

Notes on Battle Island

by David Manthey – last update on June 11, 2006.

Notes:

It is my belief that each bateau had a crew of 5. It was standard operating procedure in 1755 (according to the *Bateauaman's Book* kept by William Alexander in that year) to have two provincial soldiers in addition to the standard bateau crew. The standard crew is three men – two rowing and one steering. Furthermore, I expect that there are either two or three muskets per bateau, as the bateaumen typically only carry one musket per boat. Also, I fully expect that the provincial soldiers are rowing, not sitting under arms. This is seemingly confirmed in a somewhat incoherent account by Peter Williamson. He was a soldier and a crew member in 1755 and 1756. He implies that there are usual two men (exclusive of the captain), but in 1755 he is part of a four man crew (again, exclusive of the captain). His account is not wholly believable, as he claims to both be with Bradstreet when they are ambushed *and* with the relief column that marches out to pursue the French.

I have been told verbally that there is a historical order for all bateaumen to be under arms. I have not seen this, nor do I even have a reference to such a document.

Historical Accounts of the Battle:

- de Bougainville, Louis Antoine, *Adventure in the Wilderness*, translated and edited by Edward P. Hamilton, Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964:

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July 10: A Canadian officer arrived here with ten English, as much prisoners as deserters, reports news of successful action carried out by M. de Villiers on the Oswego River. With four hundred men he attacked a convoy of three or four hundred bateaux, each with two men, and three companies of soldiers. The English companies here are numbered one hundred men. Some have been reduced to sixty-two. [They were] returning from Oswego, where they had carried food and munitions, and had gone up again after more provisions. Villiers put them to flight and knocked off a great number, and would have knocked off a lot more were it not for the poor quality of the tomahawks furnished by the King's Store, took twenty-four scalps and killed or wounded in their flight, according to his estimate, about three hundred men. We lost in this affair a colony officer, six Canadians and colony soldiers and one Indian.

The victory would have been greater except for the precipitation of the Indians who attacked too soon, and I would add, also that of the chief, for I have seen him in a similar situation.

- Godfrey, William G., *Pursuit and Profit in Colonial North America: John Bradstreet's Quest*, Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1982.

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Unfortunately for Oswego, while the English marked time, postponing major of offensive and defensive decisions until consideration by the new commander, there was no such neglectful indecision on the French side of the lines. In May French activity in the Oswego region had been intensified by the dispatch of Captain de Villiers with 700 Canadians and Indians. His

force was to harass the enemy and watch “his movements towards the river Chouaguen.” By June the French felt that the main British attack would be directed against Crown Point, and, thus, a French-Indian diversionary attack upon Oswego might be attempted with reasonable chance of success. While diversionary it was to be launched “in such a way that the defensive might be changed into offensive, according to circumstances.” At the end of June, after considerable debate, the decision was made to lay siege to Oswego. Rigaud de Vaudreuil, Governor of Trois Rivieres, was sent with a colonial and Indian force “to assume command of Sieur de Villiers’s Camp, established at Niaoure bay about 15 leagues from Chouaguen.” Montcalm arrived at Frontenac on July 29 and on August 4 left for Niaoure and the command of the Oswego enterprise.

