The Fight for Canada

From 1755 to 1760, British, French, and American Indians engaged in some of the largest and most dramatic military operations of the American war. Campaigns in Atlantic Canada and the St. Lawrence Valley involved joint operations between naval and land forces, as well as large-scale European-style sieges employing heavy artillery and complex engineering earthworks. The contrast between these operations and the campaigns in the American interior reveal both the remarkable military power that 18th-century empires could project far from Europe and also the limits of that power. The dominance of regular European troops and fleets in these campaigns reinforced the contempt shared by most Europeans toward native and colonial fighters. This perspective shaped profoundly the fate of Britain's American empire after the fall of Canada.

Defending New France

French settlement in Acadia (now western Nova Scotia, eastern New Brunswick, and northeastern Maine) began in the early 1600s. France ceded Acadian territory to the British in 1713, but by 1750, more than 13,000 French-speaking inhabitants were living along the region's extensive coastline. The boundaries were still in dispute when conflict broke out in the Ohio Country in 1754. Most Acadians living in British territory had remained neutral during previous conflicts, but in 1755, fear of insurgency and desire for the Acadians' lands and fishing grounds led New England and British forces to ruthlessly expel the inhabitants. This ethnic displacement scattered Acadians across the British colonies and the larger Atlantic world. Those who settled in Louisiana came to be known as "Cajuns," from the word "Acadian."

Founded in 1719 as a counterweight to British Nova Scotia, the fortress and naval base of Louisburg on Isle Royale (Cape Breton Island) quickly grew into one of the busiest ports in North America. Louisburg's harbor protected French fleets guarding the rich fishing grounds as well as the sea approach to Canada. In 1745, an army of New Englanders and the Royal Navy besieged and took the port. Louisburg was subsequently returned to France by the peace treaty of 1748. During the 1750s, British forces based in Halifax (founded in 1749) were dispatched to fight against French, Canadian, and Acadian fighters as well as Mi'kmaq, Abenaki, and other warriors who opposed British colonial expansion. French ships based at Louisburg continued to provide credible defense for Canada until the successful British siege of 1758.
Founded by Samuel de Champlain in 1608, Quebec, the capital of New France, was blessed with natural defenses in the form of high cliffs and a difficult water approach from the Atlantic Ocean. By 1750, it housed grand public buildings and more than 5,000 inhabitants. British commander James Wolfe arrived in June 1759 with a fleet of 141 vessels, almost 10,000 soldiers, and 13,000 sailors. French commander Montcalm had fewer than 4,000 French regulars, 12,000 militia and Trupes de la Marine, and perhaps 1,800 warriors from the Great Lakes and Canada to defend the city and many miles of countryside. After months of ineffective probing attacks and a terror campaign that destroyed 1,400 Canadian farms, Wolfe unexpectedly landed a force west of the city. On September 13, 1759, British troops prevailed in a battle that left both Wolfe and Montcalm dead.

By 1760, France's early success against Britain and her allies was only a distant memory. Denied reinforcements or significant supplies since 1757, French and Canadian forces could only attempt to hold territory with the hope that peace would soon come. Native peoples who had allied themselves with the French suffered from the loss of supplies as well. Support from the Ohio nations, then other Indians, steadily eroded, further weakening New France. Iroquois communities in Canada and the heartland of the Confederacy remained divided through 1759, when many leaders concluded it was wise to forge good relations with the likely winners. More than 800 warriors accompanied one of the three British armies converging on Montreal in September 1760. The city capitulated to Major General Jeffery Amherst five years to the day after the Battle of Lake George/St. Sacramento.

This gold and enamel cross is the symbol of the Order of Saint-Louis, founded by Louis XV in 1693 to recognize the merit of French Catholic officers with at least 10 years' military service. Many officers of the Compagnies Franches de la Marine, including almost 150 Canadians, were awarded the cross and the title Chevalier de l'Ordre de Saint-Louis in recognition of their distinguished service in the colonial conflicts in North America. A French officer who served in Canada in the 1750s observed that "those who had been awarded the Cross of Saint-Louis were as highly esteemed as lieutenant generals."

Medal, Order of Saint-Louis, c. 1775-1825
Artist unknown
Front: "LUD. M INST 1693"
Back: "VIRTUTIS PRÆM BELL"
Gold, white enamel, silk ribbon, 13 x 3.4 cm
McCord Museum of Canadian History, Montreal (M966.22)
Charles Deschamps de Boishebert entered the Troupes de la Marine as a cadet in 1739 and served on the New York frontier, and in Acadia during the 1740s. In 1753, he led the advance detachment of Governor Duquense’s fort-building expedition in the Ohio Valley, and from 1755-1758, organized effective partisan resistance to British forces during the expulsion of the Acadians and the siege of Louisburg. In 1759, he led a corps of Acadian volunteers in the defense of Quebec, settling in France after the fall of Canada.
DOMINIC SERRES (1719-1793) EMERGED AS THE DOMINANT BRITISH MARITIME PAINTER during the Seven Years' War. Born in France, he was captured at sea during the War of the Austrian Succession (1741-48) and settled in London after his imprisonment. Rising British patriotism and interest in the string of worldwide victories that began in 1758 generated a rich market for epic paintings, prints, and other commemorative pieces. One of the first products to reach the market was a set of 12 prints chronicling the British campaign against Quebec in 1759. British naval officer Richard Short, a talented draughtsman, provided on-the-spot sketches. These four oil paintings, signed and dated by Serres in 1760, are believed to be worked up from Short’s drawings to serve as models for the engravers.

