

# CHAPTER III

"...and the evening fireside more lonesome."

IT WASN'T by chance that the East Stoughton people were worried about fulfilling their military commitments. After 1741 that aspect of colonial life became increasingly more important to them. Events which were taking place not too far from their little village made it essential that military preparedness be maintained, and duty sometimes intruded upon the quiet life of the farmer, the blacksmith and the miller.

From the very earliest times local militia units had played a vital role in the survival of the New England colonies. Militia companies usually consisted of men from the same town who marched under the command of a captain who had been elected by his peers. Several companies from within the same county formed a regiment, which was commanded by a colonel. Under the Massachusetts militia system, almost every male between the age of 16 and 60 spent some part of every year in training or in actual combat.<sup>1</sup>

During times of peace the militia system performed an important social function. In order to minimize the disruption of the farming cycle, the militiamen mustered once in May and twice in September.

Accompanied by fife and drum, the men would march in ranks to the training field - often the town square or village green - under the delighted gaze of fellow townsmen and proud family members. The routine seldom varied: After a bit of drilling, followed by a practice volley or two, the men would break ranks and join in the fun of a New England picnic. This was a cherished tradition which allowed for a break in the monotonous drudgery of eighteenth century farming.

But as benign and friendly as those training days were, they had a serious purpose. For more than three-quarters of a century England and

France were locked in combat, not only in Europe but here in America as well. The War of the League of Augsburg (1689-1697) was known as King William's War in America; the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-1713) was Queen Anne's War; the War of the Austrian Succession (1739-1748) was King George's War; and the Seven Years' War (1754-1763), known to Americans as the French and Indian War.

During these conflicts the local militia played a crucial role in the colonies' defense. They provided a steady source of volunteers - or conscripts, if necessary - for the provincial armies which had been created by the colonial governments. Although the local militia companies rarely fought as cohesive units, individual members were recruited for single campaigns, and here they fought under the command of officers whose rank did not depend upon their popularity with the locals.<sup>2</sup>

During King William's War, in the last decade of the seventeenth century, Massachusetts men took part in expeditions to Maine and Nova Scotia. Later, during Queen Anne's War, others from the Bay Colony saw service against the French. The Treaty of Utrecht ended the war, and as part of the settlement France ceded Nova Scotia (but not Cape Breton) to the English and it seemed that an era of peace was at hand.

Whatever the hopes of New Englanders may have been, however, the rivalry between Great Britain and France continued unabated. The French, trying to compensate for the loss of Nova Scotia, constructed Fort Louisbourg on Cape Breton Island, and this constituted a serious military and economic threat to New England.

When King George's War broke out in America, Massachusetts sent a large contingent of troops to besiege Louisbourg, which finally fell to the English and Americans in 1745, after heavy loss of life. The word of Louisbourg's fall brought rejoicing to the American colonies.

Bonfires lit the night skies over New England as joyful men and women felt the yoke of the French threat lifted from their shoulders.

Their happiness, however, was to be short-lived, for the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748 not only ended the war, it returned Louisbourg to the French. New Englanders were incredulous; they felt betrayed by their own government, and again the guns of the French and Indians were upon them.<sup>3</sup>

Present-day Stoughton, not settled until 1716 or incorporated until 1726, can't claim to have played much of a part in these momentous events, though its few inhabitants surely cursed the return of Louisbourg as heartily as any other New Englanders. It wasn't until the French and Indian War, when control of the entire North American continent hung in the balance, that the town of Stoughton shouldered its share of the burden.

While neither present-day Stoughton Centre nor its small settlement to the east faced any danger from an attack by the French or their Indian allies, other parts of New England were not so fortunate. Constant vigilance had to be maintained along the eastern frontier (Maine) and the western frontier (the Connecticut River Valley). Throughout the conflict military expeditions left Massachusetts for one or the other theatre of war, and these often carried Stoughton soldiers on their rolls. Some of these troops had enlisted for service, while others had been drafted.<sup>4</sup>

Records now in the collection of the Massachusetts State Archives indicate that the first Stoughton men joined the fighting in 1754. The following year there was an unsuccessful English attempt to take Crown Point, a French fort at the southern end of Lake Champlain. At least thirty Stoughton men took part in this battle, while others helped nearby in the construction of Fort William Henry. This garrison was later attacked by French forces under General Louis Joseph

deMontcalm, and when it fell in August, 1757, at least one Stoughton man was killed in the fighting.<sup>5</sup>

Although still a very small settlement. East Stoughton also contributed men to the war effort. In March 1758 Simeon Leach enlisted in a company which had been raised for an invasion of Canada. The 24-year-old corporal was the only Stoughton man in the group as it headed northward on an expedition of almost eight months' duration. Leach's company formed part of a regiment commanded by Colonel Thomas Doty, and the troops apparently suffered a great deal. "My heart was grieved," wrote the Reverend Daniel Shute upon seeing Doty's regiment on the march, "to find the men so greatly fatigued, and nothing comfortable to take. No sutler, no doctor, no chaplain with them."

