

# FORT TICONDEROGA

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## Essay for your consideration

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### **Cunning and Malicious Obstacles: Building an Abatis at Carillon, Then and Now [792 words]**

In eighteenth century Europe and North America, fortifications that were built in forested areas could not usually be entered without first passing through an “abatis” (pronounced ah-bah-TEE by the French). To military engineers tasked with strengthening fortifications by the “cunning and malicious employment of a variety of obstacles,” building an abatis was often the simplest yet most effective way to carry out their orders.\* The tools were available (axes and hatchets). The materials were plentiful (trees and brush). The procedure was simple: Cut down all the trees in front of your lines so that they face toward the enemy. Cut them so that they fall across each other in an interlocking criss-cross pattern. Trim off the twigs and leaves, and sharpen the larger branches.

If you were General Montcalm, and had 15,000 or so British soldiers camped on your doorstep, fully prepared to destroy you, your army of 3,000, and your unfinished fort, it might seem like a good idea (as in fact it was) to have your men build an especially dense abatis in front of the only tenable fortification on the Ticonderoga peninsula, the log breastwork that we know as the French Lines.

The decision to build an abatis was battle-winning. But it might not have been. The British Army was well-known for its ability to take enemy redoubts and lines by storm. The French army was well-known for building solid fortifications and defending them tenaciously. But few works, no matter how well built, can be defended indefinitely. In the Battle of Carillon, fought on July 8, 1758, the log breastwork and abatis built by Montcalm’s men in under 48 hours, was successfully defended. Attacking British columns were broken up when they advanced into the abatis and driven back by heavy French fire.

As I watched the men of the recreated Highland regiments during last June’s Battle of Carillon reenactment, hacking at our abatis with their swords and pulling at it with their bare hands, I could not help feeling what I would describe as an evil glee. From the start of construction on the New French Lines in May 2007, we were determined to make our abatis as tangled, pointy, and impenetrable as the original had been, but Sun Tsu says that every good fort needs a gap (so that the defenders can attack). Our abatis, then, would have gaps, carefully laid-out pathways that we hoped would look inviting to a British officer. “Here lads, this is the way in! Follow me!” As the attacking Highlanders were now discovering, though, our pathways were dead ends from which there was no escape from French fire.

Eighteenth century engineers built fortifications and obstacles with the best readily available materials. Montcalm’s army built an abatis because the ground they were fortifying was in an oak forest. If Carillon had been built in a treeless urban setting, engineers might have fronted their works with rows of sharpened stakes split out of timbers from dismantled buildings.

We too would make use of the best readily available materials in constructing the New French Lines, but in doing so, we did not want to damage valuable natural resources. Cutting down our cherished white oaks was not an option. Happily, winter storms provided hundreds of tree limbs and vista-clearing efforts on the historic landscape yielded brush, lots of brush. The last few pieces of our abatis, like Montcalm's, were hauled into place only hours before the battle began.

Now, months later, nature rules a quiet battleground. Our log breastwork and abatis are scarcely visible amid the weeds and sprouting tree stumps. In a few years, it will all be gone. In August 1776 the rotted remains of Montcalm's breastwork were buried under earthworks constructed by Continental Army work parties preparing for another British attack. These are the entrenchments that visitors see today as they enter the site.

The next time you visit the Fort, slow down before you reach the French Lines and imagine that you are a British soldier, on foot, your musket with fixed bayonet in your right hand. The fifty pounds of equipment and ammunition you are carrying makes it nearly impossible to move but your sergeant pulls you forward, yelling instructions you cannot hear over the roaring musketry. The smoke is so thick you can barely see the men ahead of you climbing through the abatis and falling all around you. The sharpened branches catch your belts and clothing, holding you fast. French bullets buzz past your head. "Just keep going," you tell yourself. "If we can just get through, the day will be ours."

\*Christopher Duffy, *Fire and Stone: The Science of Fortress Warfare, 1660-1860* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1996), p. 80.

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