Introduction: Approaching the 'American Army'

On 9 April 1763, Major-General Jeffery Amherst, the Commander-in-Chief of Britain's land forces in North America, authorised a historic announcement from his headquarters in New York. Amherst had received a letter from the Secretary-at-War, Welbore Ellis, informing him of a resolution that had been unanimously agreed in the House of Commons four months previously: this expressed the thanks of the House to the officers of the Navy and Army for their 'meritorious and eminent services' to King and country during the war that had now ended after some seven years. Ellis expressed his personal satisfaction in transmitting this recognition of the 'good conduct, courage and zeal of the officers and soldiers of his Majesty's army', and requested that Amherst communicate this 'public mark of honour' to the men under his command. Amherst was not noted for displays of emotion, but the sentiments he conveyed through the General Orders issued that day were clearly heartfelt:

> The Commander in chief with the warmest gratitude must express to the officers and soldiers he has the honour to command the real pleasure and satisfaction he has in communicating to them this honourable testimony of their services, and he cannot omit on this occasion to signify to them that their constant steady good conduct and unwearied exertion of their abilities in carrying on the extensive and successfull war in this country, not only entitles them to his most sincere acknowledgements, but has imprinted on him such strong marks of affection and esteem for them, that their happiness and glory must always be inseperable from his.[1]

When Amherst first arrived in America five years earlier, British soldiers had not enjoyed such renown. Indeed, the wave of victories responsible for

[1] Orders dated New York, 9 April 1763, in *Journals of the Hon. William Hervey in North America and Europe, with Order Books at Montreal, 1760–1763* (Bury St Edmunds, 1906), pp. 182–83.

raising the reputation of the King's troops to dizzy new heights by 1763 only followed long years of frustrating setbacks which had seen the prestige of the redcoats plunge. During the course of that war British regulars had been employed in North America and the West Indies on a far larger scale than ever before. The gruelling and bloody campaigns in which ever growing numbers of redcoats participated ultimately forged a seasoned 'American Army' that had first conquered Canada and then stripped the Bourbons of their most prized Caribbean possessions.[2] One civilian observer considered the redcoats who sailed from New York for Martinique in 1761 to be 'extremely well disciplined' and 'full of life and courage';[3] the soldier and historian Thomas Mante agreed that the force sent subsequently against Havana was the 'finest army, for its numbers, in the whole world'.[4] Such famous victories were only secured through a lavish expenditure of manpower: the army agent John Calcraft mourned more than the demise of business when he commiserated with Amherst on the heavy casualties sustained in the year's West Indian operations, as 'that army was compos'd of the best soldiers which ever yet existed, & the Loss of such brave men cannot be too much Lamented'.[5]

These contemporary testimonies to the high quality of the 'American Army' are difficult to reconcile with the assessments of many modern historians. In particular, the seasoned and confident troops eulogised by men like Mante bear little resemblance to those redcoats who march through the pages of both 'popular' and scholarly accounts of the Seven Years War. Many such works offer an all-too-familiar picture of the British soldier and his world – a convenient snap-shot that invariably contains certain standard components. According to this well-worn stereotype, the British Army of the mid-eighteenth century was a starkly polarised society in which a rank and file recruited from the very bottom of the social pile soldiered under the command of men drawn from its aristocratic upper reaches. Down-trodden, cowed and resentful, the humble redcoats were kept to their duty by a savage disciplinary code:

[2] For use of this title see, for example, letter from Lieutenant Nicholas Delacherois, 'Camp at the Havanna', 30 July 1762, in 'The Letters of Captain Nicholas Delacherois, 9th Regiment', ed. S. G. P. Ward, in *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, LI (1973), 5–14; p. 9.

[3] 'A Letter from a Gentleman in New York to his friend in London' (no date), in *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle . . . 1763* (February), p. 88.

[4] Thomas Mante, *The History of the Late War in North America and the Islands of the West Indies, including the Campaigns of MDCCLXIII and MDCCLXIV against His Majesty's Indian Enemies* (London, 1772), p. 484. The author had himself served as Assistant Engineer at Havana.

