

Joseph Shoer
HIST 152

English on the Warpath

English and Native American Tactics in New England, 1600-1800

In northeastern North America, English colonists and explorers encountered a completely unfamiliar people. The Native Americans possessed different cultural values, different religious beliefs, different lifestyles, and different views and methods of warfare. The native lifestyle was highly suited to their natural environment, the forested terrain of what is now known as New England. This paper will discuss the major differences between European and Native American warfare, the origins of native tactics as developed in northeastern forests, adaptations of both cultures to the other's tactics. Native American tactics were highly sophisticated and well suited to the environment of the northeastern forests, while the English were forced to react to native strategy in their colonial expansion. Even at the time of the American Revolution, Native American tactical practices remained largely unchanged (despite the encounter with a technologically superior opponent) while the English were forced to change and evolve.

Before colonizing the Americas, Europeans practiced what they considered to be "civilized" warfare. Battles in Europe were fought on open fields, during fair weather, and in the daylight hours—anything else was considered dishonorable. European soldiers were highly regimented and strictly disciplined, trained to march in step and fight in formation. The carnage of the European wars took place almost entirely on open fields, among ranks and files of troops, with officers marching at the head of the column, rather than in dispersed units. The European armies, also, fought with the objective of eliminating their opponents entirely. This attitude

persisted in the colonies: militias trained on cleared parade grounds, and were instructed to fire in volleys just as their counterparts across the ocean were drilled to do. English commanders prized regimental discipline over individual initiative.¹

The favored English weapon at the time of the establishment of the first colonies was the matchlock musket. This was a firearm triggered by a lever mechanism that lowered a burning match into a pan of gunpowder, firing a lead ball projectile. This was a weapon suited to Europe. Matchlocks weighed about twenty pounds, heavy enough to have to be propped on a separate musket rest to be fired. Musketeers were expected to follow a precise doctrine to load and fire their weapons. European strategies involved maneuvering a regiment into position on the battlefield, ordering all musketeers to load and level their weapons, and then firing a simultaneous volley into the enemy ranks. This was the only kind of tactic that matchlock muskets were useful for. The guns were grossly inaccurate, unable to be aimed and fired at single men, but a volley attack fired into a compact grouping of enemy soldiers caused enough damage to win or lose battles. Matchlocks were also not very reliable pieces of technology: they could not be fired in rainy or damp weather, as musketeers always had to keep the match lit, and battlefield commanders had to make sure that their troops always kept an adequate supply of the always-burning match.²

In the forests of Native North America, before the coming of the white man, the various tribes practiced a drastically different form of strategy. Native tactics were based heavily on their experience hunting game in the woods. Regiments and marching orders were not present—in fact, they were completely useless in the dense vegetation of the forests. Warriors moved in carefully spread out groupings, and kept their movements stealthy. The favored tactic of native

¹ Patrick Malone, *The Skulking Way of War* (Lanham: Madison Books, 1991) 32

² Ibid 56

war chiefs was the raid. Native warfare revolved around intertribal feuds, and warring tribes would put together small groups to perform lightning strikes against their enemies. Warriors would move quietly through the forest and strike without warning. Unlike the Europeans, the Native Americans fully incorporated the natural environment into their strategies: they used the cover of darkness, the confusion of storms, and the shelter of the trees to enhance the effectiveness of their attacks. Another common native tactic was the ambush. As many tribes moved their seasonal settlements or sent hunting parties out, enemy tribes would set up traps to strike at their opponents. In their ambushes, the natives used variations in the terrain to their advantage. For instance, an ambush might be set up to trap an enemy war party between the raiding warriors and a fast-moving stream, or a cliff, or a steep hill. Europeans remarked on the low-casualty nature of Native combat: once a lightning raid was done, the attackers would retreat, when an ambush took place, the attackers often left with prisoners rather than wiping out the enemy entirely. The natives never marched in regiments; they preferred to focus their tactics on individuals.³

Native technology was decidedly less advanced than the English. The Native Americans had no firearms and no steel. Their primary long-range weapon was the bow and arrow, a very effective weapon in the woods. They were light and easy to carry, and all native males were proficient in their use. Native bows were small, had a maximum range of about 170 yards, and were most accurate only at short distances. This was not a disadvantage in the dense woods: arrows could easily hit intervening tree branches if they were fired at a target that was too far away. At close range, the native hunters and warriors were renowned for their marksmanship. Native warriors also were not limited by a need for arrows to stock their quivers: nearly all native men knew how to make arrows (the English, on the other hand, had to rely on gunsmiths

