

The Troupes de la Marine in New France 1683-1760

© Susan McNelley

Author of *The Women of Ville-Marie, Pioneers of Seventeenth-Century Montréal*
First published in *Sent by the King*,
Journal of *La Société des Filles du roi et soldats du Carignan*, Vol XXVII, Issue 2, Fall 2024

When we think of soldiers sent to New France in the seventeenth century, the Carignan-Salières Regiment first comes to mind. This military force, twelve-hundred-men strong, was sent to the colony in 1665 to subdue the hostile Iroquois who had been waging guerrilla warfare against the French settlements. In 1666, the Iroquois were defeated and in 1668, those soldiers who had decided not to settle in the colony returned to France.

However, the Carignan-Salières Regiment was not the only military force sent to the colony in the founding years. By the mid-1680s, the two decades of comparative peace between the French and Iroquois were ending. Warriors of the Iroquois Confederacy, supported by the English colonists in New York, were becoming ever more daring in their attacks on the French settlements along the Saint Lawrence River. The inhabitants of these villages lived in fear that Iroquois war parties might strike at any time.ⁱ With attacks on the settlers growing more frequent, the Crown decided that the colonial militia was insufficient to protect the colony. The Troupes de la Marine, so-called because they were under the jurisdiction of the French Department of the Marine, were sent to New France. Their mission was to protect the settlements and to be used in skirmishes and raids against New England and the Indigenous people allied with the English. These troops were organized into independent fifty-man companies led by a captain, a lieutenant, two ensigns and two cadets. Initially the officers were men who were born in France. Soon, the elites of New France were sending their young men to France to return as officers in the Troupes de la Marine ⁱⁱ



Soldier of the Regiment de la Marine, 1757. Drawing from the "King's Troops, infantry, French and foreign, 1757," Vol 1, Army Museum, Wiki, PD.

The first of these "regulars" arrived in New France in 1683. In the summer of 1685, Jacques-Réné de Brisay, Marquis de Denonville, arrived in the colony as the newly appointed Governor-General of New France, accompanied by eight hundred Troupes de la Marine. By 1687, they numbered more than sixteen hundred.ⁱⁱⁱ

Do you have a male French-Canadian ancestor who immigrated to New France after 1683 and before the fall of the colony to Great Britain in 1760? If so, it is possible that he came as a soldier of the Troupes de la Marine. Look for this designation in the individual's vital records at Genealogy Québec or in the Fichier Origine.

Beginning in 1687 and lasting through the 1690s, the French and Iroquois waged what was called *la petite guerre*. Their conflict reflected the ongoing struggle to control the fur trade. The Marquis de Denonville, a veteran soldier, was given authority to subdue the Iroquois by whatever means he deemed necessary. In 1687, Denonville mounted a campaign against the Seneca, the strongest and westernmost nation of the Iroquois Confederacy. Denonville's army of two thousand men, including First Nations allies from Kahnawake and La Montagne, made its way to Fort Frontenac on Lake Ontario. There, under the guise of an invitation to a feast, Denonville took as prisoners a group of friendly Iroquois who were on good terms with the

French at the fort. Denonville had received orders from the French Minister of the Marine to send prisoners of war to France to work in the galleys. To comply, Denonville sent his Iroquois prisoners to Québec and then on across the Atlantic.^{iv}

This deception and betrayal outraged the other Iroquois at the fort. Denonville justified his actions by asserting that he believed details of the French military campaign would be communicated to relatives among the belligerent Seneca. Shortly after, the troops under Denonville marched into hostile Seneca territory. While they did not engage the Seneca in battle, they mercilessly destroyed villages and crops. Denonville considered this sufficient to impress both the Iroquois and New Englanders that the French had the means to hold and protect the territory they claimed for France.^v

The Iroquois exacted their revenge some two years later, in August of 1689. A party of about fifteen hundred Iroquois crossed Lake Saint-Louis and stole onto the west end of Montréal Island after dark on the night of August 4, under the cover of a severe summer thunderstorm. The Iroquois scattered and in small groups surrounded the cottages of the *habitants* in the settlement at Lachine. Shortly before dawn they attacked, filling the early morning air with the sounds of war whoops, screams, and terrified cries. Bullets whizzed and tomahawks flew, cutting down anyone trying to escape. The assailants set homes ablaze, reducing them to smoke and ash, and slaughtered the livestock. Chaos and confusion reigned among the soldiers and settlers, caught completely off guard. Many villagers were killed, while even more became prisoners of their assailants. The event came to be known as the Lachine Massacre.^{vi}

