

FALCONS OF THE LAKES

By Matt Wulff

ROBERT ROGERS AND HIS Rangers have been called the falcons of the lakes. They swooped down upon their enemies quickly and accurately like a bird to its prey. The areas of their major conflicts were the lakes and rivers from Canada to Albany, New York. The author of the book *The Great Warpath*, David R. Starbuck, chronicles the military sites and activities from the Richelieu River to Lakes Champlain and George, down the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers. The St. Lawrence River, as well as Lakes Huron, Michigan, Erie and Ontario all played major parts in the French and Indian War.

The rivers and lakes were our young nation's highways, and the vessels that plied her waters were yesterday's automobiles. Nearly all of the major military operations of the time involved some form of lake or river transportation, as well as support from the Navy. The types of vessels used ranged from the smallest bark canoe to British or French men of war.

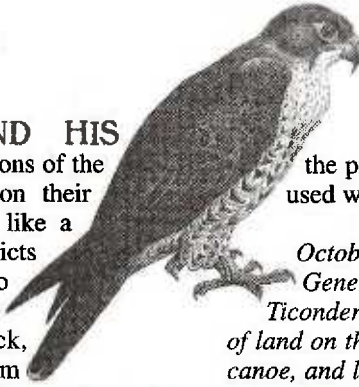
Maj. Robert Rogers' very first journal entry, which concerns his exploits in the French and Indian War, reads, "Pursuant to orders from Major-General Johnson, Commander in Chief of the Provincial Forces, raised for the reduction of Crown Point, I embarked with four men upon Lake George, to reconnoiter the strength of the enemy, and proceeding down the lake twenty-five miles. I landed on the west side, leaving two men in charge of the boat" (1).

Rogers made no reference to the type of boat used, but we can see one of the best reasons for using this method to reach enemy territory in that they traveled 25 miles in the course of the first day. America's frontier at the time was vast woodlands, with nothing more than game trails, Indian trails or military roads hacked out of the forest along which to travel. Water travel, while at the risk of being seen more easily, clearly had its advantages.

Russell Bellico's book, *Sails and Steam in the Mountains*, gives evidence of the importance of the nation's waterways in a military situation. According to Bellico, "On October 15, 1731, Beauharnois sent a letter to the king of France with a recommendation to build a fort at Crown Point on Lake Champlain. Beauharnois suggested that, 'When in possession of Crown Point the road will be blocked on the English should they wish to pass over our territory'" (17).

By "road," Bellico meant the water route up or down Lake Champlain. The terms *up* and *down* correspond to the direction of water flow on a body of water, not the direction up or down or to a point on a compass. Beauharnois' quote shows the importance of the waterways and the need to protect them.

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From the following entry, we now know that on the previously mentioned excursion, the vessel Rogers used was a canoe:

October 7, 1755, I received orders of this date from General Johnson to reconnoiter the French troops at Ticonderoga. Accordingly, I proceeded at night to a point of land on the west side of the lake, where we landed, hid our canoe, and left two men in charge of it. The next day, with the other three, I marched to the Point at Ticonderoga, where we arrived about noon. (Rogers 3)

Rogers also traveled at night to lessen the chance of being seen. He also proceeded to a point away from his destination and then marched overland to Ticonderoga. We see a combination of water and land routes used on this scout. We can surmise that Rogers was starting to understand and develop the methods of scouting, traveling and fighting that would one day become Rogers' Rules of Ranging.

The following entry contains a reference to a bark canoe: "Having made what discoveries we could, we began our return, in which we found that the enemy had a large advanced guard at the north end of Lake George, where it issues out of it into Lake Champlain. While we were there, I perceived a bark canoe, with nine Indians and a Frenchman in it, going up the lake" (Rogers 3).