THE CATHOLIC BISHOP OF QUEBEC OVERSAW RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS in New France. The view below chronicles heavy damage to Quebec’s Lower Town caused by the British bombardment during the siege of 1759.

THE CIVIL OFFICIAL KNOWN AS THE INTENDANT oversaw economic affairs and the administration of justice in New France.
A View of the Church of Notre-Dame-de-la-Victoire, Quebec City, Quebec, 1760
Dominic Serres
Oil on canvas, 35.2 x 50.2 cm
Bibliothèque et Archives Canada/Library and Archives Canada/C-025662

This church in Quebec’s lower town was named Notre-Dame-de-la-Victoire (Blessed Mother of the Victory) in 1690 following the retreat of British Admiral Phipps’ expedition against the city. Gutted by fire and British bombardment in 1759, it was later restored and remains the centerpiece of the city’s Palace Royale.

A View of the Treasury and Jesuits College, Quebec City, Quebec, 1760
Dominic Serres
Oil on canvas, 35.5 x 50.5 cm
Bibliothèque et Archives Canada/Library and Archives Canada/C-025663

In this view based on Richard Short’s eyewitness drawings, Canadian families and British sailors survey the destruction following the siege of Quebec.
This gold medal is an early example of the order worn by members of The Loyal and Friendly Society of the Blew and Orange, a fraternal Protestant organization founded by members of the British 4th Regiment of Foot around 1730. Members of the order in other British regiments served in North America during the French and Indian War.

James Thompson of Tain, Scotland, entered the Second Highland Battalion (63rd, later 78th Regiment) as a sergeant in 1757. This Scottish regiment served in the campaigns against Louisburg (1758) and Quebec (1759), and remained in Canada after the fall of Montreal in 1760. When the corps was disbanded in 1763, many demobilized officers and men, including Sergeant Thompson, took advantage of generous land grants and remained in North America. Thompson acquired these long bladed daggers, known as dirks, during the French and Indian War.

Dirk, date unknown
Artist unknown
Inscribed "Ja. Tompson"
Wood, metal, skin,
4.5 x 43 x 4.3 cm
Canadian War
Museum Collection

Dirk, date unknown
Artist unknown
Inscribed with masonic symbol
Wood, metal, skin,
3.3 x 35.3 x 3.2 cm
Canadian War
Museum Collection
After Jeffrey Amherst returned to Britain in 1764, British artist Joshua Reynolds produced this dramatic portrait of the commander. It portrays Amherst as the conqueror of Canada, a map of Montreal lying under an iron helmet before him. In the background, British troops descend the rapids of the St. Lawrence River, a feat facilitated by Iroquois guides who accompanied the 1760 expedition.

Sir Jeffery Amherst (1717 – 1797), 1765
Joshua Reynolds
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches
Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts, Museum Purchase, AC 1967.85
In spite of traditional hostility between the land and sea services, the British army and navy made great strides during the Seven Years' War in developing tools and tactics for combined operations. This is an original model of a shallow draft troop boat developed in 1758 for amphibious landings by British troops. Experience gained during campaigns against Louisburg (1758) and Quebec (1759) contributed to a series of stunning combined operations in the Caribbean, culminating in the June 7, 1762, landing of 11,800 redcoats near Havana, Cuba, with no fatalities.

After the fall of Canada in 1760, British Commander-in-Chief Jeffrey Amherst commissioned 182 silver medals for presentation to the warriors who had remained with his army during the campaign against Montreal. The medals bear an image of the city of Montreal, with the nation and name of the warrior to whom they were presented engraved on the back; in this case, a Mohican named “Tankalkel.” Amherst presented a gold example (location unknown) to Superintendent of Indian Affairs William Johnson.

This leather pouch, decorated with dyed porcupine quills, sheet metal cones, and red deer hair, is believed to have been collected in North America during the French and Indian War. It was then passed down through generations of the Amherst family. Amherst’s 1763 policies toward Native Americans after the fall of Canada sparked a widespread uprising against British forces in the Great Lakes and Ohio Country.
In retaliation for what he considered French collusion in the "massacre" at Fort William Henry on Lake George in 1757, British Commander-in-Chief Jeffrey Amherst denied the honors of war to French forces upon the capitulation of Montreal in 1760. On the evening of September 7, 1760, French officers quietly burned the regimental flags they had carried through the difficult campaigns in defense of Canada rather than surrender them to the victorious British.