Death of General Wolfe, by Benjamin West, 1770, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Canada (Courtesy of The Yorck Project)

Wolfe, Montcalm, and the Principles of Joint Operations in the Quebec Campaign of 1759

By Joseph Finnan, Lee P. Gray, John H. Perry, and Brian Lust

A critical campaign analysis of the French and Indian War's 1759 Quebec campaign demonstrates that Britain achieved victory because it reflected the principles of joint operations better than its French enemy did. While the British lacked a doctrinal publication that listed principles of joint operations, the thought processes and underlying concepts similar to our current doctrinal principles unmistakably shaped their military thought.

British General James Wolfe achieved decisive victory at Quebec because he creatively integrated many of these principles in his operational plan, thereby magnifying their effect. Committing to a clear strategic objective while practicing

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effective unity of command between the army and navy allowed Wolfe to practice economy of force with the troops he had available. He retained the operational offensive, exploiting masterful amphibious maneuver and achieving dramatic surprise in order to deploy overwhelming mass at the decisive point of the campaign. Conversely, his opponent, General Marquis de Montcalm, displayed isolated adherence to some of these principles, but his failure to integrate them into an overall approach limited their impact and led to defeat.

Quebec Campaign of 1759

After achieving naval superiority in North America and conquering the French Atlantic fortress of Louisbourg in 1758, British war plans targeted Quebec City, the capital of New France, as the primary objective for 1759. Consequently, Wolfe led his British expedition of 9,000 men up the St. Lawrence River, landing initially on Ile d'Orléans, downriver from Quebec, on June 26, 1759. Wolfe sought to draw his opponent, Montcalm, out from his defensive positions where he could conduct a decisive engagement. Montcalm refused to oblige. Wolfe ordered an artillery barrage of Quebec in early July, staged a frontal assault at Montmorency on July 31, and conducted an operation in August of widespread destruction throughout the French-Canadian countryside. With winter quickly approaching, Wolfe faced the loss of his supporting naval squadron. He opted for a bold offensive move to draw Montcalm out of his tactical defense. He therefore staged a daring nighttime amphibious operation on September 13, where 4,000 British regulars sailed downriver to a cove called the Anse au Foulon, climbed the bluff there, and moved onto the Plains of Abraham west of the city. Montcalm, unprepared for the British move, decided to attack the British line with a combination of roughly 4,500 French regulars, Canadian militia, and Native allies. Concentrated musket fire from the British regulars broke the French advance and cost France the battle. An additional force of French regulars led by the Comte de Bougainville arrived after the climactic effort, but quickly withdrew. Both Wolfe and Montcalm suffered mortal wounds in the engagement, and the remaining French garrison inside Quebec surrendered on September 17, 1759, resulting in a decisive British campaign victory.[1]

Wolfe and the Traditional "Principles of War"

Wolfe's experience suggests that joint officers should take it upon themselves to analyze historical case studies and not leave such examination solely to formal military instruction. Joint officers need to tie the lessons of abstract principles to historical examples, as well as connect them to their own personal experiences, in order to internalize and apply these principles in complex and unanticipated future environments.

While today's designation of 12 "principles of joint operations" is anachronistic for the 18th century, Wolfe largely taught himself the military arts and acquired a familiarity with the traditional principles of war. He read military theory and history widely, including writers from antiquity such as Thucydides, Julius Caesar, and Xenophon, as well as more recent military thinkers like Gustavus Adolphus, Charles XII of Sweden, and Vauban. Wolfe lamented Britain's lack of formal military education and argued that "our military education is by far the worst in Europe. We are the most egregious blunderers in war." Wolfe strongly favored critical analysis of past campaigns "to exercise the faculty of judging," making the practical case that "the more a soldier thinks of the false steps of those that are gone before, the more likely he is to avoid them."[2]

