

Tactical and Practical Problems in the French and Indian War

By Conrad S. Kisch

University of Copenhagen

The year 1754 saw the outbreak of a struggle in North America which is known to modern Americans as the French and Indian War; to its contemporaries in America it was merely the French War. As official sanction by the great powers was not granted until 1756 and because the war dragged on until 1763, Europeans call the conflict the Seven Years War.

The American phase of the war erupted as a result of long standing Anglo-French-Indian rivalries and tensions. These came to a head in the French occupation of the Ohio Valley to prevent claims by American land speculators such as the Ohio Company. Virginian militia were sent to the disputed area under one George Washington, but were quickly humbled. The French, of course, blamed England for the hostilities:

Royal Decree containing a Declaration of War Against England

All Europe knows that in 1754 the King of England was the aggressor against the possessions of the King in North America and that in June of last year the English navy, regardless of international law and the sanctity of treaties, commenced the most violent hostilities against the vassals of His Majesty and against his subjects' shipping and trade.¹

Naturally, England considered France the guilty party. King George II stated:

The injuries and hostilities which have been for some time committed by the French against my domains and subjects, are now followed by the

1 Collection de Manuscrits contenant Lettres, Mémoires, et autres Documents Historiques relatifs a la Nouvelle-France, vol. IV (Quebec, 1885), p. 15. (All citations from French are translated by the author.)

THE FRENCH AND INDIAN WAR

actual invasion of the island of Minorca, which stands guaranteed to me by all the great powers in Europe, and in particular by the French king.²

The war would end with the first British Empire at its height, New France would no longer threaten the Anglo-American colonies, and India would firmly become a British sphere of influence as a result of the battle of Plassey. Frederick the Great and Prussia were confirmed as great forces in Europe. Spain lost Florida, but gained New Orleans.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the struggle was as a harbinger of the policies, tactics, problems and misunderstandings that culminated and predominated in the course of the American Revolution, both militarily and politically.

Unlike previous military enterprises in North America, which had largely been undertaken at the expense of the colonies and with colonial troops, the British government, apparently expecting war with France, sent regular soldiers. In an attempt to capture Fort Duquesne (presently Pittsburgh), a French stronghold on the Ohio, the commanding British general, Braddock, lost not only his force and his life, but also the respect Americans had held for the British army. This would seriously hamper operations throughout the war. Americans and Englishmen both underestimated and underplayed each other's role, and mutual resentment grew.

An American myth promulgated since the 19th century by popular American historiographers and inculcated in public schools and textbooks is the belief that the French and Indian War and the American Revolution were fought and won by American riflemen, "embattled farmers", "minutemen", and other irregular troops in imitation of Indian tactics. This is usually coupled with the notion that the hardy colonial troops were vastly superior to, morally as well as militarily, or at least the equal of, the professional officers and men of the British armed forces. Such views can be found in the writings of George Bancroft in 1885, Woodrow Wilson in 1902, Carl Lotus Becker in 1943 and even to a certain degree as recently as Daniel J. Boorstin in 1958.³ This is far

2 *Parliamentary History*, vol. XV (London, 1806-20), p. 771.

3 George Bancroft, *History of the United States of America*, vol II (1885, reprinted Port Washington, New York, 1967), p. 454: "Provincials had saved the remnant of Braddock's army; provincials had conquered Acadia; provincials had defeated Dieskau: but Abercrombie and his chief sheltered their own imbecility under complaints of America." Woodrow Wilson, *A History of the American People*, vol II (New York and London, 1902), p. 124: "The provincial levies raised in the colonies had fought alongside the King's troops in all the movements of the war, and had found themselves not a whit less able to stand and fight, not a whit less needed in victory. Braddock had died loathing the redcoats and wishing to see none but the blue cloth of the Virginian volunteers...the provincials knew when the war was over that the

from the case. The use of "Indian" tactics on a scale large enough to win or lose a war, was impossible for a variety of reasons. Not the least of these were the limitations of 18th century weapons. As a Colonel George Hanger wrote:

A soldier's musket, if not exceedingly illbored (as many of them are), will strike the figure of a man at 80 yards; it may even at 100; but a soldier must be very unfortunate indeed who shall be wounded by a common musket at 150 yards, provided his antagonist aims at him; and as to firing at a man at 200 yards with a common musket, you may just as well fire at the moon and have the same hopes of hitting your object. I do maintain and will prove, whenever called on, that no man was ever killed at 200 yards, by a common soldiers musket, by the person who aimed at him.⁴

