The EUROPEAN INVASION of NORTH AMERICA

Colonial Conflict Along the Hudson-Champlain Corridor, 1609–1760

MICHAEL G. LARAMIE

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The European Invasion of North America

For Pamela, with love

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments xi

1. The First Volley 1
2. The Long Storm 9
3. The King's Men 23
4. Courcelle's Folly 33
5. The Mohawks at Bay 41
6. The New Netherlands 53
7. Toil, Turmoil, and Defeat 65
8. New York 75
9. The Burning of Schenectady 87
10. To the Gates of Montreal 97
11. The Mohawk Expedition 111
12. Queen Anne's War 123
13. A Chain of Forts 137
14. The Scourge of Scalp Point 151
15. Stalemate and Skirmish 161

16. "A Most Favorable Opportunity" 173
17. The Bloody Morning Scout 185
18. The Battle of Lake George 199
19. No Advance, No Retreat 211
20. Fort Vaudreuil 223
21. "Our Wisdom Is Be Come Folly, Our Councils Confusion" 237
22. The Partisan War 251
23. Rigaud's Expedition 265
24. Fort William Henry 275
25 Siege 289
26. "Relief Is Greatly Wanted" 303
27. Tainted Victory 315
28. The French Zenith 331
29. "An Irruption into Canada" 345
30. An Impossible Task 357
31. "Never (a) Ball Had a More Deadly Direction" 369
32. The Heights of Carillon 383
33. The Battle of Ticonderoga 393
34. Mr. Nabbercromby's Army 413
35. Amherst 431
36. A Reversal of Fortune 441
37. Iron Men and Wooden Ships 455
38. "The Total Reduction of Canada" 469
39. The Old Invasion Route 487

Appendix A: *Maps of the Hudson–Champlain Corridor* 497

Appendix B: *French and English Casualty Returns for the Battles of Lake George and Ticonderoga* 501

Appendix C: Warships on Lake George and Lake Champlain, 1742–1760 505

Notes 507

Sources 517

Bibliography 541

Index 557

Chapter 1

THE FIRST VOLLEY

As he listened to his quarrelsome allies, the Father of New France, Samuel de Champlain, must have questioned the wisdom of his recent alliance. For the last several days, he and his contingent of Montagnais, Huron, and Algonquin warriors had leisurely camped at the mouth of the Richelieu River, or, as it was known at the time, the Iroquois River. Upon their arrival, his allies had entertained themselves with hunting and fishing, but as time passed, hidden disagreements and the wisdom of such a bold attack on their dreaded enemies took hold. Soon his new allies began to depart. By the score they left, motivated by some perceived insult, by boredom, by fear, or some combination of the three. Silently they pushed their birch bark canoes into the adjoining waters and abandoned the campaign before it had even started. Champlain had yet to lay eyes on a warrior of the *Ongue Honwe,* as the Iroquois called themselves, but clustered in fortified villages throughout the lakes and rivers of upper New York, the reputation of this conquering race had already reached him. As he walked the encampment and gazed on his bickering warriors, he must have wondered whether or not these Iroquois wouldn't have been a better choice of allies for his new colony.

Events, however, were forcing decisions on the Frenchman that would soon place any such thoughts out of the realm of possibility. With the financial resources of his colony failing, Champlain lacked the time to make anything but a practical decision, and pragmatism pointed to an alliance with the northern tribes of Canada. The location of Quebec among these tribes was, in and of itself, enough to dictate an immediate friendship with these peoples, but there were even more pressing matters that called for a linking of their two destinies. The Huron of the Lakes, the Algonquin of the Ottawa River basin, and the Montagnais of the upper St. Lawrence

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were the suppliers of the only profitable element of New France: furs. With the precarious financial position the colony found itself in, there was little doubt in Champlain's mind of the ultimate consequences should this trade cease. Thus, when a Montagnais warrior arrived at Quebec and called on Champlain to join them in an attack on their hated foe, the Iroquois, there seemed little else for the Frenchman to do but cement the alliance by accepting the offer.