Bradstreet was the first to test this new French strength Oswego. On July 3 he left the Lake Ontario post for Schenectady with his train of bateaux. The convoy was rather bulky, consisting of 350 bateaux and about 1,000 bateau-men. Bradstreet therefore divided it into three divisions, placing himself in command of the first unit. The various segments were separated from each other once enroute because of the difficulties of keeping close order with such an irregular force. Thus it was the advance division under Bradstreet which wandered into an ambush set up by de Villiers’ men about eight miles from Oswego. The French-Indian force, consisting of about 450 Canadians, 180 regulars, and 100 Indians, was waiting on the north side of the river. They let a few bateau pass and then struck, hitting the portion of the convoy which included Bradstreet and about 300 bateau-men. When the firing commenced, Bradstreet led six men to a small island near the enemy; he hoped that such a move would keep the French-Indian force from crossing the river. Once there he beat back an attack of twenty foes and was joined by more of his own men. A second and third attempt at storming the island was made, but Bradstreet and his increasing but still outnumbered force stood their ground. This stubborn stance gave the remaining bateau-men time to get ashore on the south side of the river. Bradstreet now led the island force to the safe shore as well. Here he heard that the French were fording the river approximately a mile away. He took 250 men to this spot to try to catch the enemy in mid-stream. Finding about 400 had already crossed and were ensconced in a thick swampy area, he abandoned any idea of a slow advance from tree to tree and ordered a direct charge. Bradstreet himself took the lead in this headlong attack and the opposing ranks broke under it. Keeping up a steady fire, the French withdrew to the river and crossed it. At the river “the Battoemen having now a fair View of them, took them down fast; and here it was that the Enemy sustained their greatest loss.” By now the remaining portions of the convoy were at hand as was a force of about 100 from Onondaga under Captain Patten. Definitely outnumbered, the French began a retreat. A scouting party sent to check the north bank found de Villiers’ men had withdrawn “in the utmost Haste and Confusion, for they had left behind their Picks, Blankers, and Provisions.” (p. 80)

Although the French had been beaten off it appears that it was the English under Bradstreet who took the heavier losses. In the three-hour engagement, the English reports counted 20 men killed and 24 wounded among Bradstreet’s force while estimating that the French dead numbered over 100. However, on the French side there was a quite different description of what was considered a “successful action.” The French commander, de Villiers, apparently reported that the English lost 300 killed or wounded, while “we lost in this affair a colony officer, six Canadians and colony soldiers and one Indian.” If each side’s own dead and wounded counts are accepted as accurate, and their estimates of losses suffered on the other side are ignored, then Bradstreet’s forces had suffered far more casualties. On the other hand, despite the nature of the

surprise attack, Bradstreet's bateaux convoy had not been cut to ribbons but had remained intact, with the bateau-men suffering relatively light losses, given their unpreparedness. Furthermore Bradstreet's major responsibility, running supplies into Oswego, already was completed before the action took place, so the French ambush did not disrupt the provisioning of Oswego. Rather, as the *New York Mercury* pointed out, it demonstrated the wisdom "of taking large numbers of Battoemen into the service." The action proved that given leadership such as that offered by Bradstreet, bateau-men were capable of withstanding French attacks and, even in the face of sizeable enemy forces, could keep open the supply route to Oswego.

• MacKeller, Patrick, *A Journal of the Transactions at Oswego from the 16th of May to the 14th of August 1756*. A journal kept by an Engineer, as reprinted in Pargellis, Stanley, editor, *Military Affairs in North America: 1748-1765; Selected documents from the Cumberland Papers in Windsor Castle*, New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1936.

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July 1st: A part of the Garrison employed upon the Shipping and the Men allowed for the Works in bringing Fascines as pr Account.

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I took the Soundings of the Harbour and Entrance.

Colonel Bradstreet arrived this day with a Convoy of about 600 Battoes with Provisions for the Garrison and Guns and Rigging for the Vessels.—Captains Moore and Paget with a party of 150 Men, and Mr. Pitcher Commissary of the Musters came with him.

...

3rd: No men allowed for the Works upon account of the Musters.

Colonel Bradstreet set out this Morning with his Convoy of Battoes for Schenectady.

A Brig of 16 Guns and a Sloop of 12 guns launched this Morning about 10 a Clock.

Between three & four in the afternoon there came an Express with an Account of Colonel Bradstreet's Convoy being attack'd about seven miles off, Captain Pager with a Party of 150 Men was sent to reinforce him. About ten at Night there came another Express from Colonel Bradstreet with an Account of the Enemies quitting the Field and his having taken two Prisoners, and by the Account of one of them, the strength of the Enemy consisted of 180 Regulars 400 Canadians and 100 Indians, by the Account of the other, they consisted of a great many more.