Though 18th century rifles were indeed more accurate than the standard "Brown Bess" muskets, they did have three great disadvantages; one had to stand up in order to load them, thus possibly exposing oneself to enemy fire, one could not affix a bayonet, and rifles took considerably more time to load and fire than the unrifled muskets. Riflemen were therefore usually employed on the flanks or as snipers. The formal conduct of warfare during the period, drawing up lines and columns of men at close distance, was not just a matter of sheer stupidity. Rather it was by necessity the only way to make best use of the musket and the only sure hope for inflicting casualties on the enemy. Though the individual musket might have been extraordinarily inaccurate, the fire-power ensuing from a whole regiment's barrage was murderous. Colorful uniforms not only bolstered morale, but were needed in order to recognize friend from foe in the thick acrid clouds of smoke that resulted from the use of black powder. American militia, contrary to popular belief, were trained and usually performed in the conventional manner of European warfare. At such they were grossly inefficient, according to an American captain, Peter Wraxall:

redcoats were no better than they were." Carl Lotus Becker, *Beginnings of the American People*, (Boston and New York, 1943), p. 192: "Who were these men from overseas to instruct natives in the art of frontier warfare? —men who proclaimed their ignorance of the woods by standing grouped and red-coated in the open to be shot down by Indians whom they did not see?" Daniel J. Boorstin, while praising the virtues of the American rifle, the frontier uprearing of the Americans and their expertise in warfare, does later admit that the same problems the British encountered in employing colonial troops were later to plague General Washington's army. *The Americans. The Colonial Experience*, (New York, 1958), pp. 350-351, 353.

⁴ Colonel George Hanger, *To All Sportsmen and Particularly to Farmers and Gamekeepers* (London, 1814), p. 205.

THE FRENCH AND INDIAN WAR

The officers of this Army with very few exceptions are utter Strangers to Military Life and most of them in no Respect superior to the Men they are put over, they are like the Heads and indeed are the Heads of a Mob. The Men are raw Country Men. They are flattered with an easy and Speedy Conquest; All Arts are used to hide future Difficulties and Dangers from them, and the whole Undertaking in all its Circumstances smoothed over to their Imaginations...⁵

The famous Ranger bands led by Major Robert Rogers were specially selected for their attributes, which were found lacking in the majority of American troops. For example, Major General James Abercromby's orders to Rogers expressly stated that Rogers was to enlist no vagrants.⁶ Furthermore, many English soldiers served on attached duty with the Rangers.⁷

The use and contribution of guerilla bands has also been exaggerated. Aside from reconnaissance and protecting the flanks of the advancing armies, in bodies ranging from 1 man to over 400, their prime use was in raiding.⁸ A further duty placed upon the Rangers was that of informing various isolated French garrisons of the capitulation of New France in 1760 and to accept their surrender.⁹

It is worth noting that many of the officers who took part in the American Revolution received their training during the war. Major Rogers, for example, became a Lieutenant-Colonel and raised the Queen's Rangers from New York and Connecticut Loyalists.¹⁰ His colleague and captain, John Stark, like Rogers from New Hampshire, became colonel and commander of the 1st New Hampshire Regiment and the 5th Continental Regiment and served with distinction on the rebel side at Bennington.¹¹

⁵ Stanley M. Pargellis (ed.), *Military Affairs in North America, 1748-1763* (New York and London, 1936), p. 136. John Shy in *A People Numerous and Armed*, (London, Oxford and New York, 1976), pp. 30-33, points out that the colonial troops who had exhibited such poor discipline and low morale were not, in fact, militiamen, but rather draftees or the impoverished who either were enticed by promises of good pay or were forcibly impressed into military service.

⁶ Robert Rogers, *Journals* (London, 1765), reprinted with an introduction by Howard H. Peckham (New York, 1961), p. 37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-43.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 142-171.

¹⁰ John Molo, *Uniforms of the American Revolution* (New York, 1975), p. 171.

¹¹ F.A. Berg, *Encyclopedia of Continental Army Units* (Harrisburg, 1972), p. 32 and p. 79.

