

# The Battle for the Plains of Abraham, 1759

## *From the Museum of Civilization*

Quebec City was the only place where the French could lose and the British could win the Seven Years' War in North America.

A successful defence of Canada depended upon the arrival of supplies and reinforcements from Europe, carried up the St. Lawrence River. If the British captured the city, they could cut the supply lines between Canada and France. The French in Canada would be forced to surrender.

In June 1759, the Royal Navy carried a powerful British army to Quebec. On the verge of defeat after an unsuccessful three-month siege, British troops landed west of Quebec on 13 September 1759. An army of French regulars, Canadian militia, and First Peoples warriors met them in battle on the Plains of Abraham. **The British won, following a 30-minute clash of arms.** Quebec City surrendered five days later.



### Mistakes that Made History

Trapped in the chaos and confusion of war, soldiers need to make quick decisions based on limited information. The Battle of the Plains of Abraham and the future of Canada hinged on two such decisions, both of which were mistaken.

#### A. Wolfe's Mistake: Taking the Low Ground

British commander James Wolfe formed his battle line across the Plains of Abraham. Here, his soldiers could fight a European-style battle between lines of troops across open ground. But they could not threaten Quebec City, which lay beyond a 15-metre hill known as the Buttes-à-Neveu.

#### B. Montcalm's Mistake: Abandoning the High Ground

An army on the Buttes-à-Neveu could bombard the walls of Quebec City or dominate the Plains of Abraham. When word of Wolfe's landing arrived, Louis-Joseph de Montcalm and his army occupied this hill. At about 10:00 a.m., however, Montcalm abandoned a strong position to charge the British line.

#### C. The French Charge

As the French charged down the hillside, Montcalm's troops veered to the left and right, likely because of the rugged terrain. Two clusters of soldiers headed for the north end of the British line; a third advanced on the south end.

#### D. The British Volleys

The British held their ground. Their entire line fired a series of devastating volleys. Shaken, the French retreated. Montcalm's army had suffered about 650 casualties. Wolfe's forces lost 58 killed and 600 wounded. Both generals were killed.