Wolfe also fortified his appreciation for these principles through firsthand military experience, an option also available to today's joint officers. Wolfe identified his preoccupation with the principle of mass after his experience at the battle of Dettingen, in Germany in 1743, where as a junior officer he fruitlessly went on "begging and ordering the men not to fire at too great a distance, but to keep it till the enemy should come near us; but to little purpose." As a commander, he rigorously trained his troops in musket fire: "firing balls at objects teaches the soldier to level incomparably, makes the recruits steady, and removes the foolish apprehension that seizes young soldiers." Similarly, he honed his appreciation for the principles of maneuver and surprise during the abortive British amphibious effort against Rochefort on the French coast in 1757. Wolfe deduced important lessons for amphibious actions: "lose no time in getting troops on shore. . . . generals should settle their plan of operations, so that no time may be lost in idle debate. . . . pushing on smartly is the road to success."[3]

Successful Integration of Joint Operating Principles

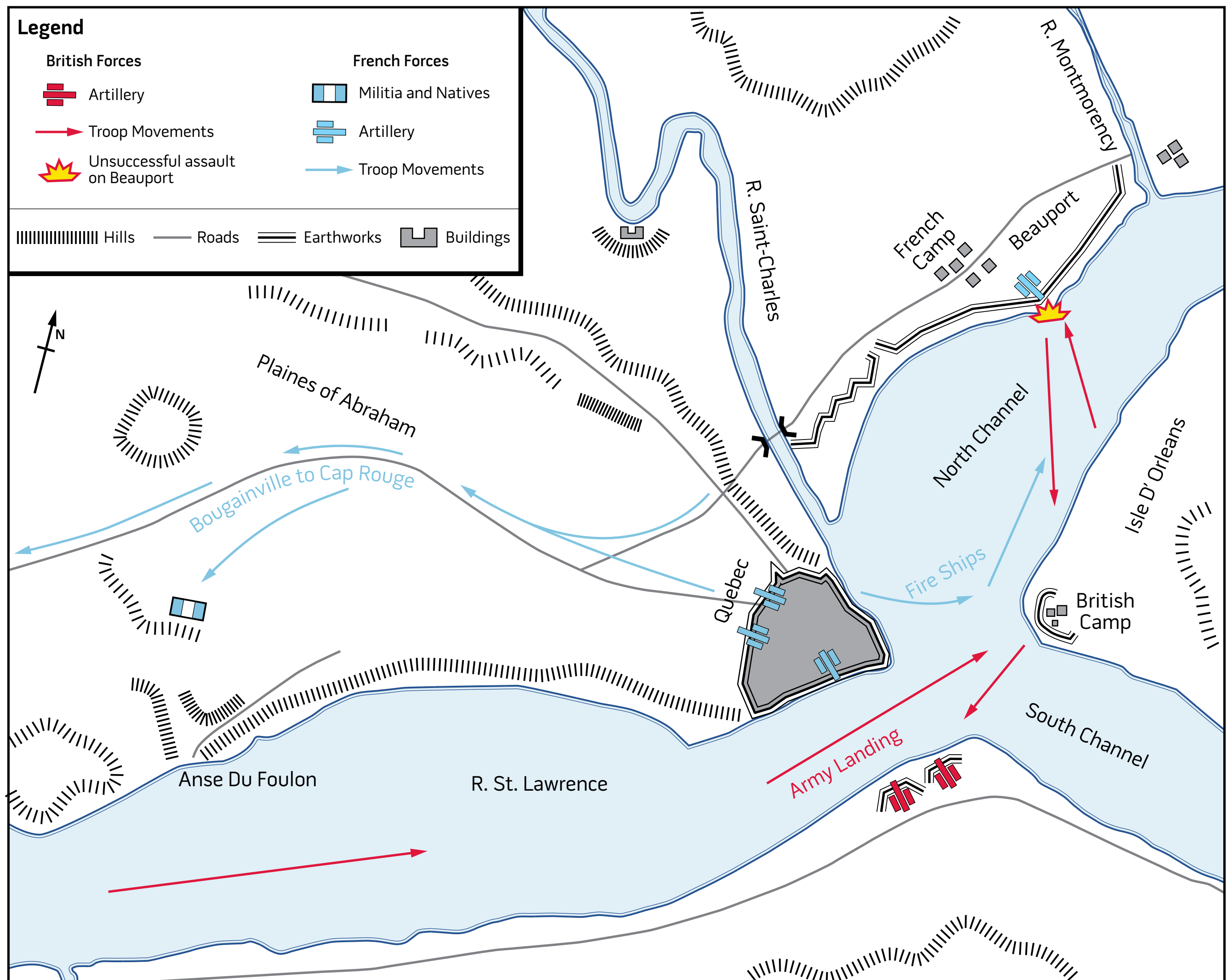
During the Quebec campaign, Wolfe integrated a majority of what we today call the principles of joint operations, using each as a force multiplier for the next, leading to ultimate victory on the Plains of Abraham.