A source of irritation between the Americans and regulars was the difference in pay. A Connecticut volunteer earned approximately 10d. per day. A British soldier earned 5d., and was forced to pay so-called "stoppages", that is, the cost of his uniform, musket and other accoutrements. Privates of Roger's Rangers were at first paid 3s. per day, but this was later reduced to 2/6.¹²

Officers also resented each other. General John Forbes called the American officers "...an extreme bad collection of broken innkeepers, horse jockeys, and Indian traders."¹³

The French-Canadian army was beset by similar problems between Europeans and Canadian militia, and between the Canadian-born governor, Vaudreuil, and the Marquis de Montcalm. Canada, however, was far more dependent on the militia and Canadian-raised "Marine" than the British. At the most there were about 6,600 French regular troops serving in America, with only slim possibilities of resupply or of obtaining fresh troops from France due to England's formidable sea power. At Montreal in 1760, Major General Levis, the French military commander, had only 2,000 regulars and about 1,000 militia against a combined Anglo-American army of 17,000.

Much use was made by both armies of another source for irregular troops, that is, the Indians. It is interesting to note how the British placed a veneer of civilization on the tribes. In a letter to "King" Uncus of the Mohegans, Rogers uses the address "Brother Uncus", and requests his aid thusly:

Should you choose to come out a Captain, General Amherst will readily give the commission for it; if not, I shall expect Poquipe and Nunnpiad. I leave you the choice of an Ensign and two Sergeants, but I hope you'll engage the fittest men for their stations. I would have the company consist of 500 private men or more if you can get them,...You may employ a Clerk for the company, to whom General Amherst will allow the usual pay.¹⁴

Dependence upon Indians could have several disadvantages. Following his defeat at Lake George, a prisoner of the English and seriously wounded, General Dieskau wrote to Vaudreuil to inform him of the treachery of the Iroquois that had ruined his chances for victory.¹⁵

12 Rogers, *op. cit.*, p.11 and p. 36.

13 Forbes to Pitt, 6 September 1758, *Correspondence of William Pitt*, when secretary of state, vol. I (New York and London, 1906), p.342.

14 Rogers, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-92.

15 *Collection de Manuscrits, op. cit.*, p. 5.

THE FRENCH AND INDIAN WAR

Furthermore, the Indians tended not to understand the civilities and niceties of 18th century warfare, such as captured officers giving their "parole", that is, a promise not to participate in further hostilities in return for release. After the surrender of Fort William Henry, the Indians lost patience, as stated in an extract of a letter published in England, dated the 15th of August 1757.

... when Montcalm called aside our field officers and said, the Indians always expected, and would have plunder; and for fear of bad consequences, advised them to give their packs to them, which they did tho' with reluctance.

As soon as the Indians got them, they began to massacre all the sick and wounded within the lines and before both armies; next they hauled all the Negroes, Mullatoes and Indian soldiers out of the ranks, butchering and scalping them; when our men began to march, they then began without distinction, stript and tomahawked both officers and men, and all in the greatest confusion took to their heels; and thus those that came in made their escape.¹⁶

Another contemporary wrote:

To what a pitch of perfidy and cruelty is the French nation arrived! Would not an ancient heathen shudder with horror on hearing so hideous a tale? It is the most Christian King that could give such orders? Or could the most nations ever excuse such French barbarity? Besides this was it ever known in the Pagan world, that terms of capitulation were held inviolably sacred.¹⁷

Montcalm himself wrote letters to Lord Loudoun and General Webb explaining his conduct at William Henry and commending the defense put up by Colonel Monrow, the commander of the fort:

I am grateful for having exposed myself as well as my officers [to danger] in defence of your [officers], who will testify to all that I did on this occasion. Tomorrow I will convey to you the prisoners whom I have gathered together and taken back from the hands of the Savages...¹⁸

16 *Ibid.*, p. 119.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 121.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 114.

