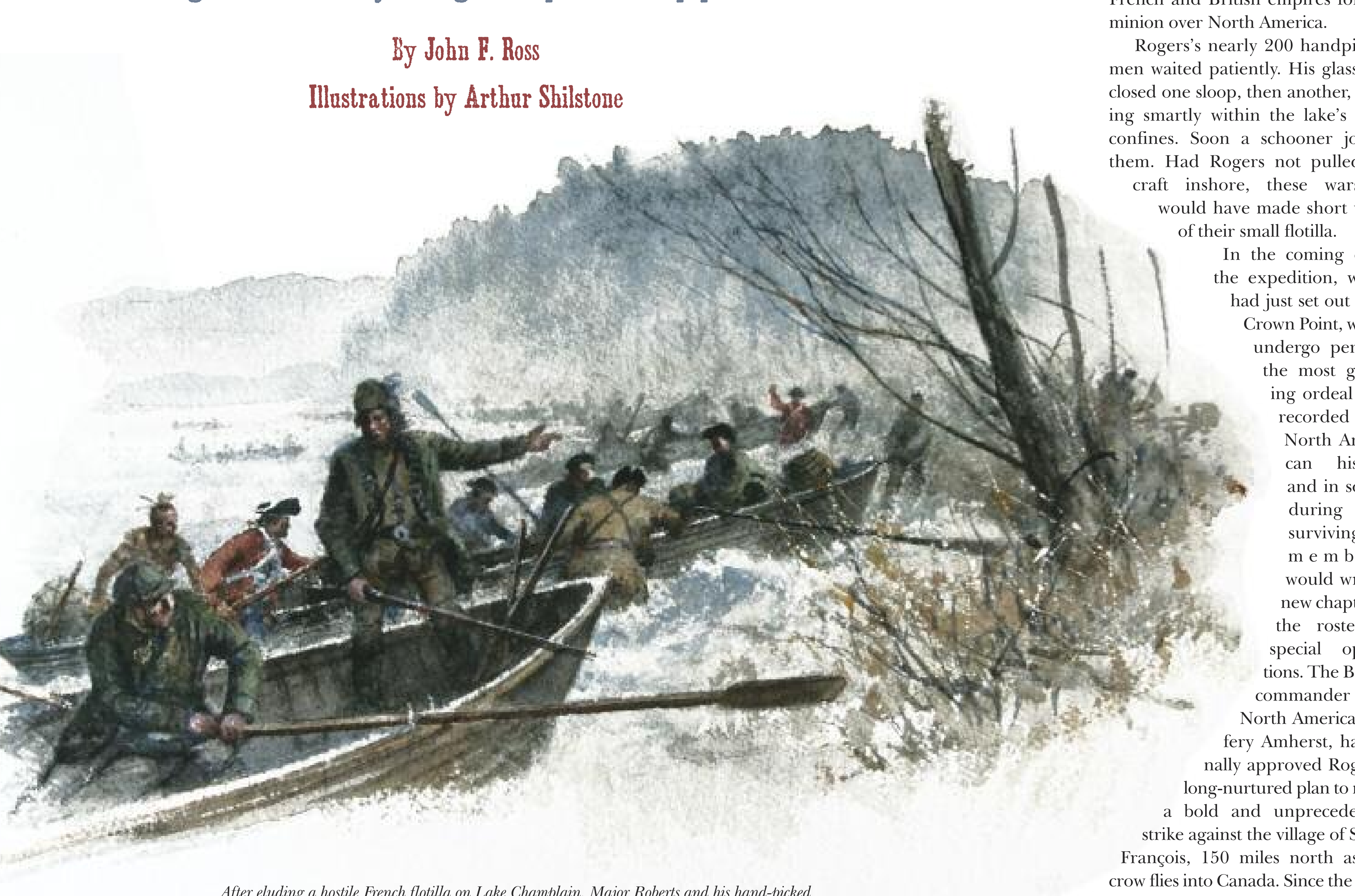
Wilderness Ordeal

Two hundred and fifty years ago, Major Robert Rogers and his rangers launched a daring wilderness raid against an enemy village, but paid a steep price

By John F. Ross

Illustrations by Arthur Shilstone



After eluding a hostile French flotilla on Lake Champlain, Major Roberts and his hand-picked team pulled silently into Missisquoi Bay to begin the overland leg of their daring raid.

A dozen miles north of the British fort of Crown Point on the eastern shore of Lake Champlain, amid the buttonbush, bulrush, and cattail wetlands that crowded Otter Creek's delta, Maj. Robert Rogers glassed down the lake for the lateen sails of a patrolling enemy French sloop or schooner. Pulled into hiding within the marsh lay 17 whaleboats, each bearing eight oars and provisions for a month. It was Saturday, September 15, 1759, in the midst of the French and Indian War, the titanic struggle between the French and British empires for dominion over North America.

Rogers's nearly 200 handpicked men waited patiently. His glass disclosed one sloop, then another, tacking smartly within the lake's close confines. Soon a schooner joined them. Had Rogers not pulled his craft inshore, these warships would have made short work of their small flotilla.

In the coming days, the expedition, which had just set out from Crown Point, would undergo perhaps the most grueling ordeal ever recorded in North American history, and in so enduring and surviving its members would write a new chapter in the roster of special operations. The British commander in North America, Jeffery Amherst, had finally approved Rogers's long-nurtured plan to make a bold and unprecedented strike against the village of Saint-François, 150 miles north as the crow flies into Canada. Since the early years of the 18th century, the Abenaki of Saint-François, strongly encouraged by the French, had launched dozens of terrorizing raids against British colonial settlements on the frontier. By playing the enemy's own game of waging fast, surprising, and destructive small-unit warfare, Rogers was gambling that he could take the heart out of the Indians' will to continue their alliance with the French—a bold wager indeed. No British ground expeditionary force in 70 years of colonial wars had even contemplated a long-range lunge of such operational scope or strategic intent.

Rogers intended to row 75 miles north from Crown Point to the lake's northeastern headwaters at Missisquoi Bay. That evening, no clouds or fog masked the waning quarter-moon, and so his impatient rangers had to wait again.

The next day Rogers noticed that a couple dozen men showed telltale signs of measles. With a full-blown epidemic on his hands not two days into the expedition, Rogers allowed the disease no further time to take its toll, posting 41 men, mostly invalids, under a minimum escort of healthy rangers, back to Crown Point within 48 hours of setting out.

