

“Bougainville, Louis-Antoine de, Comte de (1729-1811)”, in *Colonial Wars of North America 1512-1763: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan Gallay (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996): 69-71.

Born in Paris on 12 November 1729, Bougainville was the son of Pierre-Yves de Bougainville, a king’s councillor and notary, and Marguerite-Françoise d’Arboulin. His family, which originated in Picardy, claimed a noble lineage which went back to the fourteenth century, but his father only “revived” the family’s standing when he received a patent of nobility in 1741. Bougainville studied at the University of Paris and distinguished himself in ancient languages, mathematics, and the sciences. Reluctantly following his family’s wishes, he entered the Parlement of Paris as a lawyer, but continued to study mathematics under Alexis Clairaut and Jean Le Rond d’Alembert and published a *Traité de calcul integral* in two volumes in 1754 and 1756. Meanwhile, Bougainville pursued another interest by entering the elite Mousquetaires Noirs in 1750, obtaining an appointment as adjutant in the Régiment de Picardie three years later. He spent from October 1754 to February 1755 in London as secretary to the ambassador, Marshal Gaston-Charles-Pierre de Lévis-Mirepoix, duc de Lévis-Mirepoix (1699-1757), and was well received by the intellectual community, with the result he was elected to the Royal Society of London in early 1756. Resuming his place as aide-de-camp to Lieutenant General François de Chevert (1695-1769), Bougainville was promoted to lieutenant in 1755 and captain a year later.

On 3 April 1756, Bougainville sailed for Canada as the senior aide-de-camp of Major General Louis-Joseph de Montcalm, marquis de Montcalm (1712-1759). He took part in the attack on Oswego, New York, in July and August 1756, and impressed Montcalm with his bravery and excellent staff work. In September he led a reconnaissance of the Anglo-American position in the Lake Champlain area, and in August 1757 took part in the operations which led to the surrender of Fort William Henry on Lake George, New York. Bougainville was wounded during the Battle of Carillon (Ticonderoga) on 8 July 1758, when the British and American troops under Major General James Abercromby (1706-1781) were repulsed with heavy losses. In September of that year, Montcalm and Canadian-born Governor General Pierre de Rigaud de Vaudreuil de Cavagnial, marquis de Vaudreuil (1698-1778), agreed to send Bougainville to France to explain the colony’s grave situation and obtain reinforcements. Because the commander and governor had quarrelled over tactics and strategy, however, and Bougainville supported Montcalm, Vaudreuil also sent one of his Canadian colonial regular officers, Major Michel-Jean-Hugues Péan (1723-1782). Bougainville reached France in January 1759 and submitted a number of memoirs to the minister of marine. He argued that the colony would be overwhelmed by enemy armies attacking Canada from three sides unless reinforcements or a diversion were provided, and proposed sending some troops to the Carolinas to raise a rebellion among the German settlers. Mme. de Pompadour threw her support behind this plan, but since the king’s ministers considered the campaign in Germany a priority and feared that reinforcements sent to North America would be captured at sea, Montcalm was ordered to hold out until a peace treaty was signed. Only 300 recruits and a few supply ships were dispatched.

Bougainville, now a colonel and a knight of the Order of Saint-Louis, arrived back at Quebec on 10 May 1759. Quebec was soon besieged by Major General James Wolfe (1727-1759), and Bougainville was placed in charge of the French camp at Beauport, where Montcalm had his headquarters. In July, Bougainville was given command of the grenadier companies and selected Canadian militia to guard the riverbank upstream from Quebec to ensure communications with Montreal remained open. Following British vessels up and down the river, his force repelled four minor landings during August. On 13 September 1759, however, Wolfe’s army seized a position just west of the city between Bougainville’s

1,200 men strung out along the river and Montcalm's main army at Beauport. Montcalm failed to get any messages to Bougainville, who in any case was unable to concentrate his troops, some of whom were nearly a day's march away, before Montcalm engaged the British at 10:00 in the morning. The French general was later criticized by his own officers for attacking before Bougainville's elite troops could be brought into action.