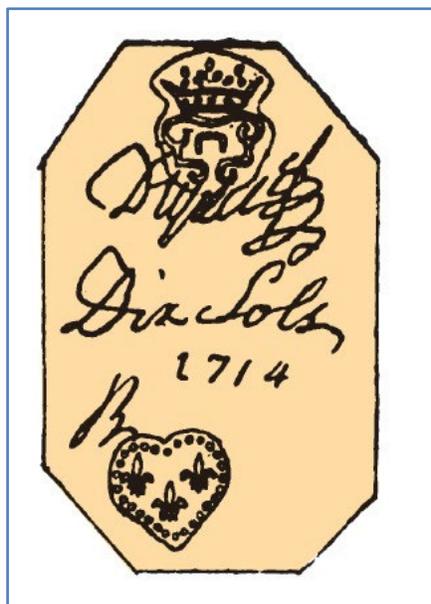
The mood in the settlements in the decade from 1690 to 1700 was one of constant uncertainty, fear, and distrust. Montréalers, in particular, lived under a state of siege. The settlements between Trois-Rivières and Montréal became fortified encampments. At the first sign of danger, people took refuge in stockades and fortified blockhouses.^{vii} The English colonies to the south were seen as supporting and abetting the Iroquois attacks against the French. In retaliation for the massacre at Lachine, the French under Governor Frontenac planned and conducted raids against the English in New York, Maine, and New Hampshire.

La Potherie, the Commissary of the Marine living in Montréal at the end of the seventeenth century, described it thus: "Nothing in the world is more cruel than an Iroquois war. Then the *habitant* trembles as he eats; no one who leaves his house can count on his returning; his sowings

and reappings are abandoned for the most part. The seigneur sees all his lands pillaged and burnt, nor can he reckon himself safe in his own stronghold. The traveler moves but by night. Let anyone work in the fields, either he is massacred, or he is suddenly carried off to be burnt alive, or he is felled by a crushing blow to be scalped. Whoever travels up the river by canoe is espied afar off and despite all precautions is tracked through the forests.”^{viii}

The performance of the Troupes de la Marine in New France failed to measure up. They were ill-equipped and ill-prepared for fighting in the wilds of the borderlands. The men who had enlisted in the troops sent to New France were young men in their teens and twenties. About half came from the urban areas of France. Many lacked the physical stamina and survival skills necessary for military campaigns in North America. The assessment of the intendant of the time was that only a couple of hundred were suitable for the guerrilla type of warfare practiced in the colony.^{ix}

When the call went out for men to mount an expedition against the Iroquois and English, the men of the civilian militia were preferred over the Troupes de la Marine. In 1669, Louis XIV had directed the governor of New France to form a militia for the protection of the colony following the departure of the Carignan-Salières Regiment. All able-bodied *habitants* between sixteen and sixty were organized into militia companies.^x



Monnaie de carte (10 sols), 1714, as reproduced in *Card Money in New France*, Wiki, PD.

Many of the militiamen had participated in the fur trade as *coureurs de bois* and knew how to survive in the wilderness in all kinds of weather. They knew how to get around on snowshoes in winter while carrying heavy packs of provisions and ammunition. After a couple of years of fighting the Iroquois, the *habitant*-turned-militiaman was as adept at this kind of warfare as his Iroquois foe. He knew how to strike quickly and withdraw. Initially, the Troupes de la Marine, unaccustomed to this type of engagement, were of little use in battles fought on the frontier.^{xi}

French-Canadian militiamen went off to fight, while the Troupes de la Marine stayed behind, manning the forts. When not stationed at the garrison, the soldiers were billeted in the homes of the *habitant* families, who were reimbursed for providing food for the soldiers. As a supplement to meager military pay, Jacques de Muelles, then intendant of New France, gave the troops permission to work for wages as laborers in the towns and on farms. Soldiers learned that they could work at inflated wages; a soldier might earn up to eleven *livres* a day cutting firewood.^{xii}

Coinage in the colony was in short supply. There was not enough to pay the soldiers' salaries and wages. Beaver skins and wheat were legal tender, but impractical for the soldiers. In 1685, Jacques de Muelles invented what became known as card money to pay the soldiers. An ordinary playing card was used, whole or cut into halves or quarters. On the card was written the word "*bon*" followed by a specific amount of money. The card was signed by the intendant with his seal affixed to the card. This new money

was then countersigned by the clerk of the treasury. Card money would be redeemed upon the arrival of ships from France each summer.^{xiii}

In the last decades of the seventeenth century, the military presence had become a dominant feature of life on Montréal Island. The more-or-less continuous threat from the Iroquois Confederacy meant that the town always needed soldiers for safety. From 1685 to 1697, between 1,100 and 1,600 Troupes de la Marine were serving in the colony. Two-thirds were stationed at Montréal or in its vicinity. The crown spent sizeable sums of money in maintaining the troops, to the effect that the military establishment was a major source of income for Montréal.^{xiv}

