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Baron Riedesel's Letter to

Duke of Brunswick

October 21, 1777

[From the Bancroft Collection in  
the New York Public Library,  
pp. 446-467.]

(Saratoga National Historical Park)

History

BARON Riedesel letter to Duke of Brunswick  
21 Oct 1777

Saratoga

The following is the letter of Major-General Baron Riedesel to the Duke of Brunswick, written at Albany, October 21, 1777, reporting to his master the events that have transpired on the Hudson River from the September 13th to October 17th, 1777. General Riedesel commanded the German troops which made up nearly half of Burgoyne's army in the Campaign of 1777. The following letter was obtained on microfilm in June of 1948 from the collections of the New York Public Library and is a part of the Bancroft Collection. The letter has been transcribed from the microfilm and translated from the original German by Julie K. Snell, wife of the Historian. It should be noted here that this is a literal translation.

The letter is comparable in many ways to the two letters, one marked public and the other private, of General Burgoyne, written from Albany on October 20th, 1777, to Lord Germain, Secretary of the Colonies, in that it is an official account of the Two Battles of Saratoga and of the Surrender. The letter should also be compared with one written two days earlier, at Stillwater on the 18th of October and signed and attested to by all of those officers who were, at that time, commanders of the German regiments and battalions with Burgoyne. The latter letter is contained in William L. Stone's Translation of the Letters and Journals relating to the War of the American Revolution, and the Capture of the GERMAN Troops at Saratoga by Mrs. General Riedesel, Albany, 1867, pp. 95 - 111. Such a comparison shows that while at many points General Riedesel uses the same phrases in both letter, at others in the letter of the 20th of October, he adds new information and states his own personal opinion much more frankly than in the letter of the 18th of October. A third point to be noted is that both the 19th century editors of the Memoirs of the Baron and Baroness Riedesel, Max Von Esling and William L. Stone, were both extremely pro-German in their attitude, and it is very difficult at many points in their translations to know if they are quoting the Journals literally or are adding their own coloring of opinion to Memoirs.

Supt. Filscworth, Saratoga Natl. P. 20 July 1949 to  
Director, cc Reg. Dir.

Albany, October 21, 1777

Most Serene Highness, Gracious Prince and Lord:

Your serene Highness will see from this most humble report in what kind of a sorry situation our fine American maneuvers have placed me and the royal troops: my hard-won reputation in Germany is sacrificed to other people, and I consider myself the most unfortunate mortal on earth. In order to put our entire situation in a clear light and to justify myself, I must make a detailed report from the beginning of our expedition.

General Burgoyne (sic) came back from England with express orders to make a connection, whatever the cost, with the army coming up from New York. In following these orders, we captured Ticonderoga and pushed on to Fort Edward (sic) even as far as Fort Miller and Saratoga. The already explained defeat at Bennington, the transporting of the batteaux over the portage from Fort George to Fort Edward and the second portage from Fort Miller to Saratoga held up the progress of the army over 5 weeks.

If these obstacles had not held up the army at that time, the enemy would have been so weak, its spirits so depressed, that I believe we would have been able to reach Albany; but by stopping so long at Fort Miller, I with my corps at Johns Farm <sup>1)</sup> expected that we would set up communication stations on the Hudson River, in order to protect our rear and to maintain our communication with Fort George as well.

General Bourgoyne, whose army was already weak by overextension, in order not to make it any smaller by detachments, formed a quite different plan, of which he never told me the least bit, as he had to admit openly to my satisfaction in a council of war held afterward; this plan was: to take with him 40 days' provisions on 180 batteaux, an artillery train of 30 cannon and howitzers, and an army of between 4 and 5000 men with the idea of striking the enemy wherever he might find him and to open by force in such a way the road to the army coming up the Hudson River, at the risk of all events which might occur. It

1) Mrs. Gen. Riedesel's Memoirs, trans. by Stone. Albany, 1867. p. 97 n.  
"This farm was immediately north of Halfway Brook 2 miles from the present pretty village of Glens Falls."

