“Within Ourselves”: The Development of British Light Infantry in North America during the Seven Years’ War

Ian McCulloch, Directorate of Heritage and History, Department of National Defence

Abstract
The first British regulars to appear in North America were those accompanying a small British expedition to wrest Manhattan from the Dutch in 1664. Colonel Richard Nicolls’ troops landed on Long Island 25 August 1664 at the exact site where General William Howe’s troops would disembark over a century later. After a swift Dutch capitulation, Nicolls’ redcoats and subsequent garrisons of British regulars would maintain a solid presence in New York for a virtually uninterrupted period of 119 years.

It has been suggested by one American historian that this factual record has been conveniently overlooked by most of his colleagues in order that “the dismal episode of Braddock’s defeat” can figure prominently in history books as the first appearance of British redcoats on the North American scene. Thus “they could be made to appear as stupid brutes led by an eighteenth century Colonel Blimp while American militia simultaneously appeared as a keen and valiant yeomanry led by that paragon of all virtue and destined military hero of the fight for American liberty, George Washington.” His accusation is a valid one, but not very surprising, as much of early American history has become firmly embedded in myth, legend and folklore. “Braddock’s Defeat”, “The Massacre at Fort William Henry”, “The Boston Massacre” and even “George Washington’s Cutting Down the Cherry Tree” have all served a variety of purposes down through the centuries. All have become part of the “usable past” and have been extensively deployed in any discussions of one of those favourite themes of North American historians—the conflict between European and colonial values and methods. Inevitably European warfare vs. North American warfare (la petite guerre) has been drawn into the mythic vortex. Canadian historian I.K. Steele writes that “North American pride in the ways of the New World has often led to the assumption that, in warfare as in everything else, the new men of the New World were better than the history-laden men of the Old.” Braddock’s defeat more than any other engagement of the Seven Years’ War has, “with some misrepresentation,” been used as key evidence to support this assumption of superiority. Stanley Pargellis reinforces this view:

Military historians hold that Braddock’s defeat taught a lesson badly needed for the time: you cannot employ parade ground tactics in the bush. To almost everyone who in one connection or another remembers Braddock, this episode stands as a conflict between Old World and New World ways, with the outcome justifying the new.

However, many historians led by Pargellis, with Paul Koppermans, Ian Strachan, and Steele in close support, stress that Braddock’s defeat can no longer be perceived or used as such. While broad generalizations about the utility of close-order formations in woods or the cunning and ruthlessness of Indian tactics or the command abilities of the young Washington may all be still true, they are not true as inferences from Braddock’s defeat. The general consensus now is that Braddock’s debacle was precipitated in large part by his critical neglect on the day of battle to observe the fundamental rules of war laid down in the European manuals of the day. His leadership lapse and complacency once nearing his objective meant that his soldiers were never given a chance to demonstrate that Old World methods, properly applied, might have very well won the day. His column from the day it launched into the North American wilderness adopted well-conceived and generally well-executed security measures as per the manuals. On the day however, these careful measures were inexplicably not ordered nor implemented by Braddock and his staff and their absence was enough to ensure the ruin of their army and give British officers a reputation for ineptitude under frontier conditions.

This reputation is undeserved, for British regulars took especial care to prepare themselves for the American theatre, including Braddock and subsequent commanders. After Braddock’s defeat no inferior guerilla force would ever overcome any substantial body of British regulars during the Seven Years’ War in North America.
Their development was a watershed in the history of irregular warfare, and this book provides a full examination of their fighting methods, covering training, tactics and campaigning from Canada to the Caribbean. It's easy to forget that the North American colonies had support from Great Britain in wars that broke out in Europe but extended to the ends of the Empire, this one being the case. Interesting data. Research seems a bit sloppy here; get ready to read the name Robert Kirkwood repeatedly. British Light Infantryman of the Seven Years’ War North America 1757-63 LIEUTENANT COLONEL IAN M McCULLOCH is a military historian and former Deputy Director of History & Heritage for the Canadian Forces, currently serving at NATO Allied Command HQ in Norfolk, Virginia. He has been published in numerous international journals and magazines and is finishing a book entitled "Sons of the Mountains" chronicling the service of the three Highland regiments that fought in North America during the Seven Years’ War. TIM J TODISH is a native of Grand Rapids, Michigan, and a graduate The history of British light infantry goes back to the early days of the British Army, when irregular troops and mercenaries added skills in light infantry fighting. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Army dedicated some line regiments as specific light infantry troops, were trained under the Shorncliffe System devised by Sir John Moore and Sir Kenneth MacKenzie Douglas. The light infantry had the nickname "light bobs" first used during the American Wars of Independence, and commonly...