The Light and the Glory (excerpt from pages 369-372) By Peter Marshall and David Manuel

In the meantime, the preliminary stages of the invasion of Canada were well under way. The main body of the attack force, under General Philip Schuyler, was at Fort Ticonderoga, with his field commander, Colonel Richard Montgomery, and under him, Ethan Allen. From the beginning, America's first campaign of territorial conquest seemed dogged with misfortune. Everything went wrong. The forces were supposed to have been halfway to Montreal by mid-October, but General Schulyler's illness had forced him to turn over command to Montgomery. In addition, short supplies, torrential rains, and endless debates over the meaning of Montgomery's orders had slowed their progress to a crawl..

On the other prong of the attack things were going even worse. Bendedict Arnold was leading a column of a thousand soldiers up the Kennebec River, straight into the heart of Maine's vast wilderness as the first frosts of winter were already setting in. He had persuaded Washington to let him plan and carry out a daring surprise attack on Quebec from a direction they would never expect. But a written request from Arnold to a friend in Quebec asking for information was intercepted before they had even reached the halfway point. From then on, the British knew when the Americans were coming, and where.

On the Kennebec, the men on the trek hardly cared because the operation had been reduced to a grinding ordeal. Their bateaux, or river boats, had been made hurriedly out of green wood, and the consequent leaking had ruined large quantities of provisions and ammunition. Vicious, icy rapids took a steady toll of the bateaux, and grueling portages delayed them still further. On October 18 the last team of oxen was slaughtered for meat, and some of the men were eating their candles to stay alive.

The next morning, the weather, which had never been good, became horrendous. Four successive days and nights of driving downpour had raised the river ten feet and turned it into a raging malevolent torrent. More bateaux and supplies were lost, and what had been a difficult and dangerous route before, turned into a nightmare from which there was no awakening.

On October 25 the rain turned to snow and brought the bedraggled army to a halt. Mutiny now shifted from an ominous possibility to a stark reality. The officers of the Connecticut troops forced Roger Enos, their commander, to withdraw them from the folly and take them back to Cambridge. His effective force now reduced by a third, Arnold struggled on.

But the worst was yet to come.

The frightening thing about the vast Maine wilderness is how easily one can get lost in it. When they reached Lake Me'gantic, much of Arnold's remaining force, misled by inaccurate maps, became disoriented and close to panic in endless swamps that seemed hopelessly similar. For three days and nights, four companies of soldiers stumbled aimlessly through the frozen wastes with nothing to eat. As Dr. Isaac Senter, the army's physician, recorded, "We wandered through hideous swamps…with the conjoint addition of cold, wet and hunger, not to mention our fatigue – with the terrible apprehension of famishing in this desert…We proceeded with as little knowledge of where were, or where we should get to, as if we had been in the unknown interior of Africa or the deserts of Arabia.

Many died, often from sheer exhaustion. George Morrison of the Pennsylvania Rifles wrote: "At length the wretches raise themselves up…wade through the mire to the foot of the next steep and gaze up at its summit, contemplating what they must suffer before they reach it. They attempt it, catching at every twig and shrub they can lay hold of – their feet fly from them – they fall down – to rise no more.

During the first few days of November, along the Chaudière River there were more smashed bateaux, drowned riflemen, and starvation. The company of dogs were eaten, and then the shaving soap. Lip salve, leather boots, and cartridge boxes soon followed. Finally, on November 8, the 650 remaining men of Arnold's column reached Point Levis, opposite Quebec on the Saint Lawrence River. They were as exhausted as if they had experienced eight weeks of unbroken combat – and the British had yet to be encountered.

By this time, their whereabouts were well known to the brilliant British General Guy Carleton, who had ample opportunity to strengthen Quebec's defenses. He was expecting the attack, and he was ready. Arnold got his men across the river on November 13, the day Montreal fell to Montgomery's column. But it took nineteen more days before Montgomery was able to join Arnold, and he brought only three hundred soldiers. Moreover, the enlistment time of most of his men was about to run out. They had to attack quickly, but they felt they needed a stormy night to cover their maneuvers up the precipices of Quebec. On December 30 they got their cover in the form of a blinding snowstorm.

Montgomery and Arnold attacked from two different directions. In the first fusillade at close quarters, Montgomery and all his senior officers were killed outright. This left his force without effective leadership, and the commissary officer, who suddenly found that he was the only senior officer present, promptly ordered a retreat.

Meanwhile, Arnold and his soldiers, having heard nothing, continued their attack alone. Arnold's indomitable will made him a brilliant but erratic commander, and urging his men forward in their first skirmish, he was badly wounded and taken back to camp. His men, confused and lost in the storm, fought on gamely in small groups. But they were finally forced to surrender, and the fiasco of the Canadian invasion was mercifully over.

In the space of a few moments, all the weeks of sacrifice and agony had come to nothing. The Americans suffered thirty dead, forty-two wounded, and more than four hundred taken prisoner. The British counted seven dead and eleven wounded.

Arnold and the other survivors held out on the south bank of the Saint Lawrence until spring, even thought their ranks were further decimated by an outbreak of smallpox. With the coming of spring and the arrival of two British warships, they finally gave up and started south for Lake Champlain. Back on American soil, wracked with dysentery and smallpox, they staggered into Fort Ticonderoga.

The story of the invasion of Canada is a grim and heartbreaking tragedy. These men had given everything in total, unhesitating commitment – and for nothing. Did it occur to them the reason might have been that no matter how noble it appeared or how total their commitment, it was entirely out of God's will?

During the Canadian expedition, the blessing of Divine Protection seems to have been bestowed – or withheld – in relationship whether individuals or groups were operating according to God's will. As Abraham Lincoln would respond, during another period of grave national crisis, "Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my great concern is to be on God's side."

The annexation of Canada was apparently not in God's plan for the United States. However, when the British for once pressed their advantage and came after the fleeing Americans in hot pursuit, divine providence once again seemed to favor the Patriot cause.