is to be noticed that General Howe had changed his plan of coming up the Hudson River, and instead of this had gone to the bay in the Delaware River, in order to break through to Philadelphia by way of Maryland and Pennsylvania, and that General Clington (sic) who had been left in the province of New York had not yet advanced to Highlands. In spite of the only slight possibility of maintaining communication with General Clington, in spite of the fact that the hostile army, which until now had remained near us at Halfmoon, had grown considerably stronger and General Gates had come from Philadelphia to take over command of the army, which had advanced again to the heights near Bimeses (sic) House, in order to give us battle, even this did not stop us from undertaking our dangerous expedition. On September 13th the whole army crossed the Hudson River and camped on the heights of Saratoga. On the 14th bridges were repaired over Fish-Kill and on the 15th a great reconnaissance undertaken and on the 16th the army encamped near overgotta (Dove-gat) House. On the 17th bridges were repaired over the swampy ravines and position taken on the heights near Sohrts (Swords) House. Again on the 18th roads and bridges were repaired with the intention of advancing on the 19th to occupy the heights opposite the enemy camp in the vicinity of Bimeses House, and then to find the opportunity of attacking the enemy. On these four marches forward the army marched each time in three columns. Brigadier Fraser commanded the column on the right hand, which consisted of the English elite corps. The middle column always marched on the heights to the right of the valley and consisted of four infantry regiments. The column on the left hand consisted of German troops, always marching on the plain by the Hudson River, and behind it was all heavy artillery and baggage. The Breymann corps always made up the rear guard. The command of the artillery, as likewise the construction of the roads was under the direction of General Philips. Due to the lay of the land, the columns were sometimes a half hour's distance from each other. On the 19th at 1 o'clock in the afternoon, as I was about to examine a bridge in the marsh, I heard all at once loud musket fire on my right, which was General Bourgoyne's advance guard, so the enemy had attacked in the marsh and right in the middle of the woods. The firing stopped. About an hour later it began again, and this time with cannon and small arms. As I could not, without receiving orders, move from the plain without risking all heavy artillery and baggage, especially since four battalions of the enemy had drawn up so that they were standing opposite me, I couldn't do anything else but send an adjutant to General Bourgoyne and await orders. The adjutant came back again about 3 o'clock and informed me that General Bourgoyne was engaged with his whole line and asked me to send him what help I could without risking ground and baggage. I immediately took my infantry regiment and 2 companies of Rhets with 2 cannon, leaving Brigadier Specht with 2 $\frac{1}{2}$  battalions on the spot. I marched through the wood up the mountain and found to my greatest amazement that I stood right on the flanks of both armies, and our left wing was retreating. I formed the 7 companies and attacked the enemy's right wing with a rapid charge. When the English saw this, they recovered

themselves and went wearily back on the enemy, who was driven from a hill through a valley and wood, and if night had not come then, I believe it would have been possible with this action to enter the enemy camp. General Bourgoyne thanked me very much and declared that for the second time I had been the guardian angel of the English. In this action our army had about 200 killed, and in all had cost us between 5 and 600 men. The 62nd regiment had only 109 men left unhurt from the battle. The columns of our army were still separated from each other and remained in that way in bivouac that night.

On the 20th in the morning General Bourgoyne reconnoitered, and in the afternoon the army occupied the position near Friemann's (sic) House on the hills, and was separated from the enemy by nothing but a swampy ravine. In the valley by the water the Hesse-Hanau regiment and the 47th English regiment remained to cover the batteaux, artillery and baggage. I stood with the left wing of 3 battalions on the ridge of the mountain, on my right hand were 4 English regiments, whose right wing was covered by a ravine, across the ravine the Fraser corps began, whose right wing was covered by a strong redoubt and on their right flank stood Colonel Breymann with his usual corps. As the greatest part of the army stood in the middle of a wood, all the trees were cut down and rows and layers of trees and earth made, so that our position was very strong. The enemy stood on steep hills in fortifications, with a swamp and abattises in front with a strength of from 12 to 14 thousand men, as in contrast to our army which had been reduced to 4000 men.

On the 21st, we learned that the enemy had actually made a daring attempt on Ticonderoga, and had surprised and taken prisoner at the portage 4 companies of the 53rd regiment, retreating after a 4-day cannonade on Fort Carillon, however. Except for daily skirmishes among the pickets, nothing unusual happened, and both armies remained unmoving in this position, and on this side General Bourgoyne wanted to wait for the approach of General Clinton; and here it was that I pointed out at different times the danger of our situation and pleaded that we at least move back over the Hudson River behind Batten-Kill, in order to make communication with Fort Eduard and Lake George again. The enemy at different times sent out detachments on both sides of the River behind us, even burning the bridge which we had built over the Fish-Kill at Saratoga. One day passed after the other, our provisions lessened,  $\frac{1}{2}$  tt of meat and  $\frac{1}{2}$  tt of bread were drawn by the soldiers, the enemy was on all sides of us, in woods which were unknown to us, and we stood in a kind of inaction, from which we did not know how to help ourselves.