³ Ibid 21

to maintain their weapons). The natives of the northern forests also used many varieties of close-quarters weapons. Usually these were clubs or stone hatchets, for which the English adopted the blanket term “tomahawk.” In reality, there was tremendous variation among the different types of clubs used, mainly depending on individual warrior’s preferences.⁴

Native Americans also practiced defensive strategies of fort-building. As protection from the small raiding parties that were the prevalent offensive tactic in North America, native tribes would build palisades around villages, where civilians could take refuge. Philip Vincent, a colonial soldier in the Pequot War, described these forts as follows:

“Natural reason and experience hath taught them to erect [the forts], without mathematical skill, or use of iron tool. They choose a piece of ground, dry and of best advantage, forty or fifty foot square (but this was at least two acres of ground.) Here they pitch, close together as they can, young trees and half trees, as thick as a man’s thigh or the calf of his leg. Ten or twelve foot high they are above the ground, and within rammed three foot deep with undermining, the earth being cast up for their better shelter against the enemy’s dischargements. Betwixt these palisadoes are divers loopholes, through which they let fly their winged messengers. The door for the most part is entered sideways, which they stop with boughs or brushes, as need requireth. The space therein is full of wigwams...”⁵

Against these forts, enemy tribes would sometimes lay siege. However, such sieges did not last long, and were not often successful, as the forts were always adequately provisioned and the attackers knew the folly of making a direct assault if they would simply be shot down. Fire was not used against the forts as the natives considered it too horrible to use as a weapon.⁶

In the early 1600s, the English began to settle in New England, founding the Plymouth Colony, Massachusetts Bay Colony, and later the Rhode Island and Connecticut colonies. While the natives at first saw the English as trading partners, the encounters soon became martial in

⁴ Ibid 15

⁵ Philip Vincent, “A true Relation of the late Battell fought in New England,” in *The Pequot War*, ed. Charles Orr (Cleveland: The Helman-Taylor Company, 1897) 105

⁶ Malone 14

nature. Native tribes began to view the colonists as potential military allies—or enemies—and vice versa. Soon some tribes were pitted directly against the English colonists in military struggles. The tactics of both sides were tested against each other. The Natives had the benefit of hundreds of years of military evolution in the forests of the Northeast, while the English soldiers had only battlefield and parade-ground experience. It is a common misconception that the English started off with a great technological edge over the natives. While the English did possess ironworking skills, they began to trade their iron goods with the natives, who made metal knives, arrowheads, and hatchets from the raw metal. The English had firearms, but among the early settlers the weaponry consisted entirely of matchlock muskets. Those guns were highly effective on the open battlefields of Europe, but were horrendously unsuitable for forest warfare. English regiments of musketeers were unable to march into the woods, while the natives used the woods naturally in war. Lone musketeers were as good as dead: it took so long to load and fire a musket, the gun was so heavy, and the barrel so long that before a soldier could ready his weapon and aim at an enemy, a native warrior could have jumped behind him with a hatchet or shot him from an unseen position with a silent bow.⁷ Matchlocks were more a liability than anything else; their only strong point was that the noise and smoke they produced frightened the natives—at first.

English regimental tactics did not overcome their inappropriate technology. The English fired their muskets in volleys, intended to be aimed at enemy regiments. The natives spread out their warriors and kept them under cover. Musket volleys were inaccurate to begin with, when fired against a single man they were strategically useless. Furthermore, the natives trained as marksmen with the bow from an early age, and they often aimed at English battle commanders. In Europe, due to the inaccurate nature of the musket battles, a colonel was in no more dangerous

⁷ Ibid 32

a position at the front of his column than anywhere else. However, in the New World, once a leader was identified, he was exposed to accurate bow shots from camouflaged positions, which could throw a highly drilled regiment into disarray.⁸

The Pequot War of 1637 provided the first major test of the tactical practices of the English and Native Americans. The Pequot War, generally speaking, took the form of English colonial armies moving into native territories on offensive campaigns. The English, used to battlefield assaults centered around major cities, mounted campaigns to attack native villages, such as the village on Block Island. Here, an English force under John Endecott was to destroy the village, kill the men, and sell the rest into slavery. Endecott sailed with ninety men and landed amidst a heavy shower of native arrows. The Natives' arrows flew thick enough that the English could not stand up long enough to load and fire their muskets. The English eventually gained the beach, and the warriors retreated, neither side suffering casualties. Endecott's army marched through Block Island, but found villages deserted and the inhabitants missing. A few short skirmishes took place. In the end, the English could do nothing but loot the Native food stores and burn their villages to the ground, demonstrating a new concept to the natives: total war—waging war against not only active soldiers, but noncombatants as well. The English left, having failed to kill more than one native.⁹