On July 1, 1609, the entire contingent consisting of Champlain and 11 Frenchmen aboard a small shallop and some of the more resolute warriors in their canoes continued their voyage up the Richelieu River. With a good breeze at their backs, the French quickly outpaced their native allies. To their left and right stood dense tracts of pine- and conifer-covered lowlands flanking the broad running river until the cliffs of Beloeil materialized out of the canopy, signaling the entrance to the Chambly basin. The vessel glided through the waters cut by the river, leaving a number of small islands to their left, when someone onboard called for all to listen. Amid the birdcalls and intermittent knock of woodpeckers was the distinct tempo of rushing water. The shallop was pulled to shore, and Champlain led a small party forward along the river bank to investigate. He had been assured that the river and the subsequent lake that followed, and would soon bear his name, would offer him unhindered passage throughout their entire length, but what he saw before him proved otherwise. Standing on a spot not far from where Fort St. Louis would be built almost a half century later, the adventurer was dismayed to see a twisting caldron of white water cascading over rock ledges and dashing among boulders for as far as the eye could see.

Troubled by the turn of events, Champlain and his comrades returned to their vessel, which was now surrounded by the canoes of his allies. He chastised the tribesmen for their apparent deception but, in keeping with his pledge, promised to continue the journey. Sending the shallop and all but 2 volunteers back to Quebec, the remaining party, numbering 3 Frenchmen and some 60 warriors, carried their canoes and baggage around the violent rapids, where they were once again placed in the water near what would one day be Fort St. Thérèse. Here, the entire force once again embarked in canoes, and, after stopping briefly at the Isle of St. Thérèse to hunt, they pitched camp for the evening a few miles upriver.

The war party departed early the next morning, gliding past the stream-fed marshes and low-lying woodland areas of what would one day be the village of St. Jean. From St. Jean, the string of canoes ascended the narrows later known as le Detroit, which is, of course, not to be confused

with the later and far more famous water passage between Lake Ontario and Lake Huron. At this point, the Richelieu widens and runs deep enough to accommodate heavier vessels, which Champlain certainly must have noticed, but it was Ile-aux-Noix, Ile-aux-Tetes (Ash Island), and Hospital Island that caught his eye. "There are many pretty islands here," he noted in his journal. "Low and containing very fine woods and meadows." Little could he know as he drifted by that the first of these islands would one day be the last outpost of the colony he founded.

The expedition made camp near the mouth of Lake Champlain, probably at what is known today as Rouses Point on the west bank of the lake, and entered the lake the next morning. It was a body of water the likes of which Champlain and his comrades, or any European for that matter, had never seen before. The lake lay wedged between sprawling chains of north–south running mountains. In the distance, to the east, lay the green mountain expanse of modern-day Vermont, which rose from behind a belt of ancient wood; and to the west, the breathtaking Adirondacks tumbled down in an emerald sweep to the very shoreline, in places carrying with it the tributaries of the lake. As they paddled on, the trio saw before them the dark wooded stretches of Isle La Motte, Long Island (North Hero), and Grand Isle, each greater in extent than the next. When the Indians pointed out that much of the eastern side of the lake was obscured by these islands, the French marveled at the extent of the waters spread before them, and then gasped when the Indians laughed and began telling them of even larger lakes to the west.

The group made their way down the western shore of the lake past what would become known as the Chazy and Little Chazy Rivers, along lengthy grass swamps, past small bays and inlets, and tumbling gray- and white-streaked bluffs, toward the narrows of Cumberland Head, which forms the promontory of Cumberland Bay. Farther south within the bay laid the tree-covered wedge of Isle St. Michael (Crab Island), and just beyond that, its larger cousin Valcour Island, with its well-sheltered harbors and rocky shores.

The party made camp above Point Sable, and, given that they were only a few days travel away from Iroquois country, the decision was made to rest during the day and travel by night. As the canoes were pushed into the water the next evening, one can only imagine the anxiety felt by the three Frenchmen as they slowly plied the darkened waters, led by the call of whippoorwills and their foreign guides. As the moon flittered behind the clouds, the gloomy shape of Isle aux Chapons (Schuyler Island) slid past to their right. The party then steered between the murky humps of the Four Wind Islands (Four Brothers Islands) and the rocky prominence of Point

Sabousin (Willsboro Point), moving steadily south past the dull gray of Flat Rock Point, through the narrows formed by Split Rock and Thompson's Point, onward toward the strip of water fashioned by the conjunction of what would be known as Crown and Chimney Point.