The trader Alexander Henry gave us an example of a bark canoe in his story of the travels and adventures he had between the years of 1760 and 1764:

Next morning we reached the shore of Lake Ontario. Here we are employed two days in making canoes out of the bark of the elm tree in which we were to transport ourselves to Niagara. For this purpose, the Indians first cut a tree, then stripped off the bark in one entire sheet of about eighteen feet in length, the incision being lengthwise. The canoe was now complete as to its top, bottom and sides. The ends were next closed by sewing the bark together, and a few ribs and bars being introduced, the architecture was finished. In this manner, we made two canoes, of which one carried eight men and the other nine. (Henry 111, 112)

These references show the size of the canoes being used and also the construction method. The real surprise is that it was not made of the well-known birch bark, but of elm. The natives were also not above using their canoes on the larger lakes, such as Lake Ontario. Bellico gave a description of the birch-bark canoe in his book:

In late September Reverend John Cleaveland, with the Massachusetts provincial soldiers provided a rare delineation of the construction of Indian canoes in his journal. After dinner one evening, he walked down to the shore of Lake

George to view two captured birch bark canoes, the largest of which was thirty five feet in length, five feet wide, and designed to carry twenty men. The inside was made "with cedar clap boards thin as brown paper and laid lengthwise of ye canoe upon which crossways of ye canoe is another laying of cedar." (74-75).

From what we have learned, the canoe seems to have been a very efficient, fast and easily made form of watercraft, but further investigation will lead us to see otherwise.

Of his experience with a bark canoe, Alexander Henry wrote:

The last of these arguments was with me so powerful that though a bark canoe was a vehicle to which I was altogether a stranger, though this was a very small one of only sixteen or eighteen feet in length and very much out of repair and though the misfortune which I had experienced in the navigation of these rocky parts of the St. Lawrence when descending with the army naturally presented itself to my mind as a still further discouragement, yet I was not long in resolving to undertake the voyage. Accordingly, after stopping the leaks as completely as we were able, we embarked and proceeded. My fears were not lessened by perceiving that the least unskillful notion was sufficient to overset the ticklish craft into which I had ventured; by the reflection that a shock comparatively gently from a mass of rock or ice was more than its frail material could sustain...In fact, we had not proceeded more than a mile when our canoe became full of water, and it was not till after a long search that we found a place of safety. (4)

While fast and easy to build, bark canoes are tricky to use, are very fragile and require frequent repair, so frequent that Alexander Henry noted, "The small roots of the spruce tree afford the wattap, with which the bark is sewed; and the gum of the pine tree supplies the place of tar and oakum. Bark, some spare wattap, and gum are always carried in each canoe for the repairs which frequently become necessary" (7).

Evidence shows us that in certain circumstances canoes were used many times by Robert Rogers and his Rangers. We also know that they would not serve in all instances and required a lot of maintenance.

Rogers introduced a new type of

watercraft in his journal entry on Nov. 4, 1755. He wrote, "Agreeable to orders from General Johnson this day, I embarked for the enemies advanced guard before mentioned, with a party of thirty men in four battoes, mounted with two wall pieces each" (5).

This must have been a more substantial craft if it could carry two wall pieces each. Brenton Kemmer's book, *Redcoats, Yankees, and Allies*, includes the following description of a bateau:

French word for boat. In British military terms, a bateau was usually a double ended, flat-bottomed boat. Lengths varied according to usage. (151)

An illustration in David Starbuck's book, *The Great Warpath*, gives the following description:

Bateaux were common on Lake George during the French and Indian War. They were pointed at bow and stern, made of pine and oak wood. They could be rowed or poled in shallow water, and had an oar off the stern for steering. (187)

The drawing shows a single mast and sail. Bateaux were mentioned numerous times by Rogers when he was embarking with small or large numbers

of men. The larger boats would have been more stable on the lakes and larger rivers, and the sail would have made for quick travel when blessed by favorable winds. This leads us to believe that the Rangers would have had to have at least a basic knowledge of sailing and the associated rigging that even a boat of this size would have required. This argument is furthered by Bellico, who noted, "Ranger Captain Tute's method of rigging blanket sails (which had been used earlier) was adopted, with each bateau rigged with two blankets" (98).

The Rangers were obviously resourceful in adapting to situations with which they were unfamiliar, although some of the Rangers may have been acquainted with the use of boats from their experiences before the war. But the importance of the waterways and travel in the Colonies is evident.

