

September 15, 1777:

Formation of Butlers Rangers.

BUTLER'S RANGERS

by Donald C. Holmes, President of the Sir Guy Carleton Branch, Ottawa 1977

The December 1, 1783, Census of Niagara ⁽¹⁾ lists some 977 individuals then resident, or daily expected, at winter quarters in and around Butler's Barracks at Niagara. A total of 479 Rangers and 368 Ranger dependants are listed by Company, with, in most cases, the rank of the father and full names and ages to the month for all members of each family noted in the census. Approximately half (152 of 321) of the different Ranger names listed are of recognizably Dutch or German origin, and much painstaking genealogical research ⁽²⁾ has located many Rangers' pre-Revolutionary homes along the Hudson and Mohawk river valleys. Their ancestors had come to the New World in the 1600's, during the Dutch regime, or with the great Palatine emigration of 1709, and had by their own volition eagerly become naturalized British subjects generations before the Revolution. Many had been Indian Department employees under Sir William Johnson, and were personally known, respected and trusted by the Six Nations. Every man in two Ranger companies was fluent in the Indian languages, ⁽³⁾ and many were forest-wise veterans of the recent French and Indian Wars.

Although not formally differentiated from the Indian Department until September 15, 1777, ⁽⁴⁾ they had been fighting as a unit since September 6, 1775, when 90 Rangers and Indians under Capt. Gilbert Tice and Lieutenants Walter Butler and Peter Johnson successfully repelled a large American force at St. Johns, Quebec. ⁽⁵⁾ On September 25th, Lieutenants Butler and Johnson captured the notorious Ethan Allen, the victor of Ticonderoga earlier in the year. ⁽⁶⁾ The Rangers were expected to arm and equip themselves ⁽⁷⁾ and most carried their own deadly accurate Pennsylvania-Kentucky long rifles, that classic North American frontier arm developed by their forefathers in the forests and mountains of south Germany and Switzerland.

The first major Ranger action was the Battle of Oriskany, said to have been one of the bloodiest of the Revolution, on August 6, 1777. Butler, the Seneca Chiefs Old Smoke and Cornplanter, with a small advance party, from St. Leger's approaching column had surrounded and cut off Fort Stanwix. Mary Brant got word through from Canajoharie that an American relief force under Nicholas Herkimer was on its way. ⁽⁸⁾ Herkimer had between 800 and 1,000 men, while Butler could muster only 80 whites and 400 Indians. ⁽⁹⁾ A Light Company of the KRRNY, King's Royal Rangers of New York, accompanied the Rangers as volunteers, but without their commander, who remained behind with St. Leger. ⁽¹⁰⁾ The British force quickly set up an ambush in a swamp near the Oneida village of Orisca. Herkimer's approaching force, which included 60 Oneida scouts, blundered headlong into the trap. American sources ⁽¹¹⁾ acknowledge fifty per cent casualties, and confirm Butler's estimate that the enemy left 500 on the field, of whom at least 200 were killed. On the Ranger side, 23 Indians were killed and 29 wounded. Captains Hare and Wilson were killed, and Private David Secord wounded. One officer of Johnson's light company was killed, and two wounded. ⁽¹²⁾

Late in June, 1778, Butler, with 200 Rangers and 300 Indians, struck the settlement of Wyoming, as the county of Westmoreland in Pennsylvania was called. Six thousand farmers had settled in the valley of the Susquehanna, from which enormous quantities of grain and beef were being shipped annually for the Continental Army. On July 3, a defending American force of 500 was torn to shreds by disciplined

Ranger fire. "Our fire was so close and well directed" Butler wrote in his report to L. Col. Mason Bolton, "that the affair was soon over, not lasting above half an hour from first fire. In this action were taken 227 scalps and only five prisoners. The American Commander came in the next day under flag of truce to negotiate on behalf of the settlement and told me they had lost one colonel, two majors, seven captains, thirteen lieutenants, eleven ensigns and 268 privates. On our side we lost one Indian killed, two Rangers and eight Indians wounded." ⁽¹³⁾ Early in the Fall of the same year, Capt. Caldwell, with 200 Rangers and 160 Indians, struck at the German Flats on the Mohawk. "We destroyed all the grain and buildings on the German Flats from William Tygert's to Fort Herkimer on the south side of the river, and from Adam Staring's to Wydeck's beyond Canada Creek on the north side, except the church and Fort Dayton (in which the local militia was hiding) and drove off a great many cows, oxen and horses. We took them out of the enclosure within pistol shot of Fort Dayton." ⁽¹⁴⁾ The inhabitants later reported the loss of 5 mills, 120 other buildings and 826 cattle.