The French also made use of Irish deserters and formed them into a company with their own sergeants, corporals, musician and camp followers.¹⁹

By and large the French served quite well and dutifully throughout the campaign. Often they won victories at astonishing odds such as at Ticonderoga (Fort Carillon). Rogers placed the size of the British army at about 16,000 men. In summing up the results of the battle he merely states:

Our loss both in the regular and provincial troops was somewhat considerable. The enemy's loss was about 500 besides those who were taken prisoner.²⁰

French accounts were somewhat more jubilant:

Would one believe it, Sir, that 20,000 Englishmen were obliged to take flight before 3,250 Frenchmen; this is what happened to the troops of the King of England, commanded by major general Abercromby. The English were bent on taking Fort Carillon in order to make themselves masters of Canada, full of confidence in the superior number of their troops, this conquest appeared certain, but they had not reckoned with Monsieur Vaudreuil or with the Marquis de Montcalm.²¹

French losses were also rather reduced: "We have lost 12 officers and 92 soldiers who remain on the battlefield. All together we had 25 wounded officers and 248 wounded soldiers."²²

The loss of New France cannot be blamed on the conduct of the French troops. Traditionally the date used for the fall of the colony is the 13th of September 1759. On that day General Wolfe defeated the Marquis de Montcalm on the Plains of Abraham outside of Quebec. Both commanders died during the action; Wolfe's final words were reportedly, "I thank God and die content." Montcalm supposedly said, "I die content, since I have the affairs of the King, my dear master, in good hands. I always had a very great consideration for the talent and capacity of Monsieur de Levis."²³ A few days later the city of Quebec surrendered.

This was not the end of the war. If anything the fate of Canada had been sealed years before. The population of Canada was roughly 55,000, that of the American colonies about one and a quarter million. The English colonies were

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 97-99.

²⁰ Rogers, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

²¹ *Collection de Manuscrits, op. cit.*, p. 219.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 222.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

THE FRENCH AND INDIAN WAR

wealthy and prosperous; Canada was merely a drain on the French crown. As Voltaire put it:

... you know that these two nations are at war over some acres of snow in Canada, and that they spend much more on this wonderful war than all of Canada is worth..²⁴

Britain had 23,000 men serving, who were amply and easily supplied from America and Britain, while the Royal Navy insured little aid would reach Canada from France; yet the French fought tenaciously. In 1760 General Levis besieged the English in Quebec and defeated them at St. Foix just as Wolfe had done to the French, though the British fell back on Quebec and the siege continued.²⁵ Levis hopes rested on help from abroad.

They wanted only the arrival of the ship from France with artillery and ammunition to crown Monsieur de Levis with the glory. The English in Quebec confessed that the first flag which would appear on the St. Lawrence river would decide the question if Canada should remain in possession of the English or return to French.

No ship arriving from France with the artillery, the fate of Canada was at last fixed by the arrival of three [British] men of war the 7th of June.²⁶

The French army then retreated to Montreal where eventually it and all of French Canada surrendered on the 8th of September 1760.²⁷

To the victor goes the spoils is the old adage. The attitude of the victorious British soldiers can be summed up in the following song, called "Hot Stuff":

Come, each death-doing dog who dares venture his neck,
Come, follow the hero that goes to Quebec.
Jump aboard of the transports and loose every sail,
Pay your debts at the tavem by giving leg-bail.²⁸

24 François-Marie de Voltaire, *Candide ou l'optimisme* (Amsterdam?, 1759), reprinted in *Les œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, édition critique par René Pomeau, vol. 48 (Oxford, 1980), p. 223.

25 *Collection de Manuscrits, op. cit.*, pp. 251-252.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 254-255.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 262.

28 Leg-bail, to escape from custody.

And ye that loves fighting shall soon have enough,
Wolfe commands us, my boys; we shall give them Hot Stuff.

Up the river Saint Lawrence our troops shall advance,
To the Grenadiers March we will teach them to dance.
Cape Breton we've taken and next we will try
At their capital to give them another black eye.
Vaudreuil, 'tis in vain you pretend to look gruff,
Those are coming who know how to give you Hot Stuff.

With powder in his periwig and snuff in his nose,
Monsieur will run down our descent to oppose.
And the Indians will come, but the Light Infantry,
Will soon oblige them to betake to a tree.
From such rascals as these may we fear a rebuff?
Advance Grenadiers and let fly your Hot Stuff.

When the 47th Regiment is dashing ashore,
While bullets are whistling and cannons do roar,
Says Montcalm: 'Those are Shirley's--I know their lapels.'²⁹
'You lie,' says Ned Botwood, 'we belong to Lascelles.'³⁰
Though our clothing is changed yet we scorn a powder-puff
So at you, ye bastards, here's give you Hot Stuff.'

