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THE BATTLE OF CHATEAUGUAY, AN IMPORTANT FRENCH CANADIAN VICTORY FOR THE PRESERVATION OF BRITISH NORTH AMERICA

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Introduction

1. In June 1812, the United States (U.S.) declared war on Great Britain following several years of trade disputes and animosity with its former colonial authority. The ongoing war in Europe between Britain and France (1793-1815) had devastated the U.S. economy. Naval blockades prevented American merchant ships from delivering their cargoes to European ports. The Royal Navy's practice of stopping U.S. vessels, in search of British sailors deserting for better wages, was also considered a lawless act. At home, American settlers were also blaming the British for selling firearms to the Indians in their fight against a U.S. expansion westward. In defense of their rights, the U.S. Government argued that a war against British North America would restore their honour and force Britain to change its unpopular policies. It was also their belief that capturing Canada's fertile lands and defenceless territories would be simply a matter of marching across the border against a distracted enemy. The dominance of the Royal Navy at sea and its blockade of the American East Coast forced the U.S. to seek victory on land.[1] Since the New England states had declared their neutrality in the conflict, any invasion of Canada would have to take place in the central region. A month later, in July 1812, American forces, although not yet ready for war, were ordered by Congress to invade Canada, and a three-year-long conflict began between the two neighbours. In the early 1800s, the two Canadas lacked the population, the military power, and the national resources to defend itself against a much stronger U.S. opponent. With Great Britain also at war in Europe against Napoleon, the British army in North America was left on its own, faced with the insurmountable task of defending a long border stretching from Montreal to Detroit.

[1] Bowler, Arthur, The War of 1812, (Toronto & Montreal: Holt Rinehart and Winston of Canada) 15.

2. The Commander-in-Chief of British forces in North America, Lieutenant-General (LGen) George Prevost, saw no benefit in provoking the Americans. Prevost instead opted for a strategy of passive defense that would preserve the colony until reinforcements arrived from England.[2] British officials were also concerned about the loyalty of the French Canadians and recent American loyalist emigrants that might welcome the U.S. invasion and take up arms against the colonial regime. In a display of patriotism and sometimes heroism, English and French Canadians rallied behind British troops in repelling the American offensive and preserving their independence. From the outset, Major-General (MGen) Isaac Brock directed a successful campaign in Upper Canada by containing infiltrations and conducting several counter-attacks across the border, often disobeying the higher guidance from LGen Prevost. Meanwhile in Lower Canada, French Canadians responded to the call by quickly mobilizing militia units including a volunteer regiment called "Les Voltigeurs Canadiens", a unit that would shortly see action in the American campaign of 1813 to capture Montreal.

3. In Fall 1813, the U.S. strategy focused on the border along the Saint-Lawrence River with two large armies totalling 12,000 men planning to meet near Montreal to capture the city and cut the lines of communication into the heart of the British colony. The overpowering U.S. invaders were, however, opposed by a well-trained and highly motivated Canadian militia that was prepared to fight hard for the defence of their country. The first encounter occurred on 26 October 1813 along the Chateauguay River, where 1,200 Canadian soldiers stopped one of two U.S. armies advancing towards Montreal, a division of 4,000 men commanded by MGen Hampton. In just a few hours, a

[2] Turner, Wesley, B., British Generals in the War of 1812, (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999) 30.

small group of 300 Canadian militiamen under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel (LCol) de Salaberry defeated a vanguard of approximately 2,000 U.S. troops. The victory at Chateauguay allowed the Canadians time to regroup and concentrate their efforts against the second American force advancing northeast along the Saint-Lawrence River. The next confrontation at Crysler's Farm on 11 November 1813 also resulted in another stunning victory for the Canadian militia. These two important victories in Fall 1813 forced the southern invaders back across the frontier for the winter and saved Canada from an American invasion for at least another year.

4. While smaller in scale than other events of the War of 1812, the battle fought on the banks of the Chateauguay River in October 1813 was a defining moment in Canadian history. In particular, two-thirds of the 300 men under LCol de Salaberry's command that day were French-speaking Canadians from Lower Canada (now Quebec). What motivated this small group of patriots to rise above all expectations and win such an uneven match-up? What caused the American defeat despite their overwhelming numerical superiority on the battlefield? This paper demonstrates that the leadership of the Canadian Commander LCol de Salaberry, the degree of the defensive preparations along the river, the loyalty of French Canadian troops, and a lack of determination from the American invaders were the key factors that contributed to the decisive victory at Chateauguay. A small but well-led military force, mostly composed of French Canadian militia well positioned behind a strong wooden barrier, held off a vastly superior but reluctant American opponent, thereby confirming their allegiance to Canada and ensuring a continued British presence in North America.