[5] Calcraft to Amherst, 13 November 1762, in WO (War Office Papers, Public Record Office, Kew)/34 (Amherst Papers)/99, fol. 127.

indeed, it was only fear of the lash that persuaded British soldiers to endure the cheerless conditions of army life and the bloody theatre of the battlefield. Drilled to a robotic level of efficiency and crammed inside gaudy and constricting uniforms, such men would march into the cannon's mouth if so ordered because the consequences of refusal were worse. Denied the most basic rights and any individual voice, British soldiers forfeited their very humanity; they were no more than automatons – faceless components in a rigid military machine. The popular image of the British Army's officers is equally unflattering: they were largely fops and fools; adept at manipulating a corrupt system, most of them had bought their way up the promotion ladder. Arrogant, unimaginative and unprofessional, their shortcomings were happily disguised by the ritualistic nature of eighteenth-century European warfare; under such prescribed conditions, shows of initiative were quite simply irrelevant. However, when removed from this familiar environment, and obliged to fight under different rules, such officers invariably led their hapless subordinates to disaster.

This hackneyed and hostile overview of the British Army has enjoyed a particular resonance in North America, for reasons which are not difficult to fathom: at a 'popular' level it fits snugly with the comforting knowledge that such 'professional' British redcoats were subsequently worsted by 'amateur' American patriots during the Revolutionary War; on another, it meshes with the work of modern American scholars who have chosen to view the Seven Years War through the eyes of the colonial populace that British regular troops were sent to defend. Seen from the perspective of a Massachusetts volunteer, or a Connecticut magistrate, the British soldier was indeed an unlovely creature. Not only did the rank and file's swearing, drinking and whoring horrify the God-fearing New Englanders, but their commanders sought to impose policies that threatened cherished liberties throughout the seaboard colonies. Of course, all of this unprecedented imperial interference might have been more bearable if the British Army had at least proved effective at its primary job of combating the French and their Native American 'Indian' allies. Yet in the colonists' opinion this had been far from the case: on the contrary, supercilious British officers had spurned the advice of their American counterparts and proved signally incapable of adapting their stilted and inflexible tactics to local conditions. The results were predictable: defeat after humiliating defeat at the hands of a numerically inferior foe.

The shattering reverses sustained by the redcoats during the dismal opening phases of the Seven Years War have long dominated popular perceptions of that conflict in America. Despite the efforts of a handful of respected scholars to prove otherwise, ultimate victory in that war

continues to be attributed to anything but the prowess of the British Army.[6] After all, it is argued, colonial troops had done much to win their own freedom from the French and Indian menace, whilst the redcoats who triumphed at Quebec and elsewhere merely delivered a belated *coup de grâce* to defences that were already undermined by Bourbon indifference, the omnipotence of the Royal Navy and the alienation of Canada's traditional tribal allies. The consensus reached by recent scholars also suggests that Americans came away from the Seven Years War with a thoroughly jaundiced impression of both the British Army and the state it represented: the seeds sown by this animosity would all too soon bear bitter fruit and contribute to the rupture of Britain's Atlantic empire.[7]

These negative portrayals of the redcoats have proved so enduring because they contain an undeniable core of truth: the British Army of the eighteenth century *did* include hardened criminals; some of its malefactors *were* subjected to horrific floggings; a majority of officers *had* purchased their commissions; combat during the heyday of the smoothbore musket *was* typically characterised by formal close-range confrontations; embarrassing defeats *were* sustained in consequence of adherence to hidebound tactics. Again, damning modern assessments of the British Army in America remain rooted in certain undoubted facts, and those historians who view the redcoats as agents of discord in the Anglo-American world have assembled an impressive body of evidence to support their findings. While not seeking to dispute the existence of such tensions, this book none the less argues that the British Army contributed far more to winning the Seven Years War in the Americas than many historians have been prepared to concede: although thousands of locally raised 'provincial' troops served on the mainland, it was the regulars who

