

FRONTIER FORT LIFE

by Richard M. Strum



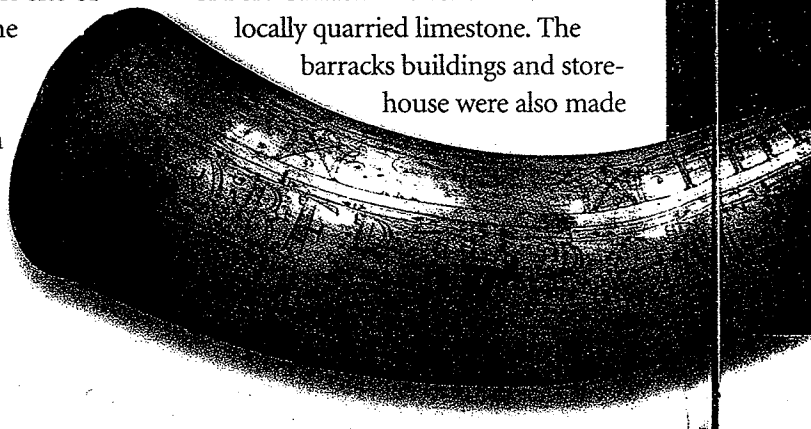
ABOVE: Sleeping arrangements for the French soldiers at Fort Carillon were not ideal. **BELOW:** Ranger Robert Rogers' name is carved on this powder horn.

Unlike fighting on Europe's long-cleared fields, where troops could live off the land, much of the fighting during the French and Indian War took place in wooded, uneven terrain. The armies of France and Great Britain and their allies had to adjust to the challenges of moving men and supplies through a vast and usually unfamiliar wilderness.

Rivers and lakes served as the major "highways" in 18th-century America, enabling armies to move troops, military supplies, and food at a time when few roads existed. Frontier forts were built along waterways to take advantage of these natural routes. For example, the site of Fort Duquesne, built at the Forks of the Ohio River, proved so advantageous that the city of Pittsburgh developed there later. Another example was Fort Carillon (present-day Fort Ticonderoga).

Located on the edge of New France's southern frontier, the French Fort Carillon was built to house a winter garrison of 400 soldiers to guard the waterway where Lake George empties into Lake Champlain. The Canadian military engineer Michel de Lotbinière supervised its construction, beginning in the fall of 1755. Lotbinière based the fort's design on the work of the French military engineer Sébastien Vauban. Nearly every European fort built in the 18th century followed Vauban's "star-shaped" design, which maximized the field of fire for the fort's powerful cannon. The idea was that no matter where the enemy was, at least one cannon pointed in that direction.

Lotbinière hired soldiers at Carillon, eager for extra pay, to help build the fort. The entire foundation of Fort Carillon was constructed with locally quarried limestone. The barracks buildings and storehouse were also made



of limestone, as were the two *demi-lunes* on the west and north sides.

The surrounding forest provided the wood for the rest of the walls. Soldiers floated timber for floors and roofs a mile down the La Chute River to the fort site. While major building materials such as limestone and wood came from close by, ironwork (nails and hinges) and glass for windows came by water from Quebec.

