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THE NEW BRUNSWICK MILITIA, 1787 – 1867

THE STORY OF THE NEW BRUNSWICK MILITIA began in 1787, just three years after the formation of the province.* It was then that the first militia act in New Brunswick was passed by the legislature at Saint John, but its terms were not implemented. In 1792, under a new act, the initial enrolment of the militia began. With the outbreak of war between France and England in 1793, and in the light of obvious American sympathy for the French, Governor Carleton urged the legislature to take more energetic steps to organize militia in the province.

On May 6, 1793, the citizens of Saint John were alarmed by the rumour that a French privateer was cruising in the Bay of Fundy and likely to launch an attack in the area. The militia was called out on night patrol, but the vessel failed to arrive. When another threat occurred in October of the same year, Governor Carleton called out the militia of Saint John and reviewed the 511 non-commissioned officers and men who responded. He set them to work preparing fascines and throwing up temporary works for the defence of the harbour. However, the presence in Saint John of British regulars and members of the New Brunswick Regiment made it unnecessary for the local militia to serve for extended periods of time.

These events promoted the passing of the Militia Act of 1794, which remained in force with little change for the next sixty-five years. It stated that every man between sixteen and sixty years of age should be enrolled in a county militia regiment or an independent company of volunteers. The regiments were to muster twice and the companies four times a year for drill. Certain groups were exempt from service, including Quakers, who were committed to serve only in time of emergency.

While on active duty, the officers were to receive pay equal to that of officers in the regular British army, while privates were to receive one shilling for each day of active service. Regular field days for drill and inspection were established through-

*This article appeared in a slightly different form in the *History Bulletin* of the New Brunswick Museum, Spring, 1963.

out the Province, and each man was to appear "with a good musket, bayonet and belt, cartridge box containing eighteen rounds of suitable ball-cartridges and two spare flints" or be fined. In addition each officer was obliged to provide himself with a "sword or hanger". In the absence of a comprehensive issue of arms, it is not surprising that during the ensuing sixty years many militiamen drilled with pole-arms and sporting guns, and that one even appeared with a blunderbuss!

The first instance of note involving the New Brunswick Militia during these years occurred in 1795 and concerned the landing of French and American privateers from the vessel *La Solide* in Passamaquoddy Bay. Word of their intended raid had reached military authorities in the area, and militiamen were rushed to the scene. The raiders were captured and imprisoned at St. Andrews, and their vessel was seized. With the exception of the *La Solide* incident, the militia was not called upon to give active defence to the shores of New Brunswick during the wars of the French Revolution. However, £3,000 in voluntary subscriptions had been raised by New Brunswick citizens to bolster the British treasury during this period. The officers and men of the Loyal Company of Artillery in Saint John subscribed over £208 for this purpose.

In February of 1808, war with the United States appeared imminent, and the militia was alerted. One company was stationed at Meductic, battalions from Kings and Saint John counties were assigned to guard Saint John, and the Charlotte County militia assembled at St. Andrews. This was done amid protests from commercial interests in the Province, who complained that a large proportion of young men were being removed from productive employment to no purpose. Since no real emergency developed, the militia was disbanded in April.

The first weeks of the War of 1812 were ominous ones for the provincial militia. American privateers frequented the Bay of Fundy and created havoc with British commerce. Although extensive fortifications were constructed at Saint John and St. Andrews and 500 men of the militia were sent to the St. Croix River as a precautionary measure, the neutrality of New England and Britain's control of the waters along the Atlantic seaboard provided sufficient protection for the province. During the following March the active militia units were disbanded as Britain's control of the sea became indisputable. For the next few years only one or two days' drill by companies, and one day's muster by battalions, were required annually of the militia.

In 1825 acts relating to the militia were consolidated. Drafts were to be chosen by ballot as before, but those for actual service were to be confined to persons between eighteen and fifty years of age, and volunteers were to be accepted without draft. The commander-in-chief was given power to establish artillery and sea-fencible (coast

guard) companies when and where he judged it necessary, and to direct the mode of drilling them. Whenever necessary, these groups were to be ordered to duty without draft, since their immediate services in the event of invasion were considered essential. Militiamen on active service were to receive the same pay as British regulars.