Native ambushes were especially effective against English with no knowledge of forest warfare and useless matchlock muskets. Lion Gardener, an Englishman in command of a small fort, took a group of ten men to recover some cut logs for use in the English fort. While on this errand, he got into an argument with some of his men, and a group of four Pequot warriors ambushed the English. The soldiers were unable to ready their firearms, two deserted on the

⁸ Ibid 88

⁹ Alfred Cave, *The Pequot War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996) 111

spot, and the Pequots were able to wound five English (one mortally) and kill two before Gardener could retreat to his fort.¹⁰

The Pequot War was won by the English through a devastating use of the tactics of total warfare. The English learned of a major Pequot settlement at Mystic, Connecticut, and set out to assault it. The English army, as well as a large group of native allies, found a palisade fortress built around a fairly large settlement. The English encircled the fort and attacked, pushing through the brush-blocked entrances to the fort. Before they got inside, the English faced stiff resistance. Once in the village, they set fire to the wigwams. The flames took hold of the entire village, and the ring of English soldiers around Mystic shot any Pequot who escaped. The English army's native allies watched in horror. Fire had never been used in such a manner in native warfare, and noncombatants were never slaughtered by native warriors. Contemporary casualty reports place the Pequot dead at 600 to 700, while two English were killed and twenty wounded. In addition, some of the natives assaulting the fort had been killed by friendly fire.¹¹

Native societies had never experienced total war before exposure to the Europeans, but the English were very familiar with it. The European continental battle system revolved around assaulting and fortifying large cities, and the English did not hesitate to use wanton destruction as a psychological weapon. The massacre at Fort Mystic broke the back of the Pequot fighters. The English willingness to use fire as a siege weapon rendered the native palisade fortress useless. Almost any later "fortress battle" between an English army and entrenched natives involved the application of fire, which resulted in the total destruction of the fort and its inhabitants. The natives began to rely more heavily on offensive raids and ambushes than

¹⁰ Ibid 131

¹¹ Ibid 151

defensive strategies in response to this new weapon, and they even adapted fire to their own use against English garrison houses in King Philip's War.

After the Pequot War, the types of firearms used in the New World underwent a drastic change. The English began to bring over and equip their colonial militias with flintlock muskets instead of the previous matchlocks. Instead of triggering the gunpowder with a lighted match, flintlocks used a spring mechanism to snap a piece of flint against a steel panel, creating a spark to ignite the powder. Flintlocks tended to be smaller, lighter, and more accurate than matchlocks, and could be fired instantly. These weapons were much more suited to forest warfare, as soldiers did not have to carry a lighted match and the weapons could be accurately snap-fired in a moment. The Native Americans were the first to realize this; in fact, early on they showed a preference for flintlocks and carbines over matchlocks, and took care to trade for the lighter, more accurate weapons for use in their hunts and raids.¹²

King Philip's War, or Metacom's War, was the greatest and bloodiest conflict between the English colonists and native tribes in New England. It illustrates very clearly the adaptations of the English army to forest warfare and the adoption of English technology by the natives. During the course of this conflict, Native American warriors raided, looted, and destroyed many frontier towns in what is now central Massachusetts. They exhibited raiding and ambushing tactics to an extent that the English had never before experienced. These raiders were far more terrible now that they had flintlocks and had been exposed to total warfare, which lessened their restraint and led to similar tactics in response.¹³

The English, suffering from unexpected lightning raids, attempted to make each frontier settlement self-sufficient in its defense. Colonial militias took time to muster, and were based in

¹² Malone 65

¹³ James Drake, *King Phillip's War: Civil War in New England 1675-1676* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999) 89

regimental units at certain towns, but a native raid could take place anywhere, at any time, without warning, as the natives were adept at moving undetected.¹⁴ In order to ensure the safety of the settlements, the English took to building “garrison houses.” These houses were family dwellings or meetinghouses, but fortified and provisioned for war.¹⁵ The English colonists’ only hope was to get to a garrison house at the first sign of native assault and defend themselves from the pillaging warriors. Unfortunately, preventing the natives from looting and destroying the rest of the town was a lost cause.

