

4-16-2012

Hollow of Death: Rogers' Rangers Desperate Fight for Survival

Bernd Horn

Canadian Forces Leadership Institute

Recommended Citation

Horn, Bernd (2005) "Hollow of Death: Rogers' Rangers Desperate Fight for Survival," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 14: Iss. 4, Article 2.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol14/iss4/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Hollow of Death

Rogers' Rangers Desperate Fight for Survival, 21 January 1757

Bernd Horn

Despite the cold January rain, Captain Robert Rogers was sweating profusely.¹ He knew time was of the essence. He and his men were in a precarious position – caught between two major French garrisons at Fort St. Frederic and Fort Ticonderoga.² Their survival lay in evading the French before they could muster a pursuing force capable of destroying the Rangers.

Rogers set a grueling pace and his Rangers made good time. However, his instincts, which had never betrayed him before, gnawed at him incessantly. “Keep spread out,” he cautioned to his men. Then, a thunderclap of muskets shattered the damp winter air. Rogers felt a sting of pain as a shot glanced across his forehead. His worst fear was now realized.

The “scout” gone bad had initially promised to be not only an adventure but yet another daring raid by the intrepid Robert Rogers and his Rangers. Ordered to conduct a scout by Major Sparks, the commanding officer of Fort Edward, Captain Rogers assembled a hand-picked team of experienced woodsmen comprised entirely of volunteers.³ On 15 January 1757, Rogers, Lieutenant Stark, Ensign Page, as well as 50 Rangers departed Fort Edward for Fort William Henry at the head of Lake George, New York. There they prepared supplies and constructed snowshoes while they waited for reinforcements.

Two days later they were joined by Captain Speakman,⁴ his officers – Lieutenant Kennedy, Ensign Brewer and 14 of his men, as well as Ensign James Rogers and 14 men from Captain Hobbs' Ranger Company. The men were issued rations for two weeks (consisting of dried beef, sugar, rice and dried peas and cornmeal held in

a shoulder knapsack slung over the shoulder and diluted rum in their canteen), 60 rounds of ammunition (ball and powder) and blankets which they draped over their heads and fastened to their waist belts.

Prior to sunset, that same day, they set off on their mission. They were tasked, as per normal, to reconnoiter to gain intelligence on the French garrison, specifically their strength and intentions, as well as cause as much “mischief” as possible – to disrupt, harass and destroy enemy forces, equipment and morale. Rogers chose to travel on the ice of Lake George to avoid the rugged, trackless mountainous terrain that framed the Lake George / Lake Champlain corridor. Traveling in Indian file, they made good time despite the adverse weather conditions and halted for the night on the east side of the first narrows. The next morning Rogers discovered that 11 men had been injured because of the strenuous march. He immediately sent them back to Fort William Henry. His war party was now only 74 strong.

They continued 12 miles down the lake hugging the shoreline to avoid detection and encamped on the west side. The following day, after a final three miles on the lake, Rogers decided it was too dangerous to stay in the open and led his group off the ice. Strapping on snowshoes, they now took to the frozen forest. Progress was slow as they trudged through the deep snow and forced their way through the pines overburdened with snow. By 20 January, Rogers was parallel to the western side of Lake Champlain about three miles inland. Well behind enemy lines, the Rangers were on their guard as they penetrated even further into French dominated territory.

The next morning was ushered in on an ominous note. It was raining steadily. The Rangers dried their muskets under covered fires in pits dug out of the snow about three feet deep. Once this was accomplished, they set off. They now changed course and stealthily marched due east under the dripping trees until they reached the ice of Lake Champlain. They were now approximately halfway between the French strong points of Fort Ticonderoga and Fort St. Frederic (known as Crown Point by the English). It appeared as if good fortune was once again favouring the intrepid bush fighter and his men. Upon reaching the lake, as if on cue, the French were seemingly delivering a huge bounty to their antagonists.

Earlier, Sieur de Lusignan, the commandant of Fort Ticonderoga dispatched a sergeant and 15 men to escort a group of empty sleighs to Fort St. Frederic to pick up badly needed supplies, namely fodder and rum. As the French soldiers bundled up against the wet cold and whipped their horses to begin their task, few, if any, had any idea of the danger that lurked ahead. The sleighs lumbered through the deep wet snow and quickly began to spread out as each team and driver settled into a comfortable pace.

Back at the edge of the lake, the Rangers immediately spied the lead sleds. Rogers quickly determined a plan of action. He ordered Lieutenant Stark with 20 men to cut off the lead sled, while he personally led another group to backtrack and act as a block should the sleighs try to retreat. He left Captain Speakman in the center with the remainder of the party. As Rogers hastened to get into position his heart suddenly sank – they had miscalculated their prey. There was 8-10 more sleds than they had at first realized! Rogers quickly sent word to Stark to stay hidden. But, would word reach his subordinate commander in time?

