Introduction:
The New England Provincial Soldier

A Problem of Perception

Scattered around northern New England are a few garrison houses that have withstood the attack of age and the elements. Altered by their various owners and hemmed in by modern construction, they nevertheless remind us of a time when Native-Americans and Europeans sought to destroy each other, when it was worth a life to harvest a crop or walk to a neighbor’s house. Such remnants of the French and Indian wars run through the texture of New England like a fine linen thread. Appellations like Ambush Rock, Fort Hill, or Garrison Street dot the regional geography, and even the names of the towns themselves, such as Goffstown, New Hampshire, and Westbrook, Maine, provide a direct link with those colonial conflicts. The legend of our sturdy Puritan ancestors, muskets in hand, fighting off hordes of screaming Indians continues to hold a strong position in local mythology, even if it owes its existence more to nineteenth-century romanticism and Hollywood than reality. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, a period now known as the Colonial Revival, the Centennial celebration, the final defeat of the western Indian tribes, and the apparent closing of the frontier recalled to New Englanders their own Indian wars, and they assiduously recorded the legends and stories of those early years in their town histories.

Everywhere, local historical societies preserved the relics of their heroic age—an Indian war club, a collection of powder horns, a musket or sword that belonged to some long-forgotten Indian fighter were all carefully laid out in viewing cases with the appropriate labels, now yellow and faded. Perhaps the most startling artifact was preserved in the Memorial Hall Museum in Deerfield, Massachusetts. Housed in an old school building whose several floors overflow with memorabilia, the museum is an antiquarian paradise. As you pass among the shoes, farm implements, carriages, spinning wheels,
and pewter mugs, you suddenly confront a door standing by itself in the middle of the floor—a witness to the night of February 28, 1704, when over three hundred Canadians and Indians sacked the village of Deerfield, killing thirty-eight and capturing 111 of the inhabitants. During the course of that attack the Indians chopped a hole through the door of the Sheldon house and, thrusting a musket through the hole, shot Mrs. Sheldon as she rose from her bed. The solitary object in the Memorial Hall Museum is that very same door. Faced with this venerable portal, the hole miraculously unrepaird, the mind endeavors to imagine the village on that night—the bitter cold of a New England winter, the hideous shouts of the raiders, the sound of musket fire, the blows of the hatchets on the door, and the terror of Mrs. Sheldon as she started out of her bed. But in the end the imagination fails because this door, stripped of its supporting framework and original environment, stands by itself in an old school building amid the shoes, the farm implements, the carriages, and the spinning wheels.2

Historians attempting to understand the French wars and the soldiers who fought in them have had to cope with the mythology of this period. Their interpretations and the observations of many contemporaries generally contradict the heroic image of the colonial soldier. British officers serving in the last French war and government officials in particular viewed the provincial as ill-disciplined, unprofessional, and incompetent. General John Forbes called colonial soldiers “a gathering from the scum of the worst people . . . an extrem bad collection of broken Innkeepers, Horse Jockeys, and Indian Traders.” James Wolfe found the troops provided by the colonies “in general the dirtiest most contemptible cowardly dogs that you can conceive. There is no depending on them in action. They fall down dead in their own dirt and desert by battalions, officers and all. Such rascals as those are rather an encumbrance than any real strength to an army.” Other officers believed the Americans to be an “Obstinate and Ungovernable People, and Utterly Unacquainted with the Nature of Subordination in Generall . . . There’s nothing to be found among them all but Laziness, Neglect Disobedience and Disorder, all ill and eating Constantly . . . [they are] the lowest dregs of the People, on which no dependence can be had, for the defense of any particular Post by themselves.”3

While obviously less acerbic in their reaction, the opinions of many historians who have examined the history of the early French conflicts concur with the notions of these professional military men. The story, as frequently told, is a familiar one, and it easily leads to the conclusion that the New England war effort was not so noble and her soldiers not so heroic. In the fall of

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1688, after months of friction and confrontation, Edmund Andros, governor of the Dominion of New England, declared war on the Eastern Indians and led a force of seven hundred provincial soldiers into the province of Maine. However, the ascension of William and Mary to the English throne altered the course of this war and, indeed, the history of New England itself. This Glorious Revolution expanded Andros’s Indian war into the major conflict known as King William’s War, the first of several struggles that pitted the English colonies against their French neighbors to the north.

