morgan's riflemen, who were concealed in woods near a 15-acre clearing known as Freeman's Farm. The owner, John Freeman, was a Loyalist who had headed north to Fort Edward to meet up with Burgoyne's army.

For three hours, the fight swayed to and fro across the clearing. After the British were reinforced by troops from their left wing, the Americans retired to Bemis Heights.

So ended the First Battle of Saratoga. The encounter cost the British force about 600 men -- double the American losses.

### BATTLE RESUMES

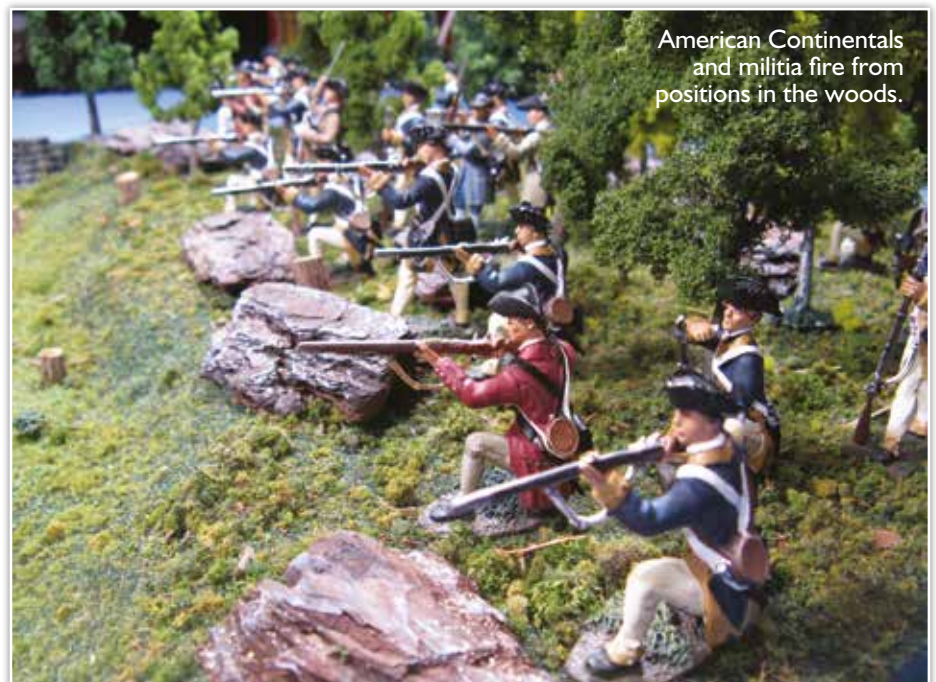
Burgoyne renewed his offensive Oct. 7, triggering the Second Battle of Saratoga.

His troops, however, were a shadow of what they had been just a month before.

"Continental Line New York/New Jersey Kneeling Loading No. 1" (ref. 18020).



"Continental Line New York/New Jersey Reaching for Cartridge No. 1" (ref. 18019).



American Continentals and militia fire from positions in the woods.



Map showing the opposing armies' movements during the First Battle of Saratoga.



British light infantrymen go into action.

They were low on forage for their horses. The men were on half-rations. Many of the Redcoats had succumbed to weakness and disease. Winter was coming soon.

On the American side, Gates now had 11,000 men and his army was growing daily. The one element missing was Arnold, who had had a falling out with Gates and been relieved of his command.

As soon as the sound of gunfire began

to echo through the woods, however, Arnold rode from the camp to direct the attack. The general rallied troops who assaulted and captured the enemy's Breymann Redoubt. But in the course of the action, the valiant Arnold was seriously wounded in the leg.

The British were routed. Their losses included Gen. Simon Fraser, who was mortally wounded by one or more of

Morgan's riflemen.

Ten days later, Burgoyne surrendered his command of 5,791 officers and men and 35 cannons.

### THE AFTERMATH

The outcome of the Battles of Saratoga was to have repercussions far beyond the fact that it was the first substantial victory of the war for the American cause.

The French threw off their cloak of neutrality. Soon the greater part of Europe, including Spain and Holland, followed the French example and joined the American side by declaring war against the British.

Saratoga was a watershed. The Americans showed they could fight a British army on their own terms and win. In addition, the Colonials' new allies turned the North American uprising into a world war embroiling the British in clashes in far-flung places such as North and South Africa, India, and the Caribbean and Mediterranean Seas.

The Battles of Saratoga had such far-reaching impact that the clash became known as the "Turning Point of the Revolution." Because of Saratoga's effect on the course of the future, many historians rank it among the top 15 battles fought throughout world history. ■



"British 10th Foot Light Infantry Reaching for Cartridge No. 1" (ref. 18040).

"Colonial Militia Kneeling Firing No. 1" (ref. 18047).

"Continental Line New York/New Jersey Kneeling Firing No. 1" (ref. 18017).



American Continentals and militia deliver brisk fire during the course of the battle.



"British 10th Foot Light Infantry Kneeling Firing No. 1" (ref. 18041).

### about the writers

James H. Hillestad is the proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum and shop in Cresco, Pa., USA.