The horses were the first to sense the intruders. The driver buried in his blankets and furs squinted into the distance as the cold rain lashed at his face. He noticed the threat too late. Although he tried to stop the

sled and turn it around the Rangers that poured onto the ice proved to be too agile, too quick and too many.

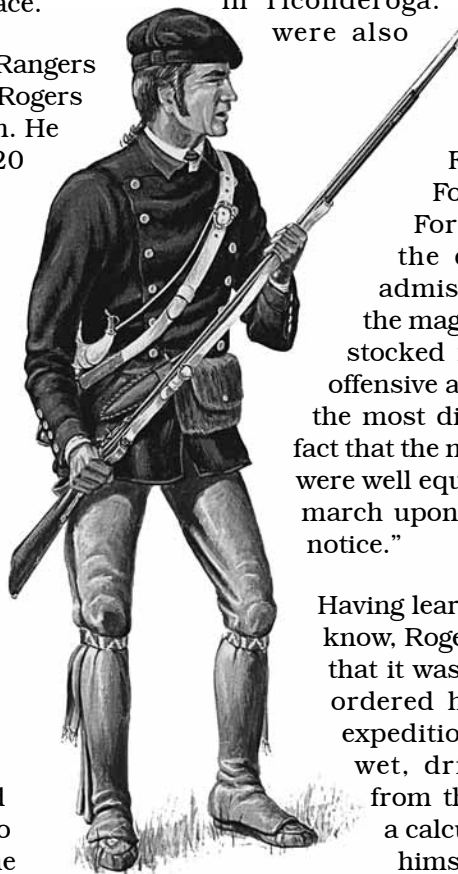
Rogers witnessed Stark and his group dash from the trees across the slippery snow to intercept the first sled. It became obvious that he had not received the warning. They were now committed. There was no turning back. Rogers reacted instantly and personally led his group into the fray. In fact, he captured the first prisoner as the lead sleigh tried to avoid Stark's men. Despite the frantic efforts of the Rangers, the rear most sleds careened wildly away and back to the safety of Fort Ticonderoga. Pursuit was hopeless. In all, the Rangers captured three sleds, six horses and seven prisoners.

Their apparent dilemma did not elude Rogers or his men. However, not prone to panic, Rogers calmly interrogated his prisoners. The news, although not surprising was unsettling. It appeared that 200 Canadians and 45 Indians, all experienced in wilderness warfare – in the art of *la petite guerre* (ambuscades, raids, scouting and individual forest combat), had just arrived in Ticonderoga.

Another 50 Indians

were also expected from Fort St. Frederic any day. All this added to an existing garrison of 600 French regular troops at Fort St. Frederic and 350 at Fort Ticonderoga. Further to the distressing news was the admission by the prisoners that the magazines at the forts were well-stocked in preparation for a spring offensive against the English forts. But the most disturbing revelation was the fact that the newly-arrived reinforcements were well equipped and “in a condition to march upon any emergency at the least notice.”

Having learned everything he needed to know, Rogers wasted no time. He knew that it was now a race for survival. He ordered his group to assemble and expeditiously marched through the wet, dripping pines to his camp from the previous night. This was a calculated risk. Although Rogers himself preached and adhered to



A member of Rogers' Rangers, 1753-1773.

Parks Canada PD 213

Major Robert Rogers

Robert Rogers remains one of the legendary colonial heroes to emerge from the French and Indian War. His bold forays against the French were tonic to a beleaguered public that was under constant attack by Indian depredations on the New England Frontier. During a time where neither the British regulars or the colonial militia seemed empowered to strike at the enemy or even defend the settlements, Rogers and his Rangers represented fearless offensive action. Finally, someone was hitting back.

Born in Methuen, Massachusetts on 18 November 1731, Rogers moved to New Hampshire near present day Concord with his family in 1739. He spent his youth exploring the wilderness and the proximity of his home town on the frontier made him familiar with Indians and their ruthless raids in time of war. At the age of only 14 he served in the militia during the War of the Austrian Succession and received his first taste for both soldiering and adventure.

From 1743-1755, Rogers pursuits, which he does not specify in his journals, but were identified as smuggling by others, acquainted him with both the French and English colonies and the trackless forests that divided them. However, by 1754, the restless Rogers was unsatisfied with his lot in life and he became involved in a counterfeiting scheme. Only an immediate call to arms saved him from an inevitable jail term, or even possibly a death sentence. Waiting for his impending court date, with the northern frontier under attack, Rogers started raising recruits for New England to serve under John Winslow. But, he quickly took his newly enlisted charges to New Hampshire when the governor of that state offered him a commission in the New Hampshire provincial regiment. In April, due to his new found political connection he was able to avoid conviction on his counterfeiting charge. Subsequently, he became a captain of "Company One" of the New Hampshire Regiment with Lieutenant Stark as his second-in-command and the 50 recruits he signed up.

