

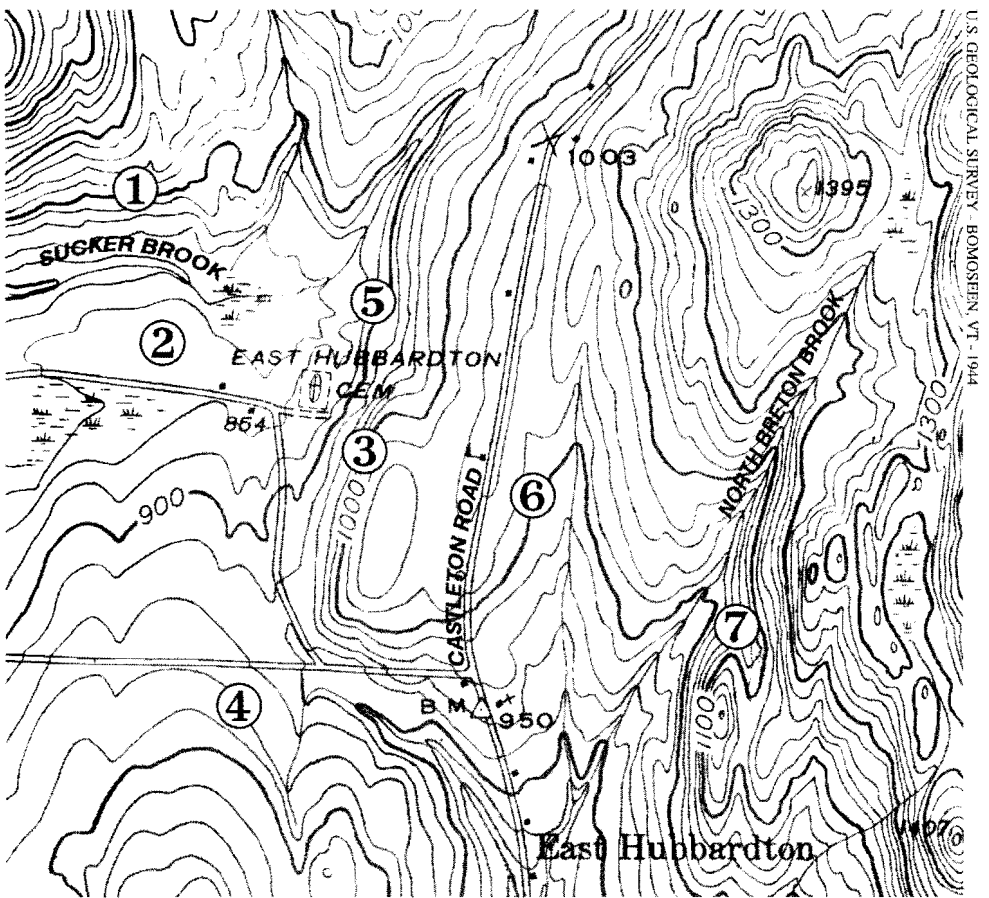
RUTLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Quarterly

VOLUME 32 No. 2

2002

July Guns of Colonial Patriots: The Battle of Hubbardton



1. British regiments arrive at battle site. 2. American companies meet British at Sucker Brook. 3. American main body on crest of hill. 4. British commit reserves to support their right flank. 5. German vanguard arrives to turn tide of battle. 6. American units withdraw to position behind the log fence. 7. Americans retreat beyond North Breton Brook and make a series of stands all the way to Pittsford Ridge.

Introduction

Hubbardton, a small township lying almost forgotten among the Vermont hills, has in its history a story to tell about this country's early struggle for freedom, and about the men who helped shape America's destiny. What happened there on a high plateau surrounded by a primeval forest shocked and awakened colonial New England, and, perhaps, the new nation that was then painfully coming into existence. This nation may not now recall the bravery and the sacrifice that was displayed there and which was an early precursor to the turning point of the American Revolutionary War at Saratoga. Because of its importance, the Battle of Hubbardton has become the object of renewed historical research.

After a lifetime of research into the roles of the participants in the Battle of Hubbardton, the author is now able to add to and expand on the known information about the battle and give some variant explanations of some of its elements. This has been achieved by a painstaking and thorough analysis of the best information that can now be abstracted from the mostly primary source materials of the actual participants in the battle. This has involved research into the names of hundreds of individuals and their testimonials.

