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# THE LEGACY OF MAJOR-GENERAL JAMES WOLFE: BATTLEFIELD LEADERSHIP AND THE DEFEAT OF THE FRENCH EMPIRE IN NORTH AMERICA

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Chris Graham



Major-General James Wolfe

The Seven Years' War (1756-1763) involved most of the larger European powers, but was fought in several theatres far away from Europe. Of these remote regions, North America was the only one to have large-scale campaigns fought across its expanse. While the British forces here were initially less than successful, they begin to see substantial gains in their battles against the French after the arrival of Major-General James Wolfe. Born to a comfortable, though by no means rich, household in Westerham, England, Wolfe grew up with a desire to become a soldier.<sup>1</sup> He joined the British army as an ensign and quickly rose through the ranks, participating in the War of Austrian Succession (1740-1748) and the Seven Years' War.<sup>2</sup> It was at the failed amphibious assault at Rocherfort, France in 1757 that Wolfe distinguished himself, being found by an inquiry to have been one of the few officers from the expedition to have attempted to carry out the attack.<sup>3</sup> This event led him to be selected as one of the commanders for

the expedition to North America charged with the capture of Louisbourg.<sup>4</sup> After this victory, the next target became the city of Quebec. The battle that made the capture of Quebec possible was the Plains of Abraham, where Wolfe's leadership and creativity were the reasons for the triumph of the British forces. It was at this pivotal battle that Wolfe displayed his strength as a leader. This success, in addition to the capture of the French fortress of Louisbourg, caused the elimination of France from North America. Wolfe's excellence as a commander brought victory on both occasions; however, the significance of his involvement is most effectively illustrated in the defeat of the French at the Plains of Abraham. British success at this battle on 13 September 1759 was the result of Wolfe's effective command abilities, which involved his battlefield leadership; proficiency at raising morale amongst his troops; and the various tactical innovations that he had his soldiers employ.

After suffering several initial defeats, the British finally seized the initiative in the war at the Siege of Louisbourg.<sup>5</sup> This was the first of Wolfe's great North American victories and was of immense importance, since the fortress of Louisbourg was a major source of French pride and strength. Its capture gave the British access to the St. Lawrence River, which would allow them into the heart of North America.<sup>6</sup> The credit for this victory lies exclusively with Wolfe, as it was he who commanded the initial landing and successfully formed a beachhead by reversing his order to retreat and instead having his soldiers support a tenuous hold on the shore.<sup>7</sup> He then led British preparations for the attack: erecting batteries, destroying the French defenders' Island Battery and edging the British siege works closer and closer to the fortress.<sup>8</sup> Had it not been for Wolfe, Louisbourg may have taken much longer to capture, or it may not have fallen at all. While

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Wolfe's leadership and battlefield influence made this victory possible, the Plains of Abraham is an even better illustration of how his command skills enabled the British to triumph.

The battle of the Plains of Abraham was the British victory that preceded the Siege of Quebec. It was this encounter that irreparably damaged the French resistance in North America. After several failed attempts to take Quebec over the course of the season, a successful attack was launched in the early hours of 13 September 1759.<sup>9</sup> The British forces, packed into their boats, went along the St. Lawrence River and landed successfully above Quebec at Anse-du-Foulon.<sup>10</sup> There were to be multiple landings, as the boats could not hold Wolfe's entire force at once.<sup>11</sup> While the main attack force was landing upriver of Quebec at Anse-du-Foulon, the British fleet and the soldiers who had remained behind engaged in a diversionary attack at Quebec that successfully drew the attention of General Montcalm to a possible landing below the French city.<sup>12</sup> Additional feints saw a French scouting force of 2,000 men under Bougainville "drawn up river towards Pointe-aux-Trembles... [and] the Quebec garrison occupied by a heavy bombardment from the Levis batteries."<sup>13</sup> These tactics allowed Wolfe's main attack force to land initially unopposed. To ensure his plan was carried out correctly, and because of his desire to be at the head of his army, Wolfe was with the first British division that landed.<sup>14</sup> The immediate obstacle to overcome after reaching the shore was scaling the heights. The only way to the top was to "[climb] a hill, or rather, a precipice of about three hundred yards—very steep, and covered with wood and brush."<sup>15</sup> The British soldiers "gained the top of the hill, without any remarkable opposition."<sup>16</sup> Once the first wave of soldiers had reached the top, however, it quickly became apparent that it was necessary to stop the French Samos Battery, which had begun to bombard the second wave of Redcoats. "A party was sent to silence it; this was soon effected, and the more distant battery at Sillery [upriver of Samos] was next attacked and taken."<sup>17</sup> The British force, roughly 4,800 strong, assembled atop the Plains of Abraham.<sup>18</sup> Due to the large battlefield and the small number of soldiers, Wolfe deployed his men in a formation two ranks deep, as opposed to the usual three.<sup>19</sup>