At first Rogers and his men escorted supply wagons between Albany and Fort Edward. However, Rogers' knowledge and experience with the "haunts and passes of the enemy and the Indian method of fighting" soon brought him to the attention of his superior, Major-General William

Johnson. By the fall of 1755, he was conducting scouts behind enemy lines.

His efforts soon earned him an overwhelming reputation. "Captain Rogers whose bravery and veracity," wrote Johnson, "stands very clear in my opinion and of all who know him...is the most active man in our Army." By the winter of 1756, the bold forays behind enemy French lines were regularly reported in newspapers throughout the colonies.



Major Robert Rogers
LAC C 6875

In March 1756, Major-General Shirley, commander-in-chief of the British forces in North America, ordered Rogers to raise a 60 man independent Ranger company that was separate from both the provincial and regular units. His unit was directed to scout and gain intelligence in the Lake Champlain theatre, as well as to "distress the French and their allies by sacking, burning and destroying their houses, barns, barracks, canoes, battoes...to way-lay, attack, and destroying their convoys of provisions by land and water." This they did with a vicious regularity.

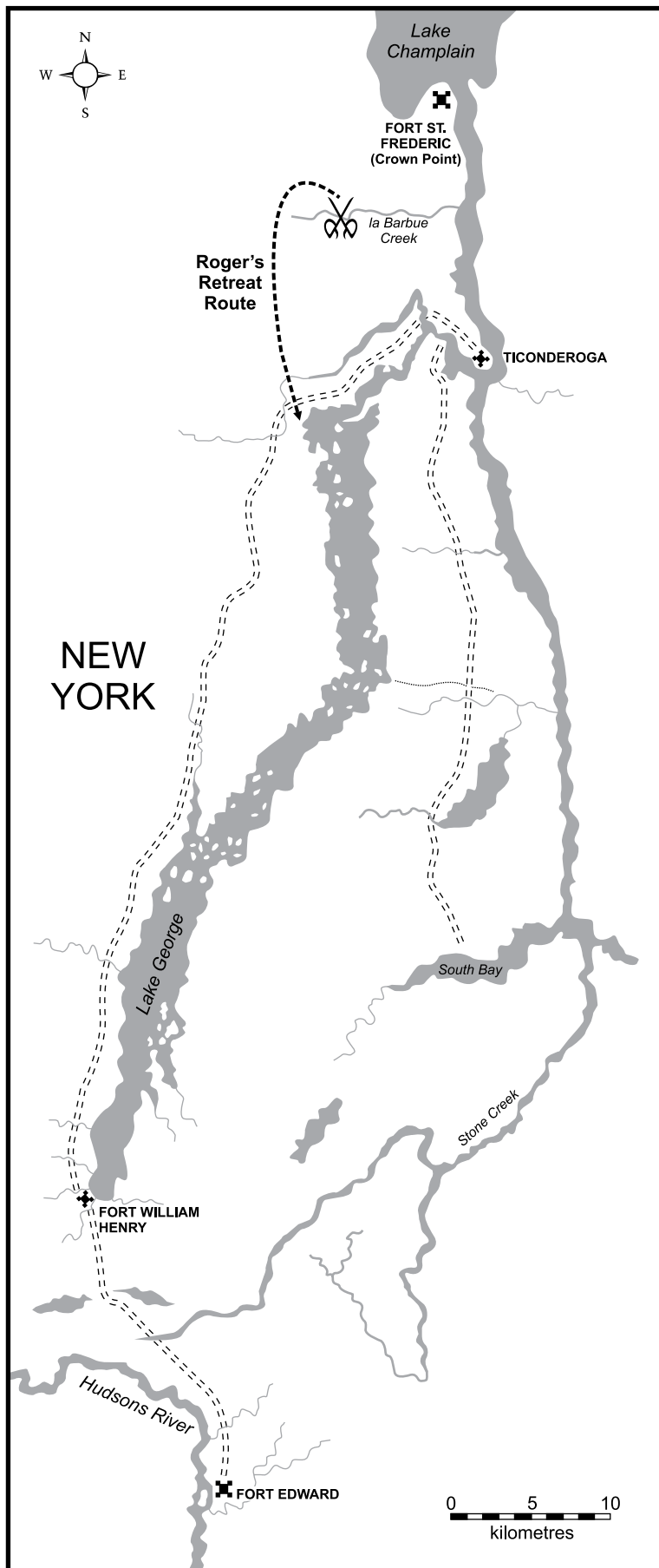
The reputation and accomplishments of the Rangers soon had an impact on British officers. All wanted Rangers to accompany their expeditions as a foil against the enemy's Canadians and Indians, as well as their ability to navigate and survive in the merciless wilderness. Moreover, some such as George Augustus Viscount Howe,

and Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Gage recommended regular light infantry units as a permanent part of the British Army. As of 6 April 1758, Major-General Abercromby, now the commander-in-chief of British forces in North America, awarded Rogers a formal commission as a captain of a ranger company and as "Major of the Rangers in his Majesty's Service."

Rogers' defining moment in the war came in 1759, when he was authorized to conduct a retaliatory raid against the Abenaki village of Saint Francis - fiercely loyal to the French and reputed to be the architects of much of the misery unleashed on the English frontier settlements. Rogers proceeded to surprise and raze the village, killing approximately 200 Indians. However, closely pursued by the French and Indians, his force, which split up to avoid capture largely perished due to hunger or enemy action.

The following year, Rogers with 600 rangers led the British invasion force into Canada via the Lake Champlain / Richelieu River invasion route. He was present at the French capitulation in Montreal. Subsequently, he was dispatched, with two ranger companies to occupy the French trading forts in the west. With the cessation of hostilities in North America the Rangers companies were disbanded and Rogers was given command of an independent company of regulars in South Carolina.

Rogers had reached his zenith during the French and Indian Wars. Financial problems and intrigues resulted in Rogers' incarceration in both North America and England. During the American War of Independence, Rogers seemingly wavered between sides. However, his British commission was viewed with suspicion by the Americans who eventually imprisoned him as a spy. He subsequently escaped and offered his services to the British. In August 1776, he was appointed to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel and directed to raise a battalion which was called the Queen's American Rangers. Rogers' age and years of hard campaigning, however, began to show and he was retired on half-pay early in 1777. He eventually returned to England where he died penniless and alone on 18 May 1795.



map drawn by Mike Bechtold ©2005

the principle that one must never use the same route twice, particularly to return home after a sortie in enemy territory, he concluded in this instant that it was unavoidable. It was necessary first to return to their last campsite to rekindle their fires to dry their guns in anticipation of combat with the French. Furthermore, as speed was now critical, he also believed that following a beaten path would expedite their escape, particularly in the wet snow and driving rain. It was not lost on any of the Rangers that the hunters had now become the hunted.

Meanwhile, back at Fort Ticonderoga the Rangers worst fears were quickly realized. As the first sleds came back into sight, the alarm was raised. The most inexperienced French soldier knew that there was only one reason for the unexpected return of the obviously terrorized sleigh teams – Rogers! Lusignan immediately sent off approximately 100 regular soldiers and colonial troops under the command of Captain Basserode. He was also fortuitous enough to have with him the experienced Ensign of Les Troupes de la Marine, Charles de Langlade, who led the Indians and Canadian volunteers which numbered about ninety.⁵ Together they hoped to intercept the English on their return to Fort William Henry.

As the Rangers dried their muskets, Rogers quickly assembled his officers. Although many disagreed with Rogers decision to retrace their steps, he overruled them and ordered them to prepare their soldiers for the march. As the rain continued to fall, the Rangers, with their muskets and powder carefully tucked under their blankets, which they wore as overcoats, set out in single file. Rogers and Lieutenant Kennedy were at the front, Captain Speakman in the center and the reliable Lieutenant Stark at the back. Sergeant Walker commanded the rear guard. The Rangers advanced approximately half a mile over broken ground in this formation when they reached a deep valley. The terrain was unforgiving and Rogers was extremely apprehensive.

Most of the other Rangers, however, were less preoccupied. Fatigued, wet and cold, they trudged along trying to keep up with the pace Rogers was setting. Most stared at the ground directly to their front. Knowing Rogers was at the lead brought a sense of security and confidence. His reputation as a bush fighter was only surpassed by his innate ability at navigation through the forbidding wilderness.