The Battle of Chateauguay – 26 October 1813

5. The U.S. campaign in 1813 initially got off to a good start with victories at Fort York (Toronto), Fort George and Queenstown, but these British setbacks were quickly reversed. Realizing that their strategy for conquest of the Canadas was not achieving any great success on the Niagara front, the Americans planned a new campaign to capture the town of Montreal and cut the British supply line between Lower and Upper Canada. Montreal was identified as the strategic centre of gravity, its loss making the British positions untenable in North America. The expedition against Montreal in Fall 1813 involved a simultaneous two-pronged assault by two American forces: one column of 8,000 troops located at Sacketts Harbour on Lake Ontario under the command of MGen Wilkinson to move down the Saint Lawrence, and a second column of 4,000 troops assembled at Plattsburg under the command of MGen Hampton to move up the Champlain valley.[3] Neither force had sufficient strength to capture Montreal, so they hoped to rendezvous near the objective, concentrate their force, and launch a coordinated attack in late September. The use of two separate forces was intended to distract the attention of the defenders as to the final objective of the campaign. This deception was partially achieved as the British Commander-in-Chief, LGen George Prevost, moved additional troops to Kingston in expectation of an attack on his garrison fort located just across from Sacketts Harbour on Lake Ontario. Unfortunately for the Americans, their force commander MGen Wilkinson became ill and the execution of the campaign plan had to wait a few weeks for his recovery.[4]

[3] Suthren, Victor, The War of 1812, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1999) 173.
[4] Ibid, 174.

6. In the meantime, MGen Hampton and his smaller U.S. force had begun to move up the Champlain valley towards Montreal along the historical invasion route. An inability to find water during a very hot and dry summer forced them to change course and go up the Chateauguay River valley along a rough bush-track road.[5] In late September, MGen Hampton's army arrived at Four Corners, New York, and set up camp south of the border in desperate need of a rest and having exhausted his supply chain from Plattsburg. After a month of waiting and inaction, Hampton finally received the word to resume his advance. His orders, from his superior MGen Wilkinson, were to move his column to the mouth of the Chateauguay River near Montreal and hold the enemy in check until the arrival of the main force sailing down the Saint Lawrence River from Lake Ontario. On 21 October, a U.S. division of over 4,000 men, mostly regular troops, began its march northward along the Chateauguay River (See Figure 1).

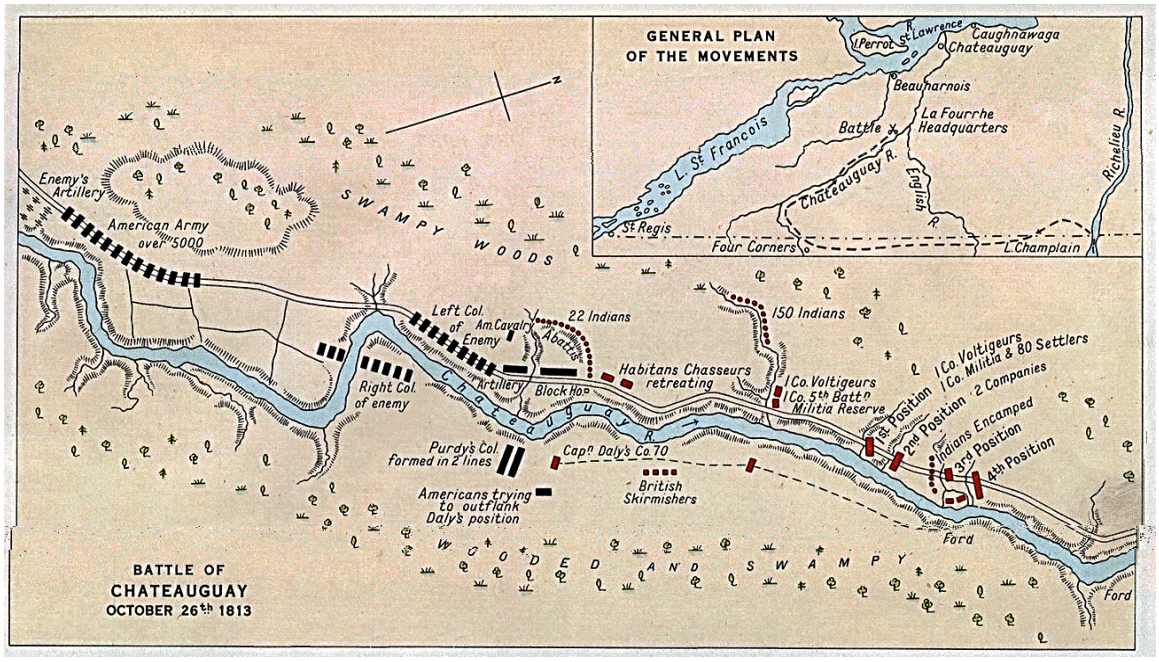

Figure 1 – Sketch of the Battle of Chateauguay

[5] Sellar, Robert, The U.S. Campaign of 1813 to Capture Montreal, (Huntingdon, Quebec: The Gleaner Press, 1913) 4.