Objective. The British had a clear and concrete strategic objective: the capture of the French Canadian capital of Quebec. This clarity and consistency allowed Wolfe to organize his operational use of joint principles toward a consistent strategic goal. Maintaining this clear and consistent objective served as a prerequisite to leveraging the other joint principles during the campaign.

Unity of Command. Though Britain had no doctrinal concept of jointness, the clarity of the objective encouraged excellent British interservice cooperation at Quebec. Wolfe needed this given his reliance on the navy for access to French Canada and for overall campaign maneuver. British Admiral Charles Saunders reported that "during this tedious campaign, there has continued a perfect good understanding between the army and navy." George Townshend, one of Wolfe's brigadiers, acknowledged that "we are indebted for our success to the constant assistance and support received from [the admirals]."[4]

Economy of Force. During the campaign Wolfe wrote, the "Marquis de

Figure 1. Siege of Quebec during June 28–31, 1759



(Courtesy Hoodinski)

Montcalm is at the head of a great number of bad soldiers, and I am at the head of a small number of good ones."[5] Wolfe sought to besiege his enemy, despite being heavily outnumbered throughout the province. He relied on the fact that his British regulars were well drilled and well disciplined and that most British battalions at Quebec had trained extensively the year before in joint army-navy amphibious tactics.[6] This greatly reduced the significance of simple numerical inferiority, especially because Wolfe's retention of the initiative would allow him to concentrate his limited forces against the primary effort.

Offensive. Wolfe did seize the initiative, although his initial attack at Montmorency utterly failed and cost 440 casualties.[7] Wolfe nevertheless retained focus on his objective and remained on the offensive at the operational level when he launched his amphibious assault on September 13. After reaching the promontory of Quebec, however, Wolfe switched to the tactical defensive, waiting patiently for Montcalm to attack and giving tactical initiative to the French.[8] While this move violated the broad principle of the offensive, it did further Wolfe's campaign goal of drawing Montcalm into open battle and embodied the modern instruction to joint officers that "commanders adopt the defensive only as a temporary expedient."[9] After the decisive engagement on the Plains of Abraham, British forces switched back to the operational offensive for the remainder of the campaign.

Maneuver. By exploiting unity of command and economy of force, Wolfe could pursue the offensive with remarkable skill by employing maneuver and making use of military geography. Relying on the navy's direct observations of the tidal pattern of the St. Lawrence River, Wolfe selected the one night in September 1759 when the tides would

deliver his men—who embarked at 0200 on the morning of September 13—to the target Anse au Foulon at 0400, shortly before dawn. Given tidal conditions, an amphibious operation the night before would land his men a full hour before dawn; one the following night would fail to deliver them ashore until after dawn. Additionally, Wolfe took advantage of moonlight to enable his assault to navigate successfully but without detection. The southeasterly direction of the moonlight effectively lit up the northern shore for his ships to identify their landing area, but failed to silhouette his assault force until it reached the objective—thereby denying the French sentries effective surveillance until nearly the last moment.[10] Then British troops climbed a 175-foot bluff where they overpowered the small number of French defenders.[11] This masterful use of maneuver further demonstrated that a commander must tailor abstract operational principles to concrete physical and temporal conditions.

