

UNITED STATES ARMY RANGER ASSOCIATION, INC.

**A BRIEF HISTORY  
OF THE  
AMERICAN RANGERS  
(1634-PRESENT)**

*"Rangers Lead The Way"*

**A BRIEF HISTORY  
of the  
AMERICAN RANGERS  
1634-1990**

by

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During the middle ages "Rangiatorem", or rangers, served the English King in his forest districts. For example in 1371 Henry Dolyng was a ranger of the New Forest and Thomas of Croydon was a ranger in Waltham. Those long ago rangers apparently protected the deer from poachers, hunted wolves, and discouraged bandits from preying upon the forest hamlets.

From the very beginning of the English settlements in North America, problems were encountered in defending against Indian attacks. Initially, the colonies tried stationing small, immobile garrisons in tiny forts located on the major avenues of approach into the settled areas. However, the Indians quietly bypassed the forts, raided the settlements, and withdrew before the militia could muster and counterattack. It was recognized very early that each colony needed "a runninge armye continually a foote" to discover the Indians' approach and give the militia time to assemble and march.

During that period the word "range" in the English language was used to describe the movement of soldiers when they patrolled an area. Thus, soldiers who ranged were called rangers. In 1634 and 1635 Edward Backler was hired as a "rainger" for Kent Island, a Virginia plantation in the upper Chesapeake Bay (present Maryland). His apparent duty was to give warning of the approach of Indians who had been harrassing the settlement. The private use of small parties of military rangers by Virginia and Maryland plantation owners was probably common by the late 1630s.

In 1648 the government of Maryland was using rangers to patrol its frontier. Rangers were the standard system of Maryland's frontier defense from 1665 to 1705. They gave early warning of the movement of warparties and attacked them when possible. The government of Virginia began employing rangers on a regular basis in 1676 and continued their almost uninterrupted use until 1717. The two colonies sometimes coordinated the operations of their units. Virginia continued to employ rangers intermittently until the end of the eighteenth century. The other southern colonies soon adopted and continued to use rangers during those periods when Indian raids appeared likely.

The northern colonies also began using rangers for defense against Indians during the seventeenth century. In 1670 the

colony of Plymouth (part of modern Massachusetts) maintained a unit under Thomas Willet. During King Phillip's War (1675-76) Plymouth and Massachusetts raised and maintained rangers for both defensive and offensive purposes. Parties of men ranged near the settlements, on the lookout for the approach of Indian warparties. Other settlers and friendly Indians were organized into independent ranging companies, such as the one commanded by Benjamin Church. The independent companies became very efficient at raiding and ambushing the hostile Indians in their own lands. Most of the other Northern colonies followed the example of Plymouth and Massachusetts and used rangers to protect their frontiers during much of the eighteenth century.

Nova Scotia, New York, and Georgia rangers were active during the War of Jenkins Ear-King George's War (1739-48), fighting the French and the Spanish and their Indian allies. During the French and Indian War (1754-63) rangers carried the burden of reconnoitering, raiding, and ambushing for the British Army in North America. American rangers in British service fought and died from Canada to Cuba. The British Army tried to imitate and replace them with regular light infantry regiments, but the project was not completely successful. Most of the colonies also employed rangers to protect their frontiers from Indian raids.

The most famous and successful ranger of the colonial period was Robert Rogers, commander of several companies in British pay during the French and Indian War. His exploits in battle on the northern frontier are legend. He also conducted a ranger training course (for British Army officers) and wrote a detailed set of Rules For The Ranging Service, which are applicable today. Nevertheless, he drew on generations of ranging experience; some of his Rules may have been borrowed from the "old ranger", Benjamin Church, who lived more than half a century earlier.

