

## Undaunted Bravery: Captain Jacob Cheeseman and his Unknown Soldiers

Philip D. Weaver  
2<sup>nd</sup> New York Provincial Battalion

After completing my, admittedly, open-ended article on the men killed with General Richard Montgomery in 1775 at the assault on Quebec, Don Hagist, editor of The Brigade Dispatch, and I began a brief correspondence regarding additional accounts. Don's goal was to try and give me a few leads in my quest to identify these men. One of these accounts, from the city's defenders, proved quite valuable:

Jan. 1<sup>st</sup>, 1776

In the morning two Canadians came in, thinking the lower town in possession of the enemy, who, upon being carried to the main guard and examined, reported that they had come from the general hospital that morning, where there was no account given of General Montgomery. This intelligence, joined with the circumstance of a fur cap, marked in the bottom R. M., having been brought in, immediately led us to suspect that he must have been killed in leading his men on to the attack of our outpost at Pres de Ville. A Canadian, also, named Gagne, who had been out plundering, having found a considerable sum of money on the body of one of the rebel officers, orders were sent down to bring up all the dead bodies from that quarter, amongst which were found by a sergeant and drummer, who went out, (fortunately for us) General Montgomery also his aid-de-camp Captain McPherson, a Captain Cheesman of their artillery, and a general's orderly sergeant, all lying dead together, pierced with wounds.<sup>1</sup>

There are several bits of important information here. Though not described, the fur cap is of interest to uniform and clothing researchers. The reference to Jacob Cheeseman, a Captain in the 1<sup>st</sup> New York, being in the artillery is most surprising, but that might easily be explained if he was wearing a blue and red regimental coat. His regiment, the 1<sup>st</sup> New York, wore blue regimental coats faced with scarlet (though the officers were not issued any uniforms) at the time.<sup>2</sup>

However, the most significant piece of information for our purposes is the money that was found on one of the rebel officers. The story goes that the

night before the assault, Captain Cheeseman dressed in his best outfit and put hard money in his pocket for his funeral, in the event he was killed. In fact, John Trumbull shows coins on the ground next to Cheeseman's body in his romanticized 1786 painting of the death of General Montgomery.<sup>3</sup> This clearly suggests the money mentioned in the above letter was Cheeseman's, but I wanted to prove it.

I found the story referred to in Shelton's biography of Montgomery and checked the footnotes. Among them was one pointing to Peter Force's American Archives.<sup>4</sup> This reference collection of huge decaying volumes is now on CD, but I no longer possessed my unit's copy. Luckily the editor of The Brigade Courier, a fellow 2<sup>nd</sup> New Yorker, John Isaksen, had his own copy of the CD. He found the following reference to Cheeseman in an extract from an unidentified letter from Canada dated February 9, 1776:

[Captain Cheeseman] seemed to have a remarkable presage that he should fall in the attack; he mentioned it without the least superstitious fear, but with the undaunted bravery of a soldier. He dressed himself that morning extremely neat, and putting five half-joes in his pocket, said that would be sufficient to bury him with decency. In him, I have lost a valuable and much esteemed friend.<sup>5</sup>

Here was the source of the legend! A close personal friend of Captain Cheeseman saw him pocket the money. Yet, I discovered elsewhere in the letter, the writer may have also been a witness to the assault:

The attack was made with as much bravery as it was resolved on, and probably would have succeeded, had not a fatal discharge from the enemy's cannon, soon after he mounted the wall, finished the glorious career of our gallant General and some of the bravest of his followers. The principal of these were his Aid-de-camp, Captain Macpherson, of Philadelphia, Captain Cheeseman, of New-York, and ten of his company, who all fell at the first fire. This mighty loss, at the first onset, so confused

