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The Pioneer of Special Ops

Frontiersman Robert Rogers and the roots of the U.S. Army Rangers

By ARTHUR HERMAN

(See Corrections & Amplifications item below.)

War on the Run

By John F. Ross

Bantam, 548 pages, $30

People once knew Robert Rogers as the steel-eyed hero played by Spencer Tracy in the film "Northwest Passage" who leads his men, including Robert Young and Walter Brennan, through heartbreak and hardship to victory over Abenake Indians during the French and Indian War. Today Rogers is almost forgotten except by the U.S. Army Rangers, who revere him as their founder and role model.

John Ross, the executive editor of American Heritage magazine, has taken it upon himself to bring this extraordinary man back to life. He succeeds with "War on the Run," a lively, evocative and at times moving biography. Rogers is the godfather of modern Special Ops. His spirit still hovers over the elite units who do extraordinary things in Afghanistan and Iraq, from the Rangers to the Navy SEALs, Marine Recon and Delta Force.

Rogers was also the original American frontiersman. Born in the wilds of New Hampshire in 1731, he explored the far reaches of the North American wilderness up to the western shores of Lake Michigan. His obsessive hope of finding a land passage to the Pacific made him the "expounder of a realm never made coherent by map or report," Mr. Ross writes, a realm stretching from the Appalachians to Oregon (a name Rogers coined for the Pacific Northwest Territory) and "so vast and alien in its contours, fauna, botany, and human occupation that it resembled a new planet." Thirty years later Meriwether Lewis and George Rogers Clark took up the challenge of charting its immensity. Still, it is Robert Rogers, far more than Daniel Boone or Lewis and Clark, who spawned the American idea of going where no one has gone before.

Tall, broad and strong, Rogers had trapped, canoed, hunted and fought Indians across the British colonies in America since his early teens. His restless and unstable temperament also landed him in trouble. In 1755 he was actually about to be indicted of counterfeiting when news came of the outbreak of war against the French. For Rogers it meant a pardon, an officer's commission and an opportunity to apply the crafts he had learned from the Indian tribes, and from the trappers and traders who passed among them, to the art of war.

Rogers realized that the American wilderness of swamp, forest, river and mountain, far from imposing a

barrier, actually opened a daring opportunity to seize the initiative and carry the war to the French and their native allies. He became the David Petraeus of his time: It took the possibility of defeat to convince others that he was right. Like certain commanders in Iraq, British generals—Edward Braddock comes to mind—were skilled and experienced in conventional European warfare but unable to adapt to their new combat environment. When on July 9, 1755, Braddock was killed and some 900 of his 1,300 men killed or wounded by a smaller French and Indian force, it was a sign that a new approach was needed.

Rogers was put in command of a group of irregulars designated the Independent Company of Rangers. What emerged was a new kind of soldier and, in Robert Rogers, a new kind of leader. If Rogers had ever read Sun Tzu's "Art of War," he would have heartily approved of one of its core principles: that battle requires fluidity and flexibility in the face of the enemy—in this case, the American wilderness made ambush and the lightning raid the norm. Like Sun Tzu, Rogers understood that victory was as much a matter of psychology as firepower or numbers: In an unconventional war in the wilderness, the general's job is to overcome his men's fear of the savage and unknown and impose it on the enemy. He once scalped a captured French soldier in full view of a fort's French garrison: The French surrendered a short while later.

Rogers rapidly transformed his ragtag force of volunteers into American ninjas. He dressed them in green woolen jackets and canvas trousers, allowing them to move virtually unseen through the forest, and gave them moccasins borrowed from the Indians. Instead of wearing the usual tricornered hat, Rogers's Rangers sported a bonnet of Scottish origin—the distant ancestor of the Ranger beret.

Rogers trained his men to be savage fighters but also brothers in adversity. He taught them how to avoid ambush, move silently through miles of underbrush, and how to pursue a retreating enemy through a trackless forest. His men were to be mentally tough and ready to take the initiative if their officers failed. "Every man's reason and judgment must be his guide," he wrote at the end of Rogers's Rules, "according to the particular situation and nature of things." It was in fact a useful frame of mind for men ready to shoulder the responsibilities of American democracy.

The fir-shaded clearing in front of the small log cabin bustled with even more activity than usual for this characteristically large frontier family.

Read an excerpt from 'War on the Run'

Rogers put his entire system to the test in his famous raid on Saint Francois north of Montreal on the Saint Lawrence River in 1759—the raid that inspired the "Northwest Passage" movie. Rogers led his 200 men on a 150-mile trek through uncharted territory to hit the settlement of French Indian allies. The rangers defied starvation, disease and vicious attacks by neighboring Indian tribes.

Men had to carry a handful of parched corn in their mouths all day to make it edible by evening. When the corn ran out, they resorted to boiling their leather straps and belts—even the scalps of Indians they had killed along the way and, in the retreat home, even the corpses of their companions.

The attack on Saint Francois was a surprise and success: and although the rangers killed far fewer Abenakes than Rogers claimed or the movie suggests, the raid taught Native American tribes in the upper Northwest that they were no longer safe as allies of the French. Rogers's raid went a long way in demoralizing the French cause in North America, and sent a signal that a new confident power was in charge.

Rogers taught that those who exceed the limits of the conventional are going to command the future. It was the lesson taken up by American strategists in their rebellion against the British Crown 15 years later. The image of Americans sniping at redcoats from behind rocks and trees and using the contours

of the land to disrupt British plans was an emblem of what Americans had learned from Rogers and his ranger tactics. They almost had the guru himself show them how to do it. Although a retired officer still in the king's pay, Rogers approached George Washington to offer his services. Washington, however, was deeply suspicious and discouraged the Continental Congress from taking up the offer. Perhaps Washington realized that the American Revolution would only have room for one military legend at a time.

So Rogers fought instead for the British, and formed the Queens Rangers. He also captured the American spy Nathan Hale, and one of his last successes was surprising and capturing the American garrison at Mamaroneck during General Howe's advance on New York. By then, however, his British superiors were having doubts about an irregular force made up of "Negroes, Indians, Mulattoes, Sailor and Rebel Prisoners," and relieved Rogers of command. He wound up back in England, a broken bitter man without a command or a purpose. Rogers died a penniless alcoholic in 1795, while the fame he craved and deserved as North America's greatest soldier, was never his.

Still, as Mr. Ross notes, Robert Rogers had forced his fellow Americans to rethink their continent and their place in it. He is the godfather not only of Special Ops but of Manifest Destiny. Roger's kind of unconventional warfare, which halted al Qaeda in Iraq and may still rescue us in Afghanistan, is also one, Mr. Ross would argue, ideally suited to the American temperament. Members of the SAS and Royal Marines might disagree. But there is no denying that thanks to Robert Rogers it's still the Americans, and the Rangers, who lead the way.

Mr. Herman's most recent book, "Gandhi and Churchill: The Epic Rivalry That Destroyed an Empire and Forged Our Age," was a Pulitzer Prize finalist and has just been released in paperback.

Corrections & Amplifications:

William Clark went on an expedition with Meriwether Lewis. This article incorrectly says his brother George Rogers Clark went on the expedition.