

## The Ranger Raid on St. Francis

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### **The Ranger's Raid on St. Francis (4 October 1759)**

Was the raid on St. Francis a proper mission for a Ranger force and did it have a strategic impact on the French and Indian War? The Ranger raid executed against the Abenaki Indians village of St. Francis on 4 October 1759 was conducted against the backdrop of the French and Indian War's Mohawk Valley theater of operations. However, addressing the question of the Ranger utility in conducting the raid also raises several additional questions: Was the raid effective? Did Roger's comply with his orders? Was the raid more of a propaganda victory than a tactical or strategic one? This paper will answer these questions as well as the veracity of the reporting on both sides.

### **Background on the French and Indian War**

The French and Indian War was the name of the conflict fought in North America as part of the global conflict known as the Seven Years' War. The war was fought along the frontier between the French and British North American colonies from modern-day Nova Scotia south towards Virginia and as far west as modern-day Detroit. The genesis for the war was the dispute over natural resources and boundaries between the competing kingdoms and their subjects in the New World. The French began fortifying the "lands upon the River Ohio"<sup>1</sup> at the same time that the British Royal Colony of Virginia claimed the land. In response to the French actions, Virginia's governor, Robert Dinwiddie, sent a militia Major by the name of

George Washington to carry messages to the French in an attempt to resolve the dispute diplomatically at the local level.

A series of diplomatic and military moves and counter-moves ensued, culminating in Lieutenant Colonel Washington ambushing a diplomatic party and killing an officer of the French Royal Army.<sup>2</sup> Washington had been in the process of reinforcing Britain's claim to the area by building a compound later called Fort Necessity.<sup>3</sup> To exasperate matters even further, there were very different descriptions of the events leading up to the death of the French officer Ensign de Jumonville and nine of his men. Washington reported "We killed Mr. *de Jumonville*, the commander of the Party, as also nine others; we wounded one, and made Twenty-one Prisoners."<sup>4</sup> When diplomatic documents were discovered, the true intent of the French patrol was realized.<sup>5</sup>

The French claimed that one of their soldiers escaped the initial ambush and watched as members of Washington's patrol murdered the ensign in cold blood.<sup>6</sup> To make matters worse for the British, Washington had placed his "fort" in an indefensible position and the French forced him to surrender. As part of the capitulation, Washington signed the surrender document (written in French), without (in his words) understanding what he was signing. What was included in the document was the statement that Washington had "murdered" Ensign de Jumonville. This led to active combat in the North American Theater.<sup>7</sup>

The fighting in the North American Theater pitted the French military and militia units and their Native American allies against the British forces and their Native American allies. The French attempted to maximize their combat power by enlisting the various tribes in the area to supply warriors to supplement French forces and to conduct independent operations in support of French military objectives.

The British felt that the addition of the Native American contingent to the French forces placed them at a disadvantage, and attempted to recruit Native American tribes to their cause. This caused difficulties for the various Native American Tribes that lived in the North American Theater of operations, because it pitted nominal Indian allies against each other. The contentious subject of religion added to the already grand animosity. The French were a predominantly Catholic nation and the British predominantly Protestant. Additionally, some of the individual Native American Tribes had converted to one of the European religious denominations. The Abenaki had converted to Catholicism in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>8</sup>

### **The French and Indian War in New England**

This article will concentrate on the Mohawk River Valley and the New England area of Operations of the French and Indian War. The year 1759 would prove pivotal for British fortunes in North America. The “de facto” British Prime Minister, William Pitt, was determined to make the year 1759 pivotal by defeating the French in North America before turning his attention to other theaters of operation.<sup>9</sup> The British strategy was to concentrate their force in actions along the eastern Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River. The British succeeded in gaining victories at the battles of Fort Niagara (6 – 26 July 1759),<sup>10</sup> La Belle-Famille (24 July 1759),<sup>11</sup> Fort Carillion (26 -27 July 1759),<sup>12</sup> and the Plains of Abraham (13 September 1759).<sup>13</sup> The Battle for Fort William Henry was a disastrous defeat for the British, because of the massacre of the garrison and their family members by the Abenaki Indians who were aligned with the French after the French accepted the garrison’s surrender and agreed to let them leave under a flag of truce.<sup>14</sup>

General Jeffrey Amherst then decided to launch a raid against the Abenaki base of operations, the village of St. Francis. The Abenaki had been raiding and pillaging the English settlements along the Atlantic coast in modern New England since at least the seventeenth century. Amherst also desired to destroy the myth of Indian invulnerability in “woodland” fighting.