By eight o'clock Wolfe's army, now complemented by a single six-pound artillery piece, was ready and awaiting the opposition.<sup>20</sup> The French, under Montcalm, were taken by surprise and "slow to react to the British landing. [By] around 9:30 a.m., Montcalm [had formed] his force of 4,500 into three columns, each six ranks deep."<sup>21</sup> Numerically, the armies were of similar size, but while the French forces contained a large portion of militia, Wolfe commanded an army composed entirely of regulars.<sup>22</sup> This gave Wolfe a tactical advantage, as all of his men were experienced, disciplined, professional soldiers. When the French charged at the British lines, Wolfe's soldiers held their fire. Wolfe had his "Redcoats [wait] until the French had advanced to within 40 yards [as well as] load their muskets with an extra ball. Montcalm's columns wilted in the face of such massed firepower."<sup>23</sup> This simultaneous and more precise musket fire crippled the French line and crushed the survivors' will to fight. The French forces quickly turned and retreated to Quebec, while Montcalm was mortally wounded in the process.<sup>24</sup> The British were quick to pursue the vanquished French. As the enemy fled, Wolfe, who had earlier been shot in the wrist, led the charge of the Louisbourg grenadiers and was hit for a second time.<sup>25</sup> He continued to move forward until, "struck by a third ball, and this time in the breast, his face towards Quebec, he fell."<sup>26</sup> Though a large portion of the retreating French troops were able to escape, victory could still be claimed as Quebec was surrendered to the British on 18 September 1759.<sup>27</sup> Although the French were not yet defeated, this signaled the end of their empire in North America.

Wolfe's battlefield leadership was a very important contributing factor in his victory over the French at the Plains of Abraham. It was his command of the army that placed the British soldiers in the best possible position for the battle, and delivered a decisive blow to the French forces. While waiting for the French to assemble, Wolfe made sure to situate his army where it would have the most protection from the French batteries at Quebec. This was achieved by arraying the British forces behind a ridge that ran across the Plains of Abraham.<sup>28</sup> Wolfe's decision not to take the high ground saved many British lives and may have affected the outcome of the battle. Steven Brumwell notes that Wolfe's deployment exploited "the shelter of the low-lying 'dead ground' behind [the ridge, which] screened his men from the direct fire of the city's guns,"<sup>29</sup> adding that if the British had assembled atop the high ground "they would have become sitting targets."<sup>30</sup> Though many commanding officers may have acted differently, assuming that seizing the high ground is always the best plan, Wolfe's direct control over his army and excellent tactical

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skill allowed him to ensure that the British force was not weakened through attrition by the artillery located at Quebec.

Another excellent example of how Wolfe's influence on the battlefield directly contributed to the British victory was his strict order not to fire until the enemy was within optimal range. Captain John Knox recorded that Wolfe made it clear that his soldiers were not to fire "until [the French] came within forty yards. [This] uncommon steadiness threw [the French] into some disorder, and was most critically maintained by a well-timed, regular, and heavy discharge of our small arms."<sup>31</sup> By waiting for the French to come within forty yards, Wolfe ensured that his army would deal Montcalm's forces one swift, catastrophic blow. Wolfe was directly involved with the implementation of this order, as he walked along the ranks of his army ensuring that every man understood his order to hold their fire until the French were at point-blank range.<sup>32</sup> This decision and its careful execution paid off for Wolfe as it severely damaged the French army.