Amherst's orders to Rogers had dictated: "You will march and attack the enemy's settlements on the south side of the river St. Lawrence, in such a manner as you shall judge most effectual to disgrace the enemy, and for the success and honour of his Majesty's arms. . . . Take your revenge, but don't forget that tho' those villains have dastardly and promiscuously murdered the women and children of all ages, it is my orders that no women or children are killed."

That day, the French flotilla dropped past their position of concealment toward Crown Point. The whaleboats hurriedly resumed their tortuous journey north, hugging the eastern shore. The long train of boats each kept close to the next, following the 25th of Rogers's 28 rules of warrior conduct—North America's first war manual—that he had written to help the British survive brutal wilderness warfare against highly experienced French and Indian adversaries. The rule not only prevented dangerous straggling but also made mutual assistance possible in the event that gummed seams burst or a westerly surge broadsided and capsized part of the column.

In the morning hours of September 23 the tired men pulled into the northern confines of Missisquoi Bay. A cold rain had pounded the open boats all night, soaking the woolen blankets wrapped around heads and shoulders. In strict silence, the men dragged the boats ashore and unloaded their supplies; then they overturned the craft and covered them with brush.

One hundred and fifty men in 17 boats could only be so quiet. Despite the insistent patter of rain, a small party of keen-eared Abenaki hunters hurrying for the warmth and brandy of the French fort at Île aux Noix, some 10 miles to the northwest, heard some unmistakably human sounds and hurried yet faster.

Unaware of this shadowy passage, the rangers had tucked at least a week's cache of provisions into the boats for their return journey. Rogers posted two Indian rangers to lie watch; should the enemy discover them, they were "with all possible speed to follow on my track, and give me intelligence." The raiders' destination still lay 72 miles away; they would have to wind as much as a third more of that distance to follow any practical path.

The small command moved directly east and away from Île aux Noix out into the gently undulating hardwood forest of what is now southern Quebec. While it still comprised a few more than 150 men, the force had already lost much of the Indian ranger complement and two of its three regular officers. Amherst had

required Rogers to pick his men from the entire army, not just the rangers. As was often the case over the course of his military career, Rogers was struggling to build coherent working order among a disparate group. Time and again he strove to mold frontier individualists into effective battle formations by communicating effectively with unlettered pioneer Scots-Irish, praying Indians, British regulars, and flat-footed coast provincials. He trained his men rigorously and taught them extraordinary practical skills. Above all, he treated them in a challengingly respectful and equal spirit, taught them to overcome dread, and created a collective mystique. In doing so, Rogers innovated and codified a particularly modern—and American—brand of warfare still taught to special forces today and used in critical situations the world over.

As the men pressed ever deeper into the north country that first day, a French bateau patrol chanced upon a British oar floating in Missisquoi Bay—a discovery that, complemented by the Abenaki report, persuaded the French commandant at Île aux Noix, François-Charles de Bourlamaque, to dispatch 40 men under his best partisan leaders, the veteran ensigns La Durantaye and Langy, whose formidable force had nearly annihilated Rogers's at the desperate Battle on Snowshoes. In short order the French discovered the well-masked whale boats, took tomahawks to most of the hulls, and then burned the remains to ensure that no enemy could reconstruct that means of return.

The discovery spurred Bourlamaque into a frenzy of activity. A sizable party heading north from Missisquoi Bay would have few logical targets—most likely Chambly, Yamaska, or Saint-François, Indian villages that acted as a sort of defensive perimeter for Canadian France. He immediately sent a courier to warn the authorities in Montréal and the governor of Trois-Rivières, 22 miles northeast of Saint-François, that Yamaska and Saint-François should be reinforced. He then moved nearly 400 men to the whaleboat landing. The trap was baited: the raiders would meet a warm reception in the north if the frontier garrison did not catch them first. Should they attempt to come back by way of Missisquoi Bay, they would be thrusting their heads yet deeper into a noose.

French and Indian scouts discovered and destroyed Rogers's cached boats and supplies, forcing the rangers to return on a far-longer route.

Oblivious to these mounting perils, Rogers and his men crossed the Rivière aux Brochets (near present-day Frelighsburg) and swung northeast. One or two days later, the mud-bespattered and gasping lookouts overtook the column, crying out the password and then articulating Rogers's worst fears: 200 French and Indians lay in ambush at the whaleboat rendezvous, while another 200 had picked up the trail. All chance of returning via Lake Champlain was gone. "This unlucky circumstance . . . put us into some consternation," wrote Rogers.

In an officers' council of war, he sketched out a desperate plan, which he acknowledged stood a good chance of failure. After ravaging Saint-François, the rangers would pass eastward by way of Lake Memphremagog, and then south to the Connecticut River valley and Fort No. 4, the northernmost British outpost on the river. He calculated that starvation would nevertheless overtake them long before they reached the fort (that way to safety being a good hundred miles longer than the Champlain passage), and so he planned to summon a relief party from No. 4 to rendezvous 60 miles up the Connecticut at the west-bank infall of the Wells River. Hard though the prospect was, the officers voted to push on.

Rogers charged 1st Lt. Andrew McMullen, who had gone lame, to carry an outline of the Wells plan to Amherst, "that being the way I should return, if at all." McMullen left shortly thereafter at the head of six rangers.

On they struggled north-northeast through the spruce bogs that laced southern Quebec. As the men forded cold, dark water the color of long-steeped tea, each step proved treacherous. Submerged unseen branches, roots, and logs ripped at moccasins and stubbed now-numb toes. Sleep proved difficult because "we had no way to secure ourselves from the water." They cut saplings and laid them down, overlaid by boughs and leaves "in Form of a raft" or "a kind of hammocks" on which they could grab a few hours of dreamless rest.

For nine days they trudged, beginning before dark and camping well after dusk, gaining less than 10 miles a day however great their effort. In the pervasive wet and cold, toenails dropped off, and despite the best efforts to keep feet dry, the first signs of trench foot became painfully manifest. And the tannin-rich water also induced painful stomach cramps.

Yet Rogers's plan worked. La Durantaye's 200 pursuers could not keep going against the bogs and frigid weather with Rogers's head start. Quitting the drowned lands, they swung westward over dry ground, then drove north, intending to catch the invaders as they emerged from this difficult country.