French Courier de Bois with Indian Ally.
from L'Abbé H. R. Casgrain, "Les Francais au Canada"

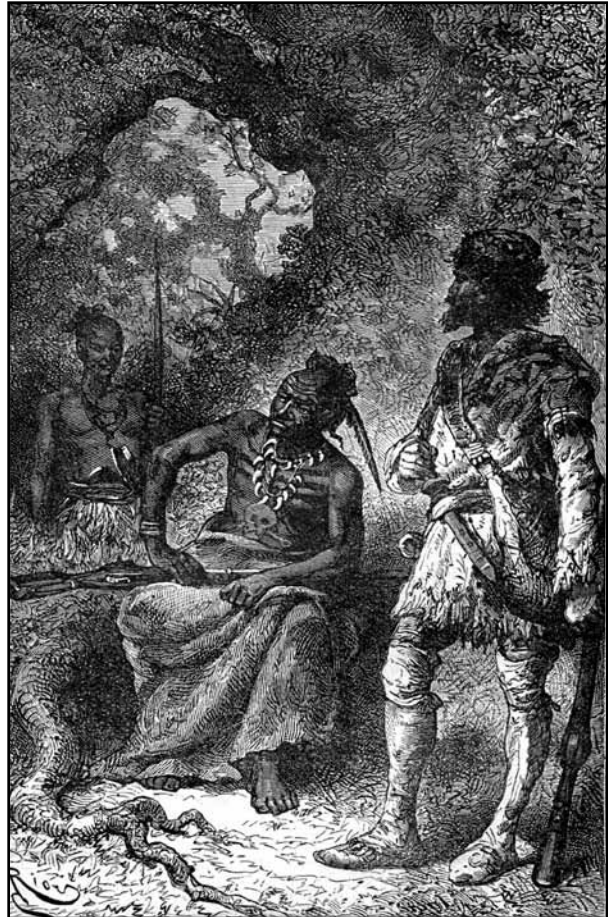
But the Rangers were not the only soldiers marching expeditiously in the rain. The French sortie quickly departed the relative comfort of Fort Ticonderoga and boldly struck out to intercept the insolent English troops. Langlade and his Canadians and Indians broke trail as they were the sole personnel with snowshoes. Moreover, this was their type of war – at which they excelled.

Langlade quickly deduced the route Rogers had taken. The rugged inhospitable terrain narrowed the options of approach and passage through the Adirondacks. He was soon rewarded as they came upon the Rangers' earlier path. This the French followed until they came to a suitable ambush site. The constant rain and wetness made their flintlocks unreliable. Therefore, they needed a spot where they could quickly fall upon and overwhelm the English interlopers.

At mid-afternoon, after marching only approximately a mile and a half, as the lead elements reached the top of the west side of yet another ravine, the sudden solitary roar of a musket discharging was quickly drowned out by a thunderclap of explosions as the nearly 200 Frenchmen, Canadians and Indians, deployed in a semicircle around the valley, unleashed their fire on the unsuspecting Rangers. Luckily, the volley was less than effective due to the wetness of the muskets. However, the French arrayed a mere five to thirty yards from the Ranger column now fell upon them with tomahawks and bayonets.

Despite the obvious disadvantage, the Rangers reacted quickly. The opening volley killed two and wounded several others, including Rogers, but instinct, as well as an ingrained sense of survival, took over. Rogers, known for his courage and coolness under fire, ordered his men to return fire and withdraw to the ridge on the far side. Lieutenant Stark and Sergeant Brewer seeing the crisis unfolding immediately formed up the rear of the column, approximately 40 men, into a defensive posture on the high ground and prepared to cover the retreat of their comrades.

The struggle was desperate. The forward most Rangers became embroiled in savage hand to hand combat. Not all could break away – those who could were hotly pursued and only reached the safety of the far hill as a result of the brisk



fire from Stark's group which beat the French pursuers back. Not before, however, several others were killed or taken captive.

Rogers now deployed his remaining force. Lieutenant Stark and Baker held the center. Ensign Rogers and Sergeants Walter and Phillips were moved into a position in reserve to watch the enemy's movement and prevent the Rangers from being flanked. Both sides continued to exchange fire. Darkness was now the Rangers' only hope. Outnumbered, inundated with wounded, and low on ammunition, the Rangers were in a precarious position. Moreover, Rogers was unsure if French reinforcements were at this moment moving toward the battlefield.

The Rangers, however, were not the only ones in a precarious situation. Their seven prisoners faced an uncertain future. Unbeknownst to them their escort was ordered by Rogers to "knock them on the head" and kill them should the Rangers come under contact with the enemy to avoid having potential foes lurking amongst them if the situation became untenable. At the back of the column the prisoners could not see

what was happening, but by the volume of gunfire they rightly surmised that a French rescue party had arrived. Their good fortune was short lived. The Ranger guards quickly went about dispatching their charges so that they could move forward and assist unencumbered with the battle. For some unexplainable reason, only three of the captives were actually killed, the other four in the end were recovered by their French comrades.⁶

But that was only one small drama of many that played itself out in the depth of the North American wilderness on that sodden January afternoon. No sooner had Rogers completed positioning his troops when the cry went up that the French were attempting to flank them on the right. Ensign Rogers and Sergeants Walter and Phillips quickly led the reserve in a quick counter attack and delivered a volley that beat back the French sortie. However, the French were



Iroquois going on a scout.