Thrown into political limbo by the Revolution and the overthrow of Andros in the spring of 1689, an unprepared New England felt the destructive power of the Eastern Indians at Dover, New Hampshire, in June, and residents suffered the loss of the village and fort at Pemaquid, Maine, later that summer. During the following winter and spring Count Louis de Frontenac, governor of New France, launched a three-pronged attack that resulted in the destruction of Schenectady, New York; Salmon Falls, New Hampshire; and Fort Loyal in Casco Bay. Although William Phips did capture the French fort at Port Royal, Nova Scotia, in the spring of 1690, the subsequent failure of the Quebec expedition that fall brought New England to the brink of financial disaster. Events proceeded from bad to worse during the rest of King William’s War. York, Maine, was decimated in January 1692; Oyster River, New Hampshire, suffered a similar fate in the summer of 1694; and in February 1696, the stone fort at Pemaquid, rebuilt at great expense by Governor William Phips four years earlier, was captured by the French and subsequently destroyed.

In 1697 the Peace of Ryswick brought only a temporary halt to this string of disasters. The renewal of bloodshed occurred in early August 1703, when five hundred Abenaki Indians under French leadership struck several towns on the Maine frontier, initiating the war named for Queen Anne. Thirty-nine inhabitants were killed or captured at Wells alone, and over one hundred from the other communities added to the toll. The following winter witnessed the destruction of Deerfield and the sad march to Canada of over one hundred captives, a march so eloquently described by the Reverend John Williams. Throughout Queen Anne’s War, as in the other French and Indian wars, New Englanders on the frontier were subjected to constant attacks by small parties of Indians who ambushed men working in the fields or women and children in their homes. The provincial forces seemed incapable of preventing these incursions.

In 1707 Massachusetts twice attempted to capture Port Royal but both efforts were frustrated by the apparent incompetence and dissentious behavior of the officers. Three years later they finally succeeded in taking the
French fort; however, the effort to capture Quebec in 1711, this time with the assistance of British troops and naval support, ended in disaster when several transport ships struck shoals at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River, resulting in the loss of over nine hundred British redcoats, sailors, and regimental women.

Queen Anne’s War came to a merciful end in 1713, but nine years later a minor war with the Eastern Indians erupted on the Maine-New Hampshire frontier. Named for Lieutenant Governor William Dummer, it is remembered chiefly for the death of the Jesuit Sebastian Rale and the battle known as Lovewell’s Fight, in which the English commander and most of his men were killed. Following the end of Dummer’s War in 1725, a period of peace allowed New England to catch its breath and even increase its borders with the establishment of new towns on the frontier. The start of King George’s War in 1744 brought New Englanders their greatest victory when they captured, with the help of the British Navy, the fortress of Louisbourg on Cape Breton Island. But the reduction of Louisbourg proved to be the high point of the conflict, as this triumph was followed by more lost opportunities to capture Quebec and the usual bloody raids by the French and Indians, including the loss of Fort Massachusetts in 1746.

Through four wars with the government of New France and her Indian allies, the New England colonies had precious little to show for it. Two minor victories at Port Royal (in 1690 and 1710), and one major victory at Louisbourg in 1745 that was subsequently reversed by the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, did very little to offset the catalog of bungled expeditions, fruitless raids, and the death and destruction along the frontier. Chronicling the disasters of Quebec in 1690, the destruction of York and Deerfield, and the debacle of Port Royal in 1707, historians have branded colonial government officials and military leaders as inefficient bunglers and the provincial soldiers as undisciplined amateurs. No other answer seems to explain the reason why the more populous and prosperous New England colonies (not to mention the rest of Anglo-America) could have so much difficulty defeating the smaller and weaker colony of New France, and, in fact, seemed to proceed from one military disaster to the next. “It seems incredible,” wrote historian I. K. Steele, “that it could take seventy years to settle the military contest between Canada and her English-speaking neighbours to the south, since the population figures for 1689 suggested odds of nearly twenty to one against the Canadians.” Richard Marcus agreed with Steele, observing that “in view of the preponderance of manpower, wealth, and material enjoyed by the English North American colonies in their struggle with New France,
the historian cannot but be impressed by the failure of the English to protect their frontiers adequately and master their northern enemies sooner than they did. This embarrassing disparity between means and accomplishment was early evident.”