Surprise. The well-executed British maneuver produced total surprise among the French. In 1757, Montcalm had identified Beauport, east of Quebec, as "the only place where the enemy can, and must, make their landing."[12] This key assumption blinded Montcalm to Wolfe's actual operational plan even after its initiation. Montcalm's failure to anticipate Wolfe's point of attack reduced Montcalm to developing a battle plan on the spot with poor situational awareness and poor communications with his dispersed forces.

British deception efforts also achieved great success. The day before Wolfe's assault on the Anse au Foulon, Admiral Saunders's sailors placed buoys into the river near Beauport as if to mark obstacles in the St. Lawrence River for an amphibious assault to avoid, as well as to conduct a heavy bombardment there. Three hours before Wolfe's landing upriver, Saunders's men rowed back and forth in the St. Lawrence near Beauport to imply an imminent landing.[13] Montcalm so strongly assumed a Beauport assault that he even interpreted the British ships traveling upriver (with Wolfe's actual amphibious assault force) as itself a diversion from the anticipated main assault at Beauport. Ultimately, Montcalm did not reach the Plains of Abraham until 3 hours after the initial British landing.[14]

Mass. The shock among French leaders led Montcalm to react relatively quickly without waiting for reinforcements, which allowed the mass effects of the British regulars' firepower to become the decisive principle in the French defeat on the Plains of Abraham. Tactically, British officers usually sought to control their men's fire for coordinated effect, whereas the French generally approved of French troops firing on their own, favoring efforts to follow this fire with a quick bayonet charge.[15] The French forces roughly equaled the number of British forces in the battle, despite Montcalm's decision to strike before Bougainville's nearly 2,000 reinforcements arrived. While French regulars had the discipline to advance deliberately and hold ranks, the Canadian militiamen sprinkled throughout the French units broke into a run. Various French forces opened fire far outside musket range, at about 125 to 150 yards, to minimal effect. French regulars reloaded standing in line while the militia reloaded in their traditional method—under cover or lying on the ground. The effect left the French line completely uneven and incapable of massing fire effects.[16] As the French advanced, the center of the line pulled ahead and the left fell behind, creating three distinct clusters of French units as they approached the British lines.[17] Once French troops started to fire their muskets, the French battalions effectively split into small groups of regulars or militia, given their different methods of reloading.[18]

British forces held fire as the French advanced; British units on the flanks opened fire at a range of 60 yards, but units in the center opened fire simultaneously at 40 yards with devastating effect.[19] A British officer reported that British forces "with great calmness, as remarkable a close and heavy discharge, as I ever saw . . . and, indeed well might the French Officers say, that they never opposed such a shock as they received from the center of our line, for that they believed every ball took place" during the decisive engagement on the Plains of Abraham. Once the smoke cleared, British forces could see the French force in full retreat.[20]

Current doctrinal instructions to joint officers caution that "the principles do not apply equally in all joint operations."[21] When Wolfe applied lessons learned from historical cases and his own experiences throughout the campaign, he reinforced the concept of operational command as an *art*, requiring commanders to interpret the relative weight of joint operating principles and their use in appropriate combinations. In this case, knowing when and how to violate specific principles actually allowed Wolfe to accomplish his overall campaign goals.

Security. Wolfe intentionally violated the principle of security at the climactic point of the battle by stationing his troops in a static line on the Plains of Abraham without entrenching and with no viable escape route. This had the calculated effect of showing enough apparent vulnerability to provoke Montcalm finally into what Wolfe had sought all summer: an open-field, pitched battle.[22] By sacrificing the principle of security, Wolfe was able to set up conditions to exploit the principle of mass to decisive effect.

Simplicity. Wolfe also jettisoned the principle of simplicity, relying instead on a highly risky, highly coordinated, and tightly timed joint service operation. Part of this decision rested on his supreme confidence in his military and naval force capabilities. The remainder reflected Wolfe's view "that in war something must be allowed to chance and fortune, seeing that it is in its nature hazardous, and an option of difficulties."[23] Additionally, the sheer complexity of the operation helped to guarantee that the French would not anticipate it and that Wolfe could exploit the principle of total surprise.