Library and Archives Canada (LAC) C-3165

not to be cheated of their prize and pressed an attack on the center. Fortunately for the Rangers, sheltered by large trees, they were able to keep up a steady, accurate fire which inflicted substantial casualties on their antagonists forcing them to retire once again.

Tenaciously, the French attempted to flank the Rangers yet again, but were unable to do so because of the swift and effective response of Roger's reserve force. This final defeat broke the spirit of the French. The regulars with no snowshoes were limited in their ability to manoeuvre – floundering in the knee-deep wet snow. Furthermore, they were unaccustomed to this type of individualist combat. As

a result, the French now settled into exchanging a steady, and not altogether ineffective, fire with the Rangers. Mr. Baker was one of several who was killed and Rogers himself sustained another wound – taking a musket ball through his wrist which disabled him to such an extent that he was

The Seven Years War: 1756-1763

The Seven Years' War was arguably one of the first global conflicts. It was fought in Europe, North America and India, with maritime operations reaching out over the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, as well as the Mediterranean and Carribean Seas. At its core, Austria, France, Russia, Sweden and Saxony, deeply concerned over Prussia's growing strength and territorial expansion under Frederick the Great, formed a coalition designed to defeat Prussia. Not surprisingly, England, already involved in a colonial and maritime struggle with France, entered into an alliance with Prussia.

In North America, the conflict (often termed the French and Indian War) actually began two years earlier in the late spring of 1754. The growing competition for the rich lands of the Ohio Valley proved the catalyst for the latest round of conflict between the French and English colonies. Robert Dinwiddie, the Governor of Virginia, concerned with the news that the French and Canadians were solidifying their claim to the Ohio by means

of constructing a series of forts, dispatched Lieutenant-Colonel George Washington and a detachment of militia to build a fort of their own on the forks of the Ohio River. A confrontation soon ensued. Washington and his party were subsequently defeated by the French at Great Meadows (Fort Necessity) and pushed back over the Allegheny Mountains. A second attempt by Major-General Braddock was made the following summer, but his force was ambushed near Fort Duquesne and virtually annihilated.

The North American theatre eventually became part of the greater conflict. Initial French victories and English set-backs in the early years of the war were reversed by 1758, due to the British decision to focus their strategy and resources on the wilderness campaign. A virtual naval blockade, in concert with an infusion of more than 20,000 British regulars, turned the tide. The capture of the Fortress of Louisbourg and Fort Frontenac in 1758, forced the French to adopt a defensive posture centered around Quebec and Montreal. The deteriorating French condition also resulted in the defection of a large number of their

Indian allies.

In 1759, the British began to roll up the remaining French forts on the frontier. One army captured Fort Niagara, and another marched up the Lake Champlain / Richelieu River corridor, while a third invested Quebec. The siege ended in September 1759, with the British victory on the Plains of Abraham. The remnants of the French Army and their Canadian militia and remaining Indian allies withdrew to Montreal in hopes of recapturing Quebec in the spring. Although almost successful, as a result of their victory in the Battle at Ste. Foy and subsequent siege of Quebec in April 1760, the appearance of the Royal Navy, forced the French to return to Montreal where they later surrendered on 8 September 1760. The war was formally ended by the Treaty of Paris which ceded virtually all of New France to the British.

unable to load his musket. Fearing the impact on morale as a result of his latest wound, Rogers sent word by runner to his officers that he was fine and that all should keep up a diligent fire and hold their positions.

Rogers was not the only individual to sustain multiple wounds. Thomas Brown, a 16-year-old Ranger private was one of those wounded in the initial discharge with Rogers. Although he was able to make it back to the center of the Ranger position and join in the firefight, his musket was soon disabled by an enemy ball that cut it off at the lock. He then took a ball in the knee and as he tried to withdraw to the rear of the position took another ball in the shoulder.

As the woods echoed with the clap of constant fire, darkness started to seep into the already overcast sky. Sensing their chance of capturing the “forest runners” was slipping away, the French attempted various stratagems to try an induce the



Above and left: Canadian Militiaman.

Rangers to surrender. First they threatened them with dire consequences if they refused to submit, warning that a large number of reinforcements was on the way which would “cut” the Rangers “to pieces without mercy.” Other times, they flattered and cajoled them, “declaring it was a pity so many brave men should be lost.” This was always followed by a guarantee that upon surrender they would “be treated with the greatest compassion and kindness.” Rogers, particularly, was singled out by name and given “the strongest assurances of their [French] esteem and friendship.”