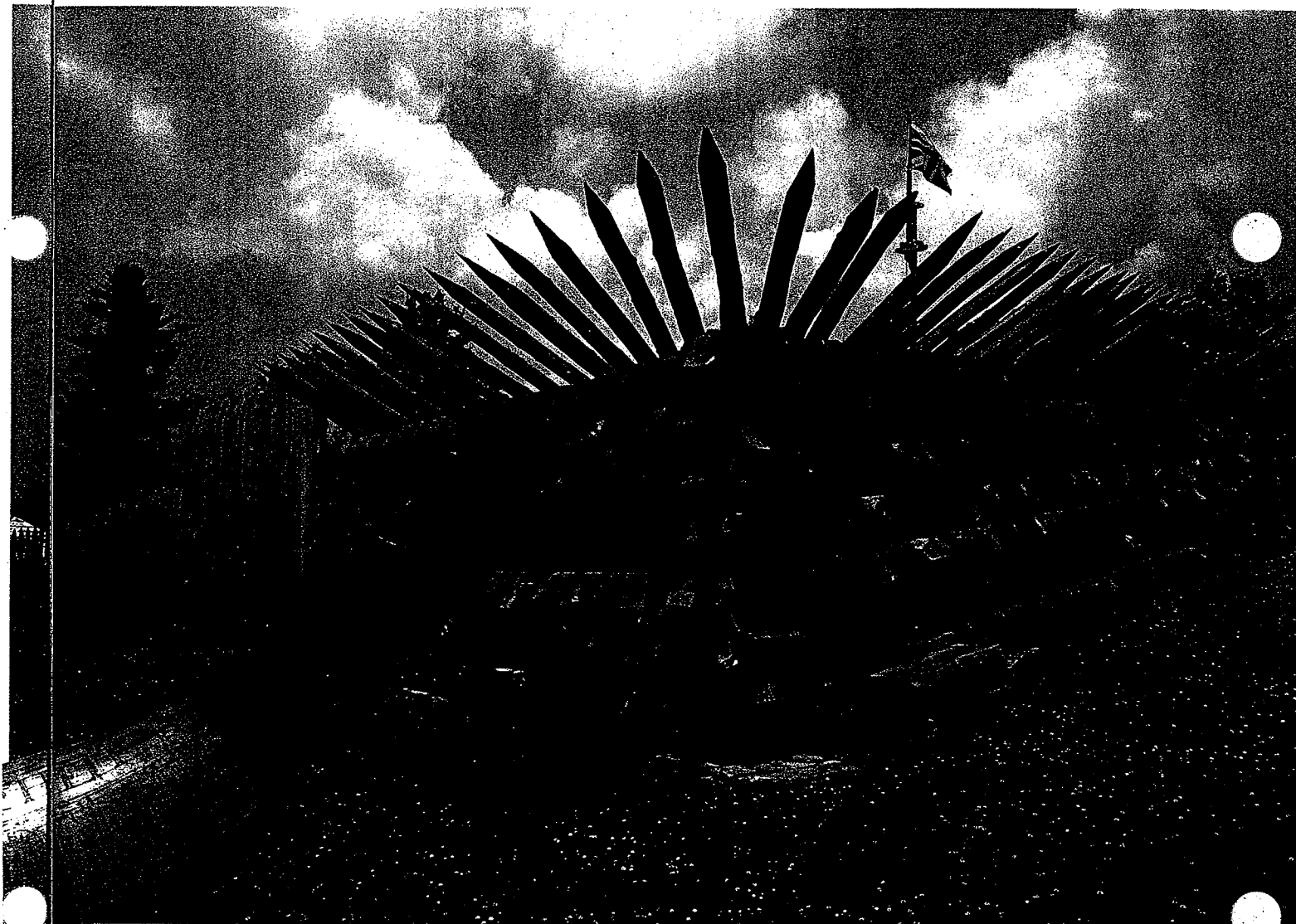
Unlike many frontier forts, Fort Carillon had no nearby civilian population. Soldiers could not bring

their families to live with them on the extreme frontier, and the danger of enemy attack was too great for settlers at Carillon. Located only 35 miles south, at the other end of Lake George, was Great Britain's Fort William Henry.

The routines of army life regulated a soldier's life at Fort Carillon. For many of the soldiers, this was their first army experience. The beat of the drum and the trill of the fife told soldiers when to get up, when to line up for inspection, when to

Demi-lunes were triangular-shaped strongholds connected to the main fort by drawbridges.

Frontier forts were like defensive islands surrounded by wilderness. These spikes made enemies think twice before climbing the walls of Fort Ligonier.



A ration is a fixed portion of food.

BELOW: Cannon positioned on the west demi-lune at Fort Ticonderoga today give visitors an idea of how the fort could defend itself. **BOTTOM:** The entrance to Fort Ticonderoga is still "guarded" by French mortar guns today.