On the 4th of October General Bourgoyne called together a council of war, consisting of General Philips, myself and Brigadier Fraser, and asked us our advice on what should be done in this affair, proposing whether we could not by a roundabout way turn the enemy on his left flank and attack in the rear, As by such movement, however, we would have to remove ourselves from the water at least 3 whole days, we would risk

losing all of the batteaux and provisions, and then have nothing at all to live on, because it wasn't to be expected that 2 battalions could defend the valley and the riverbank for 3 days. On this occasion I attempted to present the danger of our situation, as the enclosure may show, and to urge a retreat to Ft. Eduard as soon as possible especially on account of the only slight possibility of the early arrival of General Clington. However, we waited, nourished always by hope, and it was decided on the 7th of October to undertake a reconnaissance against the left wing of the enemy, and if it was found to be unattackable, to consider the retreat.

*1500 men  
and 8  
cannon*

On the 7th of October at 11 o'clock in the morning 700 men of Fraser, 300 of Braymann, 200 from the right and 300 from the left wing were commanded along with 8 cannon, in order to undertake the reconnaissance. We marched off to the right in 3 columns, drove the enemy from a retrenched house, and took possession of a hill opposite a schoolhouse, behind which on a hill their left wing was stationed. We formed our line as well as the lay of the land permitted, placing our columns on the hills. The English grenadiers stood on the left wing in the woods, the German command under Colonel von Speth (sic) nearby and Brigadier Fraser with the rest of the English to the right of us. Between 2 and 3 o'clock in the afternoon the enemy moved out with more than 5000 men, attacked the English grenadiers in the woods on the flank and rear, and when Major Ackland was wounded, this battalion was hurled back; thereupon I made a junction with our command under Colonel Speth, and the latter held up, Major Williams with 2 English cannon would not have lost the hill on the very outside if the Fraser corps had not also been driven from their right wing by an unfortunate misunderstanding, therefore this command was lessened of both wings and completely surrounded. This command, however, made a good retreat into the woods, but 2 cannon and Major Williams were taken. The firing now became general in front and on both sides, and General Bourgoyne commanded that all should retreat to the Fraser Great Redoubt. With great good fortune we reached this redoubt and had time to place these 1500 men in it. Now the enemy made his last effort and attacked the redoubt with the greatest fury. The firing was terrible for almost an hour. Our canister fire wreaked havoc on the enemy. At the same time the latter attacked the entrenchment of Colonel Breymann, which was held for a long time, but then the latter was shot dead, and the enemy came in at the rear, in that way the enemy captured the entrenchment and took tents and equipment. The largest part of the men were saved, however. Colonel von Speth, who intended to help Colonel Breymann with 40 men, was for his part surrounded in the night by 10 men and taken prisoner, and with that this unfortunate affair was ended. At 10 o'clock in the evening General Bourgoyne decided to retreat, and before daybreak I had to march to the left off the hill down into the valley, where our depot was. As, however, General Bourgoyne wanted to take the wounded, the artillery and baggage with him, the march went so slowly, that as day broke, the baggage had not yet left the valley. Consequently the hills around the valley had to be guarded as much as possible, and we stopped.

On the night of the 8th to the 9th we actually started. I was supposed to make the advanced guard with 4 battalions, the baggage following me, then the army and rear guard. Thus as I came to Overgotta House, I saw that the enemy had occupied the heights at Saratoga, which, however, he left, and placed himself across the Hudson behind Batten-Kill. Here there was still time to get through, if we had continued our march leaving behind the heavy artillery, batteaux and baggage; but we stopped at Overgotta House and remained there despite my pleas.

On the evening from the 9th to the 10th we arrived at Saratoga and saw the whole corps of the enemy marching in order to prevent our passage. Nevertheless, on the 10th we sent Colonel Sutterland (Sutherland) to reconnoiter the road this side of Fort Eduard, and to have it repaired by Captain Twiss, merely to cut his way through with the infantry; he got to within 3 English miles this side of Fort Eduard to where the passage goes over the river and found little resistance. Vague news of the approach of General Clinton or other reasons changed our plan, and Colonel Suttermann (Sutherland!) was called back, when the repair of the bridges was countermanded.