Most historians blame this “embarrassing disparity” on inefficiency and lack of professionalism within the colonial military structure. The nineteenth-century historian Jeremy Belknap believed that “a confusion of councils, and a multiplicity of directors” had led to “frequent changes of measures, and delays in the execution of them” underscored the incompetence of the provincial military establishment. Logistical support was appalling, “forts were ill supplied with ammunition, provisions, clothing and snowshoes. When an alarm happened, it was necessary, either to bake bread, or dress meat, or cast bullets, before a pursuit could be made.” At the turn of this century John Fiske agreed with Belknap that the government of Massachusetts seemed to be its own worst enemy. During the initial phase of Dummer’s War, the legislature interposed “obstacle after obstacle” in the path of Governor Samuel Shute in his effort to wage war against the Eastern Indians. “Its blundering conduct was not unlike that of the Continental Congress in the War for Independence.”

However, the most serious indictment has been made against the officers and men who constituted the colonial military forces. Their inadequate training and civilian ties prevented them from achieving the status of a true soldier. “Massachusetts had made her usual mistake,” wrote Francis Parkman. “She had confidently believed that ignorance and inexperience could match the skill of a tried veteran, and that the rude courage of her fishermen and farmers could triumph without discipline or leadership. The conditions of her material prosperity were adverse to efficiency in war. A trading republic, without trained officers, may win victories; but it wins them either by accident or by an extravagant outlay in money and life.”

Recent studies of colonial military history have supported this traditional view. John Ferling found the “inadequately trained and frequently utilized militia forces had acquired an appalling reputation by the eighteenth century . . . [this] disgraceful reputation was probably deserved.” Edward P. Hamilton elaborated on this point even more. “The average provincial was a poor soldier,” he wrote. “He could not well be anything considering his background and lack of training. Farm boys, sailors, fishermen, apprentices, and the jobless, all these were what the hurriedly raised armies drew upon to a large extent. Those who led them generally had little or no military qualifications . . . he was merely the leader in civilian life, the squire, the tavern
keeper or the merchant, translated overnight into the military leader.”

Guy Chet was more pointed in this criticism. “The unprofessionalism that characterized colonial armed forces,” he wrote, “made them uniquely inept and unreliable.” Chet concluded that the “tactical ineptitude of provincial troops and their commanders has been attributed to the insurmountable challenges posed by the North American wilderness and by the offensive prowess of Indian combatants. A closer analysis indicates that colonial armed forces deserve a greater degree of responsibility for their failings and failures.”

This inefficiency and lack of professionalism on the part of provincial soldiers has yielded two conclusions: first, the French were obviously superior in waging war in the New World, and, second, British regulars were needed to bring the wars to a close. The concept of French preeminence was advanced very early by historians. Jeremy Belknap observed that “there was a striking difference between the manner in which [war] was managed, on the part of the English and on the part of the French. The latter kept out small parties continually engaged in killing, scalping and taking prisoners . . . on the other hand, the English attended only to the defense of the frontiers; and that in such a manner, as to leave them for the most part insecure. No parties were sent to harass the settlements of the French. If the whole country of Canada could not be subdued, nothing less could be attempted.” Pervading this interpretation is the image of the Canadian coureurs de bois. “The Canadian yeomanry being mostly hunters, boatmen, or wood-rangers, and always in the woods, were about as skilled in forest warfare as the savages with whom they fraternized,” wrote the nineteenth-century historian Samuel Adams Drake. “Every attempt to reach and destroy these vigilant foemen in their own fastnesses proved worse than futile. New England was losing ten lives for one; and in property more than fifty to one.”

In the second half of the twentieth century, the strongest exponent of the theory of French superiority was the Canadian historian W. J. Eccles. According to Eccles, New France held out so long against overwhelming odds because they were “vastly superior to the Anglo-Americans in forest warfare . . . [their success] was more a measure of New England’s military ineptitude than of French strength . . . it was not the Anglo-American frontiersmen or the provincial troops that ultimately conquered Canada . . . Canada was finally conquered, after six years of hostilities, by the Royal Navy and British regular soldiers.”

Since the colonies could not provide adequate troops for their defense, indicated by the evident superiority of the French and their Indian allies, British regulars were the obvious solution to the colonial military problem,
according to British officials and many historians. “In the French wars the bulk of the important fighting was done by European troops,” wrote Harold L. Peterson. “American troops in general lacked discipline and training in European tactics, and aside from a few brilliant exceptions they were considered unreliable by the English commanders.”

