Scalping During the
French and Indian War

***By George A. Bray III***

The French and Indian War (1754-1760) is replete with incidents of scalping by French, English and Native American combatants. Newspapers, diaries, journals, and other period sources all document these occurrences.

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Scalping, of course, predated the mid-eighteenth century. Historical records, archaeology, and other sciences strongly indicate the practice originated among certain Native American tribes.1 A French soldier, identified by the initials J. C. B., related in his memoirs that "this horrible custom was practiced by these savages alone, and sprang from their own barbarism, for it seems never to have existed in any other nation, not even among nations, who, like them, have never received any idea of civilized life."2

This soldier also described how the act was executed. "When a war party has captured one or more prisoners that cannot be taken away, it is the usual custom to kill them by breaking their heads with the blows of a tomahawk . . . When he has struck two or three blows, the savage quickly seizes his knife, and makes an incision around the hair from the upper part of the forehead to the back of the neck. Then he puts his foot on the shoulder of the victim, whom he has turned over face down, and pulls the hair off with both hands, from back to front . . . This hasty operation is no sooner finished than the savage fastens the scalp to his belt and goes on his way. This method is only used when the prisoner cannot follow his captor; or when the Indian is pursued . . . He quickly takes the scalp, gives the deathcry, and flees at top speed. Savages always announce their valor by a deathcry, when they have taken a scalp . . . When a savage has taken a scalp, and is not afraid he is be ing pursued, he stops and scrapes the skin to remove the blood and fibres on it. He makes a hoop of green wood, stretches the skin over it like a tambourine, and puts it in the sun to dry a little. The skin is painted red, and the hair on the outside combed. When prepared, the scalp is fastened to the end of a long stick, and carried on his shoulder in triumph to the village or place where he wants to put it. But as he nears each place on his way, he gives as many cries as he has scalps to announce his arrival and show his bravery. Sometimes as many as 15 scalps are fastened on the same stick. When there are too many for one stick, they decorate several sticks with the scalps."3

An English captive, Thomas Gist (son of the famous Christopher Gist), wrote in his journal on September 14, 1758, that his captors "began to scrape the flesh and blood from the scalps, and dry them by the fire, after which they dressed them with feathers and painted them, then tied them on white, red, and black poles, which they made so by pealing the bark and then pain(t)ing them as it suited them."4 Captain John Knox, of the 43rd Regiment, mentioned in his journal finding "a scalp, which I suppose to have been a child's, with fine hair, en papillate; it was about the size of a large saucer stretched on a hoop, and the flesh-side painted" the following year.5