

“Army, France”, in *Colonial Wars of North America 1512-1763: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan Gallay (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996): 39-41.

The first French commercial establishments, settlements, and missions in North America were defended by soldiers in the private employ of governors, commercial companies, and the Jesuits; the main burden of defense rested on amateur civilians who took up arms in times of danger. Settlers in Canada, however, could not adequately defend themselves against annual large-scale incursions by the Iroquois, and the Indians almost forced the colonists to abandon their settlements in the early 1660s.

Direct royal government was established in Canada in 1663, and in 1665, Louis XIV dispatched the 1,200-strong Régiment de Carignan-Salières to deal with the Iroquois. This professional unit, organized in 24 companies, burned Iroquois villages and crops and obliged the confederacy to open peace negotiations. Although part of the regiment returned to France in 1667-1668, the government persuaded more than 400 soldiers and several officers to settle in the colony, making a substantial addition to Canada’s population and seigneurial class. During the following decades the government maintained a small and fluctuating garrison in the colony. In order to improve local defense, a militia was organized in 1669 comprising all able-bodied males between the ages of 16 and 60. The militia was divided into companies, each with a captain of militia chosen by the governor from among the more notable citizens.

In 1683, the Ministry of Marine, responsible for the navy and the colonies, sent the first of the *Compagnies franches de la Marine*, or Independent Companies of the Marine, to Canada. Two years later, companies were stationed in Acadia and Newfoundland, and troops were sent to Louisiana in 1703. The *troupes de la Marine*, or colonial regulars (they had no connection with the navy), were always recruited in France and wore a uniform of grey-white cloth with blue cuffs, collar, and vest. They resembled line regiments in appearance and armament, but since the corps was trained in irregular as well as conventional tactics, they also adopted a practical field uniform consisting of a short hooded coat, leather leggings, and moccasins, and temporarily replaced their swords with tomahawks and knives. Very early on, detachments of colonial regulars were trained as gunners, and official units of *cannoniers-bombardiers* were established at Louisbourg (on Cape Breton Island) in 1743, in Canada in 1750, and in Louisiana in 1759. These elite gunners also served as grenadiers and wore a blue coat with red cuffs and vest. Companies of colonial regulars garrisoned the main towns and were stationed at forts far into the interior of the continent. They formed the core of every raiding party, and customarily fought in combination with the militia and Indians. In Canada, local seigneurial families eventually almost monopolized the officer corps, but in other colonies most officers came from France and returned home when they completed their service. The sons of Canadian seigneurs so coveted officer commissions that they served as common soldiers until vacancies were available, bearing the rank of cadet, which was created for them in 1731. Fort commanders in the west often made considerable fortunes from the fur trade, and officers vigorously competed for appointments to these posts. Since there were no units larger than a company, none of the officers held an official rank higher than captain.

In 1699, there were 840 colonial regulars in Canada, organized in 28 companies of 50 men. The official establishment was fixed at 1,500 troops in 1750, and a final strength of 2,600 men in 40 companies of 65 soldiers was reached in 1757. Louisbourg’s garrison rose from six to 24 companies between 1713 and 1749, and Louisiana had up to 16 companies. The shortage of troops capable of meeting the British regulars on the conventional battlefield led to the

consolidation of several companies to form a colonial regular battalion in 1757, and a second battalion in early 1760. Lieutenant General Louis-Joseph de Montcalm, marquis de Montcalm (1712-1759), and his officers considered the Canadian officers brave, but unable to cope with the increasingly complex conventional warfare on the continent. This led to some tensions between the two officer corps. Relations between French line troops, colonial regulars, and Canadian soldiers tended to be much better. After the capitulation in 1760, 647 of the colonial regulars returned to France and were incorporated into line regiments. The rest, several hundred troops, opted to settle in Canada and endure British rule.