### **Major Robert Rogers**

Major Robert Rogers was probably the most famous “woodland” fighter of his day. Rogers was born around 1731 in the colony of Massachusetts Bay and spent his formative years in the New Hampshire back-country. Rogers spent his early youth hunting and exploring the woods.<sup>15</sup> Rogers first encountered and became fascinated with the American Indians in his youth, studying their ways, culture, habits and even language.<sup>16</sup> Rogers first gained combat experience when he joined the Militia Company from Rumford Massachusetts in 1746, and fought Indian raiders until the end of the King George’s War in 1748.<sup>17</sup>

Rogers earned a commission from Governor Shirley, when he raised enough recruits for the French and Indian War, and became the unit’s Captain. Rogers’ utility to the British became critical through a series of scouting missions and long distance raids that he and his men successfully conducted. Authorized by Amherst to raise a “Regiment of Rangers,” Rogers succeeded in drawing high quality recruits to his unit.

### **Overview of the conduct of the raid 4 October 1759**

Rogers left with two hundred handpicked Rangers and proceeded by boat up Lake Champlain. Rogers left a security element at the

site chosen to cache the boats and proceeded overland towards his target. French soldiers on patrol discovered Rogers' cache site, and the security element caught up with Rogers and warned him of the loss.<sup>18</sup> The loss of the cache site was a twofold problem for Rogers. He not only lost the planned mode of transportation back to Crown Point, he also lost all the provisions stored at the cache site to sustain the Rangers after the raid during the exfiltration.

The Abenaki, forewarned that there was enemy (British) activity in the area, moved the majority of their warriors to the village they believed to be Rogers' actual target. The Ranger leaders, as would be recognizable by any modern Infantryman, conducted a reconnaissance of the village and determined the village layout, including the location of the key buildings, the communal storehouse and the Catholic Church. The Rangers set a cordon on the far side of the village along the St. Francis river, a probable escape route, and were ordered to kill any Indians that attempted to escape in that direction. Rogers' plan was to divide his force into three elements. Each element would attack a different sector of the village. Rogers detailed the Rangers either to attack a specific building, or to act as sharpshooters, engaging any combatant when possible.<sup>19</sup> Rogers attacked at 0515hrs<sup>20</sup> and claimed that the Abenaki were unable to offer effective resistance and the raid was over by 0700hrs. Rogers looted the community storehouse and burned the entire village, including the church, to the ground.

### **Controversy surrounding Abenaki casualties**

Rogers took almost six weeks to travel from his base camp at Crown Point to the Village of St. Francis, approximately one hundred fifty miles north of Crown Point. After the raid, he and his men evaded capture and returned to Fort Number 4 in modern-day

Connecticut. Rogers claimed that he lost three officers and forty-six men out of a force of one hundred forty-two Rangers that conducted the raid.<sup>21</sup> Rogers claimed that he incurred the majority of his casualties during the French pursuit of his force back to Fort Number 4. Rogers claimed that only one Ranger had been killed during the raid and seven Rangers were wounded. According to Rogers' report of the action, sixty-five to one hundred forty warriors were killed, twenty Indian women and children were captured and later released, five English prisoners were liberated, and Chief Gill's wife, two sons and three daughters were captured. This seems to be an unexplainably small number of casualties compared to the number of Indians he claimed to have been killed or captured. Additionally, the Rangers captured enough corn to sustain them for the first eight days of their escape and evasion back to English territory.

The Abenaki claim to have put up stout resistance and to have killed forty Rangers. The Abenaki claim cannot be discounted at face value. The Rangers had lost the strategic element of surprise due to the discovery of their boats at the cache site. According to Abenaki oral history, an unnamed warrior came to the Village of St. Francis the night before the raid to warn the village that the British were nearby.<sup>22</sup> The Abenaki claimed that they had moved the majority of their women, children, and elderly members to another village,<sup>23</sup> and that only warriors remained to defend the village. This would explain their stout defense and claims of significant Ranger casualties. Which side has left the most credible history? It is impossible based on the historical evidence to say definitively which version of events is the most accurate. It is unusual for both sides to agree, independently of each other, on the number of Ranger casualties (to re-state, the Abenaki claim they inflicted forty casualties, and Rogers admits to forty-nine total casualties). While the numbers do not match exactly, it is highly improbable that they would

be so close coincidentally. It is probable that the Abenaki did inflict the number of casualties claimed and that Rogers lost the additional nine Rangers during the escape and evasion back to Fort Number 4.