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4th: The Morning very wet. No Men allowed for the Works on account of the Musters.

Captain Moore with a Party of 200 Men was sent out about 2 a Clock, there being an Account that the Enemy were encamped on the East Side of the River seven or eight Miles up.

• A letter from William Shirley to Henry Fox, dated New York, July 26th, 1756, as reprinted in Shirley, William, *Correspondence of William Shirley, governor of Massachusetts and military commander in America, 1731-1760*, New York: Macmillan, 1912.

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Sir,

I have the satisfaction to Acquaint you, that on the 3d of this Instant Captain Bradstreet

Obtain'd an Advantage in an Engagement between a party of 250 of the Battoe-Men under his Command and one of the Enemy's, consisting of 400 Canadians, 100 Regulars, and 100 Indians upon the River Onondago, at About 11 Miles distance from Oswego, which I hope will have a good effect for Checking their Incursions for the future, keeping open the Communication between that place and Schenectada, and deterring the Indians in the French Interest from being to forward to enter their Quarrels with us.

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It appears from the several Relations given of this Affair, that the Enemy, who had been in vain Waiting some time for an Opportunity to cutt Capt. Bradstreet off with his Convoy of Provisions in his passage to Oswego, fir'd upon about 100 of his Battoes in their Return from thence, which went before him in a scattering Manner, and kill'd Several of his Men; that he was Obliged himself to take to an Island near the place of the Attack with a party, which consisted of about Eight Men at first, and Never exceeded 20 during his stay upon the Island; that from thence he repuls'd them in three Attempts to ford the River in much superior Numbers to his own; that having collected about 250 of his Men on the South Side of the River Opposite to the Enemy, a large party of whom were now endeavouring to ford it about half a Mile above, he quitted the Island and Marched to meet them, and engaged about 400 of them in a Swamp; where, after Maintaining a Sharpe fight with them in the Indian Way upwards of an hour, he prevail'd on his Men to rush into the Swamp upon them, and drove them precipitately into the River, in which Many of them were kill'd; And from thence he proceeded higher up the River in pursuit of another party of the Enemy, which he had Intelligence were to cross it, a Mile about him, and soon fell in with some of the stragglers, upon which the rest betook themselves to flight.

In this Skirmish we had 20 kill'd and 24 Wounded, and it is judged from the Number of the Bodys of the Enemy; that were seen in the Water, besides those on Shoar, and of their Firelocks, Hatchets and Scalping knives, which were found that they lost at least, 100; Among which were several Indians; and in their flight they left behind them part of their Provisions and Many Blankets, which were found on the North side of the River, by our parties, which were sent out after the Engagement.

About an hour after the Action was over, the Grenadier Company of the 50th Regiment, which was upon their March to Oswego, in their return from Onondago, to which last place I had Ordered them to escort Sir William Johnson from the German Flatts, joined Capt. Bradstreet's party; and the next Morning a Detachment of 200 Men, was sent from the Garrison at Oswego to reinforce him, with which all the rest of his Battoe-Men, who were then all come up, he purposed to have gone in quest of the Main Body of the Enemy, which had been hovering several Weeks about Oswego and the 12 Mile falls, and it is judged Consisted of about 1200; But the heavy rains, which fell the whole day and Night following, prevented him.

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It is agreed, that through the whole of this Action, Captain Bradstreet behaved with good Conduct as well as Gallantry, and I must in Justice to him Observe, that the transportation of the provisions and Stores this Spring to Oswego, (upon which the preservation of this place hath so much depended) is Chiefly owing to his indefatigable Activity, and Singular good Management in his Command.

- “Action Between the French and English”, *New York Mercury*, July 19, 1756, as reprinted in

O'Callaghan, E. B., *The Documentary History of the State of New York*, Albany: Weed, Parsons, and Co., 1849.

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Albany, 13 July. 1756.