About the Author

Carmine A. Pacca was born in Shrewsbury, Vermont, but came to Rutland with his family at an early age. He attended St. Peter's School and graduated from Mount Saint Joseph Academy in 1940. For over 60 years he has been intrigued by Vermont's only Revolutionary War battle and the heroism of those who fought there. Carmine served in the U.S. Army Air Corps in the Pacific Theater during World War II. After the war he graduated from the University of Vermont with an engineering degree. For a number of years he worked in private industry in Indiana as an engineer. He retired to Rutland in 1973 and has been an active member of the Rutland Historical Society since that time, serving as an officer of the Society and on the Archives and Exhibit Committees.

The *Quarterly* is published by the Rutland Historical Society, 96 Center Street, Rutland VT 05701-4023. Co-editors: Jim Davidson and Jacob Sherman. Copies are **\$2 each** plus \$1 per order. Membership in the Society includes a subscription to the *Quarterly* and the *Newsletter*. Copyright © 2002 The Rutland Historical Society, Inc. ISSN 0748-2493.

July Guns of Colonial Patriots: The Battle of Hubbardton

By Carmine A. Pacca

In the year 1777, Lieutenant General John Burgoyne led a British invasion from Canada that in July nearly trapped the American army at Fort Ticonderoga.¹ As the Americans retreated, Burgoyne ordered Brigadier General Simon Fraser, with his elite brigade called the advanced corps, to pursue the retreating Americans and engage them. The whole elite brigade was composed of ten companies of grenadiers, ten companies of light infantry, and eight companies of the 24th Regiment amounting to 1,816 officers and men. However, only 1,276 officers and men were assembled for the pursuit.² Burgoyne also ordered German Major General Frederick Von Riedesel, with an elite brigade of the Brunswick Army, to follow and support Fraser if he became engaged. This elite brigade was composed of the Regiment Riedesel, the Grenadier Battalion and the light infantry Battalion Barner that in all amounted to 1,492 officers and men.

On 4 July General Burgoyne had sent Indians with Captain Alexander Fraser's marksmen and some Canadians around to the left to reconnoiter on the new military road to Hubbardton and then to Castleton. They were to round up horses and cattle and to take prisoners of those who resisted the King's forces.³

The day of 6 July was oppressively hot and humid even in the forest, requiring the sweltering soldiers of each moving corps to take many rest stops and seek water. The American rearguard of Major General Arthur St. Clair's main army was composed of 450 chosen officers and men, who had been on picket duty the previous night with no sleep. They were commanded by one of the American army's best officers, Colonel Ebenezer Francis.⁴ They were given the Herculean task to bring along every man they found on both sides of Lake Champlain. This included stragglers of the main army, the walking wounded, the weak, disabled or sick, and some who had drunk too much wine and could not keep up with the fast pace of the front. In addition they were to bring along all beasts such as horses and cattle. To accomplish this task, and always remain one step ahead of the pursuing British advanced corps of Fraser, was a severe challenge.⁵

The main army of General St. Clair arrived in Hubbardton near Sucker Brook about one o'clock in the afternoon, rested till five o'clock

and then moved on to Castleton.⁶ While at Hubbardton St. Clair decided to increase the strength of his rear guard by adding two more Continental units and some militia to the group. Aware that he was being pursued by the elite forces of Europe, he chose his most experienced colonel, Seth Warner, to command the reinforced rear guard. Warner's orders were to follow the main army shortly after the arrival of Colonel Francis and then to camp about one and a half miles behind the main army at Castleton. Warner was 34 years old, a full Continental colonel and a tested troop leader. He had earned his reputation the previous year in the successful American retreat from Canada. Younger than either Fraser or Von Riedesel, Warner now commanded a full brigade with all the prerogatives and discretion of a Brigadier General. He would now have the option of modifying an order as the changing situation might dictate. However, when St. Clair issued his orders to Warner, he could not have been aware of the great physical suffering of the rear guard on that torrid day as they attempted to execute the difficult task assigned to them.

While the main army was resting, the rear guard was experiencing great difficulty in moving because of the large number of troops falling out of the main army through fatigue and other reasons. Colonel Francis had to rest his troops as much as possible under the circumstances, but could not rest long enough to make a big difference because of the stifling heat of that day.⁷ The rear guard with stragglers finally reached Hubbardton a little after St. Clair's main army had moved on. All were completely and utterly exhausted and could move no further that day. Warner realized that they were in a horrible condition to face combat should they be called upon to fight. These were all his men to command now and he was responsible for all of them. He could immediately march that whole expanded rear guard, with stragglers, further south four and a half miles to satisfy his orders, but by doing so would needlessly lose many good men. He would also have to bypass two regiments of the main army camped only two and a half miles ahead. His other option was to immediately rest the men completely where they were before a new day dawned. Then he would be prepared to leave or fight depending upon how aggressively the British pursued. Nearby there was a superior defensive position. No other of that quality existed on the retreat road. The hill with a high plateau sloping slightly southward was excellent for defense if fighting became necessary. Warner, because of his Canadian experience, utilized command discretion and decided to stay till morning. Later some officers in the army, in order to defend General St. Clair, severely criticized him for that decision.