Two specific native raids exemplify the strategy of garrison-house defense and subsequent native counters to it. Brookfield, MA, was assaulted in August of 1675. Natives forced the settlers into several garrison houses, which then fell under siege.¹⁶ The natives, unable to dislodge the English, turned to a strategy they learned from the English at Fort Mystic: in a contemporary report, “the Bruits had contrived an Engine with many Wheels to fire the Garrison ten or twelve Rod off.”¹⁷ They had taken a farm cart, filled it with flammable materials, set fire to it, and tried to push it to the garrison. The warriors failed to set the garrison on fire, however, due to a rainstorm. Soon after, English reinforcements arrived and the natives set fire to the rest of the town and departed. Later in the war, the town of Lancaster, MA was assaulted in a similar manner. This frontier town consisted of about fifty English families but was not well defended. The English, again, were confined to garrison houses to watch the destruction of the town. These garrisons, however, were not as lucky as those at Brookfield: there was no rain. States Mary Rowlandson, captured by the natives at Lancaster:

¹⁴ Douglas Leach, *Flintlock and Tomahawk: New England in King Phillip’s War* (New York: Macmillan 1958) 164

¹⁵ Eric Schultz and Michael Tougas, *King Phillip’s War* (New York: Countryman Press, 1999) 39

¹⁶ Schultz 157

¹⁷ Nathaniel Saltonstall, “The Present State of New-England with respect to the Indian War,” in *Narratives of the Indian Wars 1675-76*, ed. Henry Lincoln (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1913) 36

“The house stood upon the edge of a hill; some of the Indians got behind the hill, others into the barn, and others got behind any thing that would shelter them; from which all places they shot against the house, so that the bullets seemed to fly like hail; and quickly they wounded one man among us, then another, and then a third. About two hours...they had been about the house before they prevailed to fire it (which they did with flax and hemp which they brought out of the barn, there being no defence about the house...) They fired it once, and one ventured out and quenched it, but they quickly fired it again, and that took.”¹⁸

In this case, the fire was quite successful, and forced the English to flee into the open, where most were killed or captured.

Native tactics generally changed very little from the Pequot War to King Philip’s War. They consistently relied upon surprise, ambush, and quick raids. Some scholars consider native tactics far more advanced than the Europeans, in fact, native war strategies resemble modern infantry movements more than anything else. Native warriors were trained to exploit natural terrain to their advantage and surround their opponents. Those with loaded weapons were to cover their fellow warriors who were busy reloading.¹⁹ Additionally, as illustrated before, natives at this point did not hesitate to use fire as a weapon. For example, when the English sent reinforcements to Sudbury to repel a native attack, they were drawn into an ambush by hundreds of warriors. The natives had waited until the English soldiers were caught in a pass between two hills, with warriors blocking off all escape. The English finally were able to fight their way up the side of the hill, but when they reached the top, natives set fire to the brush, forcing the English into a panicked retreat. Most of them were cut down, and the English were utterly defeated.²⁰ The natives also adopted other strategies consistent with total warfare: instead of

¹⁸ Mary Rowlandson, *Narrative of the Capture and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (Cambridge: 1682) 4

¹⁹ Armstrong Starkey, *European and Native American Warfare 1675-1815* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) 22

²⁰ Schultz 214

retreating with a few captives or after avenging a few deaths, they “sought the wholesale destruction of combat units and towns.”²¹

English tactics were continually evolving to deal with the forests. At first, they remained largely the same: centered on armies and cities, as in Europe. When they could get their hands on native forts, the English repeated the events at Fort Mystic in the Pequot War, as in the Great Swamp Fight against the (neutral) Narragansetts.²² However, the natives soon abandoned forts, and the English were forced to adapt to raiding and ambushing tactics. Benjamin Church, a colonial colonel, adopted many methods of native warfare. He was put in command of an experimental joint unit composed of allied native warriors and English soldiers.²³ He asked some of his native soldiers how they were so effective against the English in the woods, and received this response:

“They told him that the Indians gained great advantage of the English by two things: the Indians always took care in their marches and fights not to come too thick together. But the English always kept in a heap together; that it was as easy to hit them as to hit an house. The other was, that, if any time they discovered a company of English soldier in the woods, they knew that there was all, for the English never scattered, but the Indians always divided and scattered.”²⁴

Church changed his strategies, and relied upon the same surprise tactics that the native tribal warriors did. He employed native scouts, he surrounded and captured native war parties, and he adopted native stealth tactics.²⁵ It was Church’s company that finally set up a dawn ambush and ensnared King Philip, ending the war. King Philip’s War demonstrates the superiority of native tactics as the English found themselves open and vulnerable to almost any raid, and only achieved total victory when they adopted “Indian war” themselves.

