

War of Nations: Battle in The Finger Lakes- Part II

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The first reality of war is that you can throw out the battle plan after the first shots are fired as the enemy, the weather and other unknowns will nullify the plan before it can be rendered successful.

This was the case for General John Sullivan, sent by George Washington to severely hamstring the ability of Seneca Warriors and Loyalist Rangers to make war against the Mohawk Valley. Sullivan's army marching through the Finger Lakes in the summer of 1779 burned crops and villages as Oneida native guides lead them north and West through present day Geneva, Canandaigua, Geneseo and other towns along the rough path. Their mission as Washington defined it was to end the ability of the Seneca to make total war and assist the British Army.



In a letter to Sullivan, Washington made his plan clear.

"The expedition you are appointed to command is to be directed against the hostile tribes of the six nations of Indians, with their associates and adherents.¹ The immediate objects are the total destruction and devastation of their settlements and the capture of as many prisoners of every age and sex as possible. It will be essential to ruin their crops now in the ground and prevent their planting more."

Sullivan was given a strong army of four brigades with over 12 regiments and other contingents of troops including Morgan's Riflemen, an elite unit of woodsmen who had ensured victory at Saratoga and who would continue to play a crucial role in the campaigns leading up to the ultimate surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781. Morgan's men were critical to what amounted to "jungle" warfare against an irregular force that practiced guerilla tactics and faded back into the forests, gullies and mountains.

The Army crossed today's Pennsylvania/New York border near Tioga and began angling northwesterly. We would need a book to describe the logistics of assembling and marching an army through the wilderness on what would pass today as improved hiking trails. Regardless of the poor quality of the route, the Army managed as a rule, to cover 8 miles a day dragging along pack horses, cannon, and carts loaded with provisions to sustain the troops and provide ample ammunition. This all had to be accomplished with only axes to widen the trails and compasses to point the way on overcast days.

Surveying parties created maps, Pioneers (combat engineers) threw logs across swamps and bridged streams. Always, a party of Morgan's Rifle Corps or Schott's Rifle Company ranged in front of the column to trip any ambush the green coated Loyalist rangers and their First Nation's allies might be planning, and also to drive off individual hidden snipers. The style of warfare had more in common with Vietnam - "Search and Destroy" in a mysterious environment where enemy troops could be hidden behind every rock and tree. Washington well knew the risks.

The General feared and respected the military ability of the Seneca. He had seen firsthand the tremendous capability of the woodland irregulars when they and their French allies destroyed the army of British General Braddock in 1755 near the site of present-day Duquesne, Pennsylvania. He had himself been present on the gory day. He was determined not to see a repeat 24 years later.

In his letter to General Sullivan, Washington shared this - *"I need not urge the necessity of using every method in your power, to gain intelligence of the enemy's strength motions and designs; nor need I suggest the extraordinary degree of vigilance and caution which will be necessary to guard against surprises from an adversary so secret desultory & rapid as the Indians."*

The first resistance in force that the invading Patriot army met, was not far from present day Elmira, NY. Colonel John Butler commanded a handful of British regulars and hundreds of angry warriors of the First Nations. This was a polyglot force of Seneca, Mohawk, Cayuga and others. Notably, many were multi-generational Christians. The notion of vast cultural differences rarely holds up in the light of day. This was becoming more and more a war of territory and defense of strategic resources for the Colonists and one of territorial integrity for the Iroquois. Long House culture had largely disappeared by this time as Iroquoian people had developed their own fusion culture of native beliefs, Christianity, European technology and agriculture combined with traditional life patterns. European Americans on the frontiers often mirrored much of the lifestyle.

On August 29, 1779, four weeks into the campaign, the Native force hunkered behind a barricade on a steep hill above the Chemung Valley near the village of Newtown, hoping for a chance to ambush the Americans. What they hadn't prepared for was being spotted by Morgan's Rifle Corps and a shelling of artillery before the infantry raced up the hill. Unnerved by the cannon fire, the indigenous warfighters unused to European combat tactics, began to lose resolve. Casualties were low when we consider that Sullivan committed two brigades or 2,000

men plus the rifle corps to the attack, and that the combined British Crown Forces numbered 800. In three hours of skirmishing only a few dozen were killed by the bombardment and subsequent assault by the Patriot infantry. Americans killed in action amounted to a mere handful.



Sullivan had displayed strength, resolve and decisiveness. Total casualties on both sides that day amounted to around 20 dead and 50 wounded. The Loyalist Commanders knew they could not hope to stop the incursion and were impotent to defend their local allies. Without artillery and sufficient organized formations of warfighters they had to melt back into the Finger Lakes.

Some headed for the village at “Chenusio” to the northwest, others scattered to their respective villages and cabins. The main force was determined to shadow the Continental Army from the protection of the hills and forest.

The small village of Newtown was leveled by the Continentals and crops destroyed as the Army turned north and headed for French Catherine’s Town (Watkins Glen) named for Catherine Montour, a very successful Seneca horse trader.

The expedition was moving swiftly but, it was at the deserted French Catherine’s Town that the American troops committed the first of several atrocities on both sides, when a rear guard murdered a very elderly woman who Sullivan had ordered left with provisions.

The campaign now would be marked on both sides with sporadic acts of callousness and revenge. This behavior was not only a result of the bitterness felt between them but also sprang from the brutality of the Seven Years War in the 1750s and Pontiac’s Rebellion in the 60s. Frontier warfare was personal, complicated, and extremely violent by anyone’s standard and everyone was all in.