7. By that time, the weather had turned to a cold and rainy Fall, making the road treacherous and making movement very difficult for wagons and cannons. Adding to the misery was the fact that no winter uniforms had been issued to American soldiers, making this journey into Canada even more uncomfortable. By 24 October, after a four-day march along a rutted roadway often blocked by fallen timber and small ambushes, the Americans arrived at Spear's farm where they pitched tents and waited for Hampton to develop a plan of attack. Meanwhile, U.S. scouts had come upon defended log barricades blocking the road along the north shore. The U.S strategy was to attack the Canadian defenders on two fronts; a frontal assault against the first line of obstacles, supported by a surprise attack across the river behind their rear positions. On the evening of 25 October, a striking force of over 1,500 men, led by Colonel Purdy, was sent to the south side of the river with the mission to seize a fording site and surprise the Canadians from behind. However, Purdy's brigade became lost in the dense forest during a moonless night, stumbled through a cedar swamp and was later detected by Canadian scouts. LCol Macdonell, responsible for guarding the Canadian rear positions, reacted by sending Capt Daly with three companies of determined militiamen to stop Purdy's advance.

8. The Canadian defenders had been watching Hampton's army since it crossed the border and had been impeding his advance along the way. The British officer in charge of the defense of Lower Canada, MGen De Watteville, had considerable time to prepare a series of barricades along the many ravines running at right angles from the river. MGen De Watteville had delegated the task to organize the forward defenses to the Commanding Officer of the Voltigeurs regiment, the well-experienced and battle-

hardened LCol de Salaberry. Having personally conducted a reconnaissance of the area, Salaberry selected a key terrain at a bend of the river where he established his first line of defence. Salaberry strategically positioned his Voltigeurs and other militiamen on both sides of the river behind log breastworks. On the north side of the river along the main axis of advance, the battleground had been cleared of trees to create a field of fire, and an obstacle belt had been constructed connecting the river's edge to the wood line. The brunt of the initial assault was to be borne by approximately 300 Canadian soldiers who were manning the front lines on the north bank.[6] On the morning of 26 October, a lead brigade of 2,000 American soldiers left their encampment at Spear's farm and marched along the cart road towards the Canadian positions. Hearing gunfire on the opposite bank, and assuming that his flanking brigade led by Purdy had already captured the crossing site behind the enemy, Hampton ordered the attack on the barricades at around 1400 hours. The stage was now set for the Battle of Chateauguay. (See Figure 2).

Figure 2 –Battle of Chateauguay (Front Lines)

[6] Guitard, Michelle, The Militia of the Battle of the Chateauguay: a Social History, (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites Branch, 1983) 4.

9. The skirmish apparently began with LCol de Salaberry shooting an American emissary officer who asked for the Canadians to surrender. The ensuing battle raged for a couple of hours as the Voltigeurs held their front lines on the north side while the small detachment on the south contended with Purdy's confused force. At around 1600 hours MGen Hampton, realizing that his outflanking manoeuvre had failed and that no significant progress against the front barricades was being made, ordered a withdrawal back to his camp at Spear's farm. Expecting the Americans to regroup and attack again, LCol Salaberry kept his positions manned and sent a small contingent forward to pursue the retreating Yankees. However, Hampton had already decided to return to his home base for the winter, a decision that precipitated his resignation shortly after the battle. The Canadian's casualties were very light: four men killed and seven wounded. By comparison, the U.S. had over 50 soldiers killed in the action and many more wounded.[7] After only a few hours, the first battle that saved Montreal and the colony in 1813 ended. LCol de Salaberry, with barely 300 militiamen, defeated a superior American advance force of over 2,000 soldiers. As Salaberry later wrote in a letter to his father, the battle was "certainly a most extraordinary affair".[8] No matter how great his achievement, Salaberry had failed to inform his superiors of the imminent attack, a mishap that would later jeopardize his recognition as the sole victor.

[7] Suthren, Victor, Defend and Hold: The Battle of Chateauguay, (Ottawa: Canadian War Museum, Balmuir Book Pub, 1986) 22

[8] Salaberry, Charles M., Letter to his father Louis de Salaberry, (Ottawa: National Archives of Canada, Fonds de la Famille Salaberry, MG24-G45, Vol 10, Reel H-1660, 5 December 1813) 2209-2214.