In an article published in 1958 investigating “Anglo-American Methods of Indian Warfare” during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, John K. Mahon believed that “an analysis of colonial Indian warfare reveals a simple truth which our folklore has tended to obscure: that trained regular soldiery, first the redcoats and then their American counterparts, were more important than unorganized frontiersmen in breaking the power of the Indians.”

While frontiersmen “kept up a constant attrition,” in the end it was the regular soldier in the ranks, armed with a musket and bayonet, who broke the power of the Eastern Indians.

Taking this theory to its natural conclusion, historians believe that in dispatching regulars to America, both British and French, the Europeans forced their form of warfare on the New World. The provincial soldiers had failed through four wars to settle the Anglo-French colonial rivalry due to incompetence and their inability to fight the French and Indians on their own terms. The question would be settled by European troops in a European manner. I. K. Steele put this argument succinctly when he observed that,

North American pride in the ways of the New World has often led to the assumption that, in warfare as in everything else, the new men of the New World were better than the history-laden men of the Old. The defeat of General Braddock or the later success of the American Revolution can, with some misrepresentation, be seen as evidence of this superiority. Yet, it is obvious that, in the climax of the Anglo-French struggle, the Europeans came and forced their kind of warfare on the wilderness... in the Anglo-American army there was relatively little struggle over adoption of the essentials of European warfare. As long as the Americans fought like guerrillas, they were wasting their major advantage—manpower. The large influx of British troops after 1755, as well as more direct control of the fighting from Britain, ensured complete acceptance of conventional warfare.

This debate between those who argue that war in colonial North America became more “American,” or “Native,” and those who argue that war became more European has continued, with the latter focusing on the incompetence of provincial military efforts and the growing involvement of English regu-
lar forces. Armstrong Starkey wrote that “during the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, warfare in North America became increasingly Europeanized.” Starkey indicates that this may have been a deliberate choice. “Necessity and familiarity drew the Canadians to the Indian way of war, but Anglo-American militias and provincial troops remained rooted in the European military tradition.”

Guy Chet was more pointed. Chet argued that “it was the poor performance of colonial forces in King Philip’s War and King William’s War that led eighteenth-century colonial magistrates to address the short-comings of their military forces through a greater reliance on British forces and imperial administration.” Further, “only when Britain involved itself in the planning and execution of these offensive campaigns were the colonies able to effectively threaten French centers of military and administrative power.”

The logical progression contained in this view of colonial military history is difficult to ignore. Provincial soldiers were simple farmers who lacked training and discipline, and, therefore, with a few exceptions, they exhibited a remarkable degree of incompetence and inefficiency in their martial efforts. The settlers and soldiers of New France and their Indian allies displayed great superiority over the New England farmers in waging war in the New World, thus forcing the British government to send regular troops who finally conquered New France by the use of European military methods. But if the initial notion of provincial incompetence is false, then the assumed preeminence of Canadian-Indian forces and British regulars needs to be reexamined, and I will show that the concept of the New Englander as a poor soldier, proven by his performance in the early French wars, is an erroneous impression fostered both by a focus on parts of the story and by the nature of the warfare itself.

The opinions of contemporary British officers contain the most obvious erroneous view of provincial soldiers. They initially pronounced that the New Englanders were poor soldiers, and as the only military experts who observed the provincials firsthand, their opinion is valued, even if their choice of adjectives is considered caustic. Despite the excessive style, their credentials as experts are rarely challenged. John Ferling wrote that “the American officers were ‘People totally Ignorant’ of military skills, according to one British witness.” John Shy believed the opinions of British military men would later “have disastrous consequences for them,” but he never doubted the truth of their observations. Instead, he proposed a theory that the provincial units observed by the British were poor because the disfranchised, the dregs of colonial society, filled their ranks. According to Shy,
military service had ceased to be a part of colonial social responsibility, and thus the British did not view the best soldiers America had to offer. Other recent studies concur with this analysis. Historians have attempted to explain why the provincial soldier was ineffective and thus seek to justify British observations, instead of suggesting the possibility that the regular officers were wrong, that their prejudices ran so deep they were unable to recognize the truth.