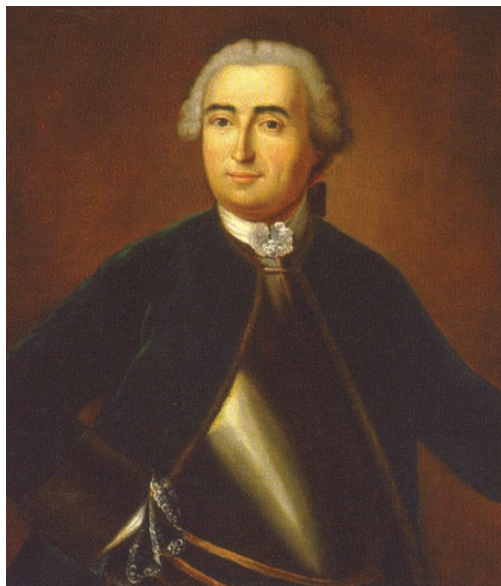
Wolfe demonstrated his excellent leadership right up until the moment of his death. He continued to issue orders even after he had been shot for a third time and forced to the ground. It was at this point, when the French retreat had begun, that Wolfe ordered "go one of you, my lads, to Colonel Burton, tell him to march Webb's regiment with all speed down to Charles' river, to cut off the retreat of the fugitives from the bridge."<sup>33</sup> Though these orders were not carried out in the confusion of the battle, it would be safe to assume that if they had been, the French retreat would have been seriously undermined and a far higher French casualty and capture rate would have been witnessed.<sup>34</sup> This again goes to show how Wolfe's orders had a profound impact on the battle. His decision not to occupy the high ground, and to reserve the British fire until the French were within optimal range show the way in which his command was vital to the British victory at the Plains of Abraham, while Wolfe's final orders illustrate how total the British success could have been had he continued to lead.

An army's morale and the soldiers' confidence in their leader can often determine the outcome of a battle. Troops will fight harder and with more determination where these factors are present. Wolfe's actions inspired his men at the Plains of Abraham and helped make the British victory possible. He was always at the forefront of his men, only sending them where he would go himself, and he consistently demonstrated genuine concern for their well-being. Wolfe boosted the morale of his army by being at its head. He was not to be found behind the lines, issuing orders from safe ground; he was at the front with his men, "[walking] about, heedless of enemy fire."<sup>35</sup> By showing that he was not afraid, Wolfe was effectively leading by example and inspiring his soldiers. The great respect that the soldiers had for their leader meant his presence at the front increased the force's fighting potential. "Wolfe walked along the front line... uttering words of encouragement, assurance, and command. The effect of the presence and words of their idol was electrical, and the red-coats fell into ranks and shouldered their muskets."<sup>36</sup> Wolfe's ability to arouse his soldiers' will to fight, but also keep them disciplined and orderly, were due in part to his inspirational presence. A leader who lacked the support and trust of the men would be unable to energize his troops in the same fashion. Wolfe's leadership and his presence at the front line had an incalculable, though unquestionably positive effect on the British army and victory.

Aside from respecting Wolfe for his various military achievements, the men liked him because they knew he cared for them. He demonstrated this on several occasions, including two on the battlefield at the Plains of Abraham. In the first instance, "a captain [who had been] shot through the lungs [recovered] consciousness [to see] the General standing at his side. Wolfe pressed his hand, told him not to despair, praised his services, [and] promised him early promotion."<sup>37</sup> Wolfe was very committed to his soldiers, and because they knew this, they trusted the orders he issued and were willing to follow him wherever he led. Wolfe also showed that he cared for his men as, while awaiting the French advance, he had his troops lie down on the ground to avoid being hit by sniper fire.<sup>38</sup> While this obviously had a tactical aspect to it as well, it shows that Wolfe was thinking about the safety of his men. By maintaining a presence at the front of the army, leading his troops in battle, and caring for the British soldiers both on an individual and collective level, Wolfe won the respect and loyalty of the men he commanded. These factors enabled him to increase his army's morale and inspire the British Redcoats to fight as hard as they could.