10. The Battle of the Chateauguay became a national epic soon after the fighting was over.[9] To commemorate this victory and preserve it in our national heritage, the Canadian government erected a monument in 1895 on the actual site of the encounter. (See Figure 3). Many detailed descriptions of the battle have been published, and several arguments have been raised with respect to the reasons for such an overwhelming success. A divergence of opinions still exists today on the main contributing factors behind this small but decisive victory. The battle of the Chateauguay, fought against all odds, had four main elements for its success: the leadership of LCol de Salaberry during the contest, the well-prepared defensive positions along the ravines, the loyal contribution of French Canadian soldiers, and the lack of determination of the American opponents. Each of these four key elements contributed to the victory individually and collectively. The factors will be covered in reverse order of importance, notwithstanding that all four were necessary for achieving success at Chateauguay.

Figure 3 – National Historical Monument at Chateauguay

[9] Guitard, Michelle, The Militia of the Battle of Chateauguay: a Social History, (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites Branch, 1983) 4.

Lack of American determination

11. The War of 1812 against British North America was not popular among all Americans, a fact that was often ignored by the U.S. administration throughout the conflict. The declaration of war had only received a very narrow margin of approval, and was not backed up by strong public support. The U.S. Congress had voted for war but seemed reluctant to spend the necessary funds on logistical supplies and equipment. Recruiting was also slow and short of its target since very few Americans were prepared to risk their lives for 160 acres of land, the incentive offered to each volunteer for their war service.[10] To conquer the Canadas, the U.S. Army would have to travel long distances over primitive roads and wage war in a region where long winters called for short summer campaigns. Logistical, recruiting, and geographical difficulties were only part of the problem. The senior officers appointed to command the U.S Army in 1812 were almost all veterans of the American Revolution and were much too old for active service. The U.S. commander MGen Hampton, a wealthy plantation owner from South Carolina, was nearly sixty years of age in 1813. Moreover, financing for the war depended mostly on funds raised through private loans. From the outset, no less than four major problems faced the U.S venture in 1812: an ill-prepared logistical support system, a shortage of trained soldiers, a lack of command leadership, and insufficient funds.[11] Each contributed to the general malaise in its own way.

[10] Graves, Donald E., Field of Glory, (Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 1999) 11.
[11] Ibid, 20.

12. In Fall 1813, the army that moved north across the border to attack Montreal consisted of poorly led and equipped soldiers. For several other reasons, the force led by MGen Hampton was not in very high spirits prior to the battle of Chateauguay. The supply chain had failed to move enough food and equipment forward, including warm clothing for the upcoming winter. The heavy autumn rainfalls had turned the dirt road into a muddy quagmire, soaking the already shivering troops and further lowering their morale. To already hard fighting conditions was added the discontent that this war was not very popular among most American soldiers. The majority of them came from Virginia and had signed up under the condition that they should not be sent outside the country. Furthermore, Hampton's intelligence was faulty on the actual size of his opponent. On 26 October 1813, a cold, wet, hungry, unwilling, and misinformed U.S force was ordered to assault the Canadian positions along the Chateauguay River. Their heart was not in the battle, and the cold night was only a few hours away.

13. Another key factor also contributed to the lack of U.S. determination at Chateauguay. The night before the main attack, MGen Hampton had received a note from Washington indicating that his winter huts were being erected behind him in upper New York State.[12] Interpreting this message as a lack of confidence by the U.S. administration in his ability to proceed towards Montreal, Hampton began to have second thoughts about his enterprise.[13] However, since his diversionary force had already been committed south of the river, Hampton decided to carry on with his original plan. The next day after the attack had begun, Hampton was notified that his smaller flanking force

[12] Suthren, Victor, Defend and Hold: The Battle of Chateauguay, (Ottawa: Canadian War Museum, Balmuir Book Pub, 1986) 11.
[13] Hickey, Donald R., The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989) 145.

had failed to circumvent the enemy. Unable to make any significant progress and unsure of his opponent's strength, Hampton ordered a withdrawal to Spear's farm.

14. Back in his camp, Hampton gathered his key staff to consider his next move. Hampton was hesitant and could not decide whether or not to continue fighting. His poor leadership style compared badly with the confident and bold Salaberry.[14] In a unanimous decision, the American officers opted to retreat into quarters for the winter so as to preserve their army for the next summer, secure their lines of communication with their supply depots at Plattsburg, and likely avoid a slaughter downriver against a perceived larger than expected Canadian contingent.[15] Since Hampton had no respect for his superior commander MGen Wilkinson, he had no qualms about not fulfilling his mission and not joining the planned two-pronged attack later against Montreal. In 1812, the senior Hampton had been bypassed for the command of the northern frontier by Wilkinson, whom he consequently hated throughout the war. Overall, the American opponent at Chateauguay was plagued by a lack of determination not only from within the force, but also from a U.S. administration unwilling to support adequately the campaign. The miserable weather conditions and the misleading size of their enemy further amplified the situation and helped convince the invaders of their demise. The decision to withdraw was mostly the result of a general reluctance to wage an unpopular war in a cold and unfamiliar country.

