The origin of the ranger tradition lies in the seventeenth century wars between colonists and Native American tribes. In the original concept rangers were full-time soldiers employed by the colonial governments to "range" between fixed frontier fortifications as a reconnaissance system to provide early warning of hostile raids. In offensive operations they became scouts and guides, locating targets (such as villages) for task forces drawn from the militia or other colonial troops.

By 1675-1676 a new element appeared in the ranger concept. Benjamin Church (1639-1718) of Massachusetts developed a special full-time unit mixing white colonists selected for frontier skills with friendly Indians to carry out offensive strikes against hostile Indians in terrain where normal militia units were ineffective. In fact, his memoirs published in 1716 by a son are the first American military manual.

The traditional ranger usage reached its peak during the French and Indian War. Robert Rogers of New Hampshire organized a corps of New England woodsmen as full-time Provincials directly under British military auspices and paid out of British funds. The companies supported British operations against French Canada on the New York and St. Lawrence River fronts. They occasionally operated with friendly Indians, but more commonly served the British as a substitute for traditional allies. Astute British commanders assigned regular British officers to Rogers' Rangers for training in wilderness warfare which they could then pass on to their normal regiments.

Veterans of this corps played a major role in the Continental Army during the Revolution, including Major General Israel Putnam and Brigadier Generals John Stark and Moses Hazen. The tranditional ranger usage had only limited application during that later war. Various state governments did employ such units for local frontier security, but the Continental Army formed very few, in part because George Washington considered frontier security to be a local responsibility and focused national military forces on opposing regular British and German units in a formal battlefield context.

Other than the regiments and separate companies of riflemen from Pennsylvania and the states to the south, who really functioned as light infantry rather than rangers, the Continental Army only formed two functional ranger units. Knowlton's Rangers, a provisional three-company unit of volunteers from Connecticut and Massachusetts line regiments under Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Knowlton, came into being during the late summer of 1776 at New York City. It performed excellently in a light infantry role at the battle of Harlem Heights on 16 September 1776, but Knowlton suffered a mortal wound. Two months later the remnants of the corps fell into British hands when Fort Washington surrendered. Captain Nathan Hale of this corps gained immortality as a brave but singularly inept spy.

Whitcomb's Rangers started as a similar provisional unit on the Lake Champlain front in 1776. It gained permanent status as a two-company force on 15 October of that year and provided reconnaissance capability to the Northern Department until 1 January 1781 when it disbanded at Coos, New Hampshire, as part of a general reorganization of the Continental Army. Most of Whitcomb's men came from New Hampshire and the Hampshire Grants (now Vermont).

Other units in the Continental Army either used the term ranger in their designation or were commonly called rangers, but did not serve in that capacity in the traditional sense. South Carolina and Georgia each raised mounted ranger units in 1775-1776, but when they became part of the Continental Army during the summer of 1776 they transformed into mounted infantry. In fact over the period of several years the 3d South Carolina Regiment gradually evolved into a line infantry regiment. When Washington authorized Gist's Additional Continental Regiment in 1777 he intended to man it with a mixture of Caucasian southern frontiersmen and members of the Cherokee and related tribes. Washington wanted to use it as a vehicle for insuring tribal support--its Native American members would become hostages for the good behavior of the rest of the tribe--as well as a combat element. The regiment never recruited the
Indian component, and changes in British operations led to the transformation of the white elements into normal infantry.

Contrary to myth, the light troops in the Continental Army overwhelmingly followed European doctrinal concepts. The four regiments of light dragoons raised in 1777 as a reconnaissance force derived from European developments in light cavalry during the eighteenth century. Only during a brief period in the winter of 1777-1778 did the Continental Army experiment with the idea of employing them as a shock force.

Light infantry companies added to the regimental organization of each Continental Army infantry regiment in 1778 also had European roots. The American leadership stressed the ideas of Maurice, comte de Saxe and the comte de Guibert, two leading French military theorists, which advocated cross-training every soldier to perform both line or light infantry roles to allow mission flexibility. Light companies normally assembled into provisional battalions at the start of each year's campaign and acted as a special strike force in traditional battlefield roles, not as a reconnaissance element.

The Continental Army's other light troops sprang from a relatively new European concept not the native American ranger tradition. During the Seven Years' War most European armies developed partisan corps (also called frei korps). Originally fielded by the French to counter Austrian irregulars recruited in the Balkans, they filled a unique niche by providing deep security around an army in the field or carried out raids behind enemy lines. The Continental Army authorized several of these formations in 1777 and 1778, primarily as a vehicle to employ European volunteers who could not be inserted into existing regiments without provoking major arguments over rank, or because of language barriers. "Light Horse Harry" Lee of Virginia (the father of Robert E. Lee) raised the only American-born unit under this concept. Each partisan unit in the Continental Army, however, had a unique organizational structure.

The 1781 reorganization of the Continental resolved the issue of light troops by bringing greater centralized control. The light infantry companies continued under their existing practice of forming provisional battalions for each campaign season. The four regiments of light dragoons transformed into combined arms Legionary Corps composed of four mounted and two dismounted troops; the various partisan elements consolidated into two Partisan Corps, each with three mounted and three dismounted troops. The structure of the legionary corps focused on providing close reconnaissance and security patrols for a field army although various operational and manpower problems hampered most of the regiments from achieving complete success.

Only Elisha Sheldon's 2d Legionary Corps (a Connecticut unit serving in 1781 in the West Point-Westchester County zone) fully exploited the possibilities of the combined arms structure. The two dismounted troops armed and equipped as light infantry provided a defensive element to protect the camp from enemy surprise attack, and also provided a base of fire around which the mounted elements could maneuver. They also became very adept at employing the mounted troops in a raid designed to provoke a British pursuit which would end with a classic "L-shaped" ambush.

The 1st Partisan Corps under the Frenchman "Colonel Armand" (the marquis de la Rouerie) and the 2d under Lee both drew assignments in Major General Nathanael Greene's Southern Department. Armand's remained a shell during 1781, but Lee had great success in the Carolinas carrying out those specific missions for which the 3-3 mix of mounted and dismounted troops had been designed. In formal battles it provided unblemished flank security, but it was even better in rear battle by conducting deep raids against British logistical bases. Lee particularly shined when his regulars stiffened the irregular local forces of leaders like Francis ("Swamp Fox") Marion. The mix of mounted and dismounted men gave it somewhat greater staying power in independent firefights while also allowing rapid forced marches (each light infantryman held on to a dragoon's stirrups).

None of the light units employed by the Continental Army carried out a training role as Rogers' Rangers had during the French and Indian War. In fact, Major General Friedrich von Steuben wrote a separate drill manual for them in late 1780. He and Washington intended it to be the companion to the famous "Blue Book", but operational factors prevented its publication and distribution.