Perseverance. Wolfe did not focus at all on the three newer principles (perseverance, legitimacy, and restraint) beyond the traditional principles of war. Abandoning perseverance, he wisely took a major gamble to bring the campaign to a conclusion in September because waiting would have deprived Wolfe of his

greatest military advantage, British naval mobility. Waiting also would have risked the primary British objective—to capture Quebec City during 1759.[24]

Legitimacy. Wolfe also did not concern himself with the principle of legitimacy. As a regular army officer fighting in a declared war, Wolfe made no special effort to demonstrate legitimacy to the French or French Canadians. Wolfe, who respected well-trained regular troops, disdained even his own American colonial troops, calling them "the dirtiest most contemptible cowardly dogs that you can conceive."[25] None of this contempt for the principle of legitimacy had any apparent effect on Wolfe's campaign progress.

Restraint. Additionally, during the combat phase of the operation, Wolfe grossly violated the principle of restraint in a failed attempt to provoke Montcalm into open battle. After the British failure at Montmorency in July, Wolfe ordered his forces "to destroy the Harvest, Houses, & Cattle" of the French Canadian countryside, whereupon British troops laid waste to 1,400 civilian farms.[26]

By contrast, Wolfe's successor Townshend realized that after the end of combat operations, he did not have enough forces to control a hostile French Canadian civilian population. When the remaining French garrison in Quebec surrendered, he ordered that "all acts of violence, pillage, & cruelty are strictly forbid [*sic*]. The garrison are to have the Honours of War."[27] Britain committed to returning French regulars to France under flag of truce, while allowing Canadian militiamen who surrendered their arms and pledged fidelity to Britain to return home.[28] In this way, the British maintained a successful occupation of Quebec City, demonstrating that while restraint had minimal relevance during combat operations, it had a decisive importance as part of postcombat stabilization efforts.

Montcalm's Ineffective Use of Joint Operating Principles

Montcalm's failure to integrate the principles of joint operations during the Quebec campaign, in contrast to Wolfe's efforts, serves as a cautionary tale to joint officers about the risks of applying these principles in isolation. By the time of Wolfe's Quebec campaign, Montcalm had to function on the operational defensive with limited personnel and material resources, since France had reoriented its strategic priorities in the wider war toward Europe and away from Canada.[29] This reality elicited a general defeatism in Montcalm by early 1759 when he predicted that "Canada will fall to the English, maybe this campaign, or the next."[30] Acting on the operational defensive put Montcalm at a significant disadvantage, ceding the initiative to Wolfe's forces. This restricted Montcalm to a reactive approach and led to a haphazard application of the principles of joint operations throughout the campaign, which in turn led to general operational incoherence and, ultimately, French defeat.

Objective. Montcalm demonstrated strategic clarity regarding his campaign objective, viewing his primary task as the conventional military defense of Quebec City, which held the key to French control of Canada. This held true throughout the campaign despite Montcalm's strategic disagreement with the French Canadian governor General Marquis de Vaudreuil, who believed that even if the British captured the city, they could not hold it if French and allied Native forces retained the ability to conduct guerrilla-style harassment throughout the province.[31] Since both the French and British commanders identified control of the capital as the campaign's key objective, this parallel focus intensified the importance for each of effectively integrating the remaining operational principles.

Perseverance. Montcalm did exercise perseverance but generally by default rather than calculation. During the campaign, Montcalm had the luxury of time and demonstrated perseverance by refusing to allow the British to draw him from his strong defensive positions from late June through early September.[32] This negatively affected the overall campaign, however, since it occurred only because Montcalm surrendered the more decisive principle of the offensive.