Breaking camp the next evening, his allies pressed Champlain to hear of his dreams as they had done throughout their journey. Before he had said nothing, but today, sensing something different, he acquiesced. As they gathered around, he told them that he had dreamed of the Iroquois drowning in the lake. In his dream, he had tried to rescue them, but his Algonquin friends had told him that they were not worth his effort and to leave them to their fate. A murmur of approval went through the natives and the canoes were propelled forward with renewed vigor.

The timing of the manufactured premonition must have surprised even Champlain when around ten o'clock that evening a flotilla of dark shapes was sighted before them. Shouts went forward: "Iroquois! Iroquois!" Before them lay the enemy, riding low in their heavier elm and oak bark canoes. Champlain's party paddled forward, but the Iroquois, wanting nothing to do with the swifter birch bark canoes of their northern enemies, quickly withdrew to a nearby rocky peninsula known as Ticonderoga.

What followed was atypical among the woodland engagements of North America, the tenets of which were governed by ambush and surprise. With neither side having the advantage, the Iroquois began the construction of a rude log palisade while Champlain and his party remained offshore in their canoes. In short order, two Iroquois canoes approached to ask their enemies if they wished to fight. The Algonquin and Huron braves replied that nothing would delight them more, and it was agreed that they would fight in the morning, given that neither side would be able to distinguish friend from foe in the darkness.

Champlain and his two comrades spent the night riding unseen in their canoes while both sides passed the time singing songs of valor and hurling insults at one another. At daybreak, Champlain and his allies landed without opposition, as agreed on earlier, and formed their ranks. Seeing their enemies before them, the Iroquois braves, some 200 strong, slowly began to defile from their newly fashioned ramparts. They moved forward confidently, "strong robust men," Champlain noted, bronzed warriors assured of their upcoming victory by superiority in numbers and in arms. When the Iroquois had advanced to within 50 paces, loud cries for Champlain propagated down the Algonquin and Huron lines. As if on cue, the formation soon parted and the Frenchman boldly advanced through the opening to stand alone between the two lines of warriors.

The stunned Iroquois halted their advance. There was silence and then a ripple of whispers through the Iroquois ranks. Before them stood a disciple of Mars. The sunlight glinted off his metal cuirass and stylish plumed helm made famous by the conquerors of Mexico and Peru. Wrapped about his chest were the 12 apostles, a bandoleer of premade ammunition charges, and to his side hung a rapier, the tip of which almost touched his turned-back leather boots. Last, but not least, he held in his hands an arquebus, a short-barreled matchlock whose cotton cord of soaked saltpeter and lead acetate slowly smoldered as the two parties beheld one another.

As Champlain saw the astonishment leave the faces of his adversaries, he raised his arquebus to one cheek and took aim at a knot of three Iroquois chieftains arrayed directly before him. The Frenchman had previously loaded his weapon with four balls, and with the calm pull of the trigger a column of blue-white smoke leapt forward. By the time the resulting echo had faded away, the trio lay sprawled across the ground, the first casualties in what would prove to be a century and a half of warfare. At this, Champlain's allies let out a thunderous cry and loosed their arrows on the stunned Iroquois.

For their part the Iroquois were staggered but did not falter before the onslaught. A second shot, however, from the woods on their flank where Champlain had posted the remaining Frenchmen changed all this. With their spirits broken and their chieftains lying dead or dying, the warriors of the Long House panicked and took flight into the woods behind them. At this point, the battle was over and the rout was on. Champlain and his allies surged forward, cementing their victory by killing and capturing a number of the enemy before the pursuit was called off a short time later.

That evening, Champlain's allies held a traditional victory celebration. They sang and danced as the spoils were divided up: canoes, baggage, and a large cache of weapons. There was also the matter of the prisoners to be dealt with. It was here that Champlain and his comrades began to understand the nature and consequences of defeat among these woodland tribes. One of the Iroquois was led out and tied to a post. He was then informed that he was to die by fire and told that he should sing his death song if he dared. Pleased with the melody, the Algonquin and Huron braves then began a systematic torture of their victim, which eventually included scalping him alive. Having seen enough of the cruelties, Champlain pleaded with his allies to be allowed to dispatch the poor wretch, but they initially refused. However, seeing the anger and disgust on his face as he turned to leave, the braves thought better of crossing the sponsor of their victory and called him back. Acting before his allies could change

their minds, the Frenchman raised his arquebus and with a well-aimed shot ended the prisoner's misery.