[6] Although few in number, the British Army's champions in America have included some of the most distinguished historians to work on the pre-Republican era. See S. Pargellis, *Lord Loudoun in North America* (New Haven, 1933), and L. H. Gipson, *The British Empire Before the American Revolution* (15 vols, New York, 1936–70). Indeed, in 1946 Gipson dedicated Volume Six of this magisterial work 'to the thousands of soldiers from the British Isles who lie buried in unknown graves here in the New World as a result of the Great War for the Empire waged between the years 1754 and 1763' (*The Years of Defeat: 1754–1757*, v). John Shy subsequently observed: 'There is renewed emphasis on the fact that British regulars won the war, and it would not have been won otherwise'. See *Toward Lexington. The Role of the British Army in the Coming of the American Revolution* (Princeton, 1965), p. 86.

[7] See A. Rogers, *Empire and Liberty: American Resistance to British Authority, 1755–1763* (Los Angeles, 1974); D. E. Leach, *Roots of Conflict: British Armed Forces and Colonial Americans, 1677–1763* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1986), esp. pp. 76–166; F. Jennings, *Empire of Fortune: Crowns, Colonies, and Tribes in the Seven Years War in America* (New York, 1986), esp. pp. 204–22. Anglo-American friction forms a leitmotif of Fred Anderson's large-scale narrative, *Crucible of War. The Seven Years War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754–1766* (New York, 2000).

campaigned throughout the Americas and increasingly bore the brunt of the actual fighting; the focus here is therefore upon the redcoats themselves.[8]

It is now widely recognised that the global conflict that encompassed both the gradual evolution and rapid destruction of the 'American Army' also defined the 'first British Empire'.[9] In acquiring vast new territories, Britain's armed forces had won victories that fuelled patriotic fervour and a growing sense of imperial destiny.[10] For the British Army itself the Seven Years War had likewise marked a watershed: the years after 1763 witnessed not only a dramatic expansion in the size of the peacetime establishment, but also saw increasing numbers of redcoats stationed overseas;[11] from a relatively modest organisation intended primarily for domestic security and limited European campaigning, the Army had been transformed into a sprawling instrument of empire. Despite the pivotal importance of the Seven Years War for Britain's progression to the rank of leading European imperial power, little scholarly attention has been devoted to those servicemen who actually waged it.[12] This book seeks to go some way towards redressing that imbalance by examining the personnel of the 'American Army'; the evidence presented challenges the enduring view of the British soldier in America, and suggests that such simplistic descriptions fail to reflect what was in reality a far more complex picture. Indeed, any deeper exploration of the British Army that operated in the Americas during the 1750s and 1760s reveals a social system characterised by distinctive rituals and relationships – one in which redcoats of all ranks emerge as individuals with voices of their own.

The campaigning experience of these soldiers was very different from that of those battalions despatched to the old battlefields of Flanders and

[8] The provincial soldier has already received attention in several scholarly works. See F. Anderson, *A People's Army: Massachusetts Soldiers and Society in the Seven Years War* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1984); J. Titus, *The Old Dominion at War. Society, Politics, and Warfare in Late Colonial Virginia* (Columbia, South Carolina, 1991); H. E. Selesky, *War and Society in Colonial Connecticut* (New Haven, 1990), esp. pp. 144–215.

[9] See P. J. Marshall's introduction to *The Oxford History of the British Empire. Volume Two: The Eighteenth Century Empire*, ed. P. J. Marshall (Oxford, 1998), pp. 1–27; also L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven, 1992), pp. 101–02.

[10] K. Wilson, *A Sense of the People. Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 196–8. E. H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire. British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2000).

[11] J. A. Houlding, *Fit for Service: The Training of the British Army 1715–1795* (Oxford, 1981), p. 7.

[12] Just as the Royal Navy enjoyed the status of 'senior service' in Georgian Britain, so sailors rather than soldiers have attracted the greatest share of scholarly interest. Students of the army during the Seven Years War have little to set beside the detailed study of the Royal Navy contained in N. A. M. Rodger's *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London, 1986).