### **Aftermath of the raid**

The survivors of the raid were then forced to escape and evade across country in an unplanned direction because of the discovery and destruction of their boats and all the provision stored there. The evasion started well but became a survival trek. The food ran out after eight days, and the French and Abenaki organized patrols to hunt for and ambush any Rangers they could find. “Major Rogers, upon receiving the news of the French and Indian force in pursuit, dispatch Lt. McMullen to return to Crown Point. His mission was to prepare of reception party for the Rangers.”<sup>24</sup> The Rangers eventually decided that it would be better to break up into smaller units and attempt to evade their way, independent of each other, to Fort Number 4.<sup>25</sup> Some units became so famished that the capture of a “red squirrel was an event.”<sup>26</sup> Many years after the fact, a member of the Royal Army attached to the Rangers reported that the men resorted to cannibalism to survive their harrowing ordeal.<sup>27</sup> It is impossible, both because of the paucity of detailed records and the hectic and harrowing ordeal, to determine exactly how many Rangers were captured and killed by the French or Abenaki patrols. Major Rogers, after organizing search and rescue parties, to guide his dispersed Ranger force back to friendly lines, composed his report and sent it off to General Amherst. The raid, based solely on Rogers’ report, was declared an unheralded success, and immediately had an effect on the morale of the military and civilian populations of British North America. The raid and its aftermath were trumpeted in newspapers in New York City.<sup>28</sup> No longer could the Native

American tribes aligned with the French conduct operations against British military or civilian targets with impunity.<sup>29</sup> The Native Americans would now have to contend with the possibility that Rogers' Corps of Rangers would conduct an attack against their villages when the warriors were away on a mission.

### **What was the strategic effect, if any, of the raid on the conduct of the war in New England?**

What was achieved by the loss of highly skilled, well trained and battle hardened Rangers? The propaganda value of the raid was incalculable, but wars are not won by the weight of a single propaganda victory regardless of its size. Rogers claimed to have killed two hundred Abenaki warriors, destroyed their village, and dispersed the surviving women and children. If so, the raid would be a blow from which the Abenaki would not quickly recover.

There is no historical evidence to indicate that the Abenaki Indians ever waived in their support of the French until the French were finally defeated and the French colony transferred to British control. After the war, the Abenaki migrated back to their traditional hunting grounds and persevered.

Finally, was the raid a mission within the capabilities and limitations of the Ranger Regiment as it was trained and organized in 1759? Unequivocally, the answer is yes. The Rangers traveled over one hundred fifty miles from their base at Crown Point to their target of the Village of St. Francis, on the St. Francis River, just south of the Saint Lawrence River. The Rangers conducted the infiltration and raid as planned. In accordance with Rogers' command philosophy, a fragmentary order was issued to change the exfiltration from a riverine movement to an overland exfiltration. It was decided to re-supply from the community stores at the target. This major change

of plan could have only been executed, already far behind enemy lines, by a well-trained and confident force.

The raid on St. Francis was a proper mission for a Ranger force and it had strategic impact on the French and Indian War, albeit largely as a propaganda victory. The Rangers executed the raid against the Abenaki Indians Village of St. Francis on 4 October 1759 and conducted it against the background of the French and Indian War's Mohawk Valley theater of operations. The Raid was a propaganda victory, but did not contribute materially to the war effort.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754 – 1766* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 44.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson, *Crucible*, 55.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>8</sup> Frank McLynn, *1759: The Year Britain Became Master of the World* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 332.

<sup>9</sup> McLynn, *1759*, 95.

<sup>10</sup> McLynn, *1759*, 149-152.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 337.

<sup>12</sup> McLynn, *1759*, 154-155.

<sup>13</sup> McLynn, *1759*, 300-309.

<sup>14</sup> Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 197.

<sup>15</sup> John F. Ross, *War on the Run, The Epic Story of Robert Rogers and the Conquest of America's First Frontier* (New York: Bantam Books, 2009), 20.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-44.

<sup>18</sup> Burt G. Loescher, *The History of Rogers' Rangers, Vol. 2: Genesis, the First Green Berets, April 6, 1758 – December 24, 1783*. 1969. (Bowie, MD: Heritage, 2000), 58.

<sup>19</sup> Ross, *War on the Run*, 250.

<sup>20</sup> Burt G. Loescher, *The History of Rogers' Rangers, Vol. IV: The St. Francis Raid*, 1969. Westminster, Heritage Books, 2008, 38.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>22</sup> Deborah P. Clifford, "The Raid On St. Francis," *Historic Roots*, no. 3 (December 1997): 19-20.

<sup>23</sup> Loescher, *The History of Rogers' Rangers, Vol. IV*, 38.

<sup>24</sup> MSG Walter H. Sargent, *The Emergence of the American Noncommissioned Officer: Rogers' Rangers During the French and Indian War from 1754 to 1763*, Combined Arms Research Library, United States Army Sergeants Major Academy Collection, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Ross, *War on the Run*, 258.

<sup>26</sup> Colonel Red Reeder, *The French and Indian War*, Kindle Edition, (Quechee, Vermont Heritage Press, 2011), position 1713 of 2517.

<sup>27</sup> Ian McCulloch, Tim J. Todish, *British Light Infantryman of the Seven Years' War: North America 1757 – 63* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2004), 28.

<sup>28</sup> Ross, *War on the Run*, 268.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 269-270.

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