CHAPTER EIGHT

PRIDE, PREJUDICE AND PRESTIGE: FRENCH OFFICERS IN NORTH AMERICA DURING THE SEVEN YEARS’ WAR

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When M. de Bourlamaque heard rumors of a potential war brewing between France and Prussia in 1755, he hastened to write the King of France and present his candidacy. Like many other officers of the French army, he had “languished during the peace,” following the War of the Austrian Succession, and the rumors refreshed his hopes for the glory in battle that would advance his position and solidify his reputation. Begging the king for a prominent role in the upcoming conflict, he presented “no other ambition, Sir, than to be able to serve in a manner that is essential [to the army].” Hundreds of other officers offered their services, pledging their “livess and possessions” and expressing sincere “attachment to [the king’s] service.” The Seven Years’ War did provide a platform for Bourlamaque and his fellow officers to exhibit their talents and zeal, but it also challenged their military culture and shook their traditions to their foundations.

Especially in North America, where Bourlamaque was to serve, the French officers’ culture and priorities brought them into conflict with the Canadians and their Amerindian allies. Amerindian warriors also relied on the war to advance their positions in society, and they competed with French officers for glory on the battlefield, vying with them for bragging rights at the end of the conflict. Louis-Joseph, marquis de Montcalm, the commanding general of the French troops, and Pierre de Rigaud, marquis de Vaudreuil, the governor-general of Canada, bickered over the necessity of Amerindians allies for the war effort and the French reticence to use them. Montcalm disparaged involving these untamed “wild men,” or

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1 Service Historique Armée de Terre, Vincennes (SHAT), 1 A 3418 Caulincoud to the minister of war, July, 1755.
2 SHAT, 1 A 3418, Bourlamaque, July 1755.
3 Ibid.
4 SHAT 1A 3418, Bauyn de Perreuse, July 1775.
Sauvages, because they proved so necessary to the war effort that they rivaled French officers as the defenders of France.5

The troups de la marine, deployed by the French navy for colonial fighting, and the Canadians of New France may have shared some customs with the French officers, but they would have appeared more “Indian” than European.6 Unlike the British colonial system, which worked to establish a landscape and a lifestyle very similar to the home country, the French colony in North America required a heightened degree of cooperation, and even assimilation, with Amerindians.7 The Canadian militia frustrated French officers because of a different understanding of military hierarchy and motivation. All men between the ages of sixteen and sixty formed a loose military system that closely resembled a citizen army, inherently different from the aristocratic basis for French forces. Tactical differences existed as well, but French officers recognized Canadian techniques as “petite guerre” and felt more challenged by the Canadians’ loose hierarchy and command structure than by their partisan tactics.

These frustrating relationships, combined with a “defeatist attitude” towards the war in general, expressed themselves in part through an increasing emphasis on zèle, the officers’ zeal for serving the king, over actual success in battle. The gradual bureaucratization of the French army had made it necessary for officers to keep a careful record of their struggles and sacrifices to snare the rewards they believed they merited. Letters to the ministers of war and marine consisted largely of accounts of wounds received and sacrifices made for the king rather than accomplished missions. The attitude in these letters suggests that in Canada, French officers were not concerned with saving the colony so much as they were concerned with behaving honorably in the face of defeat.

Because of its unfamiliarity for European armies, the American theater provides an apt laboratory for viewing the particular aspects of French military culture that caused them to lose the Seven Years’ War and their North American empire in such humiliating fashion. The French army suffered from lack of supplies, unfamiliar terrain, and poor troop quality in North America, but it was the inability of the officers to work effectively

5 SHAT, 1 A 3417, no.182, anonymous letter; for a complete discussion of how Amerindian culture was at variance with French military methods, see Christian Crouch, “Imperfect Reflections: New France’s use of Indigenous Violence and the Crisis of French Empire during the Seven Years’ War, 1754–1760,” (PhD diss., New York University, 2007).
7 Ibid., 11.