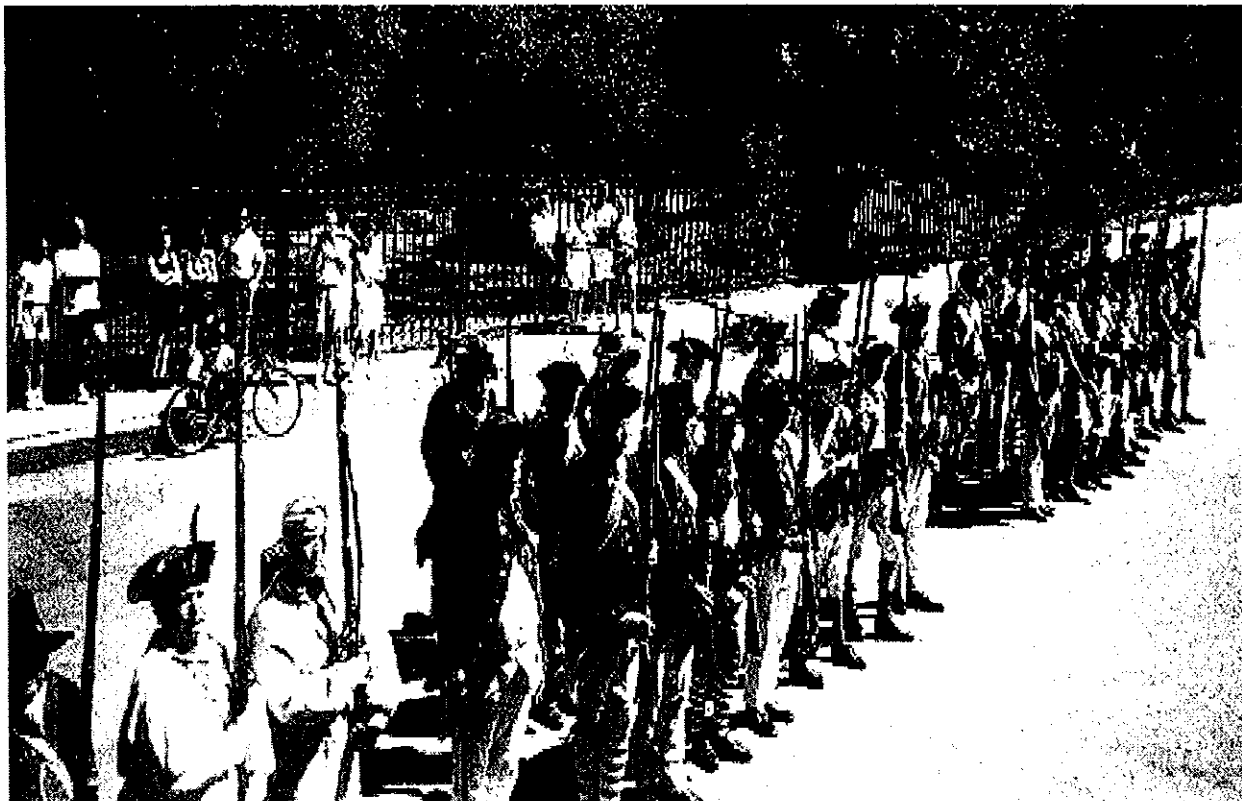
and discouraged our men that the remaining officers in the detachment thought themselves under a necessity of drawing off the men.

Captain Cheeseman was the first that scaled the wall, and intrepidly pushing forward, he received a canister of grape-shot through his body, which brought him to the ground. He attempted to rise, and his motions indicated a desire to press forward, but all was over, the fatal wound was given, through which fled as brave and heroic a spirit as ever animated the breast of an Alexander.<sup>6</sup>

According to this letter, Cheeseman was actually the one in front, being already over the obstacle (which was the second of these that they encoun-

tered), while Montgomery was actually on it. MacPherson and, at least the ten of Cheeseman's 1<sup>st</sup> New Yorkers were, logically, somewhere in between because they were all hit by the same fatal canister shot.<sup>7</sup>

This was the confirmation I was seeking, but the whereabouts of key players like Colonel Campbell, Captain Burr, Lt. Col. Antil, and Captain Visscher is still in question, and so is that of the fourteenth fatality. Was he the wounded orderly sergeant who died the following morning? Perhaps the sergeant was among the ten? What about the other wounded that had been carried off with the retreating army? Where were they positioned?<sup>8</sup>



On Friday, August 14, 1998, during the joint event held on the Plains of Abraham at Quebec City, members of the New-York Division pay their respects before the memorial marking the final resting place of Captains MacPherson and Cheeseman, and eleven unknown other ranks killed in the assault on Quebec, December 31, 1775.