Douglas Leach correctly points out that “rarely could a regular officer bring himself to utter words of praise for colonial troops, who, when measured by European professional standards, continually seemed to fall far short.” Leach also emphasized the aristocratic background of many British officers who viewed provincials as “crude, uncultured, undisciplined, and largely untrained in the science of civilized warfare.” Though not all British officers were aristocrats, they were all professionals who “prided themselves on the smartness of their appearance, the quality and uniformity of their accouterments, and the mastery of complex evolutions.” When Admiral Peter Warren sent Marine Captain James MacDonald on shore during the siege of Louisbourg in 1745, the New Englanders soon tired of his finicky criticisms of their troops. Provincial commander William Pepperrell wrote “we were glad to get rid of him, for the most he did was to find fault that our encampment was not regular, or that the soldiers did not march as handsome as old regular troops, their toes were not turned enough out, etc.”

The observations of British officers are best placed in context by understanding that they viewed their own troops in the same way. James Wolfe may have referred to provincial soldiers as “the most contemptible cowardly dogs,” but when he wrote to his father in 1755, he had the following comments to make about British regulars. “I have but a very bad opinion of the infantry in general. I know their discipline to be bad, and their valor precarious. They are easily put into disorder, and hard to recover out of it; they frequently kill their Officers through fear, and murder one another in their confusion.”

Unfortunately, although historians have spent a great deal of time attempting to explain the observations of British officers and government officials, these opinions are of almost no value in understanding the provincial soldier. The British viewed the world with the unshakeable bigotry of class, nationality, and European military experience. Anything outside their vision of the world was suspect and inadequate, and thus only soldiers trained in a European, and preferably British, manner could be considered ideal. When the British government decided to commit British troops to America in the
last French war, the extensive role of the regulars should not be used as an indication of incompetence on the part of colonial soldiers. Once the British army became involved, the provincials were shoved aside, used as laborers or beasts of burden, and this represents only the natural consequences of the deep-seated prejudice of British officers.33

Some historians have consciously, or unconsciously, adopted this prejudice. Provincial soldiers are compared to their concept of the ideal soldier, a soldier modeled on modern military concepts, but whose origins date back to European standing forces of the eighteenth century, and specifically the army created by George Washington and Revolutionary leaders during the War for Independence. The concept is vague, centering on strict discipline and extensive training, but it is the yardstick used to measure all colonial military efforts. According to Lawrence Delbert Cress, the militia was “ill prepared for the hardships of camp life and the discipline required for effective military operations.”34 John Ferling agreed, saying that military operations such as a siege “required time and was best conducted by a well-disciplined body of regular troops.”35

The inference of a universal ideal for soldiers is plain, although undefined. The bonding of “successful military campaign” and “effective military operation” with soldiers “requiring” extensive training and continuous service underscores this notion of the ideal soldier. However, there is no universal ideal soldier, for the concept must also presuppose that all wars and all battle conditions are universal as well. In reality, while the value of military discipline should not be underestimated under normal conditions, soldiers are ideal only if their training and motivation anticipate the kind of war and combat conditions they will encounter. Therefore, before condemning the provincial as a poor soldier, historians need to compare him to soldiers fighting a similar enemy under similar conditions. Otherwise, like the opinions of those British officers, the comparison is worthless.

But the erroneous impression of New England provincials as poor soldiers originates from far more than a misinterpretation of the notions of British officials. The enormous difficulties of waging war in the New World have been underestimated. The economic strain on the colonies was tremendous and has been well documented by Gary Nash and Douglas Leach. The Quebec expedition of 1690 alone increased the taxes in Massachusetts twenty times the normal rate and forced the first, but by no means the last, issuance of paper currency. Throughout the French wars, New England would experience various blows to its economy, including unremitting inflation and the almost constant depreciation of the currency.36
But beyond the overall stress to their economies, provincial governments (and this includes both New France and the English colonies) were hampered by economic realities and deliberate mercantile policies of their home governments. Arms, artillery, and most of the powder and lead used by provincial forces had to be obtained from England or other sources. British soldiers, unlike their colonial counterparts, had a plentiful supply of arms, ammunition, and, perhaps most important of all, the full support of the British navy. Under these circumstances, success came easier to the British army in the Seven Years’ War, while during the previous four wars provincial governments had to constantly beg for such logistical and naval support because they did not have it.