Young Corporal Leach was spared and returned home safely in December, 1758. For his trouble he collected his seven-and-a-half months' pay (at £ 1:18:7 per month) and settled in again to the quiet life of a small farmer. The lessons he had learned in soldiering would serve him in good stead in the not too distant future.<sup>7</sup>

Another East Stoughton man who went to war was Captain Moses Curtis, the youngest son of the settlement's founder. Thirty-seven years old in March, 1759, he led a company of eighty-five men, including thirty-four from Stoughton, on an expedition to St. John's. With Captain Curtis were Sergeant Jonathan Shurtleff, Corporal Jacob Goldthwaite and Private Thomas Mitchell, all of East Stoughton. They were away for sixteen months, returning home in August, 1760.<sup>8</sup>

The people of Stoughton - and East Stoughton too - were constantly reminded of the war. They suffered because the absence of a loved one made the day's work a little heavier and the evening fireside more lonesome. Their hearts were full of the men gone from Stoughton on expeditions to New York or Canada. Others, not called to active

service, remained on the militia's alarm list, ready to step into any emergency on short notice.

The suffering of the enemy was also made known to them through the plight of the "French neutrals," Acadians who had been expelled from their Nova Scotia homes and sent to live in the American colonies. Although these people had been under British rule since 1715, they continued to speak French and they practiced Catholicism. They never took up arms against the English, but the authorities were certain that their priests were inciting disloyalty from the pulpit.

In the summer of 1755 Colonel Charles Lawrence, Royal Governor of Nova Scotia, announced that any Acadian who refused to take an oath of loyalty to King George II would be expelled. Many refused, and that fall about 6,000 men, women and children were put aboard English ships, transported to Boston, and then distributed among the thirteen colonies. Almost a century later Henry Wadsworth Longfellow would tell the story in his beautiful poem "Evangeline."

Two thousand of these "French neutrals" - so called to distinguish them from the French of Quebec and Cape Breton - came to Massachusetts, and a few were assigned to Stoughton. In November 1755, Honore Burbin arrived with his wife Ann and their son Peter. The adults were "both in health and capable of Labour." Three years later seven more "French exiles" arrived in the town, to be followed by another seven sent over from Needham. The townspeople appear to have been sympathetic to the newcomers, and they helped them whenever possible. Richard Hixson and John Atherton looked after their needs, which included sending to Roxbury for a mid-wife for one of the French women.<sup>10</sup>

Some of the Acadians drifted back to Nova Scotia, others emigrated to distant parts of the American continent, and still others stayed where they were and became productive citizens. What lessons these

unfortunate people brought to Stoughton, and indirectly to East Stoughton, we can only wish we knew.

One historian has written that the French and Indian War “petered out.”<sup>11</sup> The English captured Quebec in 1759 and Montreal fell a year later. The Treaty of Paris, signed in 1763, gave England all of Canada, plus the Great Lakes region and the Ohio River Valley. The issue of who would control North America had indeed been settled.

But peace was another matter entirely, as the people of East Stoughton came to find out. New Englanders, and Massachusetts men among them, had invested heavily in a British victory. They had given of their time, their money, and sometimes their lives to defeat the French and Indian menace. They had served under British commanders and had seen the heralded Regulars in action; they were not overawed by their experience. When the Mother Country decided that the colonists would have to assume a larger share of the costs of their own defense, the Americans resisted. One problem led to another, and before long the men of East Stoughton were again ready to take up arms.

## NOTES

1. Robert E. MacKay, ed., *Massachusetts Soldiers in the French and Indian Wars, 1744-1755* (Boston: The New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1978), iii-ix. The preface to this volume provides excellent background information on the Massachusetts militia system.
2. Fred Anderson, *A People's Army: Massachusetts Soldiers and Society in the Seven Years' War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 27. This book is the definitive treatment of Massachusetts' participation in the war.
3. Jordan D. Fiore, *Wrentham, 1673-1973: A History* (Boston: Thomas Todd Company, 1973), pp. 58-60. This work is a fine piece of local

history which has served as a model for this chapter.

4. MacKay, iii. This book presents an alphabetical listing of Massachusetts soldiers transcribed from muster rolls and other records in the Massachusetts State Archives. The book gives the soldier's name and, when possible, his hometown, rank, place and time of service.

5. The dead man was James Berry; there may have been others from Stoughton who were killed in the same engagement. Mass. State Archives, Vol. 95, pp. 505-506.

6. Reverend Daniel Shute, quoted in Anderson, p. 88.

7. Mass. State Archives, Vol. 96-B, p. 520.

8. Mass. State Archives, Vol. 98-A, pp. 156, 163.

9. The removal of the Acadians is treated by Francis Parkman, *Montcalm and Wolfe* (1884; rpt. New York: The Crowell-Collier Publishing Co., 1962), pp. 174-206; Wretham's experience with the French neutrals is covered by Fiore, pp. 60-63

10. Mass. State Archives, Microfilm, Vol. 23, p. 19; Vol. 24, pp. 64, 133.

11. Fiore, p. 60.