Photo by Nicholas J. Finelli

As luck would have it, Campbell wrote a rather self-serving, eight page, letter to Richard Montgomery's brother-in-law, Robert R. Livingston, in March of 1776. In between trying to inflate his own actions during the assault, he names nearly all of the key players and then some.

Thanks to a lead from Steve Gilbert, a footnote for this letter suggested the Livingston Papers were in the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library and Museum in Hyde Park, NY. The library is about fifteen minutes from my front door, so I made a phone call. Apparently the manuscripts had been moved to the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City some years ago, but many of them were micro-filmed and still retained by the Roosevelt Library. The microfilm proved of little interest, but there was also a small letter book containing two transcribed letters from Canada. The book was signed "*Franklin D. Roosevelt, The White House, 1937,*" and it contained the aforementioned letter!<sup>9</sup>

According to Campbell, the Yorkers reached the first obstacle about 30-45 minutes before day break, "*with 4 or 5 Carpenters, two Saws & three Crow-bars (the Ladders not within ¼ a Mile), two or three Guides, Captn. Cheesman & Compy. followed by the General, His Aide de Camp's (Macpherson & Burr) myself, Brigad Major Wessenfells & Antill & Captn. Mott with his Compy Just behind the Genl., the rest being a considerable distance behind....*"

Campbell does not describe the look of the obstacle in detail, but it was clearly a wooden picket, about two feet thick, and quite difficult for the carpenters to cut through. Unable to wait, Montgomery, Cheesman, and about ten others squeezed between the rock precipice to the left and the picket. Campbell, who was to be directing the destruction of the picket, tried to follow, but was unable to get through himself (considering how big Montgomery was, Campbell had to have been a very large fellow); so he used his sword to hack a larger opening into the snow and ice. This allowed the rest of the column to pass through more easily.

Meanwhile, no picket had yet been cut out of the obstacle. So, Campbell sent a carpenter to join the advance party, and had, himself, closed to within some 25 feet of Montgomery, when "*the Charming Youth Macpherson*" told him the General wanted him to go back and hurry up the troops which were lagging behind. So, Campbell doubled back about

25 yards and, there, relayed his orders to Brigade Major Frederick Weisenfels. In turn, Weisenfels dropped back some 35 yards to carry them out.

Campbell was again moving to the front, re-passing the first obstacle (he recovered Cheesman's hunting sword inside) and soon got up to the rear of about 50 or 60 men who were stopped in the path. He scrambled past them to their right, while several shots of musketry and a field piece were fired. He states a "*fire-Ball Shott on the Ice to our Right & Rear*" allowed them to be better distinguished. Upon getting to the front, "*there stood Lieut. Platt of Cheesman's Comp'y,*" whom he knew and could identify in the light of the fireball:

[H]e was standing within the reach of his hand, where the General & the rest fell, there were 4 or 5 Dead against the Rock, & 5 or 6 wounded where we stood; I inquired for the General, Platt replied, he was Dead he believed here, Where is Macpherson? I think Dead, Where is Cheesman? Dead, I believe, over the rock, & Just then Several Shotts came from the uper Windows of the House, in the line of the Pickets 20 or 30 Yds. in our front, at which I desired the first 5 or 6 men behind Me to fire at & drive those Rascalls from that Window; they presented, drew their Triggers, but not a Grain of Powder Burn'd, tho I seen the Sparks from the flint & Hammer! They all swore their Arms were wett....<sup>10</sup>

If you have been following along so far, the value of this quoted portion of the letter stands by itself. However, the use of the term "rock" is very disconcerting. Earlier in the letter (which is not included here) he used it to describe the huge precipice of Cape Diamond. (Those of us who took the tour to this location, at the 1998 event, remember how massive this thing is.) The use here seems to be to refer to what has become known as the second barrier. Was it actually some kind of a rock outcropping and not a wall like our anonymous writer above describes? Was it a stone wall? That will have to be left unanswered for now, but I think it safe to conclude some of the casualties were found on either side of this obstacle.