This evening the enemy arrived and occupied the mountain on the opposite side of Fish-Kill, and established batteries everywhere on that side, where the river has to be crossed on foot. Our army took its position as well as it could, which, however, was so extended and faulty, that between the left wing where Generals Bourgoyne and Philips had erected a redoubt of 5 battalions, and me, who had occupied the right wing, there was a distance of more than 2000 paces, where I stood in the valley, having in front of me the hills at the discretion of the enemy.

On the 11th the largest part of the enemy crossed Fish-Kill and drew up parallel to our front line on a hill, having a ravine and swamp before it. At daybreak a brigade of the enemy under the protection of a thick mist crossed Fish-Kill around the mouth of the Hudson, drove away the outposts of the 62nd and 47 regiments, and took all of our batteaux with a large part of our provisions which still remained. The cannon fire of our batteries drove them back over the river again, still the loss of our batteaux was not to be remedied.

During the day the enemy attacked our outposts from the front and cannonaded our whole line from the rear. In the meantime we entrenched ourselves in the poor position which we had as well as we could, and always expected that the enemy would attack us. However, knowing the limit of our provisions, they didn't do anything but close us up tighter and tighter with strong entrenchments and batteries, so that no man could walk over 5 to 600 paces in front of the camp. I proposed once again that we cut our way through from behind, and in case we could not cross the Hudson at Fort Eduard, to cross it 4 miles below, where there is another ford, although it is much more dangerous. It was agreed that we should march out at 10 o'clock in the evening, but again this order was countermanded.

On the 12th the enemy established a post which is on the other side of a swamp on the road which is on this side of the Hudson River, so that not the smallest way remained open for retreat. As our situation became so critical, the army had only 5 days' provisions, there were so many dead horses that one could not stand the smell, General Bourgoyne had a council of war of all commanders called on the 13th, and presented to them the state of the army in this way:

That our army, reduced to 3500 combatants, was surrounded by 14 to 16,000 men, another army of from 2 to 3000 men had occupied all of the places where our army could cross the Hudson River, likewise nothing certain about the arrival of General Clington had been learned, so nothing else remained open for our army to do but:

1) to attack the enemy in a much more advantageous position than our present one, but, however, even if we could beat him, for want of provisions, we could not reach Fort George.

2) to remain as long as we could in our faulty position, and when we ran out of food to surrender ourselves at discretion.

3) to capitulate on suitable terms, or

4) to permit each one to make his own way through the woods as well as he could to get to Fort George, which was possible for wild animals but not for soldiers.

The almost unanimous opinion of all English and German staff officers was that, if General Bourgoyne believed there was a possibility of attacking the enemy with success, they were willing to sacrifice life and limb, however, to effect a retreat of from 60 to 70 miles through pathless woods and to lose cruelly a whole army would be pure sacrifice, as the army would have only enough provisions for four days, so in case the enemy did not intend to attack, it would be better to think about an adjustment and honorable capitulation while it was still possible than to consider the day when we had to surrender ourselves at discretion because of complete lack of provisions. After mature deliberation, and in order not to sacrifice completely the troops and subjects of Your Serene Highness, I agreed with this opinion, and for the following reasons:

If we had been able to attack the enemy, if we had even beaten him, we still didn't have food enough to get to Fort George, and also as all of the horses were starved to the extreme, we would have had to leave the artillery and baggage. If our army had been beaten, which was to be expected, on account of its weakness, the terrain and its unfortunate position, and on account of the very fallen spirits of the soldiers, all of the men would have been sacrificed. The king would lose an army of 3500 men and Your Royal Highness your brave subjects.

Remaining and awaiting the enemy was, on account of this, not advisable because the enemy would not attack us, but could pick the very day when we had eaten the last mouthful and take us prisoner at discretion, and it was certain also that if the enemy attacked us our position would be so defective that the corps of General Bourgoyne would be separated immediately from my small corps, and there would be a general rout. A retreat on the bank of the Hudson, where all crossings would be covered by artillery and to make the small arms fire sufficient was a wild dream, to break our way separately through the great woods, at the hazard of each, was also an impossible plan, and would sacrifice the whole corps, especially the Brunswickers, who are not made to adept themselves in pathless woods. For all these reasons and as I did not consider the situation the same as at Maxen, where General Finck could have been helped by the king in 24 hours, but rather the same as that at Pirna, where the Saxons were forced to capitulate because of lack of food, I considered an honorable capitulation not only advantageous but necessary, at least to save the troops for the king. In my situation I considered myself doubly competent to speak thus out of interest for Your Royal Highness.

