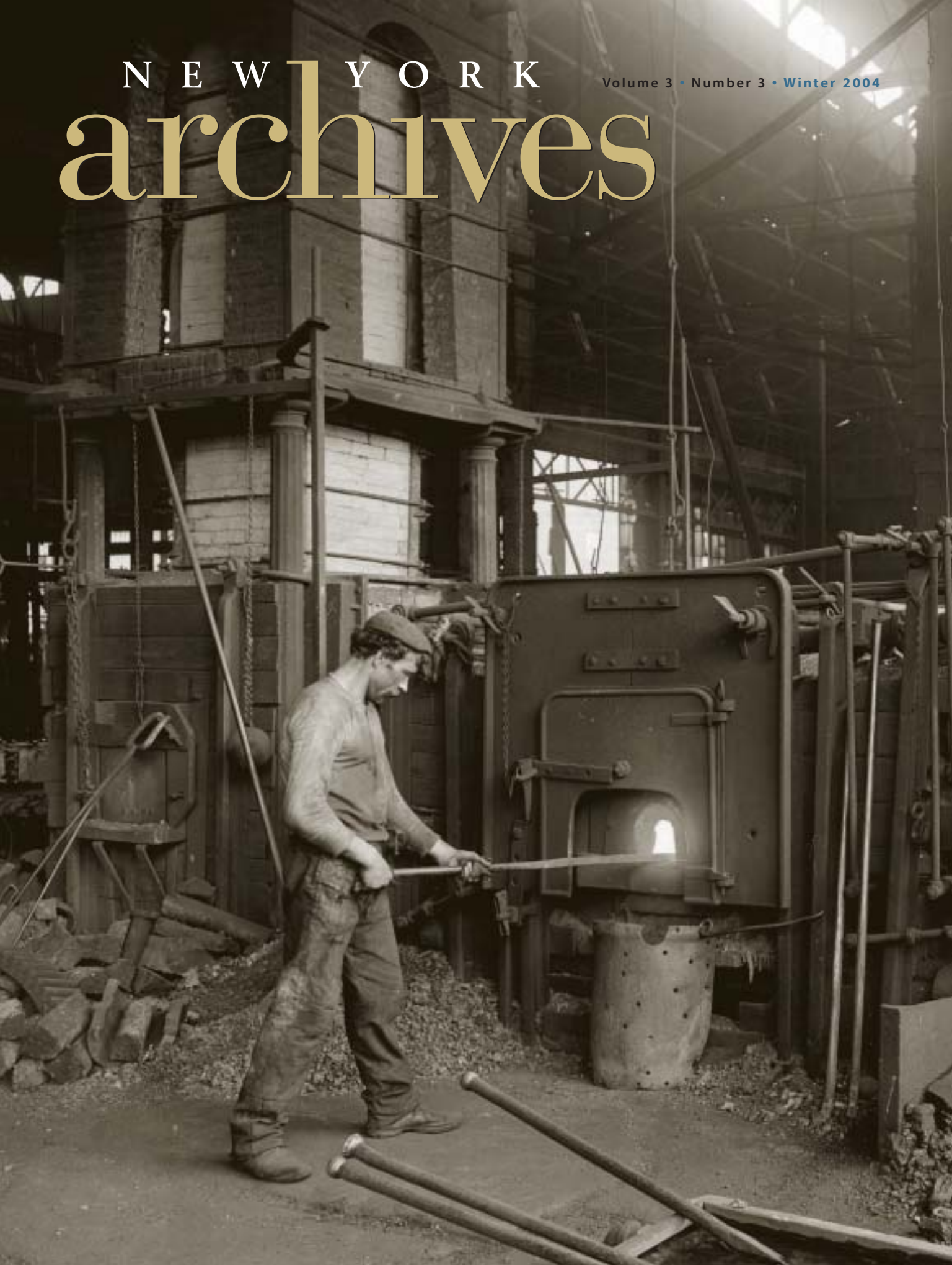


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archives



The Battle on Snowshoes

BY JOSEPH F. MEANY, JR.