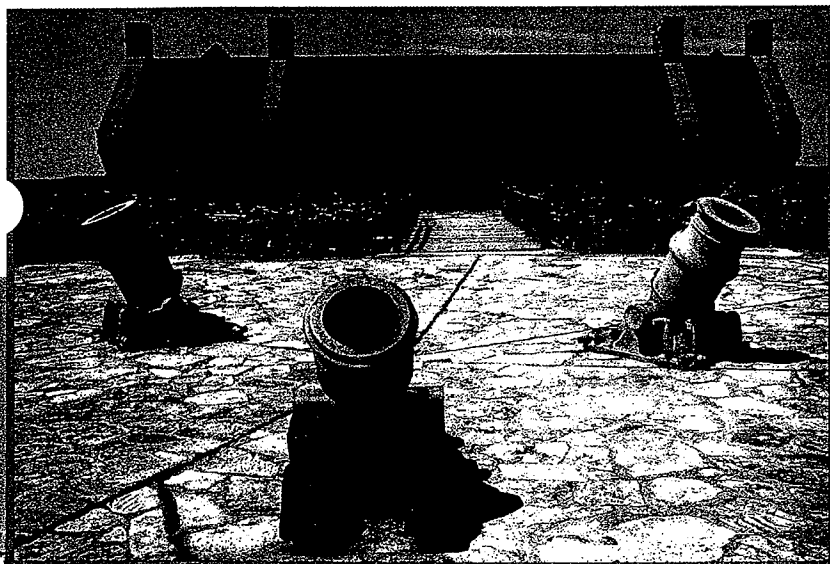
report for work, when to eat, and when to sleep. Soldiers spent very little time fighting. Most days they drilled (trained), stood guard, and worked on fatigue details, such as cutting wood or performing other daily chores.

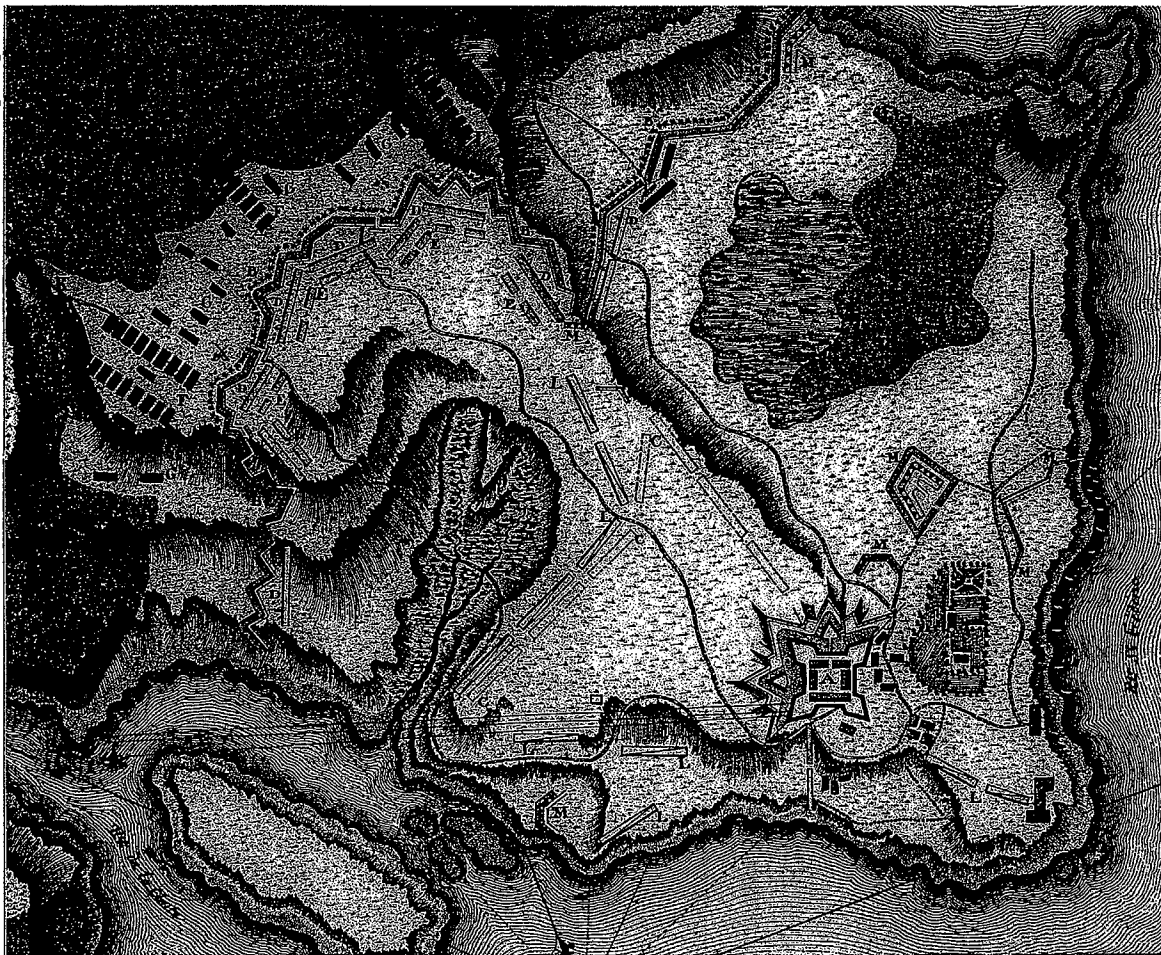
Although there were few battles at Carillon, soldiers were assigned to scouting parties. French scouts engaged with enemy scouting parties — especially those led by Robert Rogers and his Rangers. In addition to these skirmishes, the French soldiers at Carillon participated in the attack on Fort William Henry in