There were many different categories of stragglers and most, if not all of them, were left in a cleared area with girdled trees [ringed to kill them] near the banks of Sucker Brook. Here they found water, rest, refreshment and relief from the scorching heat of the torrid July day. About four companies joined them to help man a defensive position at the road crossing. To protect the troops from a surprise attack, a night picket was posted. The night before they retreated, the garrison was ordered to draw 24 extra rounds of ammunition and five days provisions each.⁸ The extra rounds would be more than enough for a good battle and the supply of food should get them to the next supply base. The troops assigned to reinforce the rear guard would bivouac on the plateau. Colonel Francis and his 450 men would soon join them. It would only be natural for many of the stragglers to join their own units there. The remaining forces, except the four companies at Sucker Brook, were unorganized and therefore less than effective. Colonel Seth Warner was in command of all these troops, which amounted to about 1,247 officers and men.

Unfortunately Warner's own regiment was not up to strength and Colonel Nathan Hale could not bring his whole 2nd New Hampshire Regiment to engage. The gallant Major Benjamin Titcomb, who was always in the thickest of the fighting, would command the portion that was to be engaged. As a balance to this shortfall, Warner had available some good militia troops and the unorganized stragglers of the main army units. The American pickets that had been posted that night near Sucker Brook to give advance warning of the enemy's approach, were not there in the morning. This caused great alarm.⁹ It is probable that Captain Fraser's Indians, reconnoitering in support of General Fraser's advanced corps, carried them off in the silent watches of the night.

The morning of 7 July had the promise of being exceedingly hot and humid, as the previous day had been. At about six o'clock in the morning, Fraser's advanced guard in column of march, commanded by Major Robert Grant of the 24th Regiment, surprised the small American units down on the south side of Sucker Brook as they were cooking and eating breakfast and thus in an unfit posture for battle.¹⁰ Private Joseph Bird of Captain John Chadwick's Company of Brewer's 12th Massachusetts Regiment was boiling chocolate. As he carried some near the road crossing, he saw the front of the British column about 250 feet up the road forming into a battle line. He immediately gave the alarm. Just at sunrise, Ebenezer Fletcher of Captain James Carr's Company heard that alarm, saw the enemy in line of battle on the north side of the brook, and prepared for action.¹¹ Captain James Carr's Company of Colonel Hale's 2nd New Hampshire Regiment was greatly burdened with

those who could not keep up with their units on the retreat. He gave his men and the stragglers immediate orders to lay down their packs and be ready for action. Every man sought secure shelter for himself behind girdled trees that stood nearby.¹²

British Major Grant, having deployed his troops in line of battle supported by light infantry with grenadiers in reserve, faced the Americans. As Grant mounted a tree stump to reconnoiter, he gave the command to fire and was immediately hit by an American rifleman's ball and died instantly. The fire fight continued hot for a short time, causing a loss of 21 men in the leading British platoon which was commanded by Major Alexander Lindsey (Earl of Balcarres), who received his "baptism of fire" that day. The light infantry suffered very much from this American fire, particularly the companies of the 29th and 34th Regiments. Captain John Harris of the 34th Regiment was struck by a ball that entered his hip. He lay under a tree where he had scrambled to avoid the scattering shot.¹³ At the first fire, many of the unorganized American stragglers retreated south into the forest in great haste. Those who remained steadfast were organized, but few in number compared to the enemy, and at length gave way. They also retreated in great haste some distance south into the forest behind them to join units posted near the crest of the high hill, leaving their casualties behind. Poor little Ebenezer Fletcher, only 16 and the fifer of his company, was wounded and left behind. Many days later when his wound had healed some, he made his escape.

