

# Ticonderoga 1758

James H. Hillestad recruits figures made by John Jenkins Designs to re-create the French and Indian War clash

Text and Photos: James H. Hillestad



A column of Black Watch grenadiers advances through the forest.

**T**iconderoga 1758 is the third French and Indian War diorama that I have done using superb figures made by John Jenkins Designs.

The first two dioramas, the Battle of the Monongahela and the Battle on Snowshoes, were the subjects of previous articles in TS&MF.

This diorama is based on a battle that took along Lake Champlain July 8, 1758, on a rise about three-quarters of a mile from the French Fort Carillon, which was later renamed Ticonderoga by the British.

As I researched the Battle of Ticonderoga, also known as the Battle of Carillon, I was struck by its similarities with what took place three years earlier along the Monongahela River outside Fort Duquesne (later Fort Pitt).

In both cases, the French occupied forts that were strategically situated to protect waterways. In both cases, the French were greatly outnumbered by the British in artillery and infantry. In both cases, the quality of the French commanders was head and shoulders above their British counterparts. And, in both cases, the French prevailed, while the British were routed.

## STRATEGIC LOCATION

The French began construction of star-shaped Fort Carillon of earth, timber and stone in 1755. It commanded a strategic point of land with Lake Champlain to the east and to the south the mouth of the La Chute River, which

drains Lake George.

Building the fort to guard the short portage trail between the two lakes was part of a strategy to confine the British colonies to the Eastern Seaboard, and keep them on the defensive. Fort Carillon provided the most forward base on the vital Richelieu River/Lake Champlain/Lake George/Hudson River waterway between New France to the north and the British Province of New York to the south.

The fort soon proved to be a sharp thorn in the side of Anglo-Americans. Carillon was the launching point for French raids against the British colonies and the successful siege of Fort William

**RIGHT:** French marines man Montcalm's breastworks.

**BELOW:** The Languedoc Regiment reinforces the French line.





**LEFT:** Map charting the Battle of Ticonderoga, also known as Carillon.

**BELOW:** Battlefield monument “To the heroism of the troops under the unfortunate Maj. Gen. James Abercromby in the attack on the French lines July 8, 1758.”



About 1,000 boats were built to transport the men, guns and baggage down Lake George. When the army set out on July 5, 1758, the flotilla of vessels stretched 7 miles from end to end.

French Gen. Louis-Joseph de Montcalm, who took command at Carillon ably seconded by the Chevalier de Levis, had only 3,527 men at his disposal to face the British juggernaut. The provisions on hand would not last the French more than a single week.

And, to make matters even worse, Carillon had been built in haste and was extremely difficult to defend. A 700-foot hill, now known as Mount Defiance,

**BELOW:** A fierce Black Watch grenadier seeks revenge for a fallen comrade.

Henry on the southern shore of Lake George in 1757.

**BRITISH OFFENSIVE**

James Campbell, Earl of Loudon, the British commander-in-chief in America, formulated an invasion strategy to “remove” the French and to conquer Canada. The main thrust of the Anglo-American assault was aimed at Fort

Carillon.

To carry out the major offensive, Maj. Gen. James Abercromby was appointed. He assembled the largest force ever seen in North America. It included as many as 18,000 men, with approximately 6,000 regulars and 12,000 militia, rangers and Indians. The artillery train was made up of 16 heavy cannons, 13 howitzers, and 11 mortars.



**ABOVE:** Round Tower on the battlefield “Sacred to the memory of the gallant Highlanders of the 42nd Regiment of Foot (the Black Watch).”



## history & diorama building

ance overlooked it, offering an ideal location from which British artillerymen could fire directly into the interior of the fort.

Because Carillon stood little chance of surviving a determined siege, the Marquis de Montcalm -- like Capt. Liénard de Baujeu, commandant at Fort Duquesne in 1755 -- decided to oppose the invaders outside the fort.

On the evening of July 6, Montcalm laid out a line of log breastworks in a 1,000-yard-long semicircle around the shoulder of a hill that commanded the

only approach to the fort from the land side. The next morning, Montcalm and his fellow officers led their men in felling trees and interweaving their sharpened branches to form a broad, tangled barrier 40 yards deep on the slopes below the log entrenchments.

The barrier of branches, called an abatis, had a purpose similar to rolls of concertina wire. Attackers would be slowed down and exposed to systematic destruction by the fire of French infantry small arms and small-bore cannons mounted on swivels on the

high vantage point afforded by the breastworks.