Simplicity. As with the principle of perseverance, Montcalm exercised the principle of simplicity, but in a manner similarly divorced from the other principles. Originally, Montcalm settled on a straightforward preparation of his defenses while waiting for likely British assaults on his positions. Once British forces arrived at the Plains of Abraham, Montcalm ordered a straightforward frontal assault on the British lines, dictated mostly by the topography of the Plains of Abraham.[33] In this case, though, the simplicity of Montcalm's attack derived more from immediacy than from wisdom, and even then it illuminated a lack of interoperability between French regular and Canadian militia units.

Legitimacy. Montcalm, like Wolfe, did not show great concern for the principle of legitimacy and, similar to Wolfe, suffered no apparent drawbacks for it. The French court's order early in 1759 elevating Montcalm to the position of commander in chief of all French forces in Canada did head off any potential infighting between Montcalm and French Canada's political leadership over strategic direction.[34] Montcalm, though, had little sympathy for his French Canadian comrades. When some French Canadian civilians in the summer of 1759 suggested surrendering the capital in order to terminate Wolfe's campaign of destruction in the countryside, Montcalm threatened them with abandonment to "the savages" as a form of counterterror.[35] Nevertheless, Montcalm still managed to exercise effective operational authority among his French regulars and his Canadian militia units during the campaign.

Unity of Command. Montcalm did exercise unity of command in Canada better than his French contemporaries in Europe. The court at Versailles, which consistently made binding "suggestions" to its field commanders, could not micromanage military actions in Canada due to physical distance.[36] Montcalm therefore exercised direct control over French regulars and Canadian militia. He did not exercise it, however, over France's Native allies, who numbered over 1,000 warriors in the Quebec campaign. The

"View of Louisbourg when the city was besieged by British forces in 1758," Captain Charles Ince, drawn on the spot, engraved by P. Canot, November 11, 1762 (Courtesy Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection)

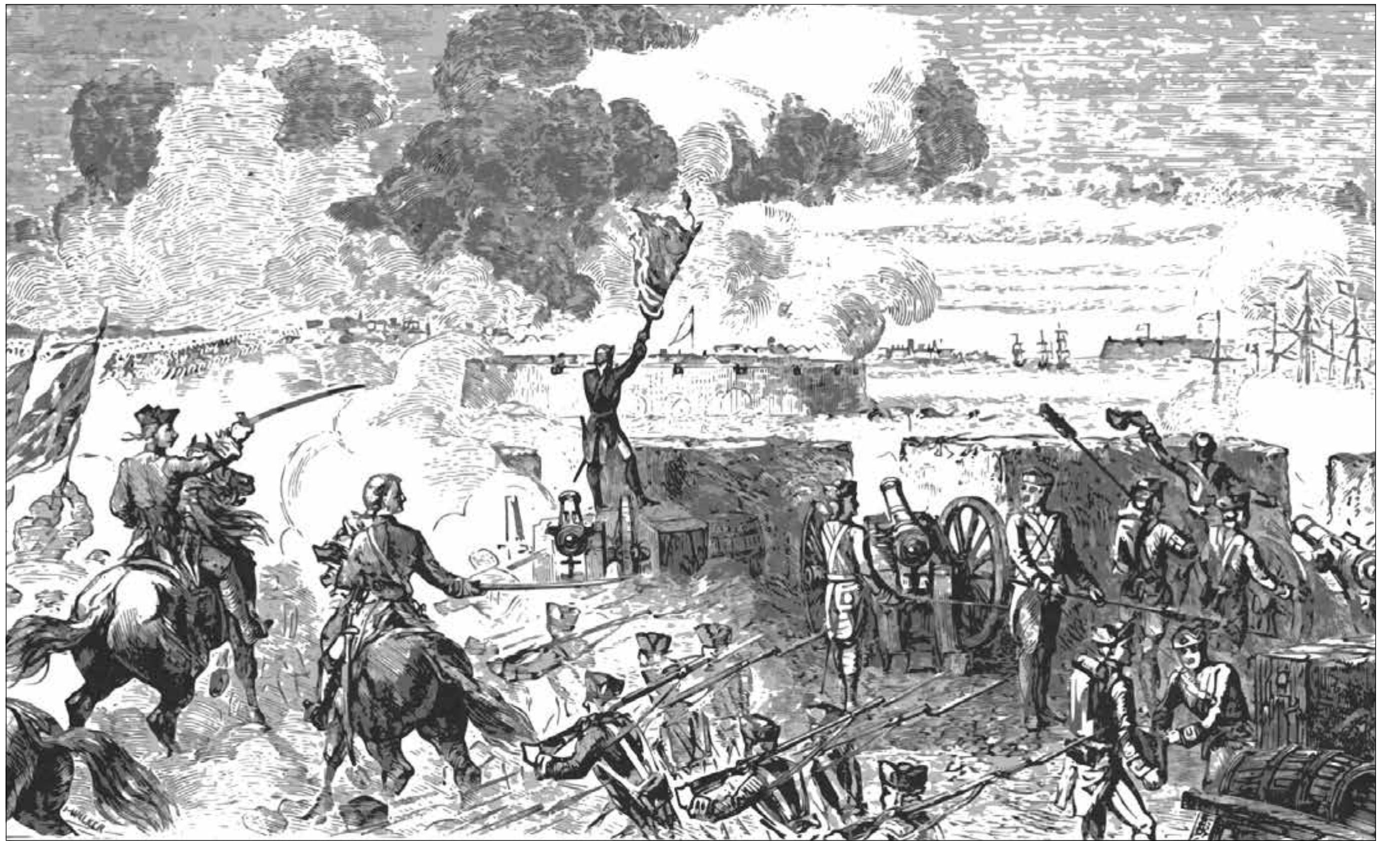
Native allies traditionally fought in parallel, rather than integrated, efforts with the French, and they performed effectively against the British at the Plains of Abraham—British troops had established themselves in a field surrounded by trees and brush, and this provided Native skirmishers with an ideal operating environment.[37]