During the following winter, Bougainville led a force which harassed the British troops around Quebec. In March 1760, Vaudreuil placed him in charge of the fort on Isle-aux-Noix in the Richelieu River, a position which the British on Lake Champlain had to capture in order to reach Montreal. The garrison repelled an attack by Brigadier General William Haviland (1718-1784) on 22 August, but on the night of 27 August 1760, Bougainville evacuated the fort and withdrew to Montreal, which by now was nearly surrounded. Bougainville, whose knowledge of English had made him very useful for parleys and the interrogation of prisoners, assisted in the negotiations which led to the capitulation of Canada on 8 September 1760.

Bougainville was not an outstanding military commander, but he was an enthusiastic and competent staff officer, performing best when under the direct command of a superior. Like most French regular officers, he recognized the importance of irregular warfare in achieving French military objectives, but was skeptical that traditional raiding parties could deal with the increasingly well-trained light infantry regiments and more conventional troops attacking Canada. Nevertheless, he showed more interest in irregular tactics than his superior, the marquis de Montcalm.

After his return to France, Bougainville accompanied the minister of war, Major General Étienne-François de Choiseul, comte de Stainville (1719-1785), to Germany as an aide-de-camp, and distinguished himself during the brief 1761 campaign. In 1763, Bougainville was given the rank of captain in the French navy so he could lead an expedition to claim and colonize the Îles Malouines (Falkland Islands). He landed on the Malouines on 3 February 1764, accomplishing his mission, but the Spanish were so outraged by this action that the French soon agreed to cede the islands back to Spain. From 1766 to 1769, Bougainville led a successful voyage of discovery around the world, and his relatively balanced description and analysis of Tahitian culture attracted special attention in literary circles, providing fuel for the debate about the "noble savage."

Bougainville continued his naval career, and in 1779 joined Vice Admiral Charles-Henri-Jean-Baptiste d'Estaing, comte d'Estaing's (1729-1794) squadron, which crossed to Newport, Rhode Island, attacked Grenada in the West Indies, and then unsuccessfully besieged Savannah. Bougainville was promoted to rear admiral on 8 December 1779, and married a Breton noblewoman, Marie-Joséphine de Longchamps Montendre, in Brest on 27 January 1781; they had four children. In 1781 and 1782, he served with Lieutenant General François-Joseph-Paul de Grasse, comte de Grasse (1722-1788), and took part in the Battle of Chesapeake Bay, the capture of St. Christopher (St. Kitts), and the disastrous Battle of the Saintes. Although he had done no worse than any other naval officer present at the Saintes, Bougainville was reprimanded at a court-martial held in 1784. As a former army officer in the navy, Bougainville was considered an intruder by many of his colleagues, and they did not hesitate to single him out as a scapegoat. This episode did not affect Bougainville's standing in the eyes of the minister of marine, however, and he was actively employed on many projects of naval and scientific interest. He was named a member of the Académie des Sciences in February 1789. Bougainville was appointed to command the Brest squadron in October of the following year. Despite his reputation for taking care of his crewmen, he had mixed success in imposing discipline on the mutinous revolutionary sailors and soon resigned his command. On 22 February 1792, shortly after his promotion to vice admiral, he resigned from the navy. He lived in retirement at his home in Coutances, Normandy, teaching at a

local school, and was briefly imprisoned during the Terror. Under the Directory, Bougainville belonged to various scientific commissions and the Institut de France, and Napoleon made him a senator and a count. He died in Paris on 20 August 1811 and was buried in the Panthéon.

During his diverse career, Bougainville distinguished himself as an army and navy officer, navigator, mathematician, and ethnographer. Admired for his many talents, outstanding intellectual capabilities, social graces, and a cheerful, generous disposition, his contemporaries recognized him as one of the leading men of their time.

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References

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See also ISLE-AUX-NOIX; MONTREAL, ATTACK ON; QUEBEC, SIEGE OF (1759); TICONDEROGA, BATTLE OF