Even more important, as John Brewer has revealed in *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State*, the British government was not capable of committing such resources until the Seven Years’ War. Certainly they were not able to commit such direct military aid in King William’s War because the means to do so did not exist. The growth of the British army really began with the Glorious Revolution and the ascension of William III. From there the British government had to develop the administrative and tax structure, not to mention overcome English prejudice against standing armies, to gradually increase military commitments throughout the so-called Second Hundred Years’ War. That they committed such regular forces to North America in the 1750s, and did not do so earlier, perhaps reflect the ability to commit such forces and the desire of William Pitt to expand the empire more than incompetence of provincial forces.37

Another factor involved in any evaluation of military performance that is not only underestimated, but often ignored entirely, is the element of chance, or, if you prefer, the fortunes of war. Historians are uncomfortable with the concept of chance or luck. They fear (and often this fear is justified) that it will lead them into the murky depths of “if only” speculation. If New Yorkers failed in most of their major military operations then there has to be a reason that can provide the basis of analysis and comparison, a reason that fits historiographic norms. Samuel Adams Drake concluded that during King William’s War “great enterprises had turned to great failures . . . not so much from faulty conceptions, as from the want of organization, discipline, command, and of that kind of confidence which comes with them.”38 Edward Hamilton believed the expeditions against Montreal and Quebec in 1690 failed because “they were both led by amateurs, capable and well-meaning men but utterly unskilled at warfare, and they were composed of untrained farmers and tradesmen, commanded by inexperienced officers. The French
on their side had a great leader, skilled officers and some trained regular troops. It is small wonder that the English were repulsed.\textsuperscript{39} The New Englanders failed because they were ignorant, inefficient, and undisciplined.\textsuperscript{40}

However, the military theorist Carl von Clausewitz wrote “war is the province of chance. In no sphere of human activity is such a margin to be left for this intruder, because none is so much in constant contact with him on all sides. He increases the uncertainty of every circumstance, and deranges the course of events . . . all action in war is directed on probable, not on certain results. Whatever is wanting in certainty must always be left to fate, or chance, call it what you will.”\textsuperscript{41} A large part of the failure of the 1690 campaign came from the inability of the forces at Albany to attack Montreal and tie down Frontenac, and from William Phips’s delay in arriving at the walls of Quebec with his fleet, a delay that enabled Frontenac to reach the city with heavy reinforcements just as the New England ships were anchoring in the river. However, an outbreak of smallpox in the army gathered at Albany partially explains their inability to attack Montreal, and one of the main causes of Phips’s delay was the necessity to wait for a shipload of powder from England (he eventually sailed without it). Thus chance (the outbreak of smallpox) and logistics (the powder from England) played major roles in the defeat of provincial forces in their bid to reduce New France. Neither of these reflects negatively on the ability of provincial soldiers, yet the interpretations given above indicate the reason for failure was the inefficiency and lack of professionalism on the part of New England military forces.\textsuperscript{42} As Clausewitz correctly observed, “we cannot suppress an inward feeling of satisfaction whenever expectation realizes itself, and if it disappoints us our mind is dissatisfied.”\textsuperscript{43}

While logistics and chance assist us in understanding the reason for some of the reverses suffered by New England in the early French wars, the principal cause of the misconception that provincials were poor soldiers can be attributed to historical methodology and to the peculiar characteristics of the type of warfare involved. It is the concentration on major events and on major disasters that has given the impression of incompetence. Traditional historical research often duplicates the methods of modern news reporting in that the ordinary escapes detection while the spectacular captures the eye. An airplane crash gives the impression that air travel is unsafe because the hundreds of flights that take off and arrive each day without incident do not make headlines. The recitation of disastrous occurrences in the early French wars (i.e., Quebec 1690, Salmon Falls, York, Pemaquid, Deerfield, Port Royal 1707, and so on) gives the impression of incompetence, but it ignores the con-
stant military service and protection provided by patrols and garrison troops and also the disruption of the Eastern Indians by numerous raids conducted by provincial soldiers. As Richard R. Johnson observed, the emphasis placed on the disasters detracts from the service provided by soldiers on patrol and the string of garrison houses and forts along the frontier. “Such was the pattern of the frontier war, with the enemy battering, and occasionally breaking, the links of the chain of the frontier towns but with reinforcements always close at hand and backed by the central government’s determination never to abandon a threatened town.”

The difficulty in appraising defensive tactics involving guerrilla-style warfare is that when the tactics are successful, nothing happens. Although there is evidence that it did occur, we can never know how many lives were saved or how many towns escaped destruction by diligent patrols or alert garrisons that discouraged Indian war parties. The Indians left no records, they filed no reports, and they granted few interviews. Therefore, their successes are magnified because nothing counterbalances the slate.