Germany. In America, redcoats might be expected to endure both the bitter winters of Nova Scotia and the torrid heat of the Caribbean, with their attendant risks of frostbite or fever. These troops likewise faced the fatigue of negotiating exceptionally difficult terrain – ranging from the forests, lakes and mountains of the mainland wilderness to the dense tropical foliage and rugged volcanic landscapes of the West Indian islands. In addition, besides encountering the white-coated Bourbon regulars that generations of British soldiers had confronted in Europe, the redcoats who served in the Americas were also obliged to deal with more exotic foes – native 'Indians' and other irregulars who employed bewildering guerrilla tactics and paid scant regard to the conventions of 'civilised' warfare. Taken together, these conditions demanded high levels of endurance and adaptability, producing soldiers who compensated in courage and tenacity for what they lacked in parade-ground polish. In the opinion of the New York trader John Watts, it was the hard-bitten veterans of these punishing American campaigns who had clinched victory during the costly expedition against Havana. He wrote:

> Your Hyde Park Generals it's said treated them with great contempt, because they were not high dressd, they had been too long away from St: James' to be fashionable, hard labour, in the Woods & Batteaus had soild their Cloths & discomposed the smart Cock, yet without such Troops … the Conquest had never been made, nor the place ours.[13]

As contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic ultimately recognised, the challenge of American campaigning created a remarkably flexible force that proved capable of waging both the 'conventional' warfare of the Old World, and operating under the very different 'irregular' conditions of the New. The British Army only achieved victory through a painful and protracted metamorphosis: the arduous process by which the 'American Army' adapted itself under the impetus of local conditions forms the second major theme of this book. During its dynamic period of transformation, the 'American Army' acquired an ethos and tactical doctrine that set it apart from other British and European armies: the redcoat regiments that assaulted Martinique in 1762 were in many respects different from those sent into the wilderness seven years before. This same army was 'American' in more than just name: although the bulk of the regulars had been recruited in Britain, a significant minority were either natives of

[13] Watts to Moses Franks, New York, 27 October 1763, in *Collections of the New-York Historical Society, 1928: The Letter Book of John Watts, Merchant and Councillor of New York, January 1, 1762 – December 22, 1765* (New York, 1928), p. 92.

the North American colonies or recent immigrants from Europe. In consequence, many of the redcoat battalions in America exhibited a more diverse character than those employed elsewhere.[14] The American theatre of the Seven Years War also witnessed the British Army's first large-scale use of Scottish Highlanders, a phenomenon that has been identified as making an important contribution towards the formation of a 'British' national identity.[15] These factors rendered the 'American Army' a distinctive and influential organisation – one that merits detailed investigation.

Structure and sources

As regards structure, Chapter 1 narrates the operations of the 'American Army'; it traces the scale, scope and effectiveness of Britain's deployment of regular manpower in North America and the Caribbean between 1755 and 1763, so providing a broad context for the thematic chapters that follow: these present a detailed examination of the redcoats and their experience of warfare in the Americas. Themes explored include the recruitment and composition of the rank and file and officer corps; the implementation of discipline; the extent to which the army represented a distinct community with its own customs; and the degree to which soldiers were prepared to speak out in defence of their established rights. Subsequent chapters address the challenges that faced the British Army in America, and its efforts to overcome them. Coverage is given to the constraints that America's physical environment imposed upon military activity, and the cultural context of American warfare – in particular, the Army's contacts with the Indian tribes of the mainland and the impact of 'savagery' upon established European codes of behaviour in wartime. Two chapters address different aspects of the Army's operational response to 'American' warfare: the danger posed by 'irregulars' and the redcoats' attempts to neutralise them; and the extent to which conditions encountered in America bequeathed a lasting tactical legacy to the British Army. Although integrated within that organisation, the Scottish Highland battalions retained a distinct cultural identity; they are therefore accorded detailed analysis in their own right. The final chapter considers the demobilisation process and the subsequent fate of disbanded veterans; it

[14] It has been suggested that as many as 11,000 colonials saw service in British regular units during the Seven Years War. See Don Higginbotham, 'The Early American Way of War: Reconnaissance and Appraisal', in *William and Mary Quarterly* (Third Series), XLIV (1987), 230–73; p. 235.