The festivities ended within a few hours, and, in keeping with another tradition, the natives broke camp to carry their prisoners and spoils of war home. Champlain may have wanted to continue his journey, and had he done so, in a few weeks he might have met Henry Hudson somewhere on the river that bears the Dutchman's name. But it was not to be. Keeping together a native contingent after a victory or a defeat was nearly an impossible task, as the history of the area would bear out time and again. Tracing their earlier path, the party found themselves back at the mouth of the Richelieu within a few days. From here, the party separated with Champlain and the Montagnais turning down the St. Lawrence for Quebec, while the Algonquin and Huron warriors departed for their northern and western homes with their live trophies. Before they left, however, they called on Champlain to visit their villages and join them in another strike against the Iroquois.

Nearly a year would pass before Champlain would heed the invitation of his allies and take up arms again. On June 19, 1610, preparations for festivities were under way on a small island near the mouth of the Richelieu River. The Montagnais, Champlain, and several of his men, along with a number of fur traders, were present, and the arrival of the Algonquian contingent was expected at any moment. As trees were being felled and the ground cleared, one of the Montagnais spied a solitary canoe being frantically propelled down the river. Soon the purpose and haste of the vessel became clear. The Algonquians had surrounded a party of 100 Iroquois a few miles away. Wasting no time, the Montagnais seized their arms and dashed for their canoes, crying for the French to follow as they pushed out into the waters of the Richelieu. Champlain and four of his men raced to join the cause, but the fur traders, interested in profit, not fighting, declined to heed the catcalls and insults of the departing braves.

Having fallen behind, Champlain and his men beached their canoes beside those of their allies. The five Frenchmen then plunged headlong into the swampy forest before them, quickly becoming lost. Stumbling over dead trees and wading through knee-deep mud, the party's plight was further aggravated by swarms of mosquitoes so thick "that we could scarcely draw breadth," Champlain later recalled. Burdened by oppressive humidity and the weight of their arms, soon even the sounds of the battle deserted the Frenchmen. The group became more and more disoriented in the intervening forest but at length managed to spot a pair of Montagnais braves and called on them to lead them to the battle.

With the help of their native guides, Champlain and his comrades soon found themselves once again within earshot of the engagement and shortly thereafter entered a partial clearing near the bank of the river. Before them they saw the Iroquois entrenched within a crude circular breastwork of fallen trees and pointed brush. In the woods about this makeshift fortification swarmed Champlain's allies showering their war cries and arrows on their encircled adversaries. The Algonquin and Montagnais braves flittered about the barricade, sniping at its occupants, but they appeared to be in no mood to launch a direct assault, having already suffered a number of casualties in an earlier attempt.

Seeing Champlain and his band, however, lifted their spirits. Together Frenchmen and Indians loosed a thunderous war whoop and stormed the entrenchment amid a hail of arrows from the warriors on both sides. Reaching the barricade, the French fired their weapons through openings in the wall while their allies, under the protection of this fire, began tearing away sections of the fortification.

Champlain had gathered together a number of Algonquin and Montagnais braves at the edge of the woods in preparation for the final assault, when a group of newcomers arrived on the scene. They proved to be a party of French fur traders under the command of a young man named St. Malo des Praries. Des Praries and his crew had heard the gunfire, and, not being able to resist, had decided to throw themselves into the fray. Seeing the reinforcements, Champlain halted the impending assault, so he claimed, to allow des Praries and his men an opportunity to share in the victory.

The traders quickly began a brisk fire on the barricade from the river, which only added to the terror and confusion within the structure. After a few minutes of this bombardment, Champlain gave the signal and the final assault was launched. The French and their howling allies raced to the ramparts, scaling the wooden barrier in places and simply tearing holes through it in others. For the panicked mob within, their fate was sealed. It only became a question of how they wished to die, tortured on the fire pole, or fighting like a cougar before a pack of hungry wolves. Most chose the latter. A few were slain or drowned in the river trying to escape, but the majority held their ground and hacked at their adversaries to their last breath.

When it was over, only 15 Iroquois braves remained, led away as prisoners, while the remaining Algonquian and Montagnais braves scalped the dead and the French traders picked through the fallen for items of interest. That night, the fires blazed as the victors danced themselves into a frenzy

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