Howard Peckham's book, *The Colonial Wars 1689-1762*, gives us a description of the large number of vessels used during an operation up Lake Champlain by Gen. Abercromby to invade Canada. Peckham wrote:

The colonies fell down on their quotas and fewer than ten thousand men were on hand July 4, 1758, when the combined army of sixteen thousand took to the water and rowed down the lake. Nine hundred bateaux, one hundred and thirty five

Noted historian and artist Gary Zaboly drew the illustration below, "Abercromby's Spearhead," showing the Rangers aboard whaleboats during the Abercromby Expedition against Ticonderoga in 1758.



whaleboats, and artillery rafts covered the width of the lake and extended several miles, as colorful a military spectacle as the war had seen. (166)

What a convoy this must have been. Bateaux must have been the mainstay of the British army, having used 900 of them for the trip against Ticonderoga. The boats must have been very strong and well built to put the lives of so many in their trust. The boats appear to have been the workhorse of the day, well suited for the task at hand. Bellico illustrated the strength of the bateau with a description of one of the unique ways that they were used. Bellico wrote, "The pontoon arrangement of bateau with the artillery was finally brought into the small cove on the southwest shore of the lake after nightfall. Twelve cannon and a few mortars were unloaded" (47).

The method mentioned above usually meant three bateaux used together, with a platform built on top of them for transporting artillery. When we think of the weight of Colonial-era cannon and mortars, even small ones, the strength of the bateau was clearly evident. The frequency that bateaux were used in this manner is suggested by Bellico, who wrote, "The floating batteries and rafts were hastily constructed at Lake George, while most of the bateaux were built in Albany and Schenectady under Colonel John Bradstreet, commander of the battoe service" (60).

Col. John "Jean Baptiste" Bradstreet was an American born regular officer. He was in charge of the men who manned the bateaux for the British army. He even took temporary charge of the retreating army after their defeat at Ticonderoga in 1758. Col. Bradstreet was well known for using his bateau men in cooperation with the army to great advantage. To have the British army place a colonel in charge of this service shows the great need and importance of this vital service to the Crown.

Would the workhorse of the British army serve all of the needs of the Rangers, or would a happy medium between the bateau and the canoe be needed?

It is believed that the new commander in chief, William Shirley, had given some whaleboats to Robert Rogers for use by his Rangers. Rogers wrote, "Our rendezvous was appointed at Albany, from thence to proceed in four whaleboats to Lake George, and from time to time to use my best endeavors to distress the French and

their allies, by sacking, burning, and destroying their houses, barns, barracks, canoes, battoes, and c." (13-14). Indeed Rogers himself mentioned the source of the boats. The entry reads, "About this time the General augmented my company to seventy men and sent me six light whaleboats from Albany, with orders to proceed immediately to Lake Champlain, to cut off if possible, the provisions and flying parties of the enemy accordingly" (18).

Rogers seems to imply that the whaleboats were a lighter, faster craft than the bateaux that they had been using. A lighter and faster boat would have been better suited to the quick-strike methods of the Rangers. Brenton C. Kemmer's book, *Redcoats, Yankees and Allies*, describes whaleboats as, "Double ended round bottomed boat used for whaling. In the military this type of boat was used to carry primarily light troops because of its quickness compared to a bateau" (160).

Their lighter weight combined with speed in a strong, more easily manned boat made the whaleboat perfect for use by rangers or light infantry. A boat that was fast enough to chase down whales must have been very sleek and cut through the water with ease. Bellico gave us a description of whaleboats that was attributed to General Amherst. Bellico wrote, "Amherst described the whaleboats in 1759 as being '28 feet in the keel, 5 feet and 2 inches broad, 25 inches deep, 34 feet from stem to stern...with seven oars besides the steering oar'"(90).

We can see another way that the British army was beginning to understand and adapt to warfare in the new world. While the bateau was the workhorse of the day, the whaleboat would have been the war's thoroughbred. Transport of these lighter boats was also mentioned in the two following accounts. The first is the story of the Rangers' portage route from Lake George to Wood Creek, the famous "water route." Cuneo wrote, "The difficulties of portaging are attested by the fact that it took four days to cover about four miles on an airline" (36-37).