On Monday Colonel Bradstreet arrived here from Oswego. On the 3d, about 3 o'Clock in the Afternoon, nine Miles on this side that Place, having about 300 Battoemen with him, in their Battoes, he was attacked from the North side of the River by about 700 of the Enemy, of which 200 were Regulars, the Rest Canadians and Indians. Col. Bradstreet, who at that time was near the Front of his Party, proceeded with six Men to a small Island near the Enemy, and ordered a few more to follow him there, to keep back the Enemy from fording the River, till the rest of his Men could land on the South side of it. He had no sooner landed with the Six Men, but he was attacked by Twenty of the Enemy, whom his Party beat back, kept Possession of the Island and were joined by six more Battoemen. They were then attacked by about 40 of the Enemy, who stood their Ground very well, and wounded eight out of the Twelve; yet as our People never fired, without each killing his Man, the Enemy gave Way. The Party on the Island were then increased to about Twenty, besides the Wounded, and were again attacked by 70 of the Enemy, whom our Folks also beat back a third time. This Affair on the Island lasted near an Hour, and had given the Rest of our Battoemen Time to land on the South side of the River and those on the Island perceiving the Enemy were coming to surround them with their whole strength, retired to the South side of the River, and were followed by the Enemy. Our People made a feint Flight until the Chief of the Enemy had forded the River, then faced about, and push'd the Enemy back into the River, where they killed great numbers of them; the Rest took to their Heels; and were so closely pursued, that they left all their Packs, Blankets & Provisions behind, and many of them their Guns. About forty of our People are killed & missing & 24 slightly wounded. The number of the Enemy killed is not Exactly known, as most of them fell in the River, but it must be at least triple the Number of Ours. Col. Bradstreet has brought two Prisoners with him.

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[From the same, July 26, 1756.]

Since our last, many letters are come to Town from Albany, all confirming the Account we had of the Defeat of the French and Indians by the Battoemen under the Command of Col. Bradstreet and all doing Honour to the active, brave and circumspect Behaviour of that Gentleman, during the whole affair. They also all agree in this, That after the Repulse of the Enemy in their three several Attacks on the Island, it was discovered that the Enemy in great Numbers were passing from the North to the South side of the River, at a Ford about a mile above, on which Cal. Bradstreet immediately marched with 250 men, to meet them. He found that the Enemy to the number of about 400 had possessed themselves of a thick Pine Swamp, on which he attacked them in their own way, behind Trees, but finding that to little purpose, while the Enemy remained covered, he prevailed on his Men to rush in upon them, which had so good an effect that the Enemy were soon dispossessed of the swamp, but still made a running Fight from Tree to Tree. In this manner they were pushed backwards for near two Miles, when having the River in their Rear, they were obliged to cross, which they did in a Manner most terrible to themselves. It was either to drown or be shot: Destruction stared them in the Face on all sides, and it soon laid hold of them, for the Battoemen having now a fair View of them, took them down fast; and here it was that the Enemy sustained their greatest Loss. One of the Prisoners taken in this pursuit, informed Colonel Bradstreet, that one of our Indians had, during the

Engagement, deserted to the Enemy, and informed them of our Disposition, on which a Party of the Enemy was ordered to cross the River, a little higher up, and to come down upon our Flanks or Rear. Col. Bradstreet marched up to the Place described by the Prisoner, and fell in with a few of them straggling before the Rest; but the whole party soon took to their Heels, and with the utmost Precipitation and Confusion, repassed the River, some leaving behind them their Arms, others their Blankets, and many Indian Implements of War. The first attack of the Enemy was made about 3 O'Clock, the Action ended about 6 in the Evening. A Scouting Party was then sent out on the North side of the River, to see if any of the Enemy were remaining, but found that they were gone off, and that in the utmost Haste and Confusion, for they had left behind them their Packs, Blankets, and Provisions. About half an hour after the Action ended, Capt. Patten, with one Hundred Grenadiers of the 50th Regt joined the Battoemen. The former being on their March from Onondaga to Oswego, about 4 Miles from the place of Action, heard the Fire, and made all the Haste they could to come up, but they came a little too late. However with this Reinforcement it was determined to pursue the Enemy to their Camp about 12 Miles off, if they could, by the next Morning, have 200 Men more from the Garrison of Oswego, and accordingly an Express was dispatched to Col. Mercer for that Purpose, who sent the 200 Men requested; but unluckily a Storm of Rain came on so hard as to render it impossible to keep the Men's Ammunition dry. It continued raining till next day, and then it was judged too late to attempt the Pursuit.