At the end of the Nine Years War in Europe in 1697, Louis XIV again saw the advantages of having soldier-settlers. Toward that end, he promised one year's pay to the soldiers who settled in New France.^{xv} Four hundred of the Troupes de la Marine settled in Montréal between 1696 and 1715. Many of the officer corps who had been born in France settled permanently in the colony, marrying the daughters of seigneurs and the more successful French pioneers, thus becoming members of the social elite. The ordinary soldiers married the daughters of minor tradesmen and *habitant* farmers. Some soldiers became drifters, living on the margins of society. They dwelt mainly in the Back Country, only occasionally venturing into the settlements, or they simply disappeared, never to be heard from again.^{xvi}

The French and First Nations peoples, including those of the Iroquois Confederation, signed a peace treaty known as the Great Peace in Montréal in 1701. Hostilities between the French and British continued until 1713, when peace was established between these two nations by the Treaty of Utrecht. Thirty years of peace followed this treaty. During this time, the Royal Crown maintained the Troupes de la Marine in New France. They were stationed at the garrisons and French outposts, charged with the defense of the western frontier and maintaining order in the colony.^{xvii}



Tensions between France and Great Britain increased in the 1740s, when both countries vied for the same territory on the North American continent. In 1756, at the beginning of the French and Indian War (known in Europe as the Seven Years War), the Troupes de la Marine consisted of thirty companies, each with sixty-five men, for a total of 1,950 soldiers.^{xviii} At the conquest of New France by the British in 1760, the French troops were given the option to stay under British rule or return to France. Many remained and settled in the former French colony.^{xix}

Troupes de la Marine. Parade at the Festival of New France, Québec City, 2011. Photo by Susan McNelley.

- ⁱ For more information on Montréal in the last decades of the 17th century, see Susan McNelley, *The Women of Ville Marie: Pioneers of Seventeenth-Century Montréal* (Monterey, CA: Etta Heritage Press, 2022).
- ⁱⁱ W. J. Eccles, *The French in North America, 1500-1783*. Rev. Ed. Markham (Ontario, Canada: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1998), 123-124.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Eccles, *The French in North America*, 103, 123.
- ^{iv} W. J. Eccles, “Brisay de Denonville, Jacques-René De, Marquis de Denonville.” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Canada: University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003. Web. Accessed 24 Mar 2024). William Henry Atherton, *Montréal, 1535-1914: Under the French Régime, 1535-1760*. Vol. I. (Montréal: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1914. *Google Books*. Web. Downloaded 7 July 2018), 285-286. Of the thirty-six Iroquois sent to France only thirteen returned.
- ^v Eccles, *The French in North America*, 103-105; Atherton, *Montréal Under the French Régime*, 285-286.
- ^{vi} Atherton, *Montréal Under the French Régime*, 288-289; Eccles, “Brisay de Denonville.”
- ^{vii} Eccles, *The French in North America*, 106-107.
- ^{viii} François Dollier de Casson, *A History of Montréal 1640-1672*. Trans. and Ed. Ralph Flenley (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1928. Internet Archive. Accessed 18 Mar. 2024), as quoted in Flenley’s Introduction, 42.
- ^{ix} Evan Haefeli and Kevin Sweeney. *Captors and Captives: The 1704 French and Indian Raid on Deerfield* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 50.
- ^x W. J. Eccles, *The French in North America*, 76-77. Militia officers assembled the men at regular intervals to ensure that they maintained their firearms in good order, knew how to use them, and developed some sense of military order and discipline. Participation in the militia was voluntary but regarded by most as an obligation. The militiamen received food, clothing, a blanket, and gunpowder, but nothing more in the way of compensation. (Haefeli and Sweeney. *Captors and Captives*, 54)
- ^{xi} Haefeli and Sweeney, *Captors and Captives*, 49-54, 104-105; Eccles, *The French in North America*, 128, 130.
- ^{xii} Eccles, *The French in North America*, 108, 127-130, 220.
- ^{xiii} Atherton, *Montréal Under the French Régime*, 276. New supplies of this paper money were issued in 1711, 1714, and 1717. By 1720, the government had redeemed all this card money. In 1729, the playing cards were replaced by a plain white card with the appropriate signatures. These cards were legal currency until New France fell to the British.
- ^{xiv} Louise Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants in Seventeenth Century Montréal*. Trans. Liana Vardi (Montréal: McGill Queens University Press. 1992), 39; Eccles, *The French in North America*, 139.
- ^{xv} Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants*, 41.
- ^{xvi} Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants*, 39-41; Eccles, *The French in North America*, 124.
- ^{xvii} Atherton, *Montréal Under the French Régime*, 318, 331; Haefeli and Sweeney. *Captors and Captives*, 206.
- ^{xviii} Atherton, *Montréal Under the French Régime*, 396.
- ^{xix} See Eccles, *The French in North America*, 198-234.