But on the day of the battle, French unity of command broke down. Montcalm and both of his acting brigadiers suffered mortal wounds, meaning that the Quebec garrison after the battle had no senior French commanders. Meanwhile, the remaining French forces outside the city, now under Governor-General Marquis de Vaudreuil's nominal command, decided after a council of the remaining officers to abandon the city to the British siege.[38]

Security. Montcalm practiced security commendably throughout the campaign except for one disastrous oversight. He heavily fortified the area east of Quebec with French regulars, which allowed him to repel Wolfe's attacks in July, but relied on less capable militia units west of Quebec given the French expectation that the British would not land there.[39] Montcalm's heavy fortification of the Beauport area, Wolfe's preferred amphibious target, did in fact deter Wolfe from landing there.[40] The French commander, though, demonstrated a fatal overconfidence that the 60-yard cliff from the river to the promontory of Quebec afforded a natural defense west of the city where "100 men posted there could stop a whole army [and] give us the time to wait for daylight [and] march there from [Beauport]." French overconfidence also led them to neglect the establishment of a signals or mounted courier system to allow the small garrison to call for help quickly.[41]

Restraint. As with the principle of perseverance, Montcalm's exercise of restraint derived more from his defensive posture than as an integrated operational approach to achieve an objective. Montcalm also fought among a friendly population, which restricted any temptation to violate restraint. But he abandoned this prudence once British troops appeared outside Quebec, allowing Wolfe to provoke him rapidly into a disadvantageous military engagement.[42] Montcalm's failure to show restraint in waiting for reinforcements on the Plains of Abraham contributed heavily to his defeat.