[14] Graves, Donald E., Field of Glory, (Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 1999) 110.
[15] Stanley, George F.G., The War of 1812: Land Operations, (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1984) 258.

French Canadian Participation

15. The participation of French Canadian soldiers in the War of 1812 has been a point of contention for some historians due to the circumstances surrounding their loyalty to the British crown. Separated from France after the conquest of 1759, the former colony of New France had begun its quest for political autonomy under the British regime and was determined to establish a strong foothold in North America. The potential invasion from the south was perceived as a threat to their survival and their new way of life on the continent. The Americans had envisaged that a coalition with Napoleonic France would lead to support from French Canadians in their crusade to annex the Canadian colonies to the United States. Many U.S. generals and politicians, including President Madison himself, had predicted that the war would be a simple march across the border. This assumption, however, did not get much sympathy from French Canadians who were opposed to any form of domination in their homeland, either British or American.

16. In Spring 1812, the British Commander in North America, LGen Prevost, aware of his shortage of regular troops, had decided to arm the local population. Knowing that he could not depend on England for additional troops, Prevost planned to recruit colonial men and train them into an organized militia.[16] As war became imminent, Prevost convinced the legislative assembly of Lower Canada to adopt a new militia act authorizing the mobilization of over 6,000 conscripts and volunteers. The militia consisted of three types of soldiers: first, a corps of volunteers who agreed to serve for

[16] Auger, Martin F., French Canadian Participation in the War of 1812, A Social Study of the Voltigeurs Canadiens, (Canadian Military History, Volume 10, Number 3, Summer 2001) 23-24.

the duration of the war; second, a body of conscripts known as the "Select Embodied Militia" recruited by random ballot for short periods of one to two years; and third, a "Sedentary Militia" composed of all able men between 16 and 50 years of age who could be called upon as required.[17]

17. Governor-General Prevost was also prepared to make political and economical concessions in order to secure the loyalty of French Canadians. Unlike his predecessors, Prevost's conciliatory policies in Lower Canada had already won him the support of community leaders and the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy. To attract more local citizens to the rank of the militia, Prevost offered financial bonuses to volunteers, and other substantial benefits such as the same level of pay as regular troops and officers' commissions for descendants of noble families.[18] The poor economy also contributed to the need for extra income and made military service more acceptable to French Canadian settlers. In order to achieve his goals, the bilingual Prevost, a Swiss-born officer serving in the British Army, used his diplomatic charm and ability to speak French to gain the support of two very influential institutions in Lower Canada: the Catholic Church and local newspapers.

18. The Catholic Clergy played a significant role in recruiting and maintaining the allegiance of French Canadians during the War of 1812. The bishop of Quebec, Monsignor Octave Plessis, issued an official proclamation to all his parishes calling on his Catholic followers to support the British defense against the American invaders, and

[17] Guitard, Michelle, The Militia of the Battle of Chateauguay: a Social History, (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites Branch, 1983) 5.
[18] Auger, Martin F., French Canadian Participation in the War of 1812, A Social Study of the Voltigeurs Canadiens, (Canadian Military History, Volume 10, Number 3, Summer 2001) 28.

urging fathers to let their sons join the militia and fight for a divine cause. The Church reminded its people that like their ancestors before them, they must once again defend the honour of French Canada, preserve their liberty and above all their religion. Priests even professed that soldiers should not fear death while fighting for a just cause because their sacrifice on the battlefield would lead them to an eternal life in heaven.[19] This patriotic message was generally well received among the populace, as the Catholic Church had a very strong influence and firm control over its French Canadian followers.

19. As the war progressed, the colonial authorities had to resort to a propaganda campaign in the local media in order to maintain the loyalty of French Canadians and generate more support throughout the population. Desertion and illegal absences without leave soon became a common practice among the French Canadian militia, and the government then turned to the newspapers for assistance.[20] In open letters addressed to their sons, fathers expressed their grief at any idea of desertion and reaffirmed the need for their sons' obedience. One father went as far as declaring that he would personally turn in his son to military justice if he were to abandon his unit. One newspaper even published the story of a deserter, who after being expelled from his hometown by his fiancée's father, later returned to see his lover. The woman not only gave him the cold shoulder, but also vowed never to become the wife of a coward and bear the children of a sinner.