Meanwhile, just a few miles away from the French fort, the British had begun an unopposed landing at the northern end of Lake George the morning of July 6. Though only two hours' march from Fort Carillon, Abercromby would spend two days getting there. Those critical two days of delaying gave Montcalm precious time needed to fortify his positions.

### TACTICAL BLUNDERS

On the morning of July 8, Abercromby sent a junior officer forward to make a



**LEFT:** Black Watch Highlanders advance through the abatis under fire.

**BELOW:** The "Ticonderoga 1758" diorama measures about 5 feet by 30 inches.





**LEFT:** Montcalm monument at Ticonderoga "erected to honor a brave and gallant gentleman."

**BELOW:** French defenders open fire on British assault troops.

discounted possible options such as outflanking the French breastworks or laying siege to the fort. After having frittered away two days, Abercromby now decided to launch a head-on assault.

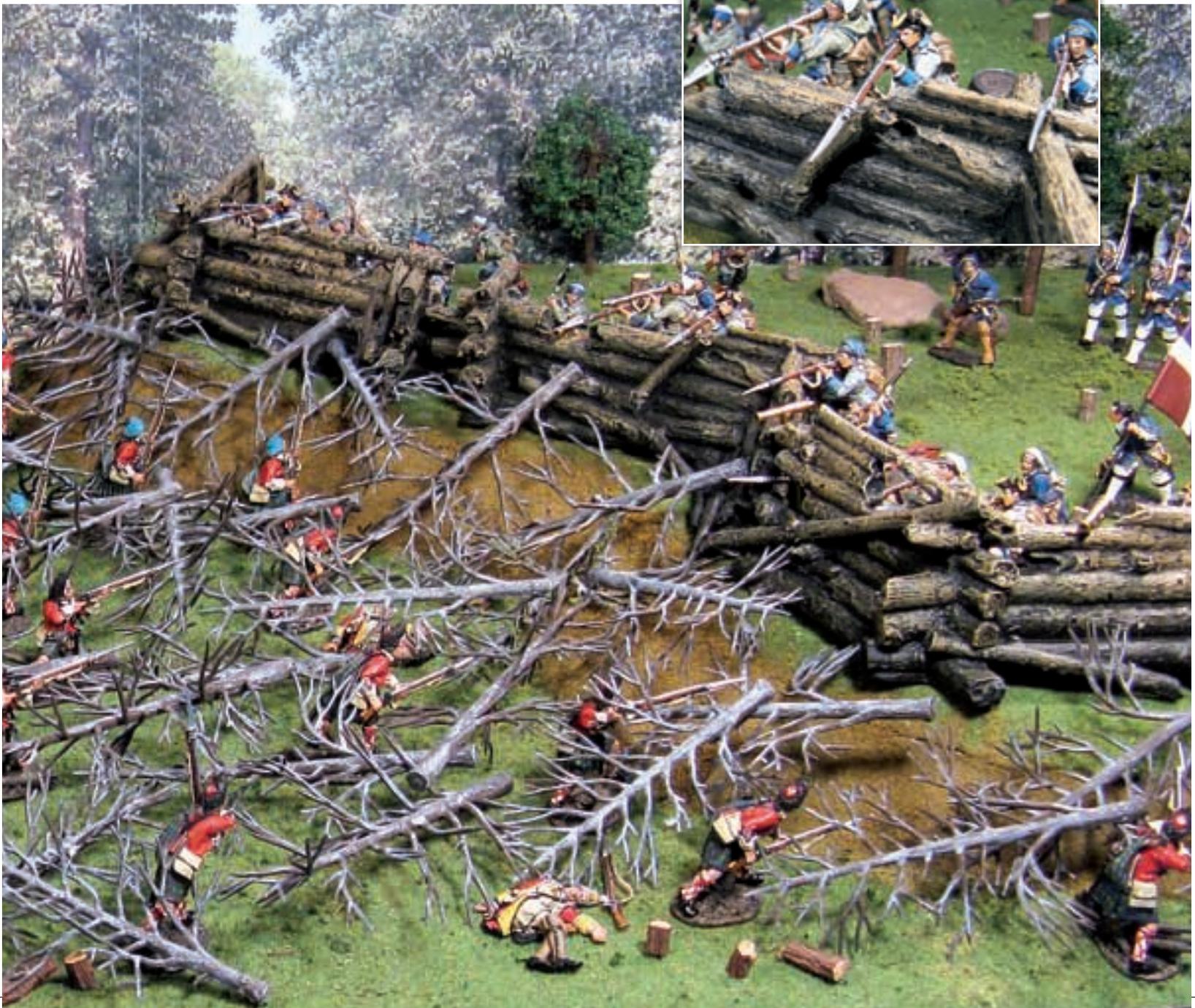
Crucially his army's heavy siege artillery remained parked near the landing place, 4 miles away. The British big guns could have easily blasted pathways through the French field fortifications.