Between the spruce wetlands and the northward-running Richelieu River flows the Yamaska, a natural water highway and marker through the forest that led directly to the Abenaki village of Saint-Michel d'Yamaska, known to the English as Wigwam Martinique, some half-dozen miles south of where that river falls into the St. Lawrence. None of the French or Indians could imagine that an alien raiding party might venture through this wilderness without keeping to its course—which made Wigwam Martinique the logical target.

Should such a force veer northeast toward Saint-François, it would have to cross the river of the same name. And nine days after leaving their boats, Rogers's exhausted column indeed came upon that treacherous, rain-swollen watercourse, remarkably within a dozen miles of their target. They would have to wade across the several-hundred-yard-wide river—a task, Rogers wrote, that would be "attended with no small difficulty, the water being five feet deep, and the current swift." Realizing that fires to dry wet clothes, a necessity in the chill fall weather, could announce their presence, Rogers told his lieutenants to have the men strip and bundle their clothes into their packs and carry them as high as possible on their necks and shoulders.

Rogers motioned forward the corps's tallest man; he would step sideways into the river, facing upstream. Another large man behind him grabbed his waist, and behind him another, forming a human chain. Slowly they sidestepped across the torrent, occasionally losing purchase on the slippery and unsecured rocks. At times the current broke a man's grip and threatened to send the hard-pressed line spilling downriver behind him. But somehow they held on and made it across.

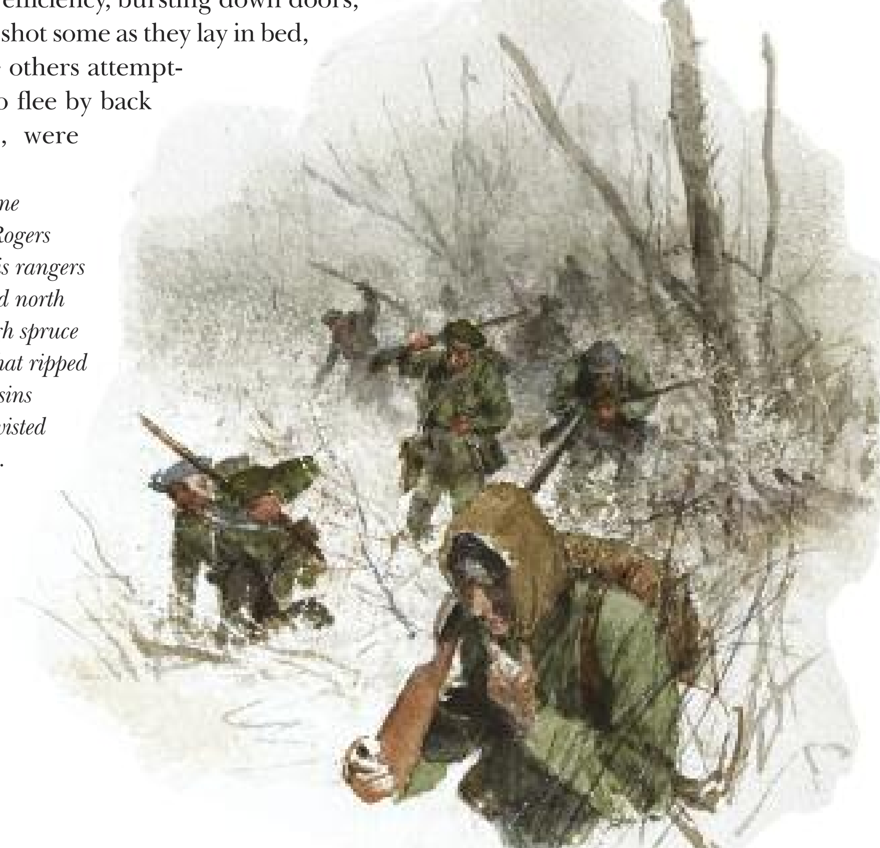
The northern shore, soft but firm underfoot, proved a godsend to the shivering force. After several hours of marching with the sun drawing close to the horizon, Rogers shinnied up a tree and spotted smoke from cooking fires to the northwest, only five or six miles distant. That evening they closed to within two and a half miles of Saint-François.

As the gray light began to kiss the tall riverbank pines half an hour before sunrise, shadowy figures filed silently to crouch by front doors and alongside the embankment paths leading to the water. The struggling dawn revealed the grisly presence of some 600 or 700 scalps swaying in the light breeze atop trophy poles; some even hung above the white-painted Jesuit church.

Almost predictably, a musket discharged by accident, precipitating the attack. Yet Rogers's men worked with grim efficiency, bursting down doors, and "shot some as they lay in bed, while others attempting to flee by back Ways, were tomahawked or run thro' with Bayonets," reported the *Boston Gazette* with dispassionate relish. The tribe's tradition says that some warriors defended the thick-walled council house to the death. "The major, who was never known to be idle in such an Affair, was in every Part of the Engagement encouraging his Men and giving Directions," declared the *New-York Gazette*.

Some dozen villagers fled down the embankment toward their beached canoes, but "about forty of my people pursued them, who destroyed such as attempted to make their escape that way, and sunk both them and their boats." Oral tradition reports that the early sun caught the hat ornament of Abenaki elder Obomsawin just short of the farther shore, and a sharpshooter struck him dead. The disorienting fusillade and clamoring burst upon the Indians as though their winged spirit Bmola had swept through the village on an ill wind.

In a quarter of an hour or so the action ended, the attack "done with so much alacrity by both the officers and



For nine days Rogers and his rangers slogged north through spruce bogs that ripped moccasins and twisted ankles.

