



Soldiers of the Royal Canadian Regiment in the Yukon Field Force make camp, while marching en route to the Klondike.

Courtesy of Glenbow Archives, Calgary, Alberta, NA-3755-31

Field Force was ordered to take the "All-Canadian Route" as it was termed, via the Stikine River and overland to the waters connecting the upper Yukon River. Access to the Stikine had been guaranteed by treaty with the U.S. and at that time, Parliament was in the process of considering a bill to construct a railway along the Stikine. By sending the Yukon Field Force on the overland route, the government assigned a march to the Canadian Army which would be one of the toughest ever known, domestic or foreign.

Of the 200 soldiers, three officers and 130 other ranks were members of the Royal Canadian Regiment of Infantry (RCR); the others came from the Royal Canadian Artillery (RCA) and the Royal Canadian Dragoons (RCD). Five women also accompanied the expedition: four nurses from the



The Yukon Field Force sailing northward on the Stikine Chief.

Courtesy of Glenbow Archives, Calgary, Alberta, NA-3755-15

Victorian Order of Nurses (VON) and one journalist from the *Toronto Globe*, Miss Faith Fenton. Her dispatches remain one of the primary sources of the history about the Yukon Field Force. All were volunteers and it is important to note that one of the reasons why the government of the day so readily used the soldiers from the regular army was because their pay was cheaper than that of the NWMP.

On May 6, 1898, the Yukon Field Force was mobilized and headed from Ottawa to Vancouver, and then north to the mouth of the Stikine at Wrangell, Alaska, where it arrived on May 16, 1898. From here, the contingent transferred to the river steamers *Strathcona* and *Stikine Chief* for the four-day journey to the hamlet of Telegraph Creek, B.C., where the trek would begin.

After celebrating Queen Victoria's birthday on May 24, the Yukon Field Force collected pack mules and prepared to march under heavy equipment (each soldier carried 50 pounds). The only food available during this arduous journey consisted of hard biscuits, poor quality bacon and black tea. The march was, by all accounts, extremely demanding both physically and mentally. Mile after mile, the group encountered harsh swamp and bog, and terrain marked by large fallen trees and boulders. At times, the soldiers marched up to their waists in swamp water leading to Teslin Lake, while trying to deal with the extreme heat and the swarms of mosquitoes.

Lt.-Col. Evans wrote to Lady Aberdeen, founder of the VON, about the march and she commented in her own memoirs:

Even Col. Evans who said at the outset that these expeditions always sounded worse than they were, admits that it was very bad ... He says the Nurses did splendidly and that they were a great comfort for several of the men who got ill — some with rheumatic fever. The only solace of which both Col. Evans and Miss Powell (one of the nurses) speak of is the glorious scenery and the profusion of flowers of