This prelude to the main action delayed the British for quite some time. It forced them to reassemble their scattered men into column formation and to march for some distance southerly before the column was halted at the foot of a high hill on their left. Fraser then faced the column to the left. He then ran up the hill with the column in front. At the same time his advanced guard was engaged.¹⁴ Fraser had previously intended to form his battle line with the light infantry battalion on the left of Major Grant's advanced guard, and keep the grenadier battalion in reserve. However, the advanced guard, without its commander, was in great danger of having the British right flank turned by Warner's spirited attack. Therefore he committed his reserve and ordered the grenadier battalion, under Major John Dyke Acland, to support the right. Acland's directions were to prevent the Americans from gaining the road that led to Castleton and Skeenesborough. This change in the battle plan greatly weakened Fraser's left for which he had no reserve on the field. Now the outcome would be determined by the timely arrival of the German Brigade.¹⁵

The British could see the strongly positioned Americans who held

the crest of the hill. The Americans had felled great trees across each other in random dispersion all the way across the slope and for a short distance down the hill. The American battle line, facing mostly west-erly, was a curved line - an arc that followed the crest of the plateau and gave them the advantage of high ground. Colonel Ebenezer Francis and his 450 men defended the center, a position of honor and of great trust and responsibility. The right flank was assigned to Major Benjamin Titcomb, who commanded part of the 2nd New Hampshire Regiment. Colonel Seth Warner, the commander of the rear guard, took the left flank with his under-manned regiment and some militia. This was per-haps the toughest portion to defend because of the terrain.

As the British struggled up the incline with determination and reso-lution, they were peppered with a very dense dose of musket balls mixed with buckshot. When the British were within thirty yards of the rebels, they received orders to prime and load. This was barely accomplished before they took a heavy fire, which for a few moments made them mind-ful of their creator.¹⁶ Then came the heavy firing by platoons, one after the other at intervals, which was heard by the inhabitants up and down the valley and far to the east of Pittsford Ridge.¹⁷ Francis and Titcomb pushed back the first attack of Major Balcarres' light infantry and forced their retreat some distance down the slope. However, the heroic Balcarres soon regrouped and advanced his troops back up the slope again for at least two more attempts. It was perhaps in this long and bitter struggle to take the crest of the hill that Major Balcarres had the lock and barrel of his fusil [light flintlock musket] shot off. He also received a slight wound on his left thigh. After the battle he counted 13 holes in his clothing made by musket fire.¹⁸

When the British gained the crest of the hill after a long contention, they sent a heavy fire among the Americans, who maintained their ground for quite some time.¹⁹ The hills and valleys reverberated with the roar of musket fire. Occasionally the dull clang of steel bayonets could be heard. The battle lines flowed back and forth with no one seem-ing to gain any permanent advantage. Colonels Warner, Francis, and Major Titcomb, the principal American officers in command in this dif-ficult and dangerous encounter, made great exertions. For quite some time they successfully resisted, and once were even on the verge of vic-tory.²⁰

Having finally gained the plateau, Fraser was now beginning to worry about his ammunition supply. He had had little time in the early morn-ing hours, when he hurriedly left Ticonderoga, to properly plan for the unlikely obstinate resistance of the retreating Americans. He also real-ized that he was not far enough from the crest of the hill for comfort,

and that he desperately needed to move forward. He knew from long experience the effect of shining bayonets glinting and gleaming in the blazing July sun and saw the possibility of striking fear and panic in the young Continentals. So he ordered a bayonet charge along his left wing. However, far from showing panic, the Americans received the charge with resolution and great bravery, reforming the line and moving a little to the right. Colonel Francis, well supported by all his officers and men, soon ordered a bayonet counter charge along his right wing, which developed with such force that the enemy's line was broken in a few places and they were thrown into great disorder and confusion. However, their officers quickly reformed the line.

After this first charge and counter charge, there occurred a second and a third by the combatants on that hot July morning. As the Americans kept moving more and more to the American right after each sortie, they soon had outflanked the British by a sizeable amount. The British did not, or could not, match that movement because they had a weakness on their left and no reserve on the field.²¹ The Americans, who early recognized that weakness, kept pounding the British left flank.²² The Americans initiated their third bayonet counter charge, which began to turn the British left flank. It looked like victory was at hand. In the vanguard of this third bayonet counter charge was Colonel Ebenezer Francis who was in the process of dealing a crushing blow that would turn the British left flank and surround the British forces.²³ At this critical stage of the battle General Riedesel arrived with the vanguard of his elite Brunswick reinforcements to support the British left flank.

Riedesel immediately ordered Major Ferdinand Von Barner with the foremost of his column, the 125-man Yager Rifle Company, to attack the American right flank. The company was commanded by Captain Carl Von Geyso and led by a small band of musicians. Meanwhile the 80-man Grenadier unit, commanded by Captain Christoph Schottelius, was to fall on the American rear.²⁴ The remainder of the German Brigade, commanded by Lt. Colonel Heinrich Breymann, was coming up some distance behind to support the action.²⁵ Schuler Von Senden, an ensign in Colonel Johann Von Specht's Regiment, stated in his *Journal of the Voyage From Portsmouth to Quebec ...* "Fraser wants the honor of the day solely for himself. [He] attacks without waiting for our arrival but he gets a severe beating, and as we enter the battlefield, he is in great disorder."