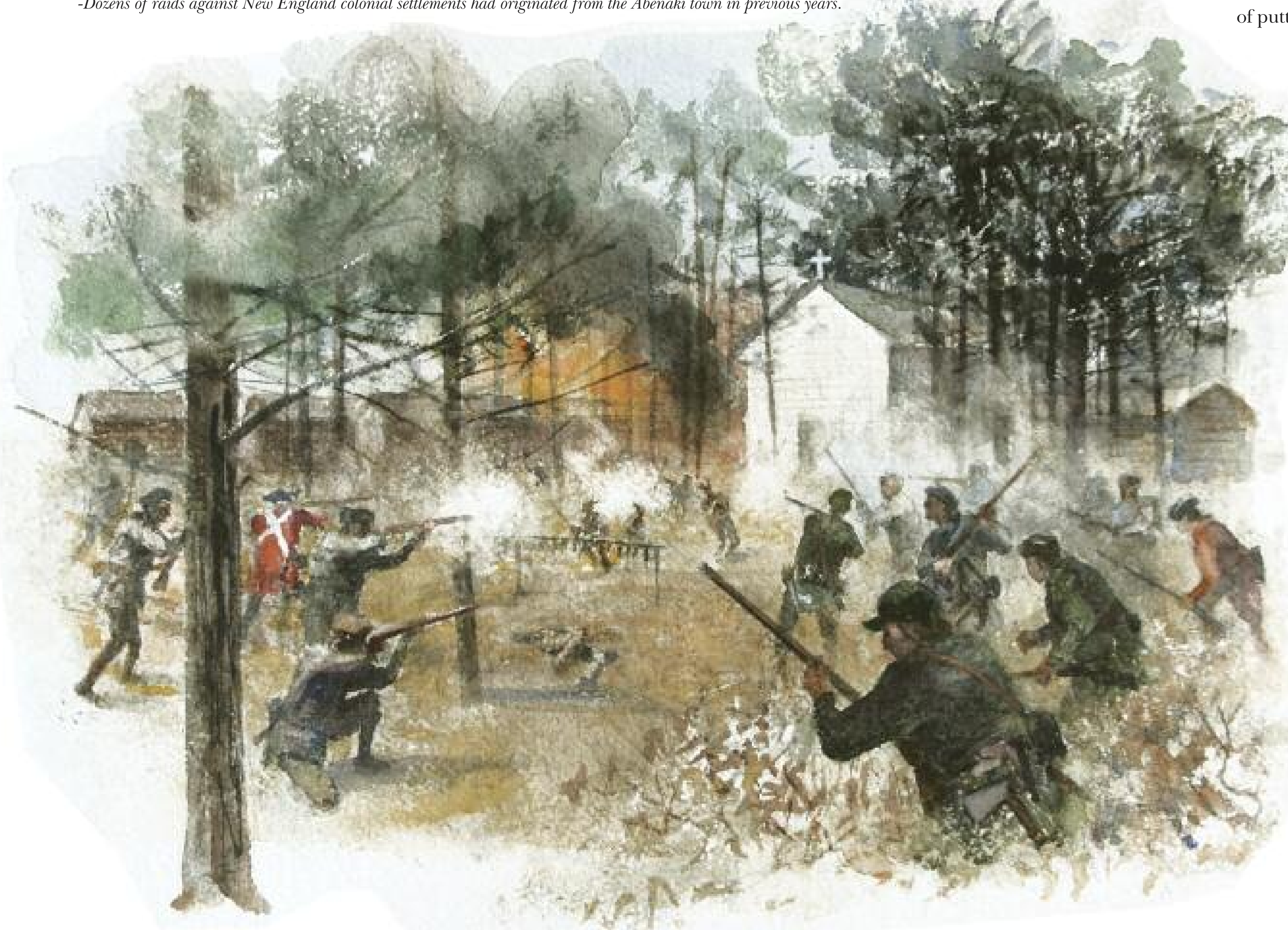
men, that the enemy had not time to recover themselves, or take arms for their own defense, till they were chiefly destroyed." A chief's two young sons had fallen to their knees crying "Quarter!" the only word they knew in English. The clamor subsided, and a handful of rangers stood with hot gun barrels and bloody bayonets and tomahawks, half incredulous at their success and braced against a counterattack that never came. Several emerged from the French church, one brandishing a 10-pound silver statue of the Madonna over his head in triumph. Inside they had torn tapestries from the walls and trampled the Host underfoot.

A little after sunrise, Rogers ordered all but three corncribs torched. Now some of the villagers hiding in the cellars or lofts streamed out, the women and children joining a small huddle of terrified prisoners; but others chose to die in the flames. The rangers heard fierce death chants from within.

The prisoners claimed that a 300-man enemy party lay in wait only four miles distant. Rogers ordered his men to stuff their packs with corn and warned against filling valuable space with loot, but many did not listen. They would pay for their greed.

On the afternoon of October 5, the day after Saint-François burned, 38-year-old Jean-Daniel Dumas and 60 French Canadian militiamen from Trois-Rivières, 16 miles to the northeast, dogtrotted into the ruined town. Some of the dead lay prepared for burial, rolled full-length in bark bound with cord. A wild-eyed figure in a heavy black wool cassock ran up to the belated rescuers. The settlement's curé, Father Pierre-Joseph-Antoine Roubaud, could barely contain his fury at those who had defiled his church and burnt his parsonage. One detail of Roubaud's tirade stopped Dumas short. The priest repeated that the rangers had carried off Nanamaghemet, or Marie-Jeanne Gill, the wife of the white chief Jean-Louis Gill of Saint-François, and their two sons, Antoine and Sabbatis.

This complicated matters. While his own small force could catch up fairly easily with Rogers, Dumas now had to move with unusual care for fear of putting the hostages at grave risk.



The exhausted rangers surprised the town of Saint-François, subduing it in 15 minutes of frenzied, violent action. -Dozens of raids against New England colonial settlements had originated from the Abenaki town in previous years.

Dumas was no stranger to battle or strategic raiding; his savvy leadership and quick thinking had turned certain defeat into a stunning victory when Braddock's army had knocked into them outside Fort Duquesne in 1755. A skilled orchestrator of Indian warfare, Dumas had long bedeviled British settlements.

The bitter surviving Abenaki braves needed little encouragement to go with Dumas. The women were already at work grinding dried corn and forming the flour into bear-grease cakes. Unlike barely digestible raw dried corn, sagamite was a perfect food for traveling.

Rogers's party, now swelled by six Abenaki women and boys and five newly unbound prisoners, had pushed southeast, paralleling the river but this time a mile more distant, so as to avoid hunting parties returning home. The men packed their cheeks with kernels of dried corn, letting their saliva soften the hard grain, the better to chew and digest it. At their infrequent halts they spat the mulch into their canteens for further soaking.

