

The Militia of Canada in the Forties

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In his interesting volume "Sixty Years in Upper Canada," Lieut.-Col. Clarke details some valuable reminiscences. The chapter on the early militia is here reproduced.

IN 1861 the people of Canada awoke suddenly to the fact that the country was absolutely without other serviceable defence than was afforded by Imperial troops and Imperial military skill. For years red-coated British soldiers had come and gone to and from Canada with regularity, and the fact seemed to be known to residents of our cities only. We had, ages ago, seemingly, driven American soldiers from Canadian soil. We had, after a little smoke and excitement, put down an incipient rebellion, again with the aid of British arms. But for actual protection from attack, or preservation from internal disorder, we relied as entirely and dependently upon British brain, muscle and ability as a toddling child hangs upon a vigorous mother. The good-will of the American nation was our chief guarantee for freedom from attack, and money spent in support of an active militia was regarded as so much thrown into the maelstrom of the turbulent Niagara. We were not illiberal when appeals were made to our generosity; we were not blind to our shortcomings when they were pointed out to us; but we were content to dawdle along the road towards effective preparation without arriving at any point promising adequate defence. The position of the Canadas then reminded me forcibly of an exhibition of the military power of the country in 1845. At that date, and for some years before, there had been an annual muster, on old King George's birthday, of the young men of our rural parts not yet enrolled for military purposes. I was then resident in the county of Haldimand, Niagara district, and received a notification that I must proceed to the village of Dunnville and attend the annual muster on the 4th of June. I proceeded there in due course, reported at a named tavern, and "fell in" with some thirty other young fellows in front of it. The specified hour having arrived, we lined up in fair order, and our names were called with military vigour. Then came a veteran carrying a tin pail with something in it, and its bearer, stopped in front of every man in turn. A tin dipper descended into the pail and ascended to the welcoming hand of each visitor as he was reached. A gurgle and a smack of the lips, and another nail had been driven into the system of the soldier. Captain Farr, commanding, then appeared in front of the contingent specially under his orders, and called us back to the "Attention" which we had bestowed elsewhere. We were "two deep," if not a little more, and received the order to "wheel" to the "left." Explanation was necessary before we could take up the unexpected movement, but after its repetition we were almost equal to the performance of the double shuffle dignified by the name of a "quick march." Then we reached a turn to our left. Dispirited by the response to the previous command to "wheel," the gallant captain—called "Cap," for short, by his corps—politely informed his command that it was useless to tell them what the drill book said, but they must "haw" or "gee" as they were directed. So first we "geed" and then we "hawed," and got there just the same.

There were several squads on the vacant lot to which we had been marched, mostly big lads and young men, who were lying on the ground good-naturedly awaiting orders. One special squad, in uniforms, and really looking soldier-like, were drilling with a combination of snap and vigour. Their backs were turned towards us, but on their counter-marching we discovered that our models were all negroes—a company raised during the recent Rebellion and said to have been very efficient in making corduroy roads. They received special notice from the colonel, who wore regimentals, too, and sat his steed—a mare—as if not afraid of it. In passing up and down the line now formed, he gave us ample opportunity, not only to admire his horsemanship, but to form an opinion of the good points of a lively colt running at the heels of its mother. After his little speech of commendation and recommendation, reports were made by company officers, and we involuntarily broke into groups. Then the fun commenced. Wrestling, jumping, "stumping for a horse race," and so forth, soon broke up all semblance of order, and one irreverent and evidently licensed good fellow tiptoed to the rear of the "Cap," and suddenly snatched and drew from its scabbard the slightly rusted sword which had been carried through a rebellion now apparently forgotten. A loud haw-

haw from the boys, and the advice from one of them to our commander to put up his "old cheese-knife," and we marched back to the tavern to receive another drink, after which the military heroes were dismissed and more fun and frolic followed.

At Waddington school, in England, the boys were regularly drilled by a Waterloo veteran, who had promoted me as a sergeant in his small command, and I had seen volunteer yeomanry under Lord Yarborough, and was shocked at the looseness here displayed. And this actually occurred in 1845, within a half-dozen miles of the battle-ground of Ridge-way, where, in 1866, university students and other smart young fellows were shot down in a fight with a Fenian "army" coming from Buffalo, and emphasising the fact that every country worth plundering ought to be able to bolt its doors and keep out burglars.