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A further Account of the Action on the 3d of July last.

[From the same, Aug. 2, 1756.]

You have doubtless before this Time, had the agreeable News of the Defeat of the French by the Battoemen on the Onondaga River.—Capt. Bradstreet's Conduct was much to his honour, and will be very advantageous to the English operations in the present Campaign.—His success against the Enemy shews us the Wisdom, of taking large numbers of Battoemen into the service—But for this Expedient, we should have been unable to keep the Passage open to Oswego; and unless our Provisions, stores &c. had been sent to that Garrison, in large Squadrons of Battoes, all other attempts to support it, would have been ineffectual; for notwithstanding our Interest in the Six Nations, we have undoubted Accounts, that 1200 of the Enemy have lain undiscovered in their Country, not far from Oswego ever since May last.

When Capt. Bradstreet left Oswego, he gave strict Orders, that the several Divisions of the Battoemen should keep close together. But such an irregular Body, could not be easily kept to good order, and therefore they were at some Distance from each other, when the Enemy attacked them.—Our Success was owing to Capt. Bradstreet's taking Possession of the Island, for by this means he prevented the Enemy from fording the River, and gave the Battoemen who were fired upon, Time to rally and collect themselves on the opposite shore.—When Capt Bradstreet gained the Island, he had not above Eight Men with him, and these repulsed about 30 of the Enemy. Upon this he was joined by six more Battoemen, and was attacked a second Time by a Party of 40 French, whom he also compelled to give Way.—Capt. Bradstreet was after that, reinforced by six others, and a Party of above 70 of the Enemy then fell upon him, and by pouring in cross Fires, wounded 12 of his Men; but after some Time, the French were forced to retire a third Time.

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A large Body of about 400, being then observed to advance upon the North Side of the River, about a Mile higher, Capt. Bradstreet imagined, that they intended to ford the River, and

surround him. On this he quitted the Island, and with 250 Men, Marched up the South side of the River, to prevent it, but the Enemy had not only forded it, but taken Possession of a Pine Swamp on that Side, before he came up. Doctor Kirkland, who was returning from Oswego, in Company with Capt. Bradstreet's command, had now gathered together 200 Battoemen, with Design to reinforce him; but Capt. Bradstreet sent him Orders to keep his Post, to cover the Battoes which were behind; and directed that Capt. Butler should Command the farthest Division of Battoes down the River, and post them in the most proper Place upon the same Duty.

When Capt. Bradstreet came to the Swamp, an Engagement began in the Indian Manner, which lasted above an Hour; Capt. Bradstreet then animating his Men, entered the swamp, and forced the Enemy out of it into the River, where many of them were slain. . . . Another Party was at that Time, attempting to ford the River when Capt. Bradstreet came up with them, and after he fell in with them, the whole Body was routed.

Not long after this last Action, a Company of Grenadiers belonging to General Shirley's Regiment, which was upon the March from Onondaga to Oswego, joined our Battoemen; and the next Morning 200 Men came to them from the Garrison. Capt. Bradstreet now proposed, to have gone in quest of the main Body of the French, but was prevented by excessive Rains.