²¹ Drake 88

²² Ibid 109

²³ Leach 217

²⁴ Benjamin Church, *Diary of King Phillip’s War 1675-76* (Chester: Pequot Press, 1975) 140

²⁵ Ibid 129

Native tactics hardly changed after King Philip's War. They adopted firearms and the European introduction of fire as a weapon into their old tactics. "Skulking war," based on the hunting strategies of marksmanship and concealment, remained the favored native tactics. The natives abandoned forts; against an enemy who did not hesitate to set them on fire, forts were liabilities rather than defenses.²⁶ The English, on the other hand, still had to make changes and experiments. They tried during the Seven Years' War to form companies of "light infantry" and "rangers," groups to be trained as Church's company from King Philip's War. These regiments, ideally, were organized as any other English unit but were trained to be proficient in the nuances of forest warfare.²⁷ English commanders, however, looked down on these "irregular" troops as undisciplined and expensive to maintain.²⁸

By the time of the American Revolution, the native way of war had prevailed in America. The majority of the revolutionary soldiers were trained as "minutemen," soldiers who could be called on individually at a moment's notice. Revolutionary skirmishes are often depicted as a highly organized and well-drilled English regiment firing volleys at colonial militiamen shooting from cover in the trees. That is a direct influence of native tactics. The English regulars were still influenced by the European style of warfare, and the commanders adhered to European manuals of strategy. On the other hand, the American patriots drew on their experience as frontiersmen. Natives who fought in the Revolution retained all their old strategies: when natives from Stockbridge were recruited as minutemen in the Revolution and organized into a native unit, their commander, Captain Solomon Uhaunauwaunmut, asked to allow his soldiers

²⁶ Starkey 132

²⁷ Ibid 133

²⁸ Daniel Beattie, "The Adaptation of the British Army to Wilderness Warfare, 1755-1763," in *Adapting to Conditions: War and Society in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Maarten Ultee (University of Alabama Press, 1986) 71

to forego English training in favor of fighting “Indian-fashion.”²⁹ Despite the success of native tactics, Europeans still preferred battlefield warfare—it took a traditional battlefield victory at Saratoga to convince the French to aid the Americans.

The influence of the “skulking way of war” is still apparent today. The modern American army trains to encourage individual initiative among its soldiers, use natural terrain and camouflage to its advantage, and develop accuracy with firearms rather than training in volley fire or parade-ground maneuvers as regular battle tactics. Soldiers are taught to work as a team, protect each other, and accomplish their objectives with a minimum of casualties. The modern Special Forces corps, idolized as able to enter hostile areas undetected, strike with efficiency and accuracy, and withdraw before the enemy can respond, can easily be seen as a modern parallel to elite Native American raiders. These early American warriors prized accuracy and stealth in combat. Natives were far from disorganized; their tactics were actually much more sophisticated and well-adapted to the natural environment than those of the colonial English. In fact, many native war parties crafted detailed battle plans right before their attacks, and the warriors were well-drilled in their roles.³⁰

The Native American way of war was drastically different from that of the English colonists, yet it was far more suited to New England. The English criticized the natives in war, as in any other pursuit, as barbaric, savage, heathen, and uncivilized. However, the English found themselves turning more and more to native guides, allies, and tactics as they sought success in colonial military expeditions. It was the English application of native strategy that ended King Philip’s War, and the American use of borrowed native tactics that made the minutemen so effective against the English Regulars in the American Revolution. Exploring

²⁹ Colin Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 92

³⁰ Malone 21

their tactics in warfare provides a unique glimpse of these two distinct cultures and their interactions.

Bibliography

1. Colin Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)
2. Alfred Cave, *The Pequot War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996)
3. Benjamin Church, *Diary of King Phillip's War 1675-76* (Chester: Pequot Press, 1975)
4. James Drake, *King Phillip's War: Civil War in New England 1675-1676* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999)
5. Douglas Leach, *Flintlock and Tomahawk: New England in King Phillip's War* (New York: Macmillan 1958)
6. Henry Lincoln, ed. *Narratives of the Indian Wars 1675-76* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1913)
7. Patrick Malone, *The Skulking Way of War* (Lanham: Madison Books, 1991)
8. Charles Orr, ed., *The Pequot War* (Cleveland: The Helman-Taylor Company, 1897)
9. Mary Rowlandson, *Narrative of the Capture and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (Cambridge: 1682)
10. Eric Schultz and Michael Tougias, *King Phillip's War* (New York: Countryman Press, 1999)
11. Armstrong Starkey, *European and Native American Warfare 1675-1815* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1998)
12. Ian Steele, *Warpaths: Invasions of North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994)
13. Maarten Ultee, ed. *Adapting to Conditions: War and Society in the Eighteenth Century* (University of Alabama Press, 1986)