[15] Colley, *Britons*, p. 103.

reassesses the place of the 'American Army' in history and legend, ventures some general verdicts regarding that force's wider significance as an agency of British empire and nationhood, and evaluates its unwitting role in the creation of the American republic.

The interpretations presented here rest upon a wide range of evidence. A particular effort has been made to reflect the views and experience of the 'common soldier', and thereby provide a voice for a figure all too often assumed to be mute. For example, in his study of Wellington's army, Sir Charles Oman noted the relative dearth of military memoirs surviving from the years before Britain's epic struggle with Napoleonic France. Oman conjectured that both the lost war with the rebellious American colonists, and the victorious global conflict it followed, had failed to spark the 'crusading' spirit that inspired the Iron Duke's soldier-scribes to record their experiences.[16] The lack of such 'voices from the ranks' has also been lamented by scholars dealing directly with the British Army of the eighteenth century. In his general survey of the subject, Colonel H. C. B. Rogers remarked upon the rarity of first-hand 'accounts of the life of the rank and file, particularly at the beginning of this period'.[17] Similarly, in a more specialised study of the Army's 'police' role, Tony Hayter regretted the paucity of memoirs, diaries and letters capable of adding flesh to the bare bones of the 'official' record; because neither 'the man in the ranks nor the man in the street wrote memoirs or correspondence', the picture had instead to be constructed 'from many scattered and oblique sources'.[18]

One object of this book is to suggest that, as far as the 'American Army' is concerned, such assessments are unduly pessimistic. Amongst the diverse sources consulted, the first-hand testimony of participants figures prominently: indeed, the voices of both officers and other ranks who fought through these costly campaigns still resonate from the pages of a surprising number of memoirs. These eyewitness sources vary greatly in

[16] C. Oman, *Wellington's Army, 1809–1814* (London, 1912), pp. 3–6. Oman was 'quite certain that there was more writing going on in the army during the ten years 1805–1815 than in the whole of the eighteenth century' (ibid., p. 3).

[17] H. C. B. Rogers, *The British Army of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1977), p. 61.

[18] T. Hayter, *The Army and the Crowd in Mid-Georgian England* (London, 1978), pp. 2–3. More recently, Alan Guy has emphasised the readiness of scholars to consult just such a diverse range of material in their efforts to shed light upon the Georgian soldiery. See *Colonel Samuel Bagshawe and the Army of George II, 1731–1762*, ed. A. Guy (London, 1990), p. 15. Dr Guy, whose own researches have done much to clarify the complexities of regimental administration, notes that the bulk of this work has addressed the period *after* 1760. Studies of army life in the reign of George III include S. Frey, *The British Soldier in America: A Social History of Military Life in the Revolutionary Period* (Austin, Texas, 1981); and G. Steppler, 'The Common Soldier in the Reign of George III, 1760–1793' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 1984).

nature and value, ranging from detailed contemporaneous journals to more impressionistic retrospective memoirs; some embrace picaresque adventures worthy of Thackeray's Barry Lyndon himself. Yet if read with a critical eye, such hitherto underexploited sources can shed a remarkable degree of light upon the personnel and campaigns of the 'American Army'.