On his return to the Ranger base at Unadilla, Caldwell was mortified to learn that Oneidas had plundered Loyalist families there, and had carried off hostages, and that the continental militia, whose lives had been spared recently at Wyoming on the condition that they promise not to bear arms again, were already advancing against him. Butler immediately assembled all available Rangers, approximately 400, plus a similar number of Senecas, whose villages were being threatened by the American advance, and set out for the American camp. By the night of November 9, 200 Rangers and 321 Indians were within 20 miles of the enemy encampment at Cherry Valley. Despite the alarm having been given by marauding Oneidas, it was learned that the Continentals ahead numbered about 300, the militia 150, and that the officers usually slept in a house a quarter of a mile outside the fort, attended by a strong guard. After an exhausting march through an early winter snowstorm, the fort and the officers' quarters were simultaneously stormed. A colonel, five officers and twenty guards were killed, a lieutenant colonel, three subalterns and ten soldiers were captured. While the main enemy force was bottled up by crossfire into the embrasures of the fort, the Indians swept the valley from end to end, burning everything in sight. ⁽¹⁵⁾ The Rangers had hoped the spectacle would draw the defenders out of the fort to their own destruction, but they stayed within the fort still with them. Instead another great herd of cattle was collected and driven off by the Rangers. ⁽¹⁶⁾

Similar Ranger successes accumulated all along the northwestern frontier. Roaming literally at will from the far reaches of the Ohio to the St. Lawrence, Ranger patrols kept year-round all weather watch on enemy movements, gathering intelligence, destroying supplies - particularly foodstuffs - much needed by the Continental Army, and assisting Loyalist refugee families to safety within the British lines. The successes of the Rangers and Indians had so vexed Washington by 1779 that he sent General Sullivan with 5,000 men to eradicate once and for all the menace on his northern flank. Sullivan failed in his ultimate objective, the destruction of the base at Niagara, and merely succeeded in driving thousands of heretofore uncommitted Indians unalterably into the British camp.

In the summer of the following year, 1780, Haldimand determined to send two major expeditions against the frontiers of New York "to divide the strength of the enemy, to deny him that year's plentiful harvest of much-needed grain, and to give His Majesty's loyal subjects an opportunity of retiring in safety from the province". By October 17th an advancing force of 200 Rangers and Indians had been detected by the American patrols near Fort Hunter, and secrecy was abandoned. By midnight the entire countryside on both sides of the Mohawk was in flames. An American force of 360 from Stone Arabia was outflanked and the American commander, Col. Brown, and 100 of his men were killed. On the Ranger side, 3 Rangers were wounded, one Private of the 8th and three Indians killed, and Joseph Brant sustained a flesh wound in the foot. ⁽¹⁷⁾ This action effectively ended the American resistance, and the march continued. Van Rensselaer eventually crossed the river and managed to post his force across the British line of advance, but a brisk exchange of fire in the gathering dusk so shook the nervous defenders that they retreated a full three miles to a position of greater safety, leaving the fords on the river open. This enabled

the British to cross and withdraw without further incident. On September 25th, the entire force re-embarked safely for Niagara.⁽¹⁸⁾ Washington himself freely admitted his dismay at the destruction of this raid. In a letter of November 7th to the Congress, he acknowledged that Johnson and Butler between them had destroyed 13 grist mills, a number of sawmills, 1,000 houses and numberless barns containing 600,000 bushels of grain virtually the entire year's crop. Along the Mohawk between Schenectady and German Flats the local militia had been reduced from 2,500 to 800. Of the missing 1,700, one third had joined the British, and the other two thirds had either been killed or had abandoned their farms and left the countryside entirely.⁽¹⁹⁾