Instead the British infantry would

reconnaissance of the French lines. After only a cursory look, he returned with the assertion that the French defenses had not been completed and

could be carried by a direct frontal assault.

Feeling confident of a quick victory, Abercromby





charge against an entrenched foe without artillery support.

#### KILLING GROUND

At noon Thursday, July 8, the British regulars launched the attack, supported by provincials.

According to a lieutenant in the 42nd Regiment (the Black Watch), “the abatis was what gave the French the fatal advantage over us. The entangled branches of its monstrous large fir and oak trees broke our ranks and made it impossible for us to keep our order. We

couldn’t advance briskly which gave the enemy abundance of time to mow us down like a field of corn.”

Though it was clear by 2 p.m. that the first British attack had failed, instead of changing his tactics Abercromby persisted in sending wave after wave of men into withering French fire. The abatis became a killing field. Valiant and determined Scottish Highlanders from the fabled Black Watch actually succeeded in reaching the base of the French wall around 5 p.m. But the few who managed to scale the breastwork were bayoneted.

Heavy British casualties piled up as the fighting raged on until nightfall. When Abercromby realized the scope of the disaster, he ordered his troops to withdraw to the Lake George landing. Their retreat through woods was disorganized and propelled by panic about possible French and Indian counterattacks in the darkness.

**ABOVE:** Languedoc support troops wearing “pokalems” (blue cloth caps).

**BELOW:** Lake Champlain as viewed from the fort in what is now upstate New York.

*“By dawn on Friday, July 9, the greatest army Britain had ever assembled in North America was rowing frantically for the opposite end of Lake George, leaving behind an enemy that it still outnumbered by more than 5-to-1.”*





**ABOVE:** Entrance to Fort Ticonderoga.

By dawn on Friday, July 9, the greatest army Britain had ever assembled in North America was rowing frantically for the opposite end of Lake George, leaving behind an enemy that it still outnumbered by more than 5-to-1.

**CARILLON'S AFTERMATH**

Concerned about his men's fatigue following the day-long battle, Montcalm had barrels of wine and beer brought forward to the entrenchments. The French troops spent the night alternating between sleeping and strengthening their defenses in full anticipation of a renewed British onslaught at daybreak.

Once they realized the British had been decisively beaten and were in full retreat, the French were so astonished they thought it was a miracle. Montcalm had a cross raised to commemorate the victory.

At least 551 Redcoats and provincials died and more than 1,300 were wounded in the Battle of Carillon. The Black

Watch alone lost nearly half its strength, with about 300 killed and a similar number wounded. The French, by contrast, suffered a total of 377 casualties.

Some historians believe that had Carillon fallen in 1758, the British conquest of North America might have been completed later that same year or in 1759. Instead the war was prolonged and Montreal, the last stronghold of French resistance, did not surrender until 1760.

Abercromby never led another military campaign and was recalled to England. He continued to be promoted, however, rising to the rank of full general in 1772.

**BATTLE IN MINIATURE**

I have walked the site of the battle, solemnly viewed monuments raised to memorialize the combatants and toured the reconstructed fort in present-day Ticonderoga, N.Y., to conduct research and find inspiration.

My "Ticonderoga 1758" diorama measures 5 feet long by 30 inches deep. The scene depicts the Black Watch trying to fight their way through the abatis to attack the French breastworks.

Matt-finished, 1:30-scale Black Watch infantry, including grenadiers, as well as field fortifications and French forces to defend them have been created by John Jenkins, the sculptor behind the brand name.

One can only marvel at his workmanship. The articulation, sculpting and fine painting set the highest standards for the hobby. ♦

**about the writer**

James H. Hillestad is the proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum and shop in Cresco, Pa., USA.