As the light finally disappeared, both sides stopped firing. The cloak of darkness could not have come sooner. The Rangers had a large number of severely wounded who could not travel without assistance and their ammunition was almost exhausted. Moreover, their proximity to Fort Ticonderoga gave the enemy a distinct



Private Rogers' Rangers by Barry Rich
Parks Canada PD 161

advantage. They could easily deploy additional forces and simply overwhelm the hard-pressed Rangers during night, or at first light. As a result, Rogers decided to use the night to make his escape. He issued his orders expeditiously and those capable of marching set off.

The French stayed on the battlefield throughout the night attempting to track down the Rangers. During this period they received a reinforcement of 25 men, a convoy of food and munitions, as well as a surgeon and chaplain.⁷ Although unable to come to grips with Rogers and his main body, the French were able to capture several of those too wounded to escape.

As such, for the seriously wounded, the night harbored no safety. Brown later explained that Captain Speakman, Baker and himself, all badly wounded had withdrawn to the rear of the position and built a small fire to keep warm. In the dark, they suddenly realized they could no longer see or hear any of their men. Speakman called out to Rogers but received no reply. They now realized those Rangers capable of flight had departed. Thomas could barely walk and the other two "could scarcely move." Therefore, the three decided to surrender to the French.

Their plan was not to be. Thomas spied an Indian coming toward the small group huddled around the fire. He crawled away from the fire so that he could not be seen, although he was able to witness the horror that was about to unfold. "The Indian came to Captain Spikeman, who was not able to resist," explained Brown, "and stripped him and scalped him alive." Baker, who was lying next to Speakman pulled out his knife and tried to kill himself but the Indian stopped him and carried him away.

Witnessing this atrocity, Brown decided to attempt to escape as best he could. As he crept along, he passed a corpse of a Ranger. Not having shoes or leggings any longer, he stopped long enough to pull off the stockings, the individual had no shoes, to protect his own legs. By now the French had become aware of the Ranger withdrawal and had made a fire and deployed large numbers of sentries on the Rangers' path. Brown, without shoes and with great loss of blood, despite his pain and agony, was able to elude capture until the next day.

At about noon, he heard shouts of Indians behind him and within minutes four of them came running toward him. Struck with fear, he threw off his blanket and quickened his pace. Suddenly he heard the cocking of muskets. The Indians told Brown to stop. He refused, hoping for a quick death by being shot rather than the fate that befell Captain Speakman. The Indians soon overtook him, but surprisingly, did not kill him. They quickly rifled through his pockets and took his money. They then took some dry leaves and put them in his wounds. They then turned about and ordered Brown to follow them into captivity.⁸

That same morning the other surviving Rangers reached Lake George approximately six miles south of the French pickets. Once on the lake travel was somewhat easier. Rogers immediately dispatched Lieutenant Stark with two men to make best speed to Fort William Henry to arrange sleigh transport for the wounded.

Remarkably, Sergeant Joshua Martin another one of the seriously wounded who was left behind because of a shattered hip and a stomach wound, refused to die. Dragging his crippled



Rangers engage Indians in hand-to-hand fighting by Ted Zuber

body through the freezing cold snow, he limped and crawled in pursuit of the Ranger main body. On the morning after the battle, unlike Brown, he caught up with the others on the ice of Lake George. Martin actually recovered and went on to serve with the Rangers for the remainder of the war.

The following morning, 23 January 1757, a party of 15 men and a sled under command of Lieutenant Buckley of Hobbs' Company of Rangers met the ragged column at the first narrows. That night, the survivors, 45 effective, and nine wounded arrived at Fort William Henry.

The grim, bitter wilderness struggle was exceedingly costly. The Rangers suffered 14 killed, 6 wounded and 6 captured – a total of 26 of 74 participants, or a casualty rate of 35 percent. Rogers' estimates of French dead, which he claimed to be 40 in his report to General Abercrombie and 116 in his later published journal, were both overly optimistic. French accounts revealed a toll of 14 killed and 24 wounded.⁹

Not unusual, both sides claimed a victory. However, each side interpreted the actions of their commanders in a different light. Rogers and his Rangers received praise for their bold strike at the French. At this juncture of the war, and particularly in this region, the Rangers represented the only real successful offensive strikes at the enemy. Their feats proved good for public morale. The high casualty toll was accepted by Rogers' superiors as the inevitable cost of such ventures.

As for the French, although the courage and efforts of the soldiery were commended, Lusignan, the commandant of Fort Ticonderoga, actually earned censure from Louis-Antoine Comte de Bougainville, an aide to Lieutenant-General Montcalm. Despite the relative success of the French sortie, Bougainville criticized Lusignan for "having weakened his garrison considerably and thus running the risk of being taken [Fort Ticonderoga] by a surprise attack."