Wolfe's tactical ingenuity and innovation as components of his command provide two concrete examples that directly contributed to his victory at the Plains of Abraham. Climbing

the heights to reach the Plains of Abraham was a dangerous gamble, but placed Wolfe's forces in a position that threatened Quebec, and ordering his troops to load two shots into their muskets felled scores of French troops. Both of these approaches greatly increased the likelihood of a British victory. The most famous aspect of the battle of the Plains of Abraham is the daring nighttime climb up the heights to the battlefield. The heights themselves were "a formidable obstacle, no less than 175 feet high. Although not perpendicular, [they] looked daunting enough."<sup>39</sup> Having all of his troops quickly and quietly surmount the heights and take possession of the Plains of Abraham was the necessary action that enabled the battle outside of Quebec. Without this unique plan, the attack would never have occurred, since up to this point the British had been unable to infiltrate the French defenses around Quebec. The French were shocked by the British actions: "General [Wolfe] had his army on the [enemy's] shore, within two miles of the town, before his arrival was well known at their headquarters."<sup>40</sup> Wolfe's army now threatened Quebec and forced Montcalm to fight a decisive battle. Scaling the heights not only enabled the battle to occur, but it also strengthened the British position, as an open field allowed the professional Redcoats to fight in the kind of battle for which they had trained and in which they had experience.<sup>41</sup> Had it not been for Wolfe's ingenious method of avoiding the heavily fortified areas around Quebec, a successful British landing and eventual victory would not have been possible.



Lieutenant General Louis-Joseph, Marquis de Montcalm

Where Wolfe's climb had made the battle possible, his orders to enhance the strength of the initial British attack helped ensure victory. The return fire that the British discharged when the French came within 40 yards crushed the opposition, but it was not solely because of the close range. Wolfe made this strike even more decisive by instructing his soldiers to load their muskets with two shots.<sup>42</sup> This tactic practically doubled the effectiveness of the attack and caused "nearly every man in the French front rank [to go] down."<sup>43</sup> The innovations that Wolfe implemented in his plans to take Quebec were very important in the defeat of the French. The climbing of the heights allowed the British to surprise the French and engage in battle with them, and the use of a double-shot round caused immense destruction to the French front line. Credit for both of these ideas is due to Wolfe's intelligent and innovative command.

The battle of the Plains of Abraham illustrates what an effective leader Wolfe was, and how his actions and presence were central to the British victory outside of Quebec in 1759. This success forced the French inside the walls of Quebec and subjected it to a full siege. The city fell soon after, which immensely damaged the French hold on the continent. It was this victory that laid the groundwork for the wholly British North America that was soon to be born. The engagements fought under Wolfe's command, particularly the Plains of Abraham, demonstrate how influential his orders and ideas were to the British victories in North America. Wolfe's leadership in the battle resulted in the best possible positioning of the British forces, which negated the artillery from Quebec that the French would otherwise have used. His commands also ensured that the French forces were defeated at the start of the battle by concentrating his army's firepower into one devastating volley. Wolfe's inspirational and caring nature, as seen from his place at the head of the army, and the order for the troops to lie down, created an enthusiasm among the British soldiers to fight harder and trust the orders given. Finally, the unconventional tactics he utilized, such as climbing the Heights of Abraham, and having his soldiers load two shots in their muskets enabled the battle to occur and strengthened the British attack. As commander, Wolfe greatly enhanced the British prospects of victory at the Plains of Abraham. When examining this battle, it is hard to imagine that such an event would have been won, or even occurred, if not for Major-General James Wolfe's leadership.

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## About the Author ...

Chris Graham of Scarborough, Ontario has completed his Bachelor of Arts Honours at Queen's University with a medal in history and politics as of spring 2009. In his time at university, he has pursued his interest in Canadian and British military history, as it has been the focus of much of his writing. Members of his family have served with the Canadian Forces in the Second World War, First World War, and the Boer War. He has accepted an offer to enroll in law school in September 2009.

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