The Rangers were no less active in the West. In August, 1781, news was received that George Rogers Clark was again on the move against non-combatant Indians favourably disposed towards the British cause. On the 26th, Rangers and Indians ambushed and killed his second in command, Col. Lochry, including six other officers and 30 men. They also captured 12 officers and 52 men, all picked Virginian Frontier Scouts. McKee and Brant then crossed over into Kentucky and advanced on Daniel Boone's fort at Boonesboro. There they met and routed a party of Kentucky horsemen. The next day a larger party returned and they too were routed by the Rangers with considerable loss.⁽²⁰⁾ In the spring of 1782, 500 mounted Kentucky riflemen, fresh from binding, beating to death, then burning 96 Christianized Indian women and children at Muskingum, were advancing on Sandusky to repeat their exploit there.⁽²¹⁾ To meet them Capt. Caldwell had 70 Rangers, 44 Lake Indians and the entire fighting force of the terrified Wyandots of Sandusky, 150 warriors, young and old. At noon on the King's Birthday, June 4, 1782, the enemy was only a few miles away. The Rangers came forward to the fork of a path from which two Indian villages could be defended. The battle developed. Next day McKee arrived with 140 dreaded Shawanese. The Americans were surrounded. They broke and fled under cover of darkness toward the Ohio River. In the subsequent pursuit 250 were killed or perished.⁽²²⁾ Caldwell and McKee, with their Ranger companies and 300 Indians, now advanced across the Ohio and on August 15 besieged Bryant's Station, then the principal fort in Kentucky, destroying the entire settlement outside its walls.⁽²³⁾ Caldwell turned aside with thirty Rangers and 200 Wyandot and Lake Indians to the Blue Licks, and there on August 18th took on some 200 of the enemy, all picked men from the Kentucky settlements, led by Cols. Todd and Trigg, Daniel Boone, and other well known leaders. Caldwell reported that 146 were killed or taken prisoner, including nearly all the principal officers. Not a Ranger was hurt, and only six Indians were killed and ten were wounded.⁽²⁴⁾

In the meantime Capt. Andrew Brant was marching against Wheeling, West Virginia in what was to be the last battle of the American Revolution.⁽²⁵⁾ With his company of Rangers and 238 Indians under the Seneca Chief Old Smoke, he had arrived at Sandusky from Niagara too late to overtake Caldwell. On September 11, 1782, he devastated the settlement at Wheeling, and ten days later joined Caldwell in the Shawanese country, where they remained for about a month before returning to winter quarters at Detroit.⁽²⁶⁾ Thus ended Ranger combat operations during the Revolutionary War. Many Rangers remained on station deep in enemy territory throughout 1783, explaining the provisional truce to the friendly tribes,⁽²⁷⁾ and assisting Loyalist families who would not live under a republican flag to rejoin the Royal Standard at Detroit and Niagara.

The Rangers paraded for the last time on the King's Birthday, June 4, 1784, in front of Butler's Barracks at Niagara.⁽²⁸⁾ Living peacefully among their faithful Indian allies, and fearless of anything from south of the Great Lakes, the disbanded Rangers quickly set about clearing new homesteads in the rich fruit belt of the Niagara peninsula. They had been thrice blessed - they had preserved their honour and fidelity to the Crown, they had been victorious in battle, and the abundant lands which they - and each of their children - received from their grateful Sovereign, were greatly superior, both in size and fertility, to those they had so unflinchingly left behind.

BUTLER'S RANGERS BIBLIOGRAPHY - D.C. Holmes 1977

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4. Ibid p. 37, 38
5. Ibid p. 26
6. Ibid p. 26, 27
7. Ibid p. 37
8. Wm. T. Hagan, Distinguished Professor of History at State University College, Fredonia, N.Y., quoted in Longhouse Diplomacy and Frontier Warfare, a New York State American Revolution Bicentennial Commission publication, p. 22
9. Cruikshank, p. 35
10. Howard Swigget, War out of Niagara-Walter Butler and the Tory Rangers, 1933, p. 85
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12. Cruikshank, p. 37.
13. Ibid, p. 47,48.
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17. Ibid, p.82-85
18. Ibid, p.85-87
19. Cruikshank, p. 87 & Hagan, p. 44
20. Hagan, p. 48 & Cruikshank p. 96, 97.
21. Cruikshank, p. 105, 106
22. Ibid, p. 107
23. Ibid, p. 108
24. Ibid, p. 108, 109.
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26. Cruikshank, p. 109.
27. Hagan, p 52.
- 28 Cruikshank, p. 113

For additional reading on the Rangers see Kirby, *Annals of Niagara* reprinted 1975 by Lundy's Land Historical Society, Niagara Falls, Ontario; also refer to the extensive bibliography given in Professor Hagan's Bicentennial Commission booklet cited above.

For Further Information :

1. <http://www.uelac.org/Military/Butlers-Rangers.php>
2. Col. John Butler's Coy - <http://www.butlersrangers.ca/>