

Why Join NFOE?

For any re-enactment group perhaps the best recruiting tool is a Hollywood blockbuster covering your period. We all know that the movie industry likes to play around with history but it is the imagery of soldiers of your favourite period on the big screen in a well-constructed period setting that can inspire. In New France Old England (NFOE) we, of course, have 'The Last of the Mohicans' working for us. The last version, released in 1996, certainly did it for me.

NFOE has quite a few years under its belt now, but, like other 18th century groups, has always been perceived as on the edge of mainstream re-enactment when compared with other periods such as ECW, ACW, and WWII. Yet there is no reason for that to be the case.

NFOE's period is 1750s Colonial North America – the time of the French & Indian War – the American theatre of the Seven Years' War. It is a war that brought the formal military disciplines of European armies to an entirely alien environment – the vast forested wilderness of North America – and mixed it with the local knowledge and expertise of established settlers and the indigenous peoples to create a conflict like no other.

The war had its classic battles that would not have been out of place in Europe: the French siege of Fort William Henry, the disastrous British attack on Fort Carillon at Ticonderoga and the two battles outside the walls of Quebec – the Plains of Abraham and Ste. Foy. But the real essence of this war manifests itself in the constant small-scale patrols, scouts and raids that each side utilised as they strived to disrupt opposition plans and in an endless search for information on enemy intentions.

The very first action of the war was of this type when a body of about 40 Virginians with Indian support, led by a then obscure colonial officer - Major George Washington – ambushed a party of about 30 French soldiers at a place now known as Jumonville Glen. It formed a pattern that continued throughout the war.

The first British regulars arrived in North America in 1755 and had much to learn about North American warfare. Here the French initially had an advantage. Besides the regular French battalions also despatched across the Atlantic in 1755, the French colony in North America – called New France – boasted its own military resource, *Les Compagnies Franches de la Marine*. These Independent Companies of the Marine were raised in France by the Ministry of the Marine for service in the colonies. They were long established in New France so the soldiers were well-acquainted with the complexities of warfare in this hostile environment.

Once in America the British gradually accepted the necessity of using local expertise and looked to Ranger companies to give them more flexibility. The most famous of the ranger leaders was Major Robert Rogers of Rogers' Rangers – who even got his own Hollywood recognition in the 1940 movie *Northwest Passage*.

Britain also raised Provincial regiments from its North American colonies to boost manpower. These men signed on for a campaign, but the relationship between the regulars and these local soldiers was often strained.

Both Britain and France organised militia formations and in the case of the French *milice* these men, many with great experience in the wilderness and familiarity with the ways of the Indians, proved a great asset.

The final component of the armies was the Indian tribes of north-eastern America and the Great Lakes. Both sides recruited the indigenous people although the British felt more uneasy in utilising their talents than the French who had maintained long-standing trading relationships; although there is no doubt that many of the French regulars reluctantly accepted their Indian allies only as a necessary evil. The Indians for their part shifted their alliances in line with their hopes to maintain their lands in the face of European encroachment.

Against this colourful assortment of units and individual characters a society like NFOE has a vibrant palette from which to create its displays. History helps us too. Many of the accounts of the raids and scouts that pushed out into the wilderness show that these parties were formed of volunteers. The boredom of duty in isolated garrisons meant there was no shortage of men willing to risk danger for the chance of excitement and the chance to earn extra money. Therefore these small groups that set out were formed from any number of units allowing for a complete variety of uniforms. There are other accounts of attacks on fatigue parties, sentries, ambushes and unplanned woodland encounters which are also easy to recreate but are historically accurate. This variety of combat situations allows NFOE to perform its public skirmishes on an almost one-to-one scale without concerns over incorporating a variety of uniform and unit types.

What, however, is most important to produce a believable French & Indian War small scale scenario is a battlefield with trees! While it doesn't have to be total woodland, it certainly does need to be a combination of trees and open space, although the public displays we have presented in woods remain to me the most memorable. They do require a lot of careful planning though to ensure the audience can actually see what is happening! But for me there is nothing more thrilling than the sight of a redcoat patrol marching along a woodland trail when the silence is broken by an unseen, unworldly Indian war whoop. It always makes the hairs stick up on the back of my neck.

So, I believe the 18th century does not need to remain on the edges of mainstream re-enactment. Often the cost of 18th century kit is put forward as a reason for not sampling the period, and yes, equipping yourself as a regular European infantryman can be costly. But kit for some of the other troop types that form NFOE can be acquired at far more affordable prices. And for some troop types you don't even need breeches – a breechclout will do. Do you have the balls to wear a breechclout!?

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