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[19] Plessis, Octave Mgr, Proclamation of April 1813, (Ottawa: National Archives of Canada, Microfilm C-130549).

[20] Lepine, Luc, Propagande et milice au Québec durant la guerre de 1812, The War of 1812 Website. Note: During the war of 1812, a total of 1321 desertions and illegal absences were recorded among the 8,430 conscripted Sedentary Militia soldiers, and 299 more cases among the 700 Voltigeurs.

20. Despite a few problems along the way, participation of French Canadians in the War of 1812 resulted in a success story for Canada. The propaganda led by the government through the Catholic Church and newspapers constantly reminded the citizens of their patriotic duty towards such a holy cause. At Chateauguay in October 1813, soldiers from all three types of militia took part in the battle, but most predominately from the French Canadian volunteer regiment -- "Les Voltigeurs Canadiens"[21] (See Figure 4). Of the approximately 300 defenders occupying the forward defensive positions, over two-thirds were French Canadians. Most of the officers, including LCol de Salaberry himself, were of French Canadian origin. Thus, the victory at Chateauguay in October 1813 can be rightfully attributed to a loyal French Canadian participation and their determination to preserve their way of life on the North American continent.

Figure 4 - Voltigeur

Canadian troops at Chateauguay (North Shore):	
Two companies of Voltigeurs (Volunteers)	140
One company of Fencibles (Regulars)	72
One company of Sedentary militia	66
Group of Abenaki Indians	22
Sub-Total	**300**
Remainder of Canadian troops:	
Capt Daly's Detachment (South Shore)	110
LCol Macdonell's reserves (Rear positions)	780
Battalion of Sedentary militia (Right flank)	350
Sub-Total	**1240**
Total	**1540**

[21] Suthren, Victor, J.H., The Battle of Chateauguay, (Ottawa: Canadian Historic Sites, Occasional Papers in Archeology and History, No.11, 1974) 95-150.

Prepared Defensive Positions

21. The extent of the defensive preparations for the Battle of the Chateauguay played a major role in stopping the American advance and keeping the number of Canadian casualties low. The Canadian militia had the advantage of being familiar with the terrain along the Chateauguay River, and of having constructed several lines of defense along the main axis of advance. A series of ditches and ravines crossing the road along the north side of the river, none very deep but all tactically important, provided natural obstacles for establishing defensive lines. Upon each of these lines, log breastworks were erected extending from the riverbank to the edge of the woods. The work of improving the defensive positions had gone on for several days, resulting in ravines being dug deeper and barricades being solidified to form a formidable defense in depth. Before the battle, a small party of axemen had also proceeded forward with the task of destroying all the bridges along the cart way.

22. LCol de Salaberry, the officer in charge of the forward sector, had personally supervised the preparation of the front lines. The chosen site for the battle dominated a small gully between low gradient slopes and directly overlooked the road. The battleground had also been cleared of vegetation to improve his observation and increase the range of musket fire. Salaberry then instructed a party of axemen to construct abatis on top of the hill as his first line of defense. Abatis consist of cut-down trees and large branches that have been sharpened and tied together with their pointed ends facing the enemy. Abatis obstacles are very difficult to penetrate under the cover of fire. The abatis

at Chateauguay extended from the river to a swamp near the tree line, making it impossible for the enemy to bypass.

23. At approximately 1000 hours on the day of the battle, the lead elements of the U.S. army came upon the abatis. Following a short exchange of fire, the Canadian work party took cover behind the obstacle while LCol de Salaberry moved forward rapidly to assess the situation. He immediately began to deploy his companies along the abatis, ensuring interlocking arcs of fire and mutually supported positions. In the meantime, MGen Hampton sat a short distance away awaiting further development from his flanking attack on the south shore. When shots were heard across the river at around 1400 hours, the American column reformed and began its attack on the abatis. The numerically superior Americans delivered successive rolling volleys of fire at the Canadians. As the abatis was laid out in an arc shape, the extensive American fire was not very effective at hitting their targets. In addition, the densely built log abatis offered very good protection against low impact musket bullets. The well-prepared defensive positions and above all, the abatis erected along the front line, were major combat multipliers in this uneven match-up, and significantly influenced the outcome of the battle. The superior U.S. force never attempted to surge over the abatis as the tactics used by LCol Salaberry deliberately misled them as to the size of their opponent.