Generals Bourgoyne and Philips themselves saw no other expedient practicable than to affect a good capitulation, and it was decided to send a drummer to the enemy, the following day, however, to send a staff-officer over, and the suggested articles would be drawn up. However, before we went our separate ways, I asked General Bourgoyne in the presence of all the staff officers to declare that he had never disclosed his plans to me, or asked my opinions, and that I had not the least part in all of the events which had occurred, to which he not only agreed, but also declared that all events which had happened, even the situation in which he now found himself, were entirely his own and no other person's responsibility.

On the 14th Major Kingston was sent to General Gates and presented our terms; General Gates refused them, and sent different terms, in which he demanded that everything should be surrendered at discretion, stating that in 3 or 4 days we must surrender ourselves anyway. These humiliating articles were rejected by everyone, hostilities began again, and I certainly expected that we would be attacked on the 15th. To everyone's amazement a drummer came on the 15th in the morning with an amendment in the capitulation rejected by General Bourgoyne, which was as favorable as possible, with the condition, however, that the troops should leave their positions that very afternoon. His sudden modification put General Bourgoyne in great confusion, uncertainty and suspicion as to whether perhaps General Clington was not approaching. In order to gain time then, it was suggested that these were only preliminary terms, and it would be necessary to have a commission draw up the still necessary secondary articles. It was agreed to send over 2 staff officers of us, Colonel Butterland and Captain Gray (Craig), and they negotiated the whole night, and the next morning everything was ready except for General Bourgoyne's signature, to bring about which both of the staff officers had given their word of honor. In the night from the 15th to the 16th a man came allegedly from Albany, who asserted that General Clington was advancing to Albany, and was probably

there by now. This perplexed us very much, particularly as this deponent had not seen the corps of General Clington, but had the information only thirdhand by hearsay. General Bourgoyne was filled with hope again, and wanted to break the already agreed preliminary terms, even if both of the deputy officers had given their word of honor that the amendment would be approved. A council of war was called together again, and first the question was raised, could General Bourgoyne break the already approved convention with honor? which was answered by a majority with No. Then, whether the news which had arrived could be accepted as true, and whether it would improve our situation or not? which was also answered by No. Finally, a compromise was reached, to write to General Gates; that we had definite information that he had sent troops to Albany during the armistice. Since, therefore, his army had been so weakened during the armistice, the capitulation could not be entered into, unless he should allow 2 of our officers to be shown his whole army. This was sent over, and on the 16th in the morning the answer came back that to make such a demand was unheard of, and that no general had to show his army. However, he could assure us on his word of honor that, since his arrival in this position, no man had been detached, but rather many more had come. However, as soon as General Bourgoyne had signed the convention, he would be ready and willing to show him his whole army, and prove that his army was four times as strong as ours. Finally, after much trouble and deliberation, General Bourgoyne signed the convention and on the 17th in the morning the army marched out, laying down nothing but muskets and sabers, and marched thus to Stillwater. Generals Bourgoyne, Philips and I rode over to General Gates and found the enemy on the way arranged effectively in the greatest order, and all the adjutants, to whom we had given the commission to make a count, had counted 13,000 combatants under arms, without counting the troops which stood arranged on the other side of the water. At noon we ate together with General Gates, and in the evening went back to Stillwater.

On the 18th the troops marched to Stillwater in 2 columns, crossing the river there on the morning of the 19th and thence via Kinderhuc (sic) to Springfield, the English however, via Kinderhuc to Northhampton, to occupy quarters in the vicinity of Boston until General Howe should send ships to take them back to England, or until an exchange agreement should be arranged. The men have retained cartridge boxes and sword belts, but they had to surrender muskets and sabers. Inclosed is the list of the strength of the corps from the 17th to the surrender, as likewise a list of those killed, wounded or taken prisoner in the previous action. These prisoners are not included in the capitulation. In Carillon are still the regiment of Prince Friedrich and almost 300 men on command, in place of the recruits from Canada. From these I have ordered a kind of battalion under the command of Captain Dieterich to be formed, and also the command in Canada of 650 men under Colonel von Ehrenkrook. I have also sent orders to Carillon, to have all equipment and whatever belongs to us sent to Canada and to send it from there via Quebec, either to Boston or to England in case we should go there, and that the Chief Paymaster should

go with it. Until then I must help myself as well as I can, and I have surrendered to Captain Gerlach temporarily the department of Chief Paymaster. As soon as we arrive at our destination, I will send in to you a list of all our losses, not only of equipment, baggage and uniforms, but also the losses to our troops.

Your Royal Highness'  
most obedient servant

(signed) Riedesel .