A bloody and costly battle at Lake George during the French and Indian War gave "Rogers' Rangers" and their legendary commander a place in the colonial history of New York.



Robert Rogers and his few remaining men make a last stand against the French and Indians.

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BACKGROUND: NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES

When James Kent, Chancellor of the Court of Chancery (1814–1823), called New York “the Flanders of America,” he meant that the state was a place condemned by geography to be a repeated battleground. Through the colonial wars, the American Revolution, and the War of 1812, New York was indeed the scene of many hard-fought engagements. None, however, were more bitterly contested than a battle fought at the height of the French and Indian War that became known as the Battle on Snowshoes.

In the winter of 1758, the British sought intelligence about French forces at Fort Carillon (Ticonderoga) and Saint Frederick (Crown Point). The intelligence mission fell to a body of American frontiersmen formally named “His Majesty’s Independent Companies of Rangers” but universally called “Rogers’ Rangers” after their charismatic commander, Robert Rogers. He and 184 rangers left their camp on Rogers’ Island adjacent to Fort Edward on March 10, 1758 and moved north on the frozen surface of Lake George using ice creepers and snowshoes.

Marching the Lake

On the morning of March 13, the fourth day of the patrol, Rogers ordered his men to don snowshoes, push inland, and circle behind Bald Mountain, out of sight of the French outpost there. The rangers moved out at 7 a.m. and marched on snowshoes until 11 when they halted, concealed

behind a ridge. The rangers expected a French supply party, but by 3 p.m. Rogers judged that the party had already passed and that his men had regained their strength after the four-hour snowshoe march. So he ordered the rangers to move down frozen Trout Brook, keeping Bald Mountain to their right and “thinking to lay an Ambush” to the outpost.

The rangers moved in three divisions. Captain Charles Bulkeley commanded the point and Rogers himself commanded the main body, followed by the rear guard. But unknown to Rogers and his men, Sieur Durantaye of the Companies Franche de la Marine, along with thirty French marines and 200 Indians, had arrived at Fort Carillon the previous evening. According to legend, the Indians’ medicine man prophesied that an English war party was out. When Indian scouts reported crossing the trail of 200 men on snowshoes (where the rangers had struck inland from Lake George), Sieur Durantaye’s Indians were eager to attack.

Durantaye, without waiting for reinforcements, rushed out along Trout Brook in search of the invaders. Meanwhile, Sieur Langy, another experienced partisan fighter at Fort Carillon, mustered 200 French marines, Canadian militia, and Indians and set out fifteen minutes behind the impulsive Durantaye.

Converging into Battle

In the journal account he wrote afterwards, Rogers described the battle’s first phase:

We kept close to the mountain, that the advanced guard might better observe the rivulet, on the ice of which I imagined the enemy would travel if out, as the snow was four feet deep, and very bad traveling on snow shoes

I orderd Ensign McDonald to the command of the advance guard, which, as we faced to the left, made a flanking party to our right. We marched to within a few yards of the bank, which was higher than the ground we occupied; and observing the ground gradually to descend from the bank of the rivulet to the foot of the mountain, we extended our party

These mid-nineteenth-century snowshoes have bent hickory sapling frames and are strung with elm bark strips. Frontiersmen undoubtedly learned early from their Indian neighbors how to make snowshoes for emergency use.



SOME RANGERS WERE CAPTURED AS THEY SCALPED THE DEAD AT THE FIRST AMBUSH SITE.

along the bank far enough to command the whole of the enemies at once

We waited until their front was nearly opposite to our left wing, when I fired a gun, as a signal for a general discharge upon them; whereupon we gave them the first fire, which killed

about forty Indians, the rest retreated. My party pursued them & Scalped about forty Indians in about one quarter of an hour.

It was a classic hasty ambush-cade, delivered with devastating surprise. But because Durantaye's and Langy's French

ambush site, while others scattered through the woods. As the French counterattack came in on his right, Rogers found his flank turned and in danger of being enveloped.