By the third or fourth day, after plodding some 30 miles, the strained command found the topography beginning to grow uneven and rugged as they entered the western flanks of the Appalachians. Rogers kept off game trails, so the going proved hard—dipping into ravines, negotiating the canopies of large blowdowns, pushing up steep inclines. Three weeks on the march with only a few hours' respite at Saint-François were starting to take their toll on speed and fitness. Long drenching downpours did little to improve morale.

Rogers kept flanking parties and a strong rearguard at constant alert, assuming that a well-fed and vengeful pursuit force could not be far behind. And something else bothered him as he urged his ragged rangers along: he had seen precious little game as they threaded through the woods. While their sheer numbers might have scared off some animals, even the good hunters whom he sent out after deer and bear came back empty-handed. The column found only an occasional partridge or red squirrel.

His men weakening by the hour, Rogers reviewed the options. Near present-day Sherbourne his officers urged that the party be split up to make hunting easier. Even though Rogers had envisioned reaching Lake Memphremagog, just a dozen miles to the southwest, from whence they could find an easier way to the Connecticut River, he agreed. The food situation was dire.

Rogers had struck a devil's bargain. Divided, the rangers lost the advantage of numbers they would have had against almost any force likely on their trail, even while they gained the ability to move faster, more silently, and less obtrusively. Would he regret this decision? All now depended on whether McMullen had made it through to Crown Point and arranged for reprovisioning on the Wells River.

Rogers split his command into "Small Companies," each of less than 20 men, excepting his own. An experienced officer would direct each group, each carrying a compass. Rogers would take the least effective and sickliest, his group and most of the others heading toward the rendezvous on the Wells. Those led by Capt. Joseph Waite, Ens. Elias Avery, and Lts. Abernathan Cargill and Jacob Farrington charted a course roughly similar to Rogers's, south and southeast. Ranger George Turner and William Dunbar of the 80th Light Foot decided on the risky but faster Indian war trail leading southeast to the Connecticut. Billy Phillips and Lt. Jenkins of the Massachusetts militia would each lead a party back to Crown Point, southwest through the Green Mountains.

Soon enough Dumas and his Canadians and Abenaki reached the point where Rogers's force had dispersed. His scouts quickly reviewed the signs and counted three diverging parties, not the 10 at least that had set off. Quickly dividing his own column and surging with the energy of a predator, he began to hunt rangers.

Two days after Rogers broke up his command, Dumas's men overwhelmed Dunbar and Turner's group, killing both lieutenants and five men and taking three prisoner. Eight rangers fought their way out as the Indians howled retribution, then scalped, stripped, and horribly mutilated the bodies, pitching the now unrecognizable corpses into a nearby beaver pond. Eventually the shaken survivors fell in with Rogers.

At nearly the same time, Dumas ran down Ensign Avery and his detachment but bided his time, despite his men's eagerness to strike immediately. He could see that Avery's group had gone beyond the limit of their resources, the men stumbling along,

eyes fixed on the ground in front of their robotically moving feet.

On the evening of the ninth day, Dumas gave the order, and a handful of Indians plunged into the midst of the worn New Englanders. One cried out when he locked eyes with a warrior only two feet away. War whoops rent the air. Completely surprised, Corp. Frederick Curtiss and the others could not even struggle to their feet; Indian hands roughly pulled them up and long knives slashed off their blankets and leggings. The Indians and Frenchmen tied them naked to trees with tumplines, except for Ranger Ballard, whose hands and feet they bound. Then the vengeful, bereaved Indians plunged their knives into him, delighting in his screams until he died.

Dumas's party then scalped Ballard, loosened the legs of the living prisoners, and set out. Sometime that evening two escaped, eventually falling in with Rogers's party. The next day the others came to a watercourse, probably the Saint-François, where their captors built bark canoes. On the evening of the fifth day, Curtiss walked into Saint-François and found five of his comrades lying butchered in the village center. An anonymous Frenchman wrote that "some of them fell a victim to the fury of the Indian women, notwithstanding the efforts the Canadians could make to save them."

Meanwhile Rogers and his party had worked their way southwest between Lakes Magog and Massawippi and shadowed the eastern shore of Lake Memphremagog. At every check Rogers harangued stragglers with prospects of what awaited them at the rendezvous. Soon they broke into the rugged northeastern highlands of Vermont.

Fortune had not entirely abandoned Rogers. In a marathon of their own and suffering from many ailments, McMullen's team had struggled the 100 or so miles back to Crown Point in nine days, arriving on October 3, the day before Saint-François fell. Amherst detailed Samuel Stevens, one of Burbank's New Hampshire rangers who had risen through the ranks to a lieutenancy five months earlier, to march in all haste to Fort No. 4 with a dispatch ordering its commander to furnish him with whatever was needed in the way of supplies, troops, and watercraft. Stevens would paddle up the Connecticut to the rendezvous and "there Remain with Said party, so long as You shall think there is any probability of Major Rogers returning that way."

The wreck of Rogers's command passed through great groves of American beech trees whose light gray trunks resembled elephant legs. The men grew irritable, agonizingly sensitive to cold, depressed, and simultaneously apathetic and easily offended. Game proved ever more elusive. Every so often they killed a partridge, but such small prizes could provide but little relief. The group took longer and longer breaks between marches. Many fell into list-

The French leader, surging with the energy of the predator, began to hunt the rangers

The 250-year-old map delineating Rogers's route on the Saint-François Raid, opposite, published here for the first time in the United States, was created with Robert Rogers's input, and represents the most important piece of primary source material about Rogers discovered in the last 50 years. Not only does it help explain his route but it also reflects his strong geographic awareness. Map courtesy of J. Robert Maguire.