We lost in these Actions about 20 Men, and 24 were wounded. What the loss of the Enemy was is uncertain.—All conjecture that above 100 were killed.—This we know, that above 80 Firelocks were brought to Schenectady: Seventy-four Men more were found by a Party, that afterwards went out from Oswego to patrol the Woods; and many doubtless were lost in the River. The Enemy fled in the utmost Disorder; for some Traders were passing by the Place of Action a few Days after, were hailed from the Shore by 20 Frenchmen, who being without Provisions and unable to find their Camp, were strolling about the Woods, upon the Banks of the River in great Distress, and begged to be taken up and carried to Oswego.—The Traders being in Number but about Half a Dozen, were fearful of taking more than one of them in, and him they delivered to the Garrison.

This Repulse will doubtless check the Incursions of the French, shake their Indian Interest, strengthen our own, and secure our future Convoys in their Passage to Oswego.—Capt. Bradstreet's Gallantry and Conduct are justly Commended.—The former, in his Defence of the Island, and the attack at the Swamp; and the latter in his prudent Disposition of the Remainder of the Battoemen, for securing his Rear, and preventing the Enemy from Surrounding his whole Party.—Nor did he receive any Help from our Indians.—The whole Number he had with him, was only Twelve.—Nine of these (such is the State of our Interest with them!) could not be brought to engage.—One went immediately over to the French, and informed them of our Numbers & Disposition. An Oneida Indian fought bravely thro' the whole Dispute but another Indian escaped to the Onondaga Castle, and spread a Report that Capt. Bradstreet was killed, & all his Battoemen defeated.—I hope we shall in the ensuing Campaign, fully avenge the Loss we sustained on the Banks of Monaughela.

• Mante, Thomas, *The naval and military history of the wars of England; including, the wars of Scotland and Ireland, Vol. VI*, London: Lewis and Co., 1795.

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... Soon after this, having received intelligence that a considerable convoy of provisions and stores, for the garrison of Oswego, would in a little time set out from Schenectady, and be

convoyed in batteaux up the river Onondaga, they formed an ambuscade among the woods and thickets on the north side of that river; but understanding that the convoy had passed before they reached the place, they resolved to wait the return of the detachment. Their design, however, was frustrated by the vigilance and valour of Colonel Bradstreet, who had expected such an attempt, and had taken his measures accordingly. On the 3d of July, while he stemmed the stream of the river, with his batteaux, formed into three divisions, they were saluted with the Indian war-whoop, and a general discharge of musquetry from the north shore. Bradstreet immediately ordered his men to land on the opposite bank, and with a few of the foremost took possession of a small island, where he was forthwith attacked by a part of the enemy, who had forded the river for that purpose; but these were soon repulsed. Another body having passed a mile higher, he advanced to them at the head of two hundred men, and fell upon them, sword in hand, with such vigour, that many were killed on the spot, and the rest driven into the river, with such precipitation that a considerable number of them was drowned. Having received information that a third body of them had passed at a ford still higher, he marched thither without hesitation, and pursued them to the other side, where they were entirely routed and dispersed. In this action, which lasted near three hours, about seventy of the batteaux men were killed or wounded, but the enemy lost double the number killed, and above seventy taken prisoners. In all probability the whole detachment of the French, amounting to seven hundred men, would have been cut off, had not a heavy rain interposed, and disabled Bradstreet from following his blow; for that same night he was joined by Captain Patten with his grenadiers, in his march from Oneida to Oswego, and next morning reinforced with two hundred men, detached to his assistance from the garrison of Oswego; but by this time the rivulets were so swelled by the rain, that it was found impracticable to pursue the enemy through the woods and thickets.”

• Williamson, Peter, *French and Indian cruelty; exemplified in the life and various vicissitudes of fortune of Peter Williamson*, Edinburgh: 1787. This is the fifth edition of a book originally published in 1757.

[I'm not quoting this particular book, but I mention it as having a description of Battle Island. Williamson is clearly writing from memory, and is often quite askew in his beliefs. For instance, he feels that opposite the carry at Rome, one reaches the Ohio River. He purports to both be with Bradstreet when the convoy is attacked on the way *to* Oswego on June 29th, and with the relief party sent out after Bradstreet is attacked. It is an interesting read, but of such obvious low accuracy, that I am not including it.]