But Rogers, a superb combat leader, was mentally and emotionally resilient. He

THE FRENCH WERE CONVINCED THAT ROGERS WAS AMONG THE DEAD. ONE WARRIOR BOASTED THAT "HE HAD HIMSELF KILLED HIM."

and Indian fighters had started out in two parties fifteen minutes apart, the ambushers were about to be ambushed with equally devastating effect.

The Rangers Retreat

The veteran Langy, hearing firing to his front, deployed his 200 men and advanced in a rough battle line. Within minutes, Langy's force received the fleeing survivors of Durantaye's force, hotly pursued by Ensign MacDonald's flank guard and followed by virtually the whole of Captain Bulkeley's division. The exultant rangers ran straight into Langy's volley, delivered at close range in total surprise. Captain Bulkeley and all his officers were killed or wounded in the fusillade. The survivors fell back in confusion to Rogers's main body of rangers.

Rogers, in turn, was unable to form his remaining men into a line to face the attacking French and Indians. Some rangers were captured as they scalped the dead at the first

took in the chaotic situation and made his decision immediately, ordering the rangers to fall back toward the high ground of Bald Mountain. If he could not break contact, he would make his stand there.

The French and Indians, realizing that the destruction of Rogers' hated rangers was within their grasp, pressed their attack so forcefully that the rangers could not manage to break contact. Rogers recorded in his journal that he lost fifty men while scrambling to high ground:

The remainder I rallied, and drew up in pretty good order, where they fought with such intrepidity and bravery as obliged the enemy to retreat a second time; but we not being in a condition to pursue them, they rallied again, and recovered their ground, and warmly pushed us in front and both wings, while the mountain defended our rear.

Casualties Mount

Rogers had no more than 120 men, many wounded, on his firing line. The rear guard on the left was cut off and overwhelmed in the confusion as the remaining rangers retreated. The French and Indians, well handled by Langy and Durantaye and infuriated by the sight of scalped victims of the first ambush, continued to press the rangers on all sides and attempted to envelop the perimeter around both flanks. But the rangers held their position, and the attackers

...were so warmly received that their flanking parties soon retreated to their main body with considerable loss.

As his casualties continued to mount, however, Rogers' position became more and more precarious. Later he remembered:

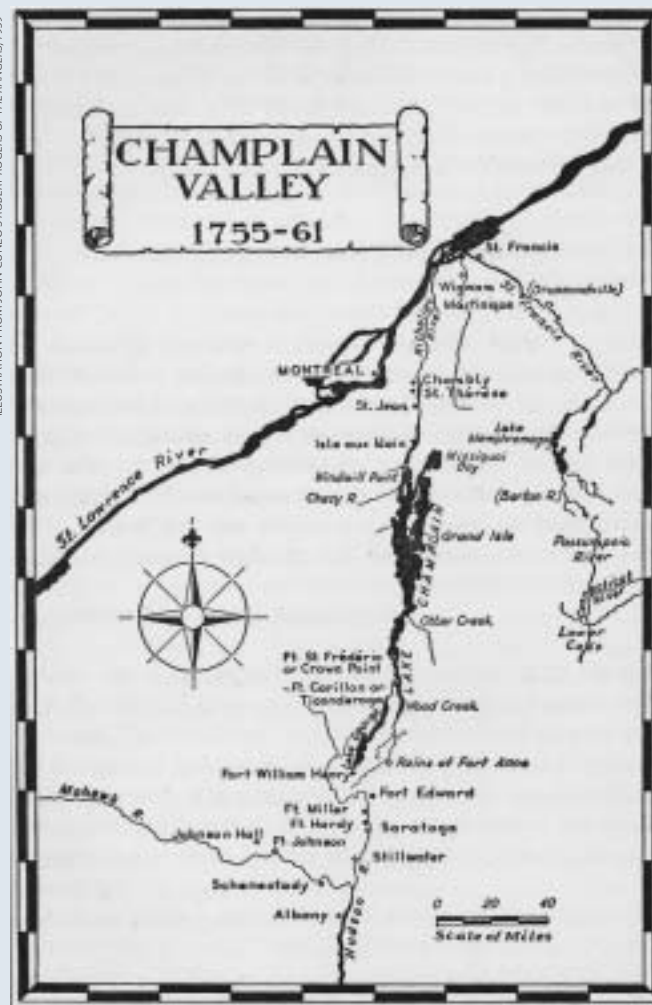
The Enemy pushed So close in the front that the partys were not more than 20 yards apart & oftentimes intermixed with each other.

