

*A Bloody Day in July:
The Parker Expedition Massacre*

By
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A pale glow behind mountains rising to the east signals the beginning of another day at the south end of Lake George. The still serenity of the lake's mist-covered water and the echo of a distant loon are in stark contrast to the events about to unfold. The muffled grating of 22 heavily laden bateau breaks the silence as Colonel John Parker and his 350 troops, comprised of five companies of Jersey Blues and several New York militia volunteers, push off from the lake shore below the walls of Fort William Henry. In recent weeks, English scouts have continued to bring back reports, often conflicting, of a French buildup at Fort Carillon at the opposite end of Lake George. The day before, an English patrol sent out from Fort William Henry discovered a French reconnaissance bateau in the narrows near the "Isle de la Barque." The French bateau was driven off with the death of a French "cadet" and several of its crew wounded. Faced with this escalating threat, Parker, with this small force, intends to take the initiative by attacking French outposts at the north end of the lake, and to destroy their sawmill on the falls of the La Chute River. But more importantly, he hopes to take French prisoners, who could provide desperately needed intelligence regarding a suspected attack against Fort William Henry.

By July of 1757, the war had not been going well for English and Provincial American forces in their struggle against the French for control of the North American continent. Though vastly outnumbering French forces in America, the British had suffered numerous defeats since the beginning of the French and Indian War in 1754. These failures, including the disastrous defeat of Braddock's army on the Monogahela river in 1755, and the loss of several critical British strongholds, were due more to the ineptitude of British leadership and their lack of appreciation for wilderness warfare, than to French military superiority.

Colonel Parker and his 350 Jersey Blues were the survivors of one such defeat. In July of 1756, French forces attacked and captured Forts Oswego and Ontario at the mouth of the Oswego River where it enters Lake Ontario. These strategically vital fortifications protected the western approaches to the English colonies. Their loss represented a severe blow to security of the colonies and to English honor. Among the English garrison taken as prisoners to Canada were Colonel Peter Schuyler and his New Jersey Blues. From his regiment, only 350 managed to escape under the command of then Captain John Parker.

The only major British success thus far had been the defeat of French forces at the south end of Lake George by General William Johnson and his provincial American militia in September of 1755. To secure their victory, Johnson's forces constructed Fort William Henry at the south end of the lake, on territory claimed by the French. That same year, the French had begun construction of Fort Carillon to control the strategic portage

between Lake George and Lake Champlain, on a point of land known to the Indians as Ticonderoga.

English suspicions of an impending attack against Fort William Henry during the early summer of 1757 were well founded. That same year, on March 19, a French force of 1600 men under the command of Francois-Pierre de Rigaud de Vaudreuil crossed the ice of Lake George in an attack against Fort William Henry and its winter garrison. Though unsuccessful in capturing the British fort, Vaudreuil and his men did succeed in destroying numerous boats and supplies lying outside the fort's walls. Creating further anxiety of a French attack, British strength at Fort William Henry had been significantly weakened by the summer of 1757 when their best troops, including the famed Robert Rogers and his rangers, had been detached to join a British expedition against the French Fortress of Louisbourg, on Cape Breton Island.

British suspicions were correct. The French were indeed building their forces at Carillon and its surrounding outposts at the north end of Lake George. In his journal, Louis Antoine de Bougainville, aide-de-camp to French commander Louis-Joseph de Montcalm, wrote that *"In order to take advantage of the absence of Lord Loudoun, who has led away the best troops, ...for his maritime expedition ...the marquis de Vaudreuil has determined to lay siege to Fort George, called by the English William Henry."*

As Colonel Parker and his troops rowed north on Lake George, they were unaware that the French also responded to the July 20th attack against their reconnaissance bateau on the lake. Upon return of their patrol boat, the French dispatched 300 Indians and Canadians who were soon *"lying in ambush, part in canoes, part on land"* with plans to capture the British vessels. On July 22nd, the French troops laying in ambush at Sabbath Day Point, spotted some of Parkers boats and reported back that it had observed *"six English barges [boats] in the vicinity of Isle de la Barque."* As Bougainville notes in his journal, French commanders immediately sent reinforcements: *"M. de Corbière left at once with about 450 men, almost all Indians, to lay an ambush among the islands with which this part of the lake is covered."* Fearing the threat of Indians skulking in the dark forests of the lakeshore, and perhaps sensing the present danger, Parker's men spent a restless night anchored in the lake just south of Sabbath Day Point. They were unaware that a short distance away, the enemy patiently waited; ready to spring their trap.