INSET MAP, ROBERT BULL

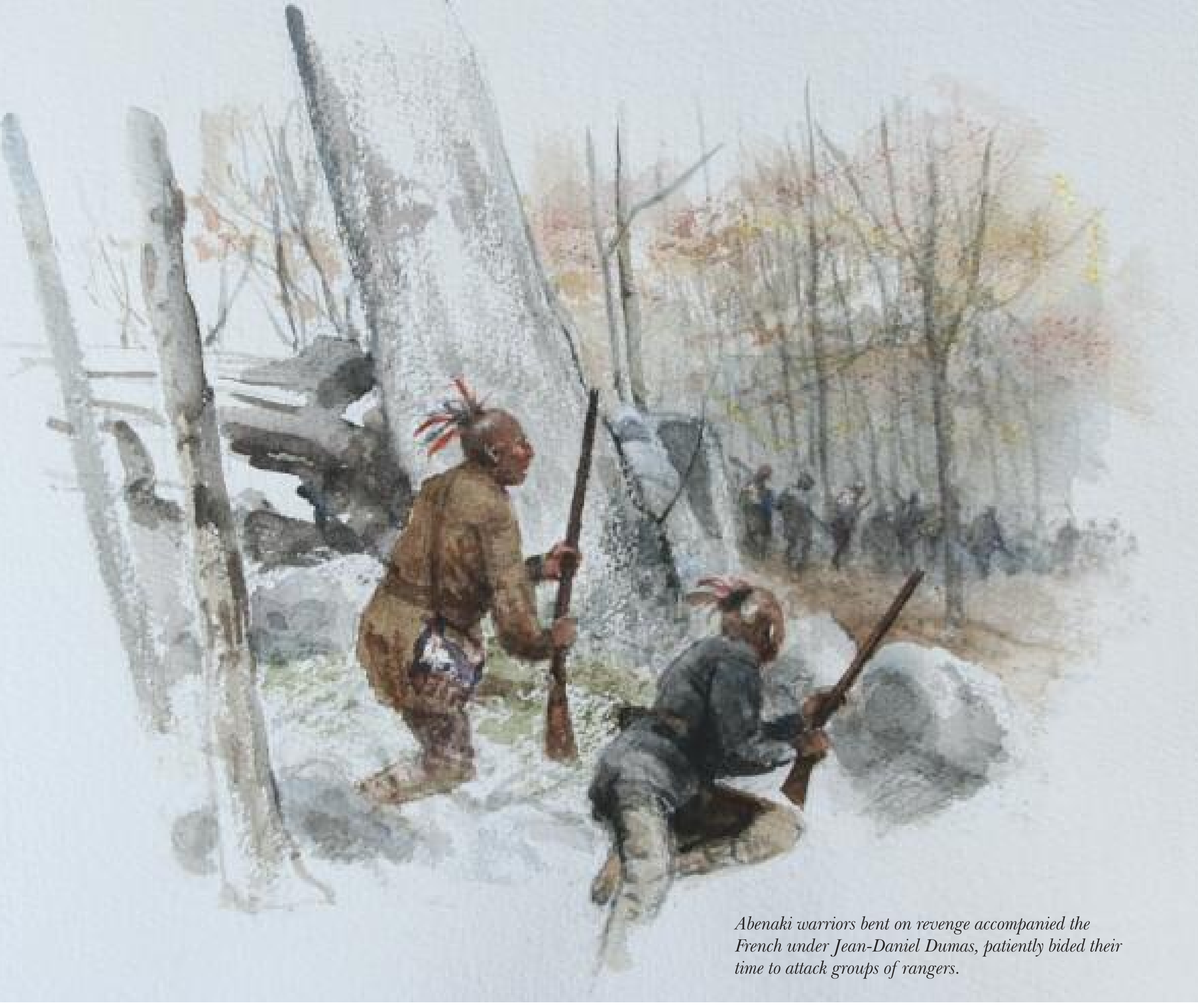
Forefather of Special Operations

Robert Rogers was a large shaping influence upon what, a quarter of a millennium later, is called special operations. Ranger recruits at Fort Benning today hear Rogers's name soon enough as it rings through their orientation booklets; they learn his rules of conduct, North America's first written and truly New World war manual; and his steely presence crowns the roster of the most accomplished in the Ranger Hall of Fame on campus.

It may at first be hard to understand how the tradecraft of the modern-day special operator, parachuting into the Hindu Kush after the Taliban, or a lightning strike force pushing into the dangerous Pakistani borderland, could echo the efforts of men from a preindustrial community struggling through New England winters on hickory and deergut snowshoes. But while much has certainly changed, the basic relationship of warriors to their technologies, environments, and enemies have not: the need to use them effectively, and, in particular high-adrenaline moments, the ability to restate a problem and rework it in new, deadly effective—but above all in swift and confident—ways. The dynamics and tactics of small units aggressively penetrating hostile territory, often at night and in the teeth of extreme conditions, rely on the same critical factors for success now as then: a stress on mobility, security, surprise, and the pursuit of psychological ascendancy over an enemy.

Yet it is in the more intangible realm of raised consciousness and motivation of the extreme warrior that Rogers made his truly great and transforming changes. He stressed that the real index of a warrior was the ability to get up day after day—cold, wet, hungry, and often far worse—to march and fight again. Yet he knew as well that all sheer endurance alone could do was to get a person killed farther away from home.

He synthesized several powerful forces—the Enlightenment's new concern with understanding as an instrument of mastery, the tenets of Native American woodcraft and skill, doctrines that united war endurance to daily life, the frontiersman's gradually unfolding focus on long hunting, and the Scots-Irish immigrants' raw democratic insistence that Jack is as good as his master—into forging an elite force, leveraging intense group identification and esprit de corps into an edged tool that would change the face of warfare.



Abenaki warriors bent on revenge accompanied the French under Jean-Daniel Dumas, patiently bided their time to attack groups of rangers.

lessness, responding only mechanically to the major's still astoundingly effective commands to get up and move along. By now he was pulling out all his tricks, harvesting oyster and chicken-of-the-woods mushrooms. The men scraped the exterior bark off black birch trees and ate the mildly sweet, wintergreen-tasting inside pulp.

As hunger gnawed at their guts, they doubled over on the march to find what little ease they could. Want bit so deeply home that they resorted to roasting the Indian scalps so recently taken as trophies and boiling their leather belts and straps, chewing the tough material for any ghost of nourishment. Some ate their moccasins and the nubs of candles they carried. They boiled their powder horns and drank the thin broth.

Some of the men in Lt. George Campbell's group lost their minds and "attempted to eat their own excrements," he later told a contemporary historian. After many foodless days, the spectral column, crossing a small river, came upon the horribly mutilated bodies of Dunbar and Turner's hapless party, piled up floating among a tangle of logs in a stream running off a pond. "This was not a season for distinctions," wrote Campbell, and the men waded into the water, so ridden by hunger that they tore into the raw and rotting flesh as though it were the finest dinner they had ever eaten. Their cravings somewhat assuaged, "they carefully collected the fragments, and carried them off."