Leadership of LCol de Salaberry

24. A few days after the battle, echoes of victory were heard across the land, and Salaberry was soon proclaimed the "Hero of Chateauguay" by his countrymen. Many subsequent accounts of the events of 26 October 1813 give praise to LCol de Salaberry

for his courage, tactical abilities, and leadership as a commander. Although revered in French Canada for his exploit, Charles-Michel de Salaberry never received national recognition as our first Canadian-born war hero.[22] Nevertheless, Salaberry was a loyal and brave Canadian military officer whose skillful direction and constant presence on the battlefield earned him the glory of victory on the banks of the Chateauguay River. Eyewitnesses recalled Salaberry standing on a tree stump waving his sword during the battle to get a better view of the situation and he constantly provided a commanding presence on the battlefield. His leadership throughout the two-hour battle was the single most influential factor in this overwhelming military achievement.

25. In 1813, LCol de Salaberry was a thirty-four-year-old professional officer, descendant of a noble Quebec family, who had served in the British Army since the age of fourteen. Governor-General Prevost, in his desperation to attract more citizens under arms, had commissioned Salaberry in early 1812 to raise a regiment of French Canadian volunteers named "les Voltigeurs Canadiens". Soldiers from the "Voltigeurs" formed the nucleus of the force engaged in action at Chateauguay. Unlike the largely untrained militia of that time, the Voltigeurs went through a rigorous training program before entering the war. Salaberry lived by a strict code of conduct, and his men were drilled with exactly the same discipline as regular troops.[23] The Voltigeurs became known as a well-organized group of sharpshooters and skilled woodsmen who preferred an indirect approach to warfare. Unlike their regular British counterparts, they did not adhere to

[22] Andrews, Allen, Brave Soldiers, Proud Regiments: Canada Military Heritage, (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 1997) 99.
[23] Guitard, Michelle, The Militia of the Battle of the Chateauguay: a Social History, (Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites Branch, 1983) 5.

straight firing lines that discharged successive volleys at the enemy. On the contrary, the grey-clad Voltigeurs combined Indian guerrilla tactics with British discipline into a deadly form of combat, a type of warfare well suited for the terrain and vegetation of that region.

26. Largely outnumbered at the battle of Chateauguay, the odds were not in Salaberry's favour. However, his professional experience and tactical skills helped close the gap. From the outset, Salaberry surveyed the ground along the river and chose the best possible site for the battle. The strategic spot was situated on the north bank where the rugged road squeezed between a dense swampy forest and the river. Within days, Salaberry himself supervised the construction of barriers and abatis in preparation for the American assault. His defensive strategy was simple. Salaberry positioned his 300 men behind the main barricades facing the main enemy approach, and detached a group of about 100 soldiers across the river to protect his southern flank. He also placed a small group of 20 Indians in the forest to the North, brandishing tomahawks, as a scare tactic due to their known psychological effect on the enemy's morale.[24]

27. The crux of the battle came down to a well-executed deception plan. To counter his inferiority in strength, LCol Salaberry brilliantly deceived his opponent on the size of his force. After the initial firing exchange, Salaberry had his men sound bugles in all directions from his front and rear positions, leading Hampton to believe that the Canadians were in much greater numbers and preparing to launch a counter-attack. Two

[24] Wohler, J. Patrick, Charles de Salaberry: Soldier of the Empire, Defender of Quebec, (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1984) 86.

other tricks reinforced the U.S. misconception concerning the size of the Canadian defenders.[25] Conscious of the fear generated by native warriors, Salaberry had instructed the Indians to yell war cries from the forest, creating the impression of an ambush ready to attack the Americans on their flank. In addition, Salaberry had a small group of uniformed militia reverse their jackets on the frontlines, giving the illusion of additional units joining the struggle. The ruse worked and fooled Hampton, who believed that the Canadians were reinforcing their positions.

28. The execution of timely deception measures and employment of skirmish tactics by the Voltigeurs were a very effective combination at the battle of Chateauguay. However, the main ingredient for their successful application and coordination was the ardent leadership of their Commanding Officer LCol Salaberry. Charles-Michel de Salaberry was a big and strong man who had a reputation as a brave and daring officer.[26] Although very demanding and strict, Salaberry knew all his men's names by heart and inspired their confidence.[27] Through the battle, Salaberry stayed behind his companies, encouraging them and directing his men from his vantage point on top of a tree stump. He would later tell his father in a letter that he had "won a victory mounted on a wooden horse".[28] (See Figure 5)

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[25] Andrews, Allen, Brave Soldiers, Proud Regiments: Canada Military Heritage, (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 1997) 97.

[26] Wohler, J. Patrick, Charles de Salaberry: Soldier of the Empire, Defender of Quebec, (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1984) 56.

[27] Andrews, Allen, Brave Soldiers, Proud Regiments: Canada Military Heritage, (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 1997) 97.

[28] Salaberry, Charles M., Letter to his father Louis de Salaberry, (Ottawa: National Archives of Canada, Fonds de la Famille Salaberry, MG24-G45, Vol 10, Reel H-1660, 5 December 1813) 2209-2214.