Dismissing the efforts of provincial soldiers involved in “la petite guerre” as “short-term emergency duty” performed by “haphazardly trained and poorly disciplined militia,” historians studying the colonial soldier have concentrated on the soldiers’ involvement in major expeditions such as Quebec in 1690 and 1711 or Louisbourg in 1745. This superficial examination of the early French wars has encouraged the interpretation that provincial war efforts were inept. But theories based on superficial examination are only valid when supported by deeper analysis. The concentration on the major events ignores the complexity of war on the northern frontier. Like the Sheldon door in Deerfield, emphasis on just the major events rips away the structure and foundation without which the New England military effort loses its reality and its vitality.

This emphasis on the major disasters is also responsible for promoting perhaps the biggest myth of all: that the French were superior in conducting war in the New World. Closer analysis reveals that the tactics of the French and English were remarkably similar and their success rates overall were about the same. Both had to defend against that most difficult form of warfare—the surprise guerrilla attack—in which all the advantages as to time and place of the strike lay with the attacker. For New France, the soldiers’ foe was the powerful Iroquois of New York while New England soldiers initially dealt mainly with war parties from the Abenaki tribes in the east and later from native groups in Canada. To defend against such surprise attacks, the French and English built fortified houses and forts along the frontier, which
served as both a sanctuary for local inhabitants and as garrisons for soldiers posted there. In addition, the English and French governments organized scouting parties to constantly patrol on the outskirts of these frontier towns, as well as guard the inhabitants at their work. Due to the success of the Abenaki war parties in attacking New England, historians have branded this form of defense as totally inadequate. W. J. Eccles observed that “smaller parties harried the New England frontier continually without the Anglo-American settlers being able to defend it successfully,” yet the French, employing the same methods, had as much trouble stopping the Iroquois as the English did the Abenaki. In actuality, this method of defense proved very effective when used properly, with the understanding that no static defense can totally stop the guerrilla surprise attack.

The English and the French realized that the best way to stop the raids was to send their own raiding parties into Indian territory. With small numbers and a fragile economy, the American Indian, though terrifying, was essentially a vulnerable adversary. The destruction of their grain supply or the capture of their families or chiefs could quickly bring about a truce. The French used the same strategy on the English colonists to discourage their expansion east and north, and it was this sort of large offensive raid involving the French and Indians that caused the major destruction of towns such as York and Deerfield.

Historians often suggest that New Englanders were incapable of conducting similar raids against Canadian villages. W. J. Eccles believed that the English colonies “had no body of men capable of traveling through hundreds of miles of trackless wilderness at any time of the year, let alone in mid-winter, to attack New France.” However, the New England colonists throughout the early French wars conducted raids against Abenaki villages deep in New Hampshire and Maine both in summer and in winter. As the majority of Indians used by the French on their raids came from the villages of Norridgewock or Pequawket, it made more sense to attack villages that actually provided the warriors for French raids rather than to waste Canadian villages.

The governments of Massachusetts and New Hampshire had to defend a long frontier while mounting offensives against two enemies: the French in Canada and the Eastern Indians. While they willingly conducted raids against the Eastern Indians, the New Englanders felt the best answer to the French menace was the capture of Canada itself. Therefore, they preferred to put their energies into major expeditions and never seriously considered emulating the French strategy. But here again, W. J. Eccles claims that “the
attempts of the English colonies to conquer Canada all ended in failure; several large-scale expeditions had to be abandoned before they made contact with the foe owing to poor organization and general ineptitude. Only part of Acadia, very weakly defended, was lost by the French in all this time. True enough. Between 1690 and 1748, New England participated in the planning and execution of nine major expeditions. Of those nine, three were successfully completed (Port Royal in 1690 and 1710, and Louisbourg in 1745); in two the English forces arrived at their destination but were unsuccessful in their attack, and the rest involved cancellation for various reasons. However, during that same time period, although rarely discussed, the French also contemplated major expeditions against military targets or population centers in New England. One French expedition never passed the planning stage, another had to be cancelled, and two others, designed to recapture Louisbourg and devastate the coast of New England, ended in disaster. Through three wars, only one French expedition aimed at the New England colonies accomplished its purpose (the capture of the fort at Pemaquid in 1696). If the failure of major expeditions was caused by poor organization and general ineptitude, there is no indication that this was restricted only to the English colonies.