How far Rogers's own struggling band broke the last taboo remains unclear. One rarely reliable source claimed that he killed an Indian woman and cut her into pieces, although killing so useful a forager does not square with his practicality. Another ranger, one named Woods, claimed that a black soldier who had died was cut up; he himself ate the man's hand along with a trout he had caught, which "made a very good breakfast."

For all these incommunicable privations, a map that Rogers drew indicates that he had kept a clear head. On October 20, some eight days after the groups divided, he and his party encountered the steep-descending Wells River somewhere near present-day Groton. The distance from the dispersal point was some 80 miles as the crow flies, but they had been compelled to travel considerably more ground as their actual course had pulled them first southwest, then southeast. Five weeks had passed since they had left Crown Point.

On a tongue of flat alluvial grassland, formed by the Wells's confluence with the main river and cleared by generations of Indian farmers, they came upon a deserted camp, its fire still burning. The survivors, who had given everything to get here, looked at one another with incredulous eyes. McMullen had clearly gotten back with Rogers's request for resupply, but the relief—with their provisions—had decamped at most only a couple of hours before. Rogers's men fired their muskets in the air and hallooed with all the strength they could muster, but the wilderness quiet swallowed all noise, and they collapsed.

By cruel fate, the relief party—Lt. Samuel Stevens and five other men—had only just given up waiting after several days. What had prompted Stevens to abandon hope after so brief a vigil? The party did not lack for provisions. Perhaps they feared enemy patrols, or perhaps the still vastness awakened ancient terrors. Most likely, however, was that Stevens did not believe that even the great major could have pulled off so demanding a journey through such treacherous terrain, a bleak judgment so absolute that he had decided not even to cache provisions.

"Our distress upon this occasion was truly inexpressible," wrote Rogers, "our spirits, greatly depressed by the hunger and fatigues we had already suffered, now almost entirely sunk within us, seeing no resource left, nor any reasonable ground to hope that we should have escaped a most miserable death by famine." Still he pushed off to hunt, but with little effect, hampered by his own diminishing strength. The Connecticut, cold and fast, reminded the survivors hourly of the abundant food just 60 miles downriver.

He ate the man's hand along with a trout he had caught

After six days Rogers, rested but weakening further, decided to "push as fast as possible toward No. 4, leaving the remains of my party, now unable to march further." A day or two earlier, he had gotten his men to fell uniformly sized pine trees with their tomahawks, then cut them to length to form a craft capable of supporting three men and a boy. Others of the unit dug up stringy but tough spruce roots, with which he bound the logs together near the water's edge. He selected Captain Ogden, an unnamed ranger, and the part-Indian boy Sabbatis, taken from Saint-François.

He left a Lieutenant Grant in command of the withering remnant, reiterating the importance of keeping the men somehow occupied. He had already taught Grant where to look for groundnuts (*Apios americana*), a climbing perennial vine that carries large starchy tubers, which boiled or roasted taste like potatoes. Indians often planted them in wet ground near their settlements, and thus a good many of the Saint-François raiders probably owed their lives to the people they had set out to kill.

Solemnly pledging to return within 10 days, the major gathered his three companions and pushed off with makeshift paddles that "we had made out of small trees, or spires split and hewed." The current bore them swiftly away; at first they spun in circles, fast learning how to keep in the midline of the river and avoid obstacles.

On the second day they nearly shot right over the roaring White Falls (near today's Wilder, Vermont), only narrowly escaping by throwing themselves into the water and thrashing ashore. The raft crashed over and broke into pieces, which the current dragged out of reach downriver. The sodden, exhausted crew worked their way around the boiling whitewater. Rogers sent Ogden and the other ranger off after red squirrels, while he and Sabbatis set about building a new raft—a challenging enough task even with adequate tools. The pair built fires around the bases of several pine trees and by sheer application brought them toppling down. Then they renewed the fire to divide the logs into roughly equal lengths.

The hunters returned with a "partridge"—either a ruffed or spruce grouse—and that scrap of sustenance gave them barely enough strength to try again. The fol-

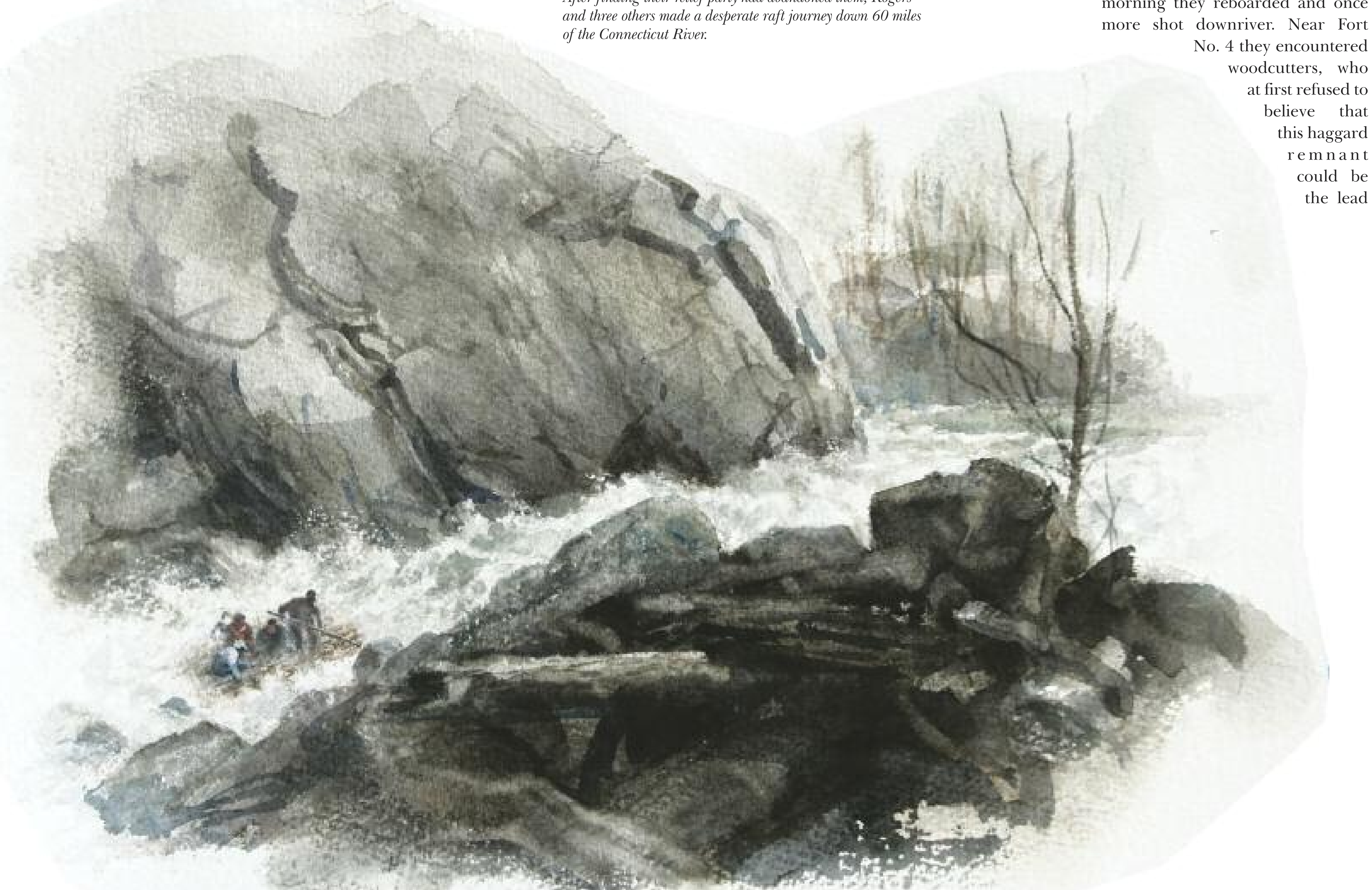
Starvation, heightened by winter weather, forced many rangers into acts of cannibalism.