Portaging was the way that boats were unloaded and carried around obstacles on the water that could not be passed over safely. A good example is the "Great Portage" around the Niagara Falls. Bellico gave a description of portaging the whaleboat and some of the armament that they carried:

In early October, the French found

four whaleboats abandoned in a little cove on the eastern shore above Crown Point, one "mounted with three swivels." Rogers following a scouting expedition to St. Jean on the Richelieu River in late August had hid the whaleboats. The vessels had been laboriously carried over on the east side of Lake George near present day Huletts Landing to Lake Champlain. (38)

This was a source of great concern for the French. They could not imagine how the British army could have found a water route of which they were unaware. Portaging whaleboats over rough hilly terrain under combat conditions would test anyone's endurance. I am sure the Rangers were glad that they were transporting the lighter, sleeker whaleboats rather than the heavier bateaux.

Rogers himself tells of another unique way in which his whaleboats were transported to a place of need. Rogers reported, "His Lordship immediately ordered me out with fifty men in whaleboats, which were carried over in wagons to Lake George" (98).

Boats were normally carried around portage areas by sheer strength and numbers of men. One last quote shows the frequency that the whaleboats were carried from place to place, enabling them to be put into action at a moment's notice. Rogers wrote, "For completion of this order I had sixty Rangers in one English flat bottomed boat and two whaleboats, in which after night came on I embarked and passed over to the other side of Lake Champlain" (128). Rogers went on to explain, "These boats were carried across the land from Lake George to Lake Champlain" (128).

Not only was the British army adapting, but also so were Rogers and his Rangers. As their skill and daring increased, so did their willingness to try for bigger prizes.

Part of England's problem stemming from the three earlier conflicts that led to the final French and Indian War was the fact that the people and the government were against a large standing army. As Spain had begun to lose its standing in the world order, Britain had become the world's major naval power. Britain's conquests were won by its naval strength, not by having hundreds of thousands of troops at its disposal. It is only natural that the Rangers had contact with some of the larger vessels of both the French and British navies.

Francis Parkman's book *Montcalm and Wolfe* chronicles the importance of the navy and the importance of cooperation between the navy and General Amherst's troops in the 1758 siege of the fortress at Louisburg:

There had been signs of the enemy from the first opening of spring. In the intervals of fog, rain, and snow squalls, sails were seen hovering on the distant sea, and during the latter part of May a squadron of nine ships cruised off the mouth of the harbor, appearing and disappearing, sometimes driven away

Here we are treated to a vivid detail of the actions of the British and French navies. Think of the horizon awash in a display of canvas, the gun ports lining the sides of the might of the British navy. We can almost see the sailors climbing the rigging, bringing the ships to life. In the next quote, we are introduced to some ship designations and purposes. Parkman wrote, "At the end of May, Admiral Boscawen was at Halifax with twenty-three ships of the line, eighteen frigates, and fire ships, and a fleet of transports, on board of which were eleven thousand and six

warships in his battles on the lakes and rivers, as in the entry, "This day being July 17th, 30 boats and a schooner of about 30 or forty tons passed by us towards Canada" (19).

Many of these vessels were used to transport goods and had been used in the fur trade before being used to help the war effort. On another occasion one of the Rangers had escaped from the French and came back with the intelligence "That two more of our frigates had got up the river, and two more men of war were near the Island of Orleans" (Rogers 155).