In 1834 the three days of annual training were limited to one day only. This was actually a form of protest from the legislature, which was very much concerned with the fact that in many units militia training had fallen to the level of recreation and amusement. Citizens of the day had been thoroughly enjoying poking fun at "flat feet" militiamen who were unable to master the intricacies of drill through several days practice annually.

In 1837, with the outbreak of the Rebellion in the Canadas, the militia of New Brunswick offered their services almost to a man. British regulars serving in New Brunswick were sent to the area. As a result, some militia were called out for garrison duty, including that of Saint John and the 1st Battalion in York County. They were not relieved until January of 1838, having served for over two months.

The boundary dispute between the United States and New Brunswick reached its emotional peak in 1839, when Governor Fairfield of Maine called out 10,000 militiamen to support his claim to the border area in dispute. Governor Harvey of New Brunswick marched all the regular troops he could spare to Aroostook and also called out the militia, which was eager to help defend the province; diplomacy, however, prevented armed combat.

From 1851 to 1861 many provisions of the militia law were suspended by the legislature, including those relating to financial grants. There were several reasons for the unpopularity of the militia movement, not the least of which was the opposition on the part of many non-volunteers who were compelled to drill annually, usually without proper equipment or capable instructors. In addition, many members of the legislature questioned the need for a militia force. Nevertheless, the keeping of the militia force was still sanctioned during these years, and those portions of the militia law dealing exclusively with the artillery and sea-fencible companies were not suspended.

In 1859 the lot of the militia improved. Because of the French declaration of war against Austria and the possibility of British intervention, Lieutenant-Governor Manners-Sutton was able to persuade the legislature to authorize the formation of militia companies at particular points in the province where danger might occur. However, these men were to serve without pay and to provide their own uniforms and accoutrements. The British government at least provided 2,520 new Enfield

rifles, in place of the temporary issue of over 13,000 Brown Bess flintlocks that had been sent to the New Brunswick militia in 1846.

In spite of the fact that no arrangements had been made for their pay, by August of 1860 over 3,000 men were enrolled in twenty-three companies of infantry and artillery and two troops of cavalry. In addition, the legislature allocated £300 for the services of twelve drill sergeants from the British forces. They travelled through the Province and gave professional training which did much to revive the rural battalions.

Neither the imperial nor the colonial governments provided uniforms for the militia. In at least one instance the British government did supply scarlet cloth at wholesale price, but on the whole it was the responsibility of each unit to acquire its own uniforms for members. The result was that only some of the units were uniformed—usually the volunteers—and even then, completely uniformed companies were not general until after 1860. Following this date very enterprising means were used to raise funds to permit the acquiring of uniforms for the individual units. Although private donations were often sought, it appears that the more common method of raising this money was through “picnics and entertainment”, with the women doing their share, particularly by sponsoring bazaars.

Lieutenant-Governor Manners-Sutton made an effort to standardize the dress of the militia, but met with no success. On January 30, 1860, for example, he recommended that all companies adopt a similar uniform, and suggested dark grey as a basic colour. However, the various uniformed units took pride in their distinctive types and colours of dress, and were reluctant to sacrifice their uniforms of grey, green, scarlet, blue, and black, often with facings of different colours, and headgear varying from Scotch bonnets to shakos with plumes. Uniformity of dress did not receive official sanction until the passing of the “Volunteer Dress Regulations” by the legislature in 1863.

A new militia act in 1862 provided for the organization of a force on principles which are embodied in the present Militia and Defence Act of Canada. Men between eighteen and sixty years of age who were liable to bear arms were divided into two categories: those of the active and of the sedentary militia. The sedentary militia was not required to drill in time of peace, and consisted of men from forty-five to sixty years of age. The active militia consisted of men from eighteen to forty-five years of age, and was divided into three groups, the most important of which was the Volunteer or Class A. The volunteer companies were to consist of between forty and seventy-five men, and they were the first to be called out for active service, when they would be given a specified rate of pay. One thousand of the volunteers

were to be drilled annually for a period of six days under competent instructors. Their engagement was for two years' service, although a discharge could be obtained at any time for valid reasons.