lowing day, the fourth since they had set out, they bound the logs together, probably with spruce roots, again risking the river's power.

The roar of Ottaquechee Falls, 50 yards of pounding cataracts, alerted the dazed foursome just in time to make it ashore. Rogers and Ogden reviewed the situation. In his journals Rogers put it simply: they would not have been "able to make a third raft in case we had lost this one." Their only chance—a steep gamble in itself—lay in getting it down the rapids. Rogers stumbled over to a bush, probably beaked hazel, pulled out his long knife, and harvested dozens of thin, wiry stems. By knotting the ends one to another, the men slowly braided a strong rope and hitched one end to the logs.

Ogden, the other ranger, and Sabbatis stared with the nearly total apathy of the starving as their leader crabbed down the embankment to the bottom of the falls. They could no longer hear one another, but Rogers waved his arm, and Ogden pushed the raft out into the current. He kept a drag on the current's power with the hazel rope while guiding it as best as he could through the tangle of rocks. At the bottom Rogers prepared "to swim in and board it when it came down, and if possible paddle it ashore." The raft bounced, bumped, and tumbled through the rapids, remarkably without coming apart. As it drew nearer, Rogers built up what head of steam he could and jumped into the icy water, kicking toward it as hard as he could.

"I had the good fortune to succeed," he later wrote with characteristic understatement. The raft's worn-out complement then worked their way toward the shivering Rogers as he lay collapsed on the rocky shore beside the crude craft. The next morning they reboarded and once more shot downriver. Near Fort No. 4 they encountered woodcutters, who at first refused to believe that this haggard remnant could be the lead detail of a fine force that only a few weeks before had dared the wilderness. The workmen helped the survivors back to Fort No. 4, where one anonymous observer noted that the major "was scarcely able to walk after his fatigues."



After finding their relief party had abandoned them, Rogers and three others made a desperate raft journey down 60 miles of the Connecticut River.

At Rogers's steely insistence that a provision canoe must leave immediately, a detachment pushed off upstream within a half-hour. It reached Grant's party four days later, on exactly the promised tenth day after the rafters had pushed off. Despite his own exhaustion, Rogers coordinated other canoes to probe for survivors along the Ammonoosuc, dispatched couriers to the Suncook and Penacook settlements on the Merrimack with instructions to supply provisions to any rangers who might straggle in, and wrote up his report to Amherst.

All told, 63 survivors somehow made their way to Fort No. 4, and another 17 to Crown Point. Dumas's partisans and the bereft people of Saint-François had killed 18 rangers; nearly a dozen known prisoners had disappeared; and starvation had claimed some two dozen more, several during Rogers's desperate passage of the Connecticut.

Rogers calculated that he had lost three officers and 46 privates. The overall number may have been slightly higher, but clearly about a third of the 142-man command that had struck Saint-François had not returned—rather more than 50 percent of the number they had killed.

In April 1760 Rogers, still weak from the ordeal, traveled to Crown Point for the court martial of Lieutenant Stevens for "Neglect of Duty upon a Detachment to Wells's River in October last," before which he testified under oath that had Stevens "delayed but a day, or even some hours longer he would have saved the Lives of a Number of his party, who Perished in the Woods." Rogers's gaze set grimly on Stevens. By flouting his corps's prime directive of complete loyalty and never giving up on one's comrades, this weak-spined subaltern had doomed many good men to slow deaths.

The court found Stevens guilty and cashiered him "a poor reward, however," wrote Rogers, "for the distresses and anguish thereby occasioned to so many brave men, to some of which it proved fatal."

THE RAID'S SUCCESS lay not in the crude accounting of lives taken but rather in the psychology of two whole societies: it had shifted the balance of terror. None of the Indian villages or French towns along the St. Lawrence could now feel secure against overland attacks. By this time, Britain had prevailed in the French and Indian War west of the Atlantic, but the final outcome of the Seven Years' War on the European continent was still unclear. Events there might force the British to return their Canadian conquests, much as they had had to give back Louisbourg in Nova Scotia in 1745.

The brilliance of Rogers's idea of undertaking a raid of such scope lay not in any massive tactical effect but in its strategic ability to unnerve the enemy. Outmatched in troop strength and resources, the French had fought—as do all effective but outnumbered powers—by employing speed and surprise to amplify what assets they possessed. Throughout the war the only British soldier who got inside the French frame of mind was Rogers, a consummate hunter and lifelong careful student of his prey. His success lay in providing a mode of warfare that outmatched the other side in its strongest suit.

The Saint-François raid delivered a blow as bold and terrifying as the Deerfield Raid of 1704 to the psyche of the St. Lawrence frontier settlements. It also sent a clear message to all Indians allied with the French: their patrons could not protect them—and the English could move where they would.