An important factor in the development of a military spirit in Canada was the presence, at many points, of one or more old soldiers, veterans of the Napoleonic and Peninsular wars. Elora, of which village I have already spoken, was fortunate in the possession of several worthy examples of this class, and the best known and most distinguished was probably William Kerr, who lived with his son in the village for many years, and who was buried there at last in the beautifully situated cemetery, and was given the desire of his heart, a military funeral, attended by a military band, and his coffin covered with the British flag. He was a native of Paisley, Scotland, born in 1791. In 1806, when he was fifteen years old, he offered himself as a recruit in his native town, and although he was so young—fighting material was becoming scarce—he was a tall, well-built lad, and he would pass the inspecting officer. He said that he felt old enough to fight, and although the weight of his musket would try his strength, Scotch pluck would carry him through. He found others readily thinking as he did, took the shilling, and nobly earned it before he left the service, as a private in the 91st Highlanders, the well-known Argyll Regiment. He was at once sent off with other recruits to Spain, and was present under Picton of whom he spoke with a feeling akin to reverence, of the many engagements which ended with Toulouse. There the 91st was exposed to the heavy fire of the French artillery during a battle fought after peace had been declared, although, of course, the fact was not known to the opposing generals. "Auld" Kerr was with Sir John Moore on his retreat, and fought at Corunna on the 16th of January, 1809. The 91st was one of the regiments covering the retreat, and the veteran told, with exciting enthusiasm, of the sad necessity which compelled the slaughter of the artillery and cavalry horses, shot and thrown over the cliffs at Corunna, and which otherwise would have been used by the French as food. He was not present at the burial of Sir John Moore, made doubly famous by the lines of Wolfe, but was in the ranks covering the retreat. He was with his regiment at Nivelles, Nive, the Pyrenees, Bayonne, Vittoria, Orthez, Toulouse, and the minor engagements which distinguished Wellington's final campaign in Spain. After Corunna the 91st was sent to Ireland to recruit, and embarked for America in 1814, but the order was countermanded, and in 1815 the regiment, consisting very largely of recruits, was sent to Ostend, and marched to Ghent and Oudenards, and in June of that year young Kerr was with his regiment in the reserves at Waterloo. In the general advance which closed that great battle, the 91st did its part with zeal, after a whole day of forced inaction under continuous fire. After the advance into France, Cambray, a French stronghold, was assaulted and taken, and here our hero received his first serious wound, a fragment of the stone walls of the fortification striking him in one eye and rendering it sightless. The 91st was the first regiment of British infantry to enter Paris, and Kerr was in its leading company. He remained in France with the army of occupation for four years, and was discharged in 1819 with a pension of a shilling a day. The old man had most happy recollections of his stay in Paris, and one formed from his stories a pleasant picture of the kindly bourgeois fraternising with the foreigner and politely aiding him in the struggle with the language. The cure, too, loomed large in the picture, as he does, or did, in

the French life of that day, and altogether the years of garrison duty in Paris were years of relaxation and genial growth after the wear and tear of much fighting.

The 91st, having been in reserve at Waterloo, was neglected in the subsequent distribution of medals and special pensions, and its claims were undecided until 1876, after which time William Kerr received, besides a shilling a day for service pension, 1s. 3d. additional for Waterloo, and entered into possession of the coveted and long-withheld medal. He died in 1878, as good a soldier as ever bore British arms.

We have given a fair picture of the Canadas from a military point of view after the Rebellion of 1837, and until the events of 1861 saw the United States disrupted and fighting, and threatening every day, by some unforeseen blunder, to drag Great Britain into the controversy. Men were excited and alarmed, and a firm conviction prevailed that Canada must cease to be wholly reliant upon British lives, blood and armaments. A move towards expansion of the active militia force must be made, and steps were slowly taken to increase the number of volunteer companies, of which a comparatively few had been organised. In the county of Wellington, where I resided, but one company of rifles existed, and a company of garrison artillery was formed. As typical of the slow progress of the volunteer movement throughout the province, and of the lack of encouragement given to it in its early days, I may cite the action in the county of Wellington, peopled largely by men of British birth or parentage. In April meetings were held in the villages of Fergus, Elora and Mount Forest, and a determination expressed that a volunteer corps should be raised in each of these places. The attendance was large, the enthusiasm genuine, and the service rolls were rapidly filled. This was in April, 1861. In that year the United States was enduring all the horrors of war in its southern and central states, and upon both sides troops were rushed to the front in tens of thousands—not so lavishly as in after years, but so numerous that a long and fierce war looked inevitable. And yet no active movement in the way of enlistment, distribution of arms and competent drill was made to any extent by our central authorities. It was not until August that the three Wellington companies, organised in April, were given official standing, and then they were uniformed at their own expense, as was the case with volunteers throughout the land. This system gave them a voice in the selection of the material of their uniforms. The Elora company was a rifle corps, and ordinarily would have worn the rifle green, but it was thought that more suitable dress might be procured than the imported regulation uniform, and of cloth manufactured in the country. After a short delay the experiment was made. The color selected was a dark fawn, and when this was seen by Colonel McDougall, the inspecting officer, it was at once approved of. Colonel McDougall went further, and recommended the general adoption of similar material, a strong cloth woven in the woollen mills at Galt. But the powers controlling the militia did not agree with the business views of the Galt manufacturer, and refused to depart from the practice of supplying to colonials uniforms made for British troops of the line. As a result, the opportunity was lost for the adoption of khaki uniform, until the losses of the African war awoke the authorities to the value of a colour undistinguishable at a much less distance than the flaring scarlet, of which every man's breadth shows against the green of grass or the verdant foliage of woodlands. It may be added that another company in the vicinity of Elora used a steel-gray satinette in the manufacture of their clothing, and were well satisfied with it as a protection for troops engaged in skirmishing, although the khaki was preferred by all seeing both when effects could be compared.

It is true that newly-formed companies in the early sixties purchased their own uniforms, but it is proper to add that the Government reimbursed the outlay to a partial extent, after the stability of the several corps had been established by the performance of as many drills as was determined by the authorities to be necessary to secure "effective" men. For many years now cloth for uniforms has been