During the American Revolution (1775-84) the individual states and the Continental government made widespread use of rangers. The frontier war was bitter and hard fought; the British incited Indian tribes against the American settlements. However, some of the ranger companies became so efficient that Indian raids practically ceased in their areas of operation. The British Army was particularly adept in employing loyalist ranger units, like John Butler's Corps of Rangers, in raiding and ambushing Americans along the frontier. In some instances American and British rangers engaged one another in combat.

The British government again incited Indian tribes against the frontier during the War of 1812 (1812-1815). Several independent companies of United States Rangers were raised from among the frontier settlers, as part of the regular army. Throughout the war they patrolled the frontier from Ohio to western Illinois, on horseback and by boat. They participated in many skirmishes and battles with the British and their Indian allies. Several companies were also raised by the frontier states (in the present Midwest).

The United States government and several frontier states continued to use rangers as protection against hostile Indians. During 1832-33 the United States Army maintained a 600 man Battalion of Mounted Rangers on the prairies and plains of the western frontier. In 1835 Texas began using rangers for the defense of its frontier. Companies commanded by experienced men such as Jack Hayes were a constant danger to Indian warparties. During the War With Mexico (1846-48) some Texas units served under the direction of the United States Army.

During the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries rangers were volunteers who were looked upon as specialized, elite soldiers. They conducted the types of operations that are still considered as ranger specialities: ranging (reconnoitering an area for information or searching for targets of opportunity); raiding; ambushing; attacking across unusually difficult terrain; and spearheading attacks. Indians were commonly recruited to serve as guides and scouts and as rangers. During operations rangers used the best available means of transportation. If the circumstances permitted, they rode horseback; however, their horses were used for transportation only. They usually dismounted and fought on foot. They also used boats whenever possible. Waterborne patrols and amphibious raids were conducted by rangers as early as the late seventeenth century. Units in New England sometimes conducted their winter ranging operations on snowshoes and ice skates.

The early rangers received little formal training. The most successful units were those that were composed of men who were familiar with living and working in the forests, on the prairies, or on the plains. Such men were very independent and only good leaders could secure their best performance.

From the 1600s until the end of the frontier in the late 1800s it was a tradition that rangers provided their own weapons, clothing, equipment, and horses. In return they were paid higher wages than other soldiers. For example, a United States Ranger (1812-15) received one dollar per day, triple the normal army pay. Rangers seldom wore standard uniforms; however, their weapons and equipment were often standard within companies. Their firearms were normally the very best that could be purchased.

Several famous men served as rangers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For example, Daniel Boone was a North Carolina ranger for a short time, probably in 1759, stationed at Fort Waddell on the forks of the Yadkin River. Three of his sons commanded ranger companies during the War of 1812. Nathan Hale was commanding a company in Thomas Knowlton's Battalion of Connecticut Rangers during the Revolutionary War when he volunteered for the spy mission that led to his execution by the British on 22 September 1776. In Illinois, during the Black Hawk War of 1832, Abraham Lincoln was a member of the state frontier guard whose members were called rangers. He served in Elijah

Iles' company during the period 29 May-16 June 1831. He provided his own arms and horse. Lincoln then reenlisted as a ranger in Jacob Early's company and served from 20 June to 10 July 1831. He ranged in northwestern Illinois and southern Wisconsin, on the lookout for hostile Indians.

In 1862, during the Civil War (1861-65), the Confederate government authorized the formation of Partisan Ranger bands to reconnoiter, raid, and ambush behind Union lines. Units were organized throughout the South, and some provided very effective service. In Virginia John (Hanse) McNeill's Company of Partisan Rangers (later commanded by his son, Jesse) inflicted many injuries upon the Union Army, including the capture of two Union generals. John Mosby's 43rd Battalion Partisan Rangers was very much feared by Union soldiers. He and his men harassed the rear areas of the Union Army in Virginia during much of the war, raiding encampments, capturing men (including a general), and destroying supplies.