With Monckton and Townshend, those brave brigadiers,³¹
I think we shall soon have the town 'bout their ears.
And when we have done with the mortars and guns,
'If you please, Madame Abbess, a word with your nuns.'
Each soldier shall enter the convent in buff,
And then never fear we will give them Hot Stuff.

29 "Those are Shirley's...", i.e., the colonials led by William Shirley, Governor of Massachusetts. To call a regular soldier a member of Shirley's command was a grave insult as they did not want to be thought of as mere provincial yokels, but as professional soldiers. Regiments in the British army were distinguished from one another, among other things, by the varying colours of the lapels on the uniform coats. This was employed with a system of multi-coloured regimental lace that was used as an edging to uniforms, for example, around button holes. In the case of the 47th Regiment the lapels were white.

30 Ned Botwood, sergeant in the 47th. Lascelles, Lieutenant-General, commander of the 47th Regiment, *Collection de Manuscrits, op. cit.*, p. 266.

31 Monckton and Townshend, commanders of the 17th and 28th regiments respectively, *loc.cit.*

Royalty was somewhat more gallant:

In the summer of 1763, Le Chevalier Chaussegros de Lery and his Lady were presented at court and where [sic] the first of the [new] subjects of George the III who had that honour.

The young and gallant Monarch on receiving Madame de Lery, who was a very beautiful woman, observed to her:

'If all the Ladies of Canada are as handsome as yourself, I have indeed made a conquest.'³²

With the benefit of hindsight we might judge King George's boast as being a bit premature. Though King George and his successors were to maintain control over Canada, the cost was far greater than those "few acres of snow" were worth for the conquest of Canada entailed the loss of the far wealthier and more important American colonies.

When peace was declared in 1763 it was felt by many, including William Pitt, to be merely an "armed truce" in light of the French decision to station some 20,00 men in the West Indies.³³ Parliament decided to counter this move by deploying 10,000 regulars in North America to be paid for through direct taxation of the American colonies.³⁴ At an average annual cost of £389,752 this amounted to nearly 4 percent of the national budget and was a true burden on the British tax-payer, who naturally enough, felt it only just that the Americans contribute economically to their own defence as well as to the debt incurred through the war.³⁵

With the removal of the French threat in Canada, the Americans could perceive no legitimate reason for the continued presence of a strong British

³² *Ibid.*, p. 313.

³³ Peter D. G. Thomas, "New Light on the Commons Debate of 1763 on the American Army", *William and Mary Quarterly* vol. XXXVIII no. 1 (1981), 110-12.

³⁴ *Loc. cit.*

³⁵ Peter D.G. Thomas, "The Cost of the British Army in North America, 1763-1775," *William and Mary Quarterly* vol. XLV no. 3 (1988), 516. Thomas notes on 512 that the nominal number of troops was gradually reduced from 10,000 men (20 battalions each consisting of 500 men) to 6,201 (13 battalions of 477 men) by 1773. The actual number of regulars would have been much lower as battalions were seldom up to strength. A muster in 1763 revealed, for example, only 6,400 men at a time when there nominally ought to have been 10,000.

force and were especially adverse to the idea of actually paying for this military establishment or to the war debt by means of what they deemed to be attempts at unconstitutional taxation. The various crises between the American colonies and Britain soon ensued. To put it simply, without a French bogeyman the *raison d'être* for American subservience to Britain's interests vanished.

The French and Indian War served as a training ground for countless American officers in the Revolution, who indeed were to attempt to emulate Britain's success by trying to conquer Canada themselves. But we must not forget that it also gave the British military valuable experience in conducting warfare under American conditions. The British did not perform so badly during the Revolution as the popular myths would have it, and were, when necessary, "...as adept at irregular warfare, at the tactics of hit and run as...the rebels."³⁶

The bad showing and poor quality of the American troops during the French and Indian conflict might have led British military and civil authorities to believe that it would be a simple matter to quell the Revolution militarily, while the Americans, having seen British fiascoes such as Braddock's defeat at Fort Duquesne or Abercromby's at Fort Carillon (Ticonderoga) may have been misled into thinking that the British were more inept than they actually were, and that a war of independence would be an easier matter than it proved to be. Finally, the extremely disharmonious contacts and the countless insults exchanged between the British and Americans may have strengthened the American's view of his own identity as an American and not an Englishman and weakened the sense of common bonds and purposes.

36 Shy, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-13.