The savage struggle at la Barbue Creek on that wet January afternoon never proved to be a

critical tactical engagement of the war. Rather, it represented just another of a continuing series of “cat and mouse” engagements that framed much of how conflict in the North American wilderness was waged during the early years of the Seven Years War (commonly referred to as the French and Indian War). Nonetheless, the contest was important. Constant scouts and raids served many important functions. They provided intelligence and attacked the enemy, thus, depleting his physical and material strength, as well as his morale.

Rogers’ strike behind enemy lines, despite his close escape, proved important if for no other reason than to let the French and their Indian allies know that they no longer owned the forests. Nonetheless, for the Rangers, the nondescript ravine in the Adirondacks became a hollow of death where they fought savagely for their survival.

Notes

1. For more information on Robert Rogers’, see inset box on page 7.
2. For more information on Seven Years’ War, see inset box on page 10
3. The following sources were used to prepare this text: Russell P. Bellico, *Chronicles of Lake Champlain. Journeys in War and Peace*. New York: Fleischmanns, 1999, pp.143-147; Bougainville, Louis Antoine Bougainville (Edward P Hamilton, editor and translator), *Adventure in the Wilderness* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), pp.81-82; H.R. Casgrain, ed. *Journal du Marquis De Montcalm durant ses Campagnes en Canada de 1756-1759* (Québec: L.J. Demers & Frère, 1895), pp.147-148; John R. Cuneo, *Robert Rogers of the Rangers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp.45-51; *Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol IV, 1771-1800* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), pp.679-682; John D. Lock, *To Fight with Intrepidity...The Complete History of the US Army Rangers 1622 to Present* (New York: Pocket Books, 1998), pp.31-40; Burt G. Loescher, *The History of Rogers Rangers. Volume I - The Beginnings Jan 1755 - 6 April 1758* (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, Inc., (1946) reprint 2001), pp.111-140, 325-350; Francis Parkman, *Montcalm and Wolfe* (New York: The Modern Library, 1999), p.222; Timothy J. Todish, *The Annotated and Illustrated Journals of Major Robert Rogers* (Fleischmanns, NY: Purple Mountain Press, 2002), pp.57-64; and *Warfare on the Colonial American Frontier: The Journals of Major Robert Rogers & An Historical Account of the Expedition Against the Ohio Indians in the year 1764, Under the Command of Henry Bouquet, Esq.* (Reprinted from an original 1769 Edition - Bargarville, IN: Dreslar Publishing, 2001), pp.35-41.
4. Captain Speakman is often misspelled as Spikeman in contemporary accounts.
5. The exact numbers are difficult to ascertain. Rogers gives a figure of 250 French in his journals, although it is largely agreed that this number is somewhat inflated. Bougainville states that 100 French regulars were dispatched but does not quantify the number of Indians or Canadians. Parkman, quotes the Governor of New France, Philippe de Rigaud de Vaudreuil, as stating that the French sortie against Rogers totaled 89 regulars and 90 Canadians and Indians. Loescher gives the number as 115 (inclusive of Regulars, Canadians and Indians) at one point, but later states the number could be anywhere from 145-250.
6. The fate of the prisoners is also contentious. Rogers does not mention his orders to kill the prisoners, nor does he state what happened with them. Nonetheless, the Rangers did not return to Fort William Henry with prisoners or scalps. Cuneo and Loescher state the prisoners were killed. Bougainville states four were recovered.
7. At 8:00 p.m. two Canadians arrived at Fort Ticonderoga with a message that the French forces were low on ammunition. As a result, a detachment of 25 men to carry powder and rations (biscuits), as well as a surgeon and priest were dispatched. “Relation de l’action lancé contre les anglois ce les frontier, 21 Janvier 1757 (Carillon),” National Archives of Canada (NA), Microfilm C-362, Bourlamaque Collection, Vol IV, 11 March 1756-18 April 1760, p.310.
8. See Cuneo, 49 and Loescher, 331-340 for a description of Brown’s subsequent captivity.
9. Again, exact numbers are difficult to nail down. Bougainville gives the French total at 11 killed, 27 wounded of which 3 later died. Lieutenant-General Montcalm’s account concedes only 9 killed and 18 wounded (some of which he states later died of wounds). Parkman quotes Vaudreuil as giving total casualties at 37. Bellico states that French casualties amounted to 19 killed and 27 wounded of which 23 later died and Loescher puts them at 18 and 27. Bougainville and Montcalm assigned to the Rangers 42 dead, and 8 captured.

Colonel, Dr. Bernd Horn is the Director of the Canadian Forces Leadership Institute. He is also an adjunct-associate professor of history at the Royal Military College of Canada.