The History Behind the “Riflemen at Bennington”

By: Kevin Fleming

In 1777, British General John Burgoyne set out from Canada with over 7,000 men to seize control of the Hudson River Valley. Moving south, Burgoyne aimed to capture key American fortifications and link up with other British forces moving north from New York City. After capturing Forts Ticonderoga and Edward and defeating American forces at Hubbardton, Burgoyne dispatched Lieutenant Colonel Fredrich Baum to raid an American supply depot at Bennington, located in the Green Mountains of present-day Vermont.[[1]](#endnote-1)

On August 16, Baum and his 1,000 German, Loyalist, and Indian troops met 2,000 American militiamen at Bennington. These Green Mountain Boys were led by John Stark of New Hampshire. Stark was an experienced battlefield commander. In the French and Indian War, he had fought with Robert’s Rangers. During the first years of the Revolution, Stark fought with distinction at Bunker Hill and commanded a Continental regiment at Trenton and Princeton. He also participated in the ill-fated American invasion of Canada.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The outnumbered Baum established defensive positions and called on Burgoyne for reinforcements. Seizing the initiative, Stark launched a bold three-pronged attack on Baum’s forces. The American troops quickly overwhelmed the British defensive positions. Baum himself was cut down by the Green Mountain Boys while leading a desperate charge to break out from his unit’s untenable position. Following the melee, British reinforcements under Lieutenant Colonel Heinrich Breymann arrived at the battlefield. Breymann’s force battered the American’s left flank, but Stark quickly reoriented his forces to meet the British counterattack. Aided by reinforcements from Colonel SethWarner’s regiment, the American forces blunted the British onslaught. After several more hours of fighting, the British reinforcements abandoned the field.[[3]](#endnote-3)

During the battle, a significant minority of Stark’s militiamen carried rifles rather than the standard weapon of the time, the smoothbore musket. Deadly accurate for its time, a rifle could effectively engage targets 300 yards away: at least triple the effective range of a standard musket. Nonetheless, rifles were rarely issued to regular soldiers, because they also took three times as long to reload, making them ill-suited for use in standard line engagements, where massed volleys were exchanged at close ranges. Still, loosely organized militiamen fighting independently in wooded terrain could make the greater accuracy of the weapon outweigh its slow rate of fire.[[4]](#endnote-4)  The rifle’s unique capability likely served little purpose in Stark’s final assault on Baum’s position, which quickly devolved into a desperate close-quarters fight. Lacking a bayonet, the rifle now became a liability. Riflemen, however, were well suited for harassing Baum’s forces prior to this decisive action. In the days leading up to the battle, American scouting parties attacked British forces advancing towards Bennington then quickly fled into the woods. Such attacks disrupted the enemy’s advance, lowered their morale, and impeded their ability to conduct reconnaissance.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The rifle’s impact extended throughout the Saratoga Campaign. Recognizing its importance, Washington dispatched Daniel Morgan’s riflemen north to help defend against the British incursion.[[6]](#endnote-6) Burgoyne observed, as the song explained, “the ringing of the rifle from the tree.” In his official review of the campaign, he detailed how riflemen placed themselves in trees behind American formations to target his officers.[[7]](#endnote-7) Riflemen killed scores of British officers, including Brigadier General Simon Fraser, who fell during the battle of Bemis Heights. Both at the time, and even more so in later American memory, the exploits of the sharpshooters were trumpeted and indeed exaggerated, to emphasize the contribution of a distinctively American military strength.

Stark and the Green Mountain Boys earned a decisive victory, inflicting close to nine hundred casualties while only sustaining seventy of their own. In what was supposed to be a minor raid, Burgoyne’s army lost close an eighth of its fighting strength.[[8]](#endnote-8) The Battle of Bennington demonstrates how a militia force, familiar with the battlefield terrain and led by an experienced and bold commander, could achieve victory over regular British forces. The battle made Stark into a Revolutionary hero. The current New Hampshire state motto originates from a toast he gave commemorating the battle: “live free or die,” he proclaimed, “death is not the worst of evils.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

1. Edward G. Lengel, “Chapter 13: From Defeat to Victory in the North: 1777-1778,” chapter eds. Clifford J. Rogers & Samuel J. Watson, in *The West Point History of Warfare*, eds. Clifford J Rogers and Ty Seidule (West Point Press, 2024), 13.2-13.4, 13.8, 13.12-21. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Kevin Weddle, *The Compleat Victory: The Battle of Saratoga and the American Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 241. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Weddle, *Compleat Victory*, 244-250. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. John W Wright, “The Rifle in the American Revolution,” *The American Historical Review* 29, no. 2 (1924): [293](https://www.jstor.org/stable/1838519?seq=1)-299; Neil L. York, “Pennsylvania Rifle: Revolutionary Weapon in a Conventional War?” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 103, no 3 (1979): [305](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20091374)-308. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Weddle, *Compleat Victory*, 242-244; John Stark, *Memoir and Official Correspondence of Gen. John Stark*, ed Caleb Stark (Gregg Press, 1972), 129-130. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Lengel, “From Defeat to Victory in the North: 1777-1778,” 13.23-24. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. John Burgoyne, *A State of the Expedition from Canada: As Laid Before the House of Commons* (J. Almon, 1780), [122.](https://archive.org/details/stateofexpeditio00burg/page/122/mode/1up) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Weddle, *Compleat Victory*, 250-251. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. [“State Motto,”](https://www.nh.gov/almanac/state-motto) NH.GOV, The State of New Hampshire, accessed June 26 2025; Stark, *Memoir and Official Correspondence*, 312-313. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)