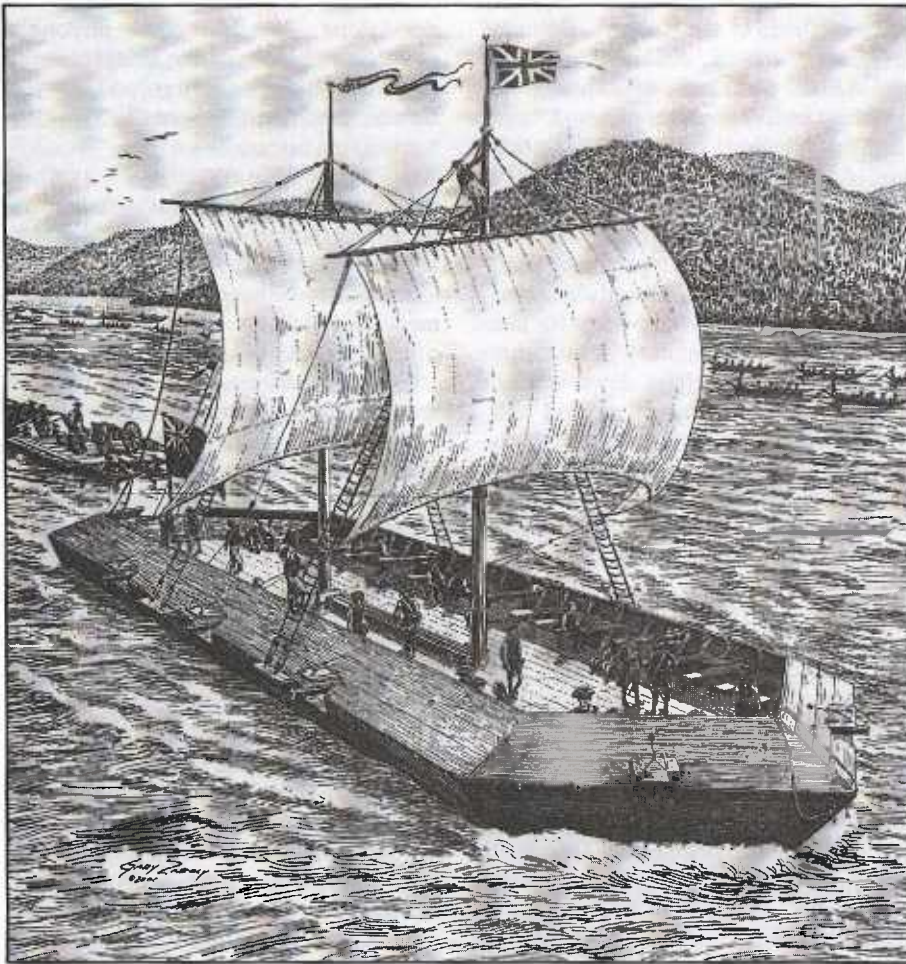
When Rogers was ordered to strike the posts at St. Jean and Chambly, he did so in cooperation with two sloops of the British navy, as described in John Cuneo's book, *Robert Rogers of the Rangers*. Cuneo reported, "Two sloops were ordered to make a diversion in the direction of the Richelieu River" (121-122). This was in support of a landing by the Rangers. The ships would make attacks or movements upon forts or land emplacements that would require the full attention of the enemy, allowing the Rangers to embark unhindered. Describing a sloop, Bellico wrote, "A contemporary newspaper described the 'Earl of Halifax', 51 feet keel, and about 100 tons burthen to carry 18 6 and 4 pounders, 20 swivels, 50 sailors and a company of Marines" (74).

Rogers and his Rangers, over the course of the French and Indian War, were also responsible for the capture of many larger French ships. The Rangers as well as the British army knew that the waterways must be cleared of the French navy before the army could make incursions against the enemy. Bellico noted, "In one action in July Rogers reported pursuing two vessels, 'lighters or shallops' (probably small sailing galleys), which were sunk with their cargoes near Button Bay on Lake Champlain" (38).

Rogers himself attests to the capture of larger vessels. One entry reads, "I soon got opposite the vessels, and by firing from the shore, gave an opportunity to some of my party to swim on board with their tomahawks, and took one of the vessels, in the meantime Col. Darby had got on board the Radeau and had her manned" (163).

Kemmer describes a radeau as a seven-sided floating gun battery. Wrote Kemmer, "This low riding flat bottomed boat was pointed on the bow, forming seven sides to fire from" (158).

Bellico gives us an even better description of the radeau in the following:



This illustration by Gary Zaboly is of the radeau *Invincible*, which was part of Jeffery Amherst's expedition to Fort Carillon in 1759.

by gales, sometimes lost in fogs, and sometimes approaching to within cannon shot of the batteries. Their object was to blockade the port, in which they failed, for French ships had come in at intervals, till as we have seen, twelve of them lay safe in the harbor, with more than a year's provisions for the garrison. At length on the first of June, the southeastern horizon was white with a cloud of canvas. (336)

hundred soldiers, all regulars, except 500 provincial rangers" (336, 337).