Economy of Force. Because Montcalm remained on the operational defensive, he dispersed his forces over a wide geographic area, thereby violating the principle of economy of force. Since the British could decide the location of the primary engagement, this guaranteed that the French force would expend a high proportion of its combat power on secondary efforts. Wolfe's assault, therefore, caught French forces widely dispersed—Montcalm to the east at Beauport, Bougainville to the



"Brigadier General James Wolfe at the siege of Louisbourg, 1758," by Charles R. Tuttle (*Illustrated History of the Dominion*, 1877)

west at Cap Rouge—and as a result, Bougainville and 2,000 of France's best troops did not arrive on the battlefield until after the British had defeated Montcalm's main force.[43]

Maneuver. Montcalm lost control of the St. Lawrence River east of Quebec City at the start of the campaign.[44] This, plus his need to defend a broad territory, severely limited his ability to maneuver his forces. Ultimately, Montcalm's need to move his forces by land in the operational area meant that first his own and then Bougainville's forces each arrived too late to the battle to repel British forces.[45]

Surprise. Montcalm failed most disastrously on the interrelated principles of surprise, offensive, and mass. At the Plains of Abraham, Montcalm suffered total surprise regarding the location and timing of the British assault, which arguably led to his rash and unsuccessful response. Conversely, Montcalm's behavior achieved no surprise while playing perfectly into Wolfe's operational plan, meaning the British did not have to adjust their approach at all due to French actions.

Offensive. Montcalm spent the entire campaign on the operational defensive and never achieved the initiative throughout the campaign. When Montcalm suddenly decided to switch without preparation to the tactical offensive on the Plains of Abraham, he did this solely as a reaction to Wolfe's initiative. This combination, which proved catastrophic, demonstrates that applying a joint operating principle in a technical way without integrating it into an overall operational context can actually do more harm than good.

Mass. Montcalm's offensive action also suffered from a fatal weakening of French mass both before and during the battle. Because most battalions of French regulars had suffered attrition over the course of previous North American campaigns with few replacements from Europe, Montcalm compensated by integrating Canadian militia into French regular units, thus reducing unit integrity across many of his regular forces.[46] Montcalm compounded this weakness by failing to wait for Bougainville to arrive with the best French regular units available to his command before launching his attack on the British line. The disjointed French attack displayed a critical French failure to concentrate mass among French combat power, leading to decisive defeat.

Conclusion

Wolfe's experience at Quebec implies that while formal doctrinal instruction in the principles of joint operations is useful, it will not by itself yield superior integration of these principles in practice. A truly inspired application of joint operating principles requires a commander to rely on a broad understanding of historical case studies, personal experience, creativity, and specific campaign conditions to exploit these principles to maximum effect. Conversely, Montcalm's experience suggests that enacting these principles simply as part of a rote checklist might individually yield modest results but will fail to maximize a military force's capabilities and will leave the force at the mercy of an adversary commander who inte-

grates these principles into a coherent overall operational plan. Notably, Wolfe favored historical authors who were not only military theorists but also military practitioners.

Today's military practitioners can benefit from Wolfe's example of an abiding focus on the overall objective of the French capital, his mastery of surprise through understanding of the terrain, and his unique massing of overwhelming effects. While the character of war may be rapidly evolving, the nature of war maintains many immutable principles. Studying historical cases demonstrates that the principles of joint operations apply universally in time and place, a lesson James Wolfe implicitly knew and mastered in 1759. Future joint force officers will face the challenge to fuse doctrinal understanding, historical exemplars, and personal creativity to apply joint operating principles in the future operating environment. JFQ

Notes

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[16] Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 360–361.

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[19] Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 360–361.

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[21] JP 3-0, A-1.

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[24] Frank W. Brecher, *Losing a Continent: France's North American Policy, 1753–1763* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 149.

[25] Ibid., 255.

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[27] MacLeod, *Northern Armageddon*, 267.

[28] Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 364–365.

[29] Francis Parkman, *France and England in North America*, vol. 2, part 7*: Montcalm and Wolfe* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1942), 183.

[30] MacLeod, *Northern Armageddon*, 189–190.

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[32] Fowler, *Empires at War*, 198, 206–207.

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[38] Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 363–364.

[39] Ibid., 348.

[40] MacLeod, *Northern Armageddon*, 28.

[41] Reid, *Quebec 1759*, 61; see also MacLeod, *Northern Armageddon*, 158.

[42] Fowler, *Empires at War*, 198, 206–207.

[43] Borneman, *The French and Indian War*, 220–221.

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