It took only a week for the Army to ascend Seneca Lake while a smaller detached force Under Colonel John Harper of the Volunteer Corps worked its way up the east side of Cayuga Lake. A warrior taken prisoner near present day Geneva indicated that Butler’s Rangers and the native force were hoping to set a trap near Geneva. Crown forces still hoped to stall or turn back Sullivan’s expedition.

With crops being destroyed in late summer the Loyalist Colonel knew that Niagara would be inundated with displaced and hungry refugees, and that there would be no haven for his forces that winter among the villages of the Finger Lakes. Butler had built a ranger encampment in Kanadasaga (Geneva) and it too was burned. The Patriot Army paused here for a day and took in an abandoned child believed to have been taken prisoner during a loyalist raid.

It was a singular expedition. With aspects of Manifest Destiny, exploration and specific military objectives. Troops marveled at the size of native fields of corn and the quality and height of the forest timber and broad "savannahs" of tall grass.

In his journal entry on September 9th Lieutenant Colonel Adam Hubley of the 11th Pennsylvania noted - *"After marching seven miles, (from Kanadasaga/Geneva) we came to a creek known by the name of Flint Creek, which the whole, excepting Clinton's brigade, crossed, and encamped on a plain which had been occupied by the enemy but a few days before for the same purpose. Distance seven miles."*

The hamlet of Flint and Flint Creek live on today. The route of march was down modern routes 5 & 20.

The countryside was empty of First Nations residents, but here and there they were met with distant shots and paused to burn extensive fields of crops, native cabins and orchards.

Less than two weeks after the battle of Newtown Sullivan's Army reached "Kanandaque" and put the torch to "the best collection" of cabins they had yet encountered - it was September 10th and the Army climbed a low hill west of town and rested at the site of another village of 20-30 houses of "hewn plank." They ate some of the corn and vegetables they found there and destroyed the remainder. The campaign was well in hand the following day as they marched southwest through Canandaigua toward present day Bristol, down what is now known as County Road 32.

Mid afternoon of the following day they descended a ridge to the head of Anyayea (Honeoye) Lake where about a dozen First Nations cabins formed a Seneca hamlet. The extensive fields of corn were destroyed, and a small fort was built around one of the cabins using barrels of flour and casks of musket balls. The little fort was manned by a detachment of 50 men who were suffering minor injuries. Their job was to guard precious supplies and lighten the load for the main body. Time was running short to wrap up the campaign and return to Easton, Pennsylvania before cold weather set in.

The main body set off on the 12th in the direction of Conesus Lake, surveying the route and making notes of Conyeadice and Adjutsa Lakes - respectively Canadice and Conesus. Late that day - Lieutenant Thomas Boyd, Sergeant Parker, and 24 men of the Rifle Corps along with a small group of Oneida Warriors including one Chief named Honjost set off on a reconnaissance of Chenusio or Jinisee as it was sometimes called - known to be the principal village of the Seneca in the area of the wide valley.

Boyd was returning to with his party to give a report on the morning of the 13th when they encountered a group of Loyalists and Senecas who fired on them and ran. Boyd made a fatal mistake and pursued with his men including the mounted Oneida men. They ran directly into an ambush set by several hundred of Butler's little army. Butler's Crown forces delivered a staggering volley which cut down many of the riflemen. A hasty withdrawal by a few carrying word of the ambush to Sullivan's main body exposed them to more musketry. Boyd's main party fought back from a copse of trees, surrounded, and in the end 17 men were either dead or missing.

One of the survivors - America's first known sniper, Timothy Murphy, escaped. Several of the men were taken prisoner and herded west from today's Groveland to the banks of the Jinisee River where they were tortured and executed. Lieutenant Boyd's and Sergeant Parker's remains were recovered on September the 14th. Among the dead was the "Estimable Oneida Sachem," interpreter and scout - Hanjost who was recovered among the soldiers he and his Oneida men volunteered to serve with.

The village at Chenusio containing 128 "elegant" houses was put to the torch on the 15th and extensive fields ready for harvest destroyed. Two more captives, a woman and child taken in a raid were repatriated and the Army began to retrace its route. The child who was suffering from malnutrition later died.

Sullivan knew he could not stretch his supply lines any further and that he had done substantial strategic damage which would ensure the Mohawk Valley harvest of 1779 was uninterrupted. The expedition was only a partial military success. In 1780 the Loyalists and First Nations would strike back with a vengeance burning and fighting pitched battles in the Mohawk and Schoharie Valleys. Battles which they won.

The thousands of men who served with Sullivan's expedition would not forget the vast grasslands, towering forests and rich soil of the Finger Lakes and Genesee.

In 1789 with the Opening of the Phelps and Gorham purchase, Veterans from New England would trek into our region seeking a new life. Living alongside their Native neighbors would be tense and eventually the Pickering Treaty - the first treaty the new United States signed with any Original Peoples would be formalized and celebrated in Canandaigua at the location of the present Ontario County Court House. Relations between the Iroquois Confederacy and the United States Government have been contentious, but the Treaty is still honored by descendants and representatives every year in Canandaigua.



The State of New York and the Federal Government pride themselves on the history of the treaty but have not always been as true as they could.

First Nation's successes in casino management over the past few decades have spurred recent past state administrations to try to muscle in on the gambling business by granting licenses to non-native businesses which has been notably less successful than the Oneida or Seneca casinos. Before we castigate Sullivan we might want to look at our own failures to deal honorably.

We would not live in this beautiful land if not for Sullivan's expedition and might even have continued as an unwilling part of the British Empire, but we must remember with honesty the profanity and ugliness of war on all sides. The American Revolution created a great and singular nation. Remember the sacrifices that were made by all.