In 1723, the Ministry of Marine obtained the Régiment Suisse de Karrer, a Swiss unit raised by the army in 1719, for garrison duty overseas. A depot company was stationed at the French port of Rochefort, and other companies garrisoned Louisbourg, New Orleans, Mobile, Martinique, and Saint-Domingue (Haiti). The soldiers of this regiment, which was renamed Hallwyl when a new colonel purchased the unit in 1752, wore a red coat like other Swiss troops, and blue cuffs, vest, breeches, and stockings. The disciplined Swiss distinguished themselves against the Louisiana Indians and during the first siege of Louisbourg, but were disbanded in 1763.

With the exception of the Régiment de Carignan-Salières, no line regiment of the French army served in North America until the mid-eighteenth century. Four line regiments and some French provincial militia briefly stopped at the future site of Halifax during Lieutenant General Jean-Baptiste Louis Frédéric de La Rochefoucauld de Roye, duc d'Anville's (1709-1746) disastrous expedition to retake Louisbourg in 1746, but during the Seven Years' War numerous line regiments arrived in North America. They were temporarily placed under the authority of the minister of marine, and the commanding general was subject to the strategic decisions of the governor general of New France. Four thousand three hundred men belonging to the second battalions of the regiments of La Reine, Languedoc, Guyenne, Béarn, Royal Roussillon, and La Sarre, and the second and third battalions of Berry served with Major General Baron Jean-Armand de Dieskau (1701-1767) and Montcalm in Canada. With them were gunners and engineers from their respective corps, and a few German and Irish troops sent to attract deserters from the British army. The second battalions of the regiments of Artois, Bourgogne, Cambis, and Volontaires Étrangers served at Louisbourg during the war, and in 1762-1763 a battalion of the Régiment d'Angoumois was stationed in Louisiana. They all wore the grey-white uniforms of the line army with the distinctive facings of individual regiments.

Each line battalion in Canada in 1755 had 12 companies of fusiliers and one company of grenadiers, amounting to an average of 31 officers and 525 other ranks. By the last years of the war, however, each battalion had fallen to two-thirds of even half strength. The desperate shortage of conventional infantry was first met by consolidating the companies of colonial regulars into battalions; then, in 1759, by drafting militiamen into line battalions, which helped to throw Montcalm's columns at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham into confusion; and finally, in 1760, by attaching militia companies under French officers to each regular battalion to serve as light infantry. The latter solution proved to be highly effective at the Battle of Sainte-Foy.

During the Seven Years' War, drafts of unpaid militiamen were organized in five-company brigades, usually strengthened by colonial regular non-commissioned officers and soldiers. The militia officers were *habitants* with limited military experience and authority, and they were customarily placed under the command of professional officers from the colonial regulars and sometimes the line regiments. The lack of experienced officers and the annual raising of militia units made it difficult to turn this body of civilians into an effective fighting

force. Nevertheless, the militiamen possessed a strong military tradition and willingly performed valuable service as transport troops and irregulars, patiently enduring miserable conditions and illness because they habitually lacked tents, clothing, and nutritious food. The militia performed best when supported by regular troops. Canadian soldiers saw nothing wrong with destroying American settlements and killing armed civilians, but refrained from scalping the dead and attempted to discourage atrocities by their native allies.

In the seventeenth century, the French government committed small numbers of troops to North America in order to defend Canada against the Indians, but after 1700, they pursued a more aggressive strategy to contain American agricultural settlements behind the Appalachians. A string of garrisons between New Orleans and Quebec held a large number of Indian nations economically and politically in the French orbit, and in wartime the Indians and Canadians kept the enemy on the defensive. The Atlantic fortress of Louisbourg was designed to protect the fisheries, but without naval support it was unable to defend the fishing fleets or withstand a lengthy siege. During the Seven Years' War, the French government ordered its generals in Canada to tie down the British army for as long as possible while the French army made gains in Germany. The generals faithfully carried out their orders and managed to hold out for six years.

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References

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See also ARTILLERY, FRANCE; FRANCE; FRANCE-CANADIAN RELATIONS; NAVY, FRANCE; WEAPONS, FIREARMS