



Portrait of an American Rifleman

Robert Rogers and his Rangers

In the early days of America's history, before independence, wily frontiersmen formed community militias to provide protection from the native Indians and French-Canadian settlers. By the 1760s, peace resulted in militia training reaching a low point. For example, during militia training, a common salute to an officer consisted of a militiaman's firing a blank shot at an officer's feet. A general sense of humor and neglect existed among the colonists toward formal military discipline. However, marksmanship and weapon handling remained important as a part of daily life and thus was regularly practiced. Many of the other practices of the colonial militia can be traced back to Robert Rogers and the early American frontiersmen that were his "Rangers."

Robert Rogers was born in Massachusetts, pioneering to New Hampshire as a boy. There he served with both scouting parties and the New Hampshire militia. While still a young man, Rogers became involved with a counterfeiting scheme for which he was indicted the year before the beginning of the French and Indian War. Character notwithstanding, the British Army recognized the need for experienced frontiersmen in a wilderness war, so the counterfeiting charges were dropped and Rogers was appointed to recruit men for a company of his own. This company came to be popularly known as Rogers' Rangers. Though possibly disliking the whole idea, the stiff British command was practical enough to give the able, but unorthodox Rogers the independent command and training of his Rangers. The Rangers were guerilla fighters who consisted of frontier settlers, Indians and freed slaves. Rogers selected his men based on merit and drilled rigidly, though in an unconventional manner for the times. Training consisted of mock skirmishes, target practice (the British regular command considered target practice a waste of ammunition), and strict adherence to Rogers' Rules for Ranging. The Rules for Ranging, extracted from the journals that Rogers kept of his exploits (published in 1765), are still a part of training for United States Army Rangers.

Rogers' Rangers were sent on long-distance missions to places regular regiments could not go. They were active from Nova Scotia through New England, to modern-day Ohio and Michigan. Rangers wore green in contrast to their red-coated allies and were required to be "equipped each with a firelock, sixty rounds of powder and ball, and a hatchet" and to be ready ". . .to march at a minute's warning." Many of these practices were carried on by the militia and minutemen of the American Revolution. During the fighting at Lexington and Concord, a false rumor spread among the British soldiers that the colonial men, known for their tomahawks, were scalping the British wounded. Because many British soldiers considered the colonists brutes on a similar level as the Indians, the rumor spread quickly, instigating actual British atrocities. The Rules for Ranging also said to "fall or squat down" when engaging an enemy. Rangers often shot and reloaded from this prone position, "while lying on their bellies" which is a firing position known to marksmen for its accuracy. The British soldiers referred to this peculiar technique as "Indian style."

It has been reported that no less a military man than Britain's General Gage found Rogers lacking the qualities of an officer and a gentleman. Gage also distrusted Rogers for his dealings with the Indians, the fact that he was a colonist, and his close friendship with one of Gage's primary rivals, General Jeffrey Amherst. As another testament to Rogers' tarnished reputation, 20 years later at the outset of the American Revolution, George Washington had Rogers arrested as a spy when Rogers, apparently in good will, wrote to Washington for an appointment in the Continental Army. Rogers had previously turned down an appointment in the Continental Army from the Continental Congress on the grounds that he was a British officer. Rogers later served with the British and participated in the capture of American patriot Nathan Hale. Not only did Rogers end up on the wrong side of the fight for American liberty, he suffered from alcoholism, was divorced by his wife, and ended his life as a broken man, having spent a considerable portion of his own wealth equipping his Rangers.

While Rogers may not have possessed all the virtuous characteristics we expect from an American Rifleman, his life, like many others in the American story, was a paradox, an uneasy truth of virtue mixed with vice. A man with both his talents and vices exposed to history, Robert Rogers' legacy can still be found in the unorthodox tactics of the fight for American liberty. Both Continental Army General Israel Putnam and Colonel John Stark, a hero of Bunker Hill, had been captains in the Rangers. Certainly, Rogers cannot be given credit for all of the tactical ingenuity of the revolutionary generation, but many of the Massachusetts militia who routed the British on the day of "the shot heard round the world" are reported to once have been Rogers' Rangers. Regarding the devastating British retreat from Lexington and Concord, Lord Percy of the British officer corps remarked about the colonial militia, held in low regard by the British troops, that "there were men amongst them who knew very well what they were about." Lord Percy further attributes the skill of the militia men to their "having been employed as Rangers."

To find out how you can learn the skills of the American Rifleman, see the backside of this article.