Ships of the line are British men of war, or heavily armed warships, that can not only do battle at sea, but also can bombard land emplacements. Twenty-three of them must have been an impressive sight to the Rangers aboard the transports, especially those from the frontier who might not ever have seen a ship of that size before. Maj. Rogers came across many smaller armed

"Radeau", meaning raft in French, denoted the flat-bottomed nature of the ship. The lower sides of a radeau inclined slightly outward while the upper sides or bulwarks curved inward at a steep angle over the interior of the vessel. The upper sides were "planked up higher than a mans head shelving in or arching inwards to defend ye men's bodies and heads, with port-holes for ye cannon" and contrived so that "tis impossible for the enemy to board her." The Radeau was equipped with a large number of sweeps (oars) with a design for one or two masts and square sails. (75)

A quote from the journals of 2nd Lt. Thomas Moody gives us a glimpse of the action aboard a radeau:

This morning a very unfortunate accident. One of the ruddos was ordered to cover the grenigers who went to land one (sic) the point opposite to the fort. A shot which was the second that was sent from the enemy Capt. Legg of the Royal Artillery both his leggs shot off died soon after. Christopher Langley the calf of his leg shot away. Nathaniel March both of his legs. James Urin of our company shot off by the knee. The amputation was above. Robert Towerson the top of his knee which was amputated. This morn I was ordered with 60 men of our rigiment to carry provisions down to a small island where I had view of the poor unhappy persons above mentioned. We hear that it was 6 that was wounded in the manner following: the rodo went very near the fort and fired several times without any return. Then they tacked about on which the French fired. The men sitting on the quarter deck which raked them in the manner following manner (sic). The ball went forward and lodged in the knave of a wheel. Returned from the island about 12 clock. (26)

Imagine the smoke and the noise of the guns, the screaming of the wounded and the dying. Imagine the debris on the deck, tangled with the men and the rigging.

Some of the other boats that plied the waters of Lake George and Lake Champlain were called brigs. Of this large well-armed vessel, Bellico wrote, "...the Brigantine...will mount twenty guns," but other reports noted "six 6 pounders, twelve four pounders, and twenty swivels" (98). At 155 tons, the brig was probably one of the largest ships to ply the lakes during the French and Indian War.

The British army employed a rather strange way of protecting the all-important naval ships in wintertime, as noted by Bellico:

The sloop *Halifax*, *Land Tortoise*, row galleys, and other vessels at the lake, including 260 bateaux, were sunk in the depths of Lake George for protection. Because the French had destroyed Fort William Henry during the summer of 1757, the ships could not be safeguarded at a garrisoned fort over the winter. Leaving the vessels exposed would certainly result in their destruction, as had occurred during a French raid across the ice in March 1757. Placing them in cold storage at the bottom of the lake with retrieval planned for the spring of 1759 was the only option available. (76-77)

To go to such trouble to sink and then raise that number of ships shows the importance of the vessels and the importance of protecting them for the campaigns ahead. As a side note, an original radeau from the French and Indian War is sunk in near perfect condition in Lake George. The radeau, named the *Land Tortoise*, is protected in a New York State Submerged Heritage Preserve, thus preserving this important window to our past.

Rogers and his Rangers knew the importance of controlling the lakes and rivers, and this was accomplished by the watercraft that plied these waters. Control of the lakes and rivers meant control of access to the forts and troops and of much-needed aid in time of conflict. When Gov. Vaudreuil surrendered at Montreal, the stranglehold that surrounded him included the St. Lawrence River, Lake Champlain and Lake Ontario

We could go on and on about the use of watercraft by the Rangers. However we can be assured of the importance of watercraft by the fact that

Maj. Rogers felt compelled to devote three of his ranging rules to the use and safety of these vessels:

Rule #24 If you are to embark in canoes, battoes, or otherwise, by water, choose the evening for the time of your embarkation, as you will have the whole night ahead of you, to pass undiscovered by any parties of the enemy, on hills, or other places, which command a prospect of the lake or river you are upon.

Rule #25 In paddling or rowing, give orders that the boat or canoe next the sternmost, wait for her, and the third for the second, and the fourth for the third, and so on, to prevent separation, and that you may be ready to assist each other on any emergency.

Rule #26 Appoint a man in each boat to look out for fires, on the adjacent shores, from the numbers and size of which you may form some judgment of the number that kindled them, and whether you are able to attack them or not. (62-63)

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