You will also note above that Campbell makes reference to a picket at the house, about 20-30 yards to their front. It was here that the defenders were waiting, according to a British account:

[The enemy] had halted about fifty yards from the

barrier; and as the guard remained perfectly still, it was probably concluded they were not on the alert. To ascertain this an officer [more than likely this was one of the guides] was seen to approach quite near the barrier. After listening a moment or two, he returned to the body; and they instantly dashed forward at double quick time to the attack of the post.<sup>11</sup>

The rock wall/outcropping is not even mentioned (though the account does seem to explain why the column had faltered there). Only the barrier at their position is spoken of. Yet, members of the assault force, like the 2<sup>nd</sup> New York's John Hogeborne, remember storming two obstacles.<sup>12</sup> How can this be?

Since none of the survivors in the assault got past the rock outcropping, most were probably unaware of the picket beyond it and simply refer to two obstacles, thinking of the rock outcropping as one of them. It makes sense that Campbell, who made it all the way to the front, describes two pickets plus the rock obstacle. Accounts by the defenders do not refer to the rock outcropping because they apparently did not build it.

Meanwhile, Campbell continues in his letter to Livingston that after the men's muskets misfired, Major Dubois of the 3<sup>rd</sup> New York had moved to safety a Frenchman, named Lewis Gerard, who was wounded at the time Montgomery was killed. (I suspect he was one of the guides for the attackers.) Major Dubois then returned and:

...Enquired for the General & Others to which I gave him Answer. Captn. Vischer, of the 2d. Yorkers & Benschoten of the 3d & some others then Came up; After repeated enquirey for the Carpenters, Guides, &c. and finding the rear not yet in the [first] Barrier, they being tired & wore out I desired Vischer to get some men to remove the groaning Wounded & enable them to Crawl off. The Major & Others Quiry'd what could be don?—thought that with only the Bayonet and Wearing Troops, it was not right to think of any thing further; I replied that I was thinking of our situation & had resolved it impracticable to Attempt any thing further by surprize, or with a prospect of Success: therefore, I desired him to go to the Pickets at the first Barrier & there give the Order to return, to prevent being crowded in passing that place Whilst I with Major Wessenfels, Vischer, Mott, Platt, Burr & some others then up, remained to bring up the Rear & be ready for any thing that might happen; (Indeed Mott was averse to move from the

place unless it was to go forward) there were several Shott thrown during this space of time but happily no loss on our Side, & I can assure you there was no Confusion or Disorder in the retreat, & we got to Head Quarters, (Just 2 Miles W. from town) as Fatigued I believe as ever troops could be, I never was more so....<sup>13</sup>

Thus ends the two pages of this letter that addresses what happened during the final minutes of the Yorker assault on the city of Quebec on 31 December 1775. Granted, by his own admission, Campbell was not there to witness the death of Montgomery, but he was there to see the before and after images.

Campbell also emphatically reports that a new player, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Richard Platt, was with Cheeseman's company. Since Platt was originally with Weisenfels' company, this appears to be an inaccurate statement - but not necessarily so.

We know that Weisenfels was named Brigade Major so would have no longer commanded his company.<sup>14</sup> His second in command, 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. John A. "Jack" McDougall, had died of fever at La Prairie on 19 November 1775.<sup>15</sup> We also know that nine days later, Lt. Col. Ritzema, of the 1<sup>st</sup> New York, had ordered Weisenfels' and Cheeseman's companies to proceed together with Montgomery's advance force.<sup>16</sup> So, with 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. John Houston and ~~three~~ **23 ENLISTED MEN** privates, from Cheeseman's company, being listed as on command at Point Levy (on the opposite shore of the Saint Lawrence River),<sup>17</sup> my suspicion is that Cheeseman probably commanded elements of both companies as one.