The old county battalions still existed, largely on paper only, as an administrative organization. They served as a framework for the annual muster of the "B" and "C" classes of the active militia. After Confederation these "B" and "C" classes would become the reserve or undrilled militia.

In 1865, since New Brunswick had refused to enter Confederation, the responsibility for defence fell on its own citizens. The defence budget for the militia was raised to a record amount of \$30,000. Camps of instruction were set up in Fredericton at the Exhibition Building in 1865, and at Torryburn in 1866. These steps permitted twenty-eight days of intensive training per year for most of the Volunteer militia. Increased emphasis was placed on rifle-shooting competition, and while the Volunteer movement lost impetus in the more rural areas, it thrived in Saint John and in the other large centres of the province.

The next threat to the safety of New Brunswick, the "Fenian Scare", reached its emotional peak in 1866. The Fenian Brotherhood, a group of Irish patriots and exiles in the United States, planned to harass British colonies as part of their struggle to achieve independence for Ireland. By March of that year considerable numbers of Fenians had gathered near Eastport and Calais, preparing for an attack on New Brunswick. The House of Assembly made financial provision for the mobilization of the New Brunswick militia. As in the past, the militia was eager to serve, and about 1,000 of these men were called out. Some were posted in the Saint John area at Partridge Island, Fort Howe, and Martello Tower. The York County Battalion was sent to St. Andrews. It was followed in May by the Saint John Volunteer Battalion, which remained there on active service until the end of June. Late in April the Fenians did make an attempt to land one or two boatloads of men on Indian Island. An exchange of shots with the militia detachment on duty followed. The militia signalled to a British man-of-war, which dispatched marines to the scene, and the Fenians fled before their approach without having landed.

By mid-April the threat had become quite serious. From two to three thousand armed Fenians, under the command of Bernard Doran Killian, were dispersed along the frontier from Machias to Calais. Realizing that fourteen scattered militia companies could not deal with this threat, Lieutenant-Governor Gordon requested additional British regulars from Halifax. Their arrival, supplemented by three

British men-of-war, and a warning from Washington to the Fenians, rapidly terminated the threat.

The fact that the militia of New Brunswick did not participate in open warfare before Confederation does not mean that it was not an important arm of defence. It undoubtedly frequently served as a deterrent to privateers and raiding parties along the coasts of the province. Its existence permitted the deployment of more British regulars in the main theatres of action during the pre-Confederation history of British North America. The history of the New Brunswick militia has added colour to the tradition of the province, and reminded its citizens of their responsibility for its well-being and security.

NOTE

The New Brunswick Museum's extensive military collection includes many items that are associated with the militia of the province. Of this material, perhaps the most striking is the series of uniforms dating from the 1840's.

(a) Irish Royals. Composite undress uniform of this unit which was active from 1835 to 1850. The uniform is navy blue. A contemporary newspaper asserted that "each man was six feet tall and well-formed".

(b) Irish Royals. Full dress uniform of 1846, worn by Lieutenant William Patton, who was a light-infantry officer. The tunic is scarlet with gold facings, and the trousers white. The Irish Royals formed a company of the 1st Battalion Saint John City Light Infantry, and consisted of men of Irish origin or descent. This unit was described in a local newspaper of the day as "the pride of the city".

(c) Queen's New Brunswick Rangers. Full dress uniform of Lieutenant-Colonel E. L. Jarvis, who commanded this unit from 1846 to 1854. The tunic and the trousers are dark green, the former having red facings, and the latter a gold stripe. This unit had its headquarters in Loch Lomond and was comprised of light infantry, with special training as scouts, and several troops of hussars. It was gazetted in 1846 and was patterned after the Queen's Rangers, a Loyalist Regiment that had seen action during the American Revolutionary War and a number of whose members afterwards settled in New Brunswick.

(d) Westmorland Regiment of Militia. Full dress uniform of about 1870 of Lieutenant-Colonel A. E. Botsford of the 2nd Battalion, Westmorland Regiment of Militia. The tunic is grey, with red facings and silver lace, and the grey trousers have a red stripe. This unit was active from 1823 to 1873 and was commanded by Botsford from 1829 to 1873. An annual muster and drill was held at Sackville.