1757 and the Battle of Carillon in the summer of 1758, when the British failed to capture the French fort even though its army outnumbered the defenders five to one.

Keeping the soldiers at Carillon supplied with food, especially during the harsh winters, proved difficult. A typical day's *ration* for a soldier included bread, salted beef or pork, dried peas, and sometimes a little butter. Soldiers often supplemented their rations by planting a garden each spring. It provided fresh vegetables to help stave off scurvy, a disease resulting from lack of vitamins. The French soldiers formed "messes," each made up of seven soldiers, who cooked their rations together in a single pot.

The French struggled to keep outposts like Carillon supplied with





Fort Carillon's star-shaped design allowed for its protection from many angles. This map shows the failed 1758 attack by the British.

essentials during the winter of 1757–58. As the war progressed, the British navy made it difficult for French supply ships to reach the St. Lawrence River and Quebec, the capital of Canada. With fewer supplies reaching Quebec safely, there were fewer supplies to send on to the frontier forts. Rations became so scarce at Carillon that the French hired six Native Americans to hunt for game to help feed the garrison. Soldiers were not allowed to hunt for game on their own because of the danger posed by enemy scouts such as Rogers' Rangers.

In addition to a dwindling food supply, staying warm through the long, cold winters was also a challenge. It took more than 1,500 *cords* of firewood each year to keep the

garrison of soldiers warm. During one raid, Rogers set fire to the garrison's firewood supply, wiping out a large portion of the previous summer's work.

As the war progressed, the difficulties of defending Canada from a British invasion without the necessary food and supplies increased at Fort Carillon. There simply were not enough troops to man all the French outposts stretched across Canada. Although the French won their share of battles, the British won the war because they were able to keep their troops well supplied while making it ever more difficult for the French to do the same. ↑↑

Richard M. Strum grew up near Fort Ticonderoga and is now the director of interpretation and education there. He is the author of *Fort Ticonderoga*, a forthcoming book for young readers.



FAST FACT
FORT CARILLON WAS RENAMED FORT TICONDEROGA AFTER IT FELL TO THE BRITISH IN 1759.

Cords are units of quantity for stacked firewood. One cord measures 4x4x8 feet.