

“Lévis, François-Gaston de, Duc de Lévis (1719-1787)”, in *Colonial Wars of North America 1512-1763: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan Galloway (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996): 381-83.

Lévis, a member of a cadet branch of one of the most ancient and prestigious noble families in France, was born at the Château d’Ajac, near Limoux, Languedoc, on 20 August 1719. His parents were Jean de Lévis, baron d’Ajac, and Jeanne-Marie de Maguelonne. In 1735, the 15-year-old chevalier de Lévis, as he was known, was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Régiment de la Marine. During the War of the Polish Succession (1733-1738), he took part in the Rhine campaign, rising from lieutenant to the rank of captain. Lévis also distinguished himself in the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748), serving at Dettingen and in Bohemia, Alsace, southern Germany, and Piedmont. During the latter campaign he was assistant chief of staff for his influential cousin, Gaston-Charles-Pierre de Lévis-Mirepoix, duc de Lévis-Mirepoix (1699-1757), who later became a marshal of France.

Anxious to advance his career but unable to afford a regiment, Lévis volunteered to accompany Major General Louis-Joseph de Montcalm, marquis de Montcalm (1712-1759), to Canada as his second-in-command with the rank of brigadier. Arriving at Quebec on 31 May 1756, Lévis was immediately given an independent command on the Lake Champlain frontier while Montcalm besieged the forts at Oswego. His order of battle, issued at the beginning of the advance, demonstrated that Lévis was already familiar with the role of light troops in protecting and supporting conventional infantry, and he made excellent use of the Indians, Canadians, and French colonial regulars under his command. Although Lévis and Montcalm had frequently seen irregular troops in action in Bohemia and Piedmont, Lévis made better use of this experience. His great personal charm, intelligence, and interest in irregular tactics made him very popular among the Canadian officers and the governor general, Pierre de Rigaud de Vaudreuil de Cavagnial, marquis de Vaudreuil (1698-1778).

Lévis displayed his military talents during Major François-Pierre de Rigaud de Vaudreuil’s (1703-1779) raid on Fort William Henry in early 1757, and during the fort’s capture that summer when he commanded the siege train, transport boats, and later the advance guard. In 1758, the marquis de Vaudreuil ordered Lévis to march into the Mohawk villages and coerce this pro-British tribe into joining the French, but Lévis’s mixed force had barely set out when Major General James Abercromby (1706-1781) began his offensive. Lévis was recalled, and he moved quickly to join Montcalm, arriving at Fort Carillon late on 7 July with 400 men. He took up positions covering the exposed right of the French abatis. Fortunately for Montcalm, Abercromby made no attempt to outflank these works during the battle the following day.

Montcalm blamed Vaudreuil for the lack of Canadian and Indian support during the Battle of Carillon or Ticonderoga, and the governor general responded by asking the minister of marine to replace Montcalm with his second-in-command. The minister promoted Lévis to major general, but Montcalm remained at his post. In 1759, Montcalm advocated placing his army on the defensive in and around the fortifications of Quebec, but Lévis realized it would be fatal for the troops to be penned up in the city. He successfully argued that the army be stationed in a strong advanced position by the Montmorency Falls to prevent the British from even approaching Quebec. Lévis sharply repulsed an Anglo-American landing at Montmorency on 31 July using the firepower of Canadian militia supported by a reserve of French regulars.

On 9 August 1759, Montcalm sent Lévis and 800 men to the upper St. Lawrence to counter a feared descent from Lake Ontario. On hearing the news of Montcalm’s disaster on the Plains of Abraham on 13 September, however, Lévis rushed back to the main army and found a

mob of demoralized officers and men in retreat toward Montreal. He promptly turned the army around and marched to the relief of Quebec. Much to his disgust, he learned that Canadian commander Major Jean-Baptiste-Nicolas-Roch de Ramezay (1708-1777) had surrendered the city on 18 September. Lévis did not hesitate to blame the defeat on his late superior's decision to attack Wolfe's army before the French troops were assembled.

During the winter of 1759-1760, Lévis stationed detachments around Quebec to harass the British while the bulk of the army remained in winter quarters around Montreal. On 20 April 1760, before the river ice melted, Lévis advanced on Quebec with 4,000 regulars and 3,000 militia. With the exception of Captain Louis Legardeur de Repentigny's (1712-1786) Canadian brigade, Lévis had each militia company attached to a French battalion under selected French officers in order to ensure closer cooperation between the line infantry and light troops. This innovation greatly increased the strength and effectiveness of his regular battalions and contributed to his victory at Sainte-Foy on 28 April 1760. Brigadier General James Murray's (1721/22-1794) British infantry suffered heavy losses from the fire of the French regulars and their light infantry companies, and Lévis's counterattacks forced Murray to order a retreat.

Lévis besieged Quebec with a few field guns, but it was evident the city would only fall if French ships arrived and landed reinforcements and more cannon. When British warships began anchoring at Quebec on 9 May, Lévis had little choice but to raise the siege and retreat to Montréal. When Major General Jeffrey Amherst, First Baron Amherst (1717-1797), negotiated the capitulation of Canada on 7-8 September 1760, he refused to grant Lévis' remaining troops the honors of war, and Lévis requested Vaudreuil's permission to fight rather than surrender. The governor general, however, ordered him to accept the articles of capitulation rather than needlessly destroy the city. After burning their colors, the French surrendered and returned to France on the condition they would not serve again for the duration of the war.

Lévis was promoted to lieutenant general in 1761, and the British, to recognize his brave defense, granted him permission to fight anywhere in Europe. Lévis served with Marshal Charles de Rohan, prince de Soubise (1715-1787), on the lower Rhine in December 1761, and commanded the advance guard of Lieutenant General Louis-Joseph de Bourbon, prince de Condé (1736-1818), the following year, distinguishing himself at the Battle of Nauheim or Johannisberg. He married Gabrielle-Augustine de Danton, daughter of the treasurer general of the artillery and a director of the Compagnie des Indes, in March 1762.

After the end of the Seven Years' War, Lévis left active service. He was appointed governor of Artois in 1765, created a marquis, and then named marshal of France on 13 June 1783. A year later he was elevated to the peerage as duc de Lévis. He died at Arras on 26 November 1787, aged sixty-seven.

François-Gaston de Lévis's military conduct was characterized by clear and innovative planning, decisive action, and an ability to inspire the confidence of soldiers and Indian warriors belonging to different corps and nations. His use of Canadians as irregulars and then light infantry was particularly impressive. There is little doubt that if Lévis had been in command from the beginning of the war, Canada would have stood a much better chance of surviving the enemy invasions.

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References

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*See also* MONTCALM-GOZON DE SAINT-VERAN, LOUIS-JOSEPH; MURRAY, JAMES; QUEBEC, FRENCH ATTEMPT TO RECAPTURE; RIGAUD DE VAUDREUIL DE CAVAGNIAL, PIERRE DE; TICONDEROGA, BATTLE OF; FORT WILLIAM HENRY (NEW YORK)