This study focuses on the beginning of the Second Hundred Years’ War when the English colonists fought wars with minimal help from the mother country. There have been many studies of the last French and Indian War (often referred to by its European name, the Seven Years’ War), most notably works by Fred Anderson. In particular, his work presents a valuable study of the provincial units that served alongside British regiments in that “Great War for Empire.” Similarly, King Philip’s War in the 1670s has been covered from every conceivable angle. The period in between, from King William’s War through King George’s War, represents very different circumstances from those other two conflicts. The Indians in King Philip’s War were an internal enemy and within easy reach (although not necessarily easy to find), and they were not supported by a European government. In the last French war, the great weight of the British (and French) military descended on America, completely changing the rules and circumstances. From 1688 to 1748, New Englanders fought a foe at some distance and, for the most part, without major help from England.

A complete understanding of early American warfare cannot be gained by concentrating on the major events by themselves; the subject is far too complex. War in the New World assumed its own patterns and offered its own set of problems to be overcome by all participants. Through decades of conflict,
the New England military system became tuned to the rhythm of frontier war. Juggling a commitment to families, communities, and themselves, the New Englanders who performed active duty in the French wars learned and adopted the tactics of “la petite guerre” while never losing sight of their ultimate strategic purpose—the reduction of Canada.

In this respect, Guy Chet places me squarely on the side of those who see an “Americanization” of war in North America, or in other words, a growing adoption of “native” approaches to war. This is a legitimate interpretation: one that I espoused at one time, but now I don’t see the provincial approach to war becoming more “native” or more “European.” As John Morgan Dederer wrote in *War in America to 1775: Before Yankee Doodle*, “The colonists were eminently sensible, resourceful people who sought useful knowledge from any source. They borrowed only what they thought they needed: if it did not work, it was discarded; if it worked, it was improved and adapted for their new environment. They could not transport European institutions whole to the New World, so they borrowed extensively but selectively.”56 And so they also borrowed from native ways of war. It was not either/or: it was a merger of approaches, truly an American way.

Part I will reveal that what developed in North America was a way of war that blended preserved elements of European war and adopted native approaches. It is essentially an operational study of defensive (garrison houses, forts, patrols) and offensive strategies (raids and expeditions) used by Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Chapter 1 describes the coming of war, in both the formal sense as a declaration between nations or people, and the intimate manifestation of that war in the form of an attack. The chapter also introduces the military system of New England, delineating the administrative militia from the active provincial service, and discusses the initial response to war—pursuit of enemy raiding parties. The preparation of frontier communities to defend themselves, and the use of fortified or “garrison” houses follows in chapter 2. Warfare involving primarily provincial forces begins with a description of provincial forts (discussed in chapter 3), including their construction, garrisons, and their usefulness in drawing the fury of large enemy forces away from frontier towns. The conduct and the development of effective scouting techniques, both defensive and offensive, are explained in chapter 4, and chapter 5 explores the Anglo-American cooperation that was necessary to attempt the reduction of Canada itself. Finally, the last chapter in part I details the logistical problems associated with the procurement of weapons and ammunition without which the war could not have been fought.
While part I focuses on how war was conducted, part II focuses on the experience of provincial soldiers. Recruiting practices, including both incentives and compulsion, and an analysis of what type of individual actually performed active service begins part II. Provincial officers, how they were chosen, and their dual responsibilities of leadership and the enforcement of military regulations are discussed in the next chapter, followed by an examination of training and discipline and the source of fighting spirit. Chapter 10 depicts the physical experience of combat and the tactical response to Indian warfare. The final chapter presents a review of wounds, accidents and illness, medical care, and the psychological impact of war, manifested primarily in a bitter hatred of the Eastern Indians.

I do not attempt to portray New England provincials as completely heroic or as completely inept. As with all armies, the ranks of New England provincial soldiers included a wide spectrum of ability; they were neither all heroes nor all bunglers. They had to compensate for the curves thrown at them by chance, and, like their Canadian and Indian counterparts, they had to conduct war under enormous handicaps, especially in the area of logistical support (a handicap they would have to overcome again during the War for Independence). Only by examining the total military effort on the northern frontier, only by understanding how war was conducted and experienced, and only by restoring the whole Sheldon house to the shattered door, in other words, the structure and the foundation to the traditional framework, can we hope to present a balanced view of the New England provincial soldier.