Letters from private soldiers and NCOs occasionally surface amongst the papers accumulated by senior officers; however, the bulk of such collections comprise correspondence between fellow officers, along with material addressing aspects of army administration. Of the major collections consulted here, the papers of three successive commanders-in-chief, John Campbell, Lord Loudoun (1756–58), James Abercromby (1758) and Jeffery Amherst (1758–63), proved particularly valuable.[19] In addition, a mass of material concerning the period 1756–58 exists among the various official and personal papers relating to Brigadier-General John Forbes.[20] Another category of source material which deserves particular mention is the extant collections of orders issued within the 'American Army'. Examples of such 'orderly books' survive at various levels – army, brigade, garrison, regiment and even company – offering coverage for most theatres of operations between 1755 and 1763. Besides providing a contemporaneous record of efforts to regulate the activities of a given formation, orderly books shed light upon many facets of army life, frequently naming individuals of all ranks: as such, they go some way to bridge the gap between personal memoirs and correspondence, and those sources concerned purely with military administration.

In terms of official administrative records, the evidence relating to the 'American Army' initially appears both scanty and fragmentary; in certain instances, such as the tattered 'returns' of troops serving in America held at the Public Record Office, this description is quite literally true. Hanoverian Britain lacked the bureaucracy of its arch rival across the Channel; in consequence the official records cannot compete with the documents held in the Archives de la Guerre and quarried by André Corvisier for his study of the French soldier of the *ancien régime*.[21]

[19] Loudoun Papers (LO) and Abercromby Papers (AB), Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Both the 'official' (WO/34) and the 'family' (Centre for Kentish Studies (CKS), Maidstone, U1350) Amherst papers have been consulted.

[20] Much of Forbes's correspondence is gathered in the National Archives of Scotland, Edinburgh. See GD (Gifts and Deposits) 45 (Dalhousie Muniments)/2 and microfilms RH 4/86/1–2. Other important material has been published in *Writings of General John Forbes, Relating to His Service in North America*, ed. A. P. James (Menasha, Wisconsin, 1938).

[21] See A. Corvisier, *L'Armée française de la fin du XVIIe siècle au ministère de Choiseul* (2 vols, Paris, 1964).

Despite such discouraging first impressions, upon closer acquaintance the War Office files yield valuable evidence. As Dr John Houlding has demonstrated, systematic analysis of such routine documents as marching orders and inspection returns can reveal much about the Army's role and efficiency. In addition, the registers of those veterans who applied for pensions from the Royal Hospital at Chelsea contain basic biographical information which goes far to compensate for the dearth of soldiers' discharge papers from the era of the Seven Years War.[22] The hefty ledgers of correspondence emanating from the office of the Secretary-at-War provide a helpful running record of administrative decisions. Less orderly, but more interesting for the purposes of the present book, are the letters and petitions sent to the War Office by individuals ranging from senior officers to soldiers' widows; these survive in collected form from 1756 onwards.[23]

Anyone studying the British Army in North America during the Seven Years War owes a debt to the pioneering work of Stanley Pargellis; his formidable scholarship underpinned an analysis of army administration that remains required reading. In the course of his researches, Pargellis noted the importance of another extensive range of War Office papers, the records of the Army's General Courts Martial; indeed, he observed that these minutes 'reconstitute the intimate details of army life more satisfactorily than any other kind of document'.[24] As with soldiers' memoirs and journals, provided that due caution is observed and selectivity exercised, the minutes of the General Courts Martial constitute an invaluable body of evidence; indeed, extensive work undertaken on these records for this study has only served to increase respect for Pargellis's assessment of their worth.

In combination, these varied personal and official documents provide a substantial reservoir of primary source material: this book employs such evidence to present a detailed reassessment of the redcoats and their experience of the Seven Years War in the Americas; in doing so it aims to illuminate a neglected and misunderstood society, and thereby place some flesh and blood upon the metaphorical 'sinews of power' of Hanoverian Britain's 'fiscal–military state'.

[22] Both the chronological 'Admission Books' (WO/116) and the unit-based 'Regimental Registers' (WO/120) have been used. Discharge documents of men applying for pensions from 1787 onwards are in class WO/121.
[23] See WO/4 (Out-letters, Secretary-at-War); WO/1 (War Office, In-letters).
[24] Pargellis, *Lord Loudoun*, p. 370; WO/71 (Courts Martial, Proceedings).