At dawn, Parker's boats were again underway. Whether due to the darkness of night or the morning mist, Parker unfortunately had allowed his boats to become separated. The leading three of Parker's boats Passed Sabbath Day Point well ahead of the rest, and were immediately taken by the French without a shot being fired. Soon after, three more of the British boats were taken in the same manner. Apparently still unaware of the danger, Parker and his remaining 16 boats passed Sabbath Day Point where they were greeted by the blood chilling war whoop of hundreds of French Indians and a hail of bullets from the dense woods of the nearby shore. Terror stricken, Parkers force attempted to flee south only to discover that their retreat had been cut off. Having launched their birch bark canoes from the south side of Sabbath Day Point, the Indians raced like demons toward the fleeing English troops. The trap had been sprung.

The panic of Parker's men only fueled the fury of the Indian's attack. Many of the British boats were overturned and sunk, drowning many of their occupants. Many others tried in vain to swim for the mistaken safety of shore, only to drown, or to be killed in the water. The scores of Indians lying in wait in the forest tomahawked most of those who managed to reach the shore. Bougainville would later describe the bloody event. "*The Indians jumped into the water and speared them like fish, and also sinking the barges by seizing them from below and capsizing them...The English, terrified by the shooting, the sight, the cries, and the agility of these monsters, surrendered almost without firing a shot.*" Parker and 50 to 60 of his men managed to escape the slaughter in several boats and by land, while over 160 of the British survivors were taken prisoner and brought back to Ticonderoga. For many of the English, the worst was yet to come.

In an age when honor guided the lives of men and the manner in which wars were fought, European alliances with Native Americans, particularly for the French, was considered a necessary evil. Their skill as scouts and knowledge of the vast forests of North America were considered vital to the French war effort. However, many of the French would be haunted by the cruelties committed by their Indian allies, to which they would bear witness.

Pierre Roubaud, a Jesuit Missionary accompanying his flock of Abenakis Indian "converts", writes of the arrival of the British prisoners and their Indian captors who were already making good use of captured British rum. He also describes the terrible fate awaiting several of Parker's men. "*The first object that appeared to my eyes on arriving there was a large fire; and the stakes of wood set in the ground betokened a feast. There was one indeed. But, oh, heavens! what a feast! The remains of an English body, more than half stripped of the skin and flesh. I perceived a moment after, these inhuman creatures eating, with a famished avidity, this human flesh; ...drinking skullfulls of human blood...The saddest thing was, they had placed near them about ten Englishmen, to be spectators of their infamous repast.*"

Bougainville also recounts the terrible fate of the English prisoners. "*They put in the pot and ate three prisoners, and perhaps others were so treated. All have become slaves unless they are ransomed. A horrible spectacle to European eyes.*" Bougainville also describes the almost paradoxical acts of kindness shown by the Indians who "*made touching visits to their prisoners, caressing them, taking them white bread, wishing to see that they lacked nothing.*" For the French Indians, good treatment of their prisoners was actually in their own best interest. During this period, Indian captives were considered part of the spoils of war, and could later be ransomed by the Indians for a tidy profit back in Canada. Nevertheless, Bougainville later notes that "*Just the same, they ate one of them up...*" On July 26th the surviving prisoners were sent to Montreal, and by September were ransomed by the French.

The loss of the bulk of Colonel Parker's force was a serious blow to the English in manpower, material, and morale. In a letter to Lord Loudoun written at Fort Edward on August 1, General Webb quickly tried to distance himself from the disaster. "...Col

Parker set out from Fort William Henry without my knowing any thing [sp] of the matter till too late to prevent it, with 300 men and twenty seven boats of different kinds, to what purpose I really [sp] cannot tell. All the reason they can give for it, was to take some Prisoners, and at day break the next morning fell into an Ambuscade of French & Indians at a place called Sabbath day point about twenty six miles from Fort William Henry... By this unfortunate stroke your Lordship will perceive the Enemy have at present the Superiority on the Lake, we having now but two of the Old Sloops and five Whale boats remaining. I have however given orders to have sixteen others sent up from Albany and Schenectady as soon as possible.”

The following year, grim reminders of the Parker’s disastrous expedition were noted by a journalist accompanying General Abercromby’s army on their way to yet another British defeat against Fort Carillon. *“At 6 o’clock in the evening we had already arrived at Sabbath-day Point, 24 miles, a spot famous by the unfortunate defeat last year of Colonel Parker, who lost there 300, out of a detachment of 350 men, he had under his command. We beheld there its melancholy remains, both in the water and on the shore.”*

As the English feared, the French attack against Fort William Henry did come only days after the Parker expedition, and within a short time the fort and its entire garrison fell to Montcalm’s army and Indian Allies. The ensuing “massacre” committed against the English prisoners, made famous by James Fenimore Cooper’s “Last of the Mohicans,” would overshadow the Parker disaster and leave it largely forgotten. Indeed as it remains today, as but a little known footnote to history.