Darkness was approaching, and Rogers, having lost over 100 men, sought only to hang on until nightfall. Langy and Durantaye were equally determined to finish the rangers before they could break up and escape into the night. Their final assault came from all sides.

Lieutenant Phillips on the right was the first to be cut off and overwhelmed, although Rogers continued to hold the center. His strength down to twenty men, their right flank cut off from Phillips, and the enemy so close that combat was



All images of Robert Rogers are derived from the same drawing that was done by an artist in England who had never seen him.



virtually hand to hand, Rogers, now in the last extremity, ordered his remaining men to scatter and evade capture in the woods:

I thought it most prudent for me to retreat & bring off as many of my people as I possibly could.

A Legendary Escape

Rogers himself made good a legendary escape, supposedly sliding down the smooth, frozen, near-vertical east face of Bald Mountain to the surface of Lake George, over a thousand feet below. It would forever after be known as "Rogers' Slide." Some historians suggest that he only backtracked to the lip of the cliff, to convey the impression to his pursuers that he had actually used "Rogers' Slide." In his journal, Rogers does not mention his own escape, saying only that "the Indians closely pursu[ed] us"

But as the rangers dispersed into the gathering gloom, Rogers threw off his uniform coat, which was, of course, discovered later. In the pocket was his captain's commission, signed by Sir William Shirley. The French were convinced that Rogers was among the dead. One warrior boasted that "he had himself killed him."

The rangers' designated rally point was the shore of Lake George, where they had left their sleds and packs so many hours before. Rogers reached Lake George about 8 p.m. and struck out for the rendezvous. He soon met other survivors, including several

wounded. He gathered the survivors at the rally point and immediately sent two rangers on ice skates south to Fort Edward with requests for a relief force. Four severely wounded men were put on sleighs, with two men each to pull, and also sent south. The remaining handful of survivors he kept in a perimeter around the rally point, where they were able to collect others as they came in, though all nearly froze to death that night without fire or blankets.

"A Vast Cold & Tedious Day"

At daybreak on March 14, the remaining rangers started for Fort Edward. The two advance messengers arrived there at noon and informed the garrison that Rogers

*...Had a Hot Ingagment
Such as Scare Even [sic] was*

*Known in ye Country &
Most of His Party Destroyed.*

Colonel Haviland immediately ordered three companies of rangers to Rogers' support. These met the survivors at Sloop Island, six miles from the head of Lake George. Rogers spent the night of March 14–15 on Sloop Island, first sending again to Fort Edward for three horse-drawn sleighs to carry the remaining wounded.

The next day, March 15, was described by Ranger Jabez Finch as

*a Vast Cold & Tedious Day
Espacially for ye Wounded
Men.*

The defeated rangers trickled into Fort Edward in small groups about 3 p.m. Rogers, bringing up the rear, reached the fort about 5 p.m., bringing with him fifty-two survivors,

In 1758, Fort Edward was a British outpost and Fort Ticonderoga was the nearest French fortification.

eight of them badly wounded. He had lost 125 men.

Rogers immediately set about reconstructing his shattered force. In April, he was promoted to "Major of the Rangers in His Majesty's Service"—a vote of confidence in the partisan leader that subsequent events would more than justify. The rangers continued to undertake many hazardous missions, including the 1759 raid on the Abenaki village of Saint Francis that, almost two hundred years later, would become the historical basis of both the novel and the film *Northwest Passage*, starring Spencer Tracy as Captain Robert Rogers. And a tangible legacy of the Battle on Snowshoes still remains: today's U.S. Army Rangers proudly trace their existence back to "Rogers' Rangers," the intrepid eighteenth-century American fighting force. ■

The journals of Robert Rogers, which give a detailed account of the Battle on Snowshoes, were first published in London in 1765, although the whereabouts of the original journals are unknown. However, many good reprints currently exist.