My real hope was that Platt, who was among a handful of officers on the campaign that actually filed a pension application, would be able to shed some light on the matter. Unfortunately, he was satisfied to only bring up his subsequent commissions and never even mentioned his 1775 service.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond that, I have learned that every one of the sources used in these two articles has been quoted or cited by other historians or researchers. What is missed, I think, is that they were never combined into a single narrative. By dovetailing Campbell's extensive assertions with the other fractured accounts, we get a better picture of what actually happened during those climactic moments.

Weather conditions were horrible and the terrain was worse. Falling behind schedule, Montgomery's column was impeded still further by the first man-

made obstacle. This forced them to squeeze through one man at a time. Soon, the first four downsized companies of Yorkers were stretched out on the icy path to their front, which was hardly longer than a football field. Cheeseman's 1<sup>st</sup> New Yorkers led them, followed by Mott's company of the same regiment. Visscher's 2<sup>nd</sup> Yorkers probably came third, followed by Benschoten's 3<sup>rd</sup> Yorkers.<sup>19</sup> The rest of the force was stretched out farther to the rear.

Upon reaching some kind of a rock outcropping or wall and spotting an enemy position, Cheeseman's men somehow faltered. Once getting the all clear, Montgomery mounted this outcropping and at some point, it is said, shouted "*Push on, brave boys; Quebec is ours.*"<sup>20</sup> Cheeseman, being the good company grade officer he supposedly was, regrouped his men, and unknowingly led them over the top to their death. The men that were hit fell on either side of the outcropping. A significant amount of enemy artillery and small arms fire (reports are varied as to the amount) was being brought upon them from an enemy defensive position some 30 yards to their front. The burning fireballs lit up the entire area. Those shot to their right exposed their flank. Their muskets were so wet as to be rendered useless (except to carry a bayonet). An undetermined number of their force was wounded and had to be carried to safety. The Yorkers, though stopped, did not panic. They maintained discipline, ascertained their situation (rightly or wrongly), and withdrew in good order.

As for the men who died, I fear we may never know who they were specifically. Yet, I feel they, along with those that survived, should be remembered as heroes instead of as the forgotten casualties of a military blunder. So, I intend to keep looking until the day I can put names to each and every one of these brave men that remain buried in what I call "*America's First Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.*"

#### Notes

1. "Journal of the Principal Occurrences during the Siege of Quebec by the American Revolutionists under Generals Montgomery and Arnold in 1775-76," published in *Blockade of Quebec in 1775-1776 by the American Revolutionists*, Fred C. Wuertele, ed., Library and Historical Society of Quebec, 1906, reprinted by Kennikat Press, Port Washington, NY, 1970. Courtesy of Don N. Hagist. It was pointed out the last time that the Sergeant was severely wounded. He survived only an hour or so after being found by the British and brought inside the city.

2. *Military Collector and Historian: The Journal of the Company of Military Historians*, "Those New York Coats of 1775 - A Dissenting View", Eric I. Manders, Vol XXXIII, Number 2, Summer 1981, 69-71.

3. "The Death of General Montgomery in the Attack on Quebec," John Trumbull, 1786, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT.

4. *General Montgomery and the American Revolution: From Redcoat to Rebel*, Hal T. Shelton, (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 141 & 218.

5. *American Archives*, Peter Force, Ed., Volume 4, 4th Series, 706-7, "Extract of a Letter from Canada, February 9, 1776 (Here-in-after Force). Great Britain, Public Record Office, Audit Office, Class 13, Volume 113, part 2, folio 145. British General Orders, issued at Newtown, Long Island on 2 September 1776, state that a Johannes was to be valued, by weight, at eight dollars. A dollar was to be valued at 4 shillings, 8 pence Sterling, or 8 Shillings New York currency. Courtesy of Todd W. Braisted, 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, New Jersey Volunteers. Todd explained that a Johannes was a Portuguese coin prevalent in New York City and the Hudson Valley. Less weight created half and quarter joes. Five "half-joes" at that time would therefore be worth \$20. This is approximately the monthly salary for a Continental Army infantry officer in 1775. Cheeseman and nearly all of the 1<sup>st</sup> New York in 1775, were recruited in New York City.