The United States Army made only minor use of ranger units against the Confederate Army. However, Indian unrest soared in the west during the war. Most of the federal troops had been withdrawn from the frontier, and several of the states formed ranger units for frontier defense. One of the most active was the First Regiment of Mounted Rangers, a Minnesota unit whose twelve companies ranged the frontier and helped defeat the Santee Sioux during 1862-63.

After the Civil War rangers continued to guard the Texas frontier. In 1881 they fought their last battle with Indians, and their primary mission changed from Indian defense to law enforcement. Texas had maintained military rangers almost continuously for half a century. Today their descendants are the members of the small companies of rangers who are part of the Texas State Police.

More than half a century passed without military ranger units in America. However, during World War Two (1942-45) six Ranger Infantry Battalions were activated by the United States Army. They were organized from volunteers and were trained to British commando standards. The commandos used techniques that had been developed by rangers in America more than two hundred years before. The 1st, 3rd, and 4th Ranger Infantry Battalions fought the Germans and Italians in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy. They began the tradition of wearing the scroll shoulder sleeve insignia, which has been officially adopted for today's ranger battalions. The 2nd and 5th Ranger Infantry Battalions landed at Normandy and fought their way across Western Europe against the Germans. The 6th Ranger Infantry Battalion conducted ranger operations in the Philippine Islands against the Japanese.

Seventeen Ranger Infantry Companies (Airborne) were organized during 1950-51. They were trained by the Ranger Training Command at Fort Benning, Georgia, and some of the companies received mountain warfare instruction in Colorado. The

Training Command at Fort Benning, Georgia, and some of the companies received mountain warfare instruction in Colorado. The 1st through the 5th and the 8th Ranger Infantry Companies experienced intensive combat in the Korean War (1950-53). Rangers began using a new element of transportation--the parachute; all companies were airborne qualified. The 2nd and 4th Companies made a combat parachute assault in Korea. Because of the World War Two and Korean War rangers' outstanding reputations, the term "ranger" came to mean the very best of soldiers.

Since 1951 the Army Infantry School at Fort Benning has operated a very demanding Ranger Course in which volunteer candidates receive instruction in ranger operations. The "Ranger School" was conducted initially by the Ranger Department and now by the Ranger Training Brigade. The training is realistic, simulated combat and is conducted over forest, swamp, mountain, and desert terrain. The students include members of rangers units. Other men also attend the school and return to their units to provide a corps of ranger leadership. Successful graduates wear a ranger arc tab above their unit shoulder sleeve insignia.

In 1969, during the Vietnam War (1962-73), fifteen airborne ranger companies were raised under the colors of the 75th Infantry. The 75th was the decendent of the 5307th Composite Unit (Merrills' Marauders), a regimental size long range penetration unit that served in the jungles of Burma during World War II. Companies C through I and K through P, 75th Infantry (Ranger) fought in Vietnam with the primary mission of long range patrolling in enemy areas. The companies assumed the assets of the long range patrol units, some of which had been existence in Vietnam since 1967. They served until the withdrawl of American troops. An Indiana National Guard unit, Co D, 151st Infantry (Ranger), also experienced combat in Vietnam.

Companies A and B, 75th Infantry (Ranger) had remained on duty in the United States. In 1974 they were replaced by the 1st and 2nd Battalions, 75th Infantry (Ranger) which gave the Army a stronger capability in ranger operations. During 1984 the 3rd Battalion was also organized. All three battalions were then placed under the command of a new ranger headquarters, the 75th Ranger Regiment. Ranger battalions conducted combat parachute assaults on Grenada (1983) and Panama (1989). Today, the men of the Ranger Regiment are tasked with the responsibility for missions similar to those that were undertaken by their grandfathers during the past three and a half centuries. Ranger weapons and means of transportation have changed considerably; however, the basic nature of their operations remain the same. If an experienced ranger from one of Robert Rogers' companies returned and joined a modern ranger company he would probably feel right at home after a few weapons classes. However, it might take a while before he would grow accustomed to parachute and helicopter assaults.

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