The Yager Rifle Company advanced courageously upon the Americans, singing psalms with musical accompaniment, while keeping up an incessant firing. The company was met by a brisk fire from 400

Americans who wounded five officers, including Major Barner and two captains.²⁶ At about this time, as Colonel Ebenezer Francis of the 11th Massachusetts Regiment was leading the third bayonet counter charge to finally turn the British left flank, he received a rifle ball through his right arm. While Francis continued the charge at the head of his men with great bravery, a Yager rifle ball entered his right breast and he fell forward on his face, mortally wounded.²⁷ (Later the men of the Yager Company buried him in deference to his bravery).²⁸ While this third counter charge was in progress Major Benjamin Titcomb, who was commanding part of the 2nd New Hampshire Regiment, was severely wounded and taken prisoner near the British left flank.

By this time the 80-man German Grenadiers were on the flank and trying to get into the rear of the American right wing. When the American Colonel and Major fell and the German Grenadiers partly outflanked them, the Americans stopped fighting. They then pulled back a short distance eastward on the undulating plateau to a hill position of less eminence and resumed firing.²⁹ Here they were pushed so warmly that they left the position, pulled back east across the road leading to Castleton, and were ordered to form on the east side of a log fence.³⁰ Once there, they fought for quite some time. Try as they would, the British could not drive them out. Private Joseph Bird of Captain Chadwick's Company had fired nearly 20 cartridges before the whole German Brigade appeared on the field to join the action.³¹ On the American left wing, where Colonel Warner's undermanned Green Mountain Boys and some militia were fighting from behind the log fence,³² the battle to hold back the British Grenadiers was becoming desperate. By this time the Americans had already lost the road leading to Castleton, but had not yet lost the whole valley leading south.

The numbers facing the American line increased when the remainder of the German Brigade came into action with 1,287 more officers and men. Colonel Warner, commanding the rear guard, saw that he was now contending with overwhelming numbers. With another bayonet charge forming, he had no reason to stay longer. Therefore he ordered a complete disengagement retreat of the whole rear guard. The battle on the plateau had then lasted about one hour and twenty-five minutes.³³

Before the Grenadiers were able to close the whole valley leading south to Castleton, Captain John Chadwick of the 12th Massachusetts Regiment with about 30 men, and perhaps others, was able to retreat through the closing trap.³⁴ The remaining Continentals who retreated,

with Warner bringing up the rear, raced mostly southeast down the long open meadow, exposed to enemy fire on their rear. They had some difficulty crossing the brush fence, came to the brook and then to the forested land that rose into a mountain that peaked at Pittsford Ridge. Arriving at the forested edge of the land, the Continentals quickly reorganized for a stand on commanding ground behind trees. For quite some time very hot firing took place with many casualties.³⁵ The battle spread up to the nearby north-south ridge, high above the North Breton Brook where there was a fierce struggle by the Continentals. Once in the woods the retreating Americans made judicious use of the forest trees and cover. Having the advantage of higher terrain, they made the enemy pay dearly for the chase. The Americans occupied a series of defensive positions, firing and retreating on the way to the summit.³⁶ This extended the battle for about another hour and added to the British casualties.³⁷

Even after the battle ended, many of Colonel Seth Warner's troops lay concealed in the woods and occasionally took shots at the British Grenadier officers. They severely wounded Captain John Shrimpton in the shoulder. Major John Dyke Acland was also wounded in the thigh.³⁸ About five o'clock in the afternoon Fraser ordered the Grenadiers down from the summit as he was fearful of an attack by reinforcements from St. Clair's main army. But there was no attack. Meanwhile Colonel Warner led about 100 men of different regiments from the Pittsford Ridge area to Rutland where they arrived in the evening.³⁹ They stopped at James Mead's tavern and dwelling house, where they looked for a good meal and for a doctor to dress their wounds caused by the battle. Jacob Rubach, an excellent doctor, lived in Rutland and had previously treated the troops stationed at Fort Ticonderoga. They hoped that Dr. Rubach would be available to dress the wounds of Sergeant Josiah Dorman of Captain Wheelwright's Company in the 11th Massachusetts Regiment, among others.⁴⁰ Sergeant Dorman was wounded in the breast and hand and was considered one of the walking wounded.

The rear guard, although once on the verge of victory, had performed the assignment expected of them. They had protected all the units of the main army by stopping further pursuit by the British, and then disengaged with most of the command intact to fight another day.