Figure 5 – LCol de Salaberry on his "wooden horse"

29. After the fighting was over, LGen Prevost and MGen de Watteville visited the front lines to praise the troops for their courage. Both were, however, remarkably reserved in their compliments to LCol Salaberry, who had failed to inform them of the imminent American attack.[29] In his report back to England, Governor-General Prevost wrote that he, himself, arrived at the front shortly after the battle began, taking some credit for the victory. This version of the facts was not backed up by any other eyewitness accounts of that day and did not get further support. Furthermore, the war diaries of MGen de Watteville and LCol Macdonell later convey most of the credit to LCol de Salaberry. The courageous leadership of Salaberry played a critical part during the battle and was the pivoting factor for the decisive Canadian victory that day. Historians have generally cited the good leadership of professional soldiers as key to British success in defending Canada. In this case, a native-born officer leading a small group of militia won the day at the Battle of Chateauguay.

[29] Berton, Pierre, Flames across the Border: 1813-1814, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987) 228.

Conclusion

30. On 26 October 1813 along the Chateauguay River, a small but well-led Canadian force won an overwhelming victory by repelling a much larger American army. Despite their superior numbers, the U.S. attackers lacked the logistical support and fighting spirit required for that scale of invasion. After a few hours of skirmish in rainy and cold weather, the unwilling American force withdrew for the remainder of the winter. The victorious Canadian militia was mostly composed of French Canadian soldiers, including two companies of the famed Voltigeurs. With their loyalty in question, the *Canadiens* responded well to the call of duty and fought valiantly under the leadership of LCol de Salaberry. For his courage, bravery, and leadership in battle, LCol de Salaberry was later awarded a gold medal and the British Order of the Bath.[30] Salaberry used the terrain to his advantage by constructing a series of breastworks between the river and nearby forest. Well protected behind ravines and obstacles, Salaberry and his men employed guerrilla and diversionary tactics to deceive and defeat a much stronger U.S. opponent.

> *Combining fieldworks with the correct choice of natural obstacles and the advantages that derive from knowing the battlefield while the enemy does not, with our ability to conceal our arrangements better than he can, and, in general, with our superiority in means of surprise in the course of action, can*

[30] Andrews, Allen, Brave Soldiers, Proud Regiments: Canada Military Heritage, (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 1997) 98-99. Note: Order of the Bath is an order of Chivalry founded in 1725.

make the influence of the terrain itself overpowering and decisive, so that the enemy will succumb without ever knowing the real cause of his defeat.[31]

Carl Von Clausewitz (On War)

31. Although small in scale and number of casualties, the Battle of Chateauguay was very important to Canada's survival as a British colony due to its consequences.[32] Had MGen Hampton's troops been able to link up with MGen Wilkinson's army later that year, Montreal would have been threatened by a combined American force of 12,000 soldiers at its doorstep. With winter approaching and the Saint-Lawrence River blocked by ice, the fortified city of Quebec would have been cut off from its resupply by the Royal Navy, and likely fallen to the U.S. invasion.[33] The victory at Chateauguay allowed the Canadians time to regroup and concentrate their efforts against the second American force advancing northeast along the Saint-Lawrence River. The next confrontation at Crysler's Farm on November 11th 1813 also resulted in another stunning victory for the Canadian militia. Poorly led and suffering from cold, hunger and disease, the numerically superior American troops proved no match for the battle-hardened Canadians. By preventing the capture of Montreal in the fall of 1813, the Canadians had saved their country from another U.S. invasion.

32. The War of 1812, often referred to as Canada's War of Independence, was a war of defense and survival against a much stronger U.S. opponent. Had the U.S. been

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[31] Clausewitz, Carl Von, On War, (edited by Howard & Paret, Princeton University Press, 1976) 407.
[32] Suthren, Victor, Defend and Hold: The Battle of Chateauguay, (Ottawa: Canadian War Museum, Balmuir Book Pub, 1986) 22.
[33] Ibid, 22.

successful in their endeavour, Canada would not have survived as an independent country in North America. The Treaty of Ghent, which ended the conflict in December 1814, directed a return to the pre-war status quo. Despite this conclusion, Canadians took great pride in having resisted a superior enemy while preserving their country. The battles of Chateauguay and Crysler's Farm in 1813 also had a significant effect on the military ethos in Canada. These victories helped create a myth that the Canadian militia had won the War of 1812 on its own, a myth that would be painfully perpetuated well into the 20th Century. Canada may well have survived another American invasion but victories like Chateauguay were due largely to the leadership skills and disciplined tactics instilled into the Canadian militia by the professional British regulars.

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