6. *Ibid.* Force.

7. The terms wall, barricade, and picket used in these and other accounts describing this action all seem to refer to the same thing. So, I have chosen "obstacle" as an appropriate euphemism.

8. Letter to Mr. Hugh Gaine, Gersham Mott Papers, Special Collections Department, Rutgers University Library. Reprinted in *The Colonial Chronicle*, Volume 1, Winter 1996, 6-7. Numerous New York officers write that "the wounded were brought off..." Records Group 15, Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land-Warrant Application Files, (Washington: National Archives Microfilm Publications, M804); S.42870. (Here-in-after Pensions) Private John Rose, a transfer into Visscher's 2<sup>nd</sup> New York company, by his own account, was wounded in the arm during the assault.

9. Livingston Papers, Transcribed Letter Book, (Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library, 1937), 28 March 1776, Col. Donald Campbell to Robert R. Livingston, 1-8. (Here-in-after Campbell.)

10. *Ibid.* Campbell, 3-4.

11. *The Bulletin of the Fort Ticonderoga Museum (North American Review)*, Vol. X, Number 1, 1957, 74. Reprinted from Vol. III, No. 3, 1934 Bulletin. See also *The Sword of Brigadier-General Richard Montgomery*, J. M. LeMoine, (Quebec: Middletown & Dawson, 1870), 16. This is an unattributed account probably extracted from Hawkin's *New Historical Picture of Quebec*, published in 1843.

12. *Ibid.* Pensions, S.13457. Private John Hogehome of the 2<sup>nd</sup> New York, notes Montgomery "was killed after storming the first and second pickets..."

13. *Ibid.* Campbell, 3-4.

14. I have not been able to find the actual order naming Weisenfels to this position, but there are numerous orders signed by him as Brigade Major, well before the Yorker's initial departure for Quebec. Campbell refers to him as both "Major" and "Brigad Major" in his letter to Livingston.

15. *History of the First New York 1775-1783*, T.W. Egly, Jr., (Hampton, NH: Peter E. Randall, Publisher, 1981), 12-13. A letter dated 19 November 1775, found in the New-York Historical Society's copy of the McDougall Papers, from Lt. Col. Ritzema to his father, Col. Alexander McDougall, is cited. Col. McDougall, the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> New York in 1775, was serving in the Provincial Congress and never left New York City. His other son, Ranald, a second lieutenant in GoForth's Company, was mysteriously captured during the assault. The circumstances behind the capture are unknown at present, but he appears not to have been with Montgomery's column.

16. Journal of [Lt.] Col. Rudolphus Ritzema of the First New York Regiment, August 8 1775 to March 30 1776, from the original in the Collection of the New York Historical Society, entry dated 25 November 1775, 103.

17. Records Group 93, Revolutionary War Rolls 1775-1783, (Washington: National Archives Microfilm Publications, M246), Roll 65, 1<sup>st</sup> New York Regiment, Jacket 1-2, Capt. Jacob Cheeseman's Company, January 1776.

18. *Ibid.* Pensions, S.46406. I could only prove it was this Richard Platt's application because he stated he served from 28 June 1775. This is the date nearly all 1775 New York officers' commissions are dated.

19. This is deduced simply because Visscher got to the front of the column before Benschoten. Campbell does not specifically mention their respective companies, but they were probably there as well. Visscher probably used his own company to remove the wounded, which explains when Private John Rose might have been hit.

20. *Canada Invaded, 1775-1776*, George F. G. Stanley, (Toronto: Samuel Stevens Hakkert & Company, 1977), 98.

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