

EDITORIAL

Why the Red Serge?

*His Friend demanding what Scarlet was?
the blind Man answered, It was like the
sound of a trumpet.*

Locke.

The adoption of that most striking detail in the Force's uniform, the "red serge", was not a piece of empty swagger, nor was it merely another expression of the strong British sentiment in this country. It resulted from sound diplomatic forethought. To trace the reason to its origin one must turn the clock back to the frontier days of the West, to when a rifle regiment garbed in green replaced a red-coated line regiment at Fort Garry. Perhaps further than that, for the British military scarlet, worn as long ago as 300 years, came to this continent about the beginning of the 18th century.

In an age when many white men subscribed to the barbarous doctrine that "The only good Indian is a dead one", the Indian came to realize that in the eyes of the soldiers of the Great White Mother (Queen Victoria) the life of every redskin was as sacred as that of any pale-face. By experience he knew that justice and fair dealing could always be expected from the redcoats.

To most of the colour-sensitive aborigines of the Canadian North West, however, this cherished tradition sprang from the regiment that in 1846 had been sent by Her Majesty's government to Red River Settlement, the very region from which 28 years later the North West Mounted Police were to make their epic march westward to the mountains. In 1845 the tocsin "54-40 or Fight" sounded and ominous threats of war over the bitter boundary dispute came from below the border, while on the Canadian side around Red River there was growing unrest among the half-breeds many of whom to secure redress for their grievances would readily have fallen in with an outside belligerent. The controversy ended amicably in the Oregon Treaty of June 15, 1846, which set the 49th parallel as the boundary line between this country and the United States; but news of the settlement, which allayed the fears of war, did not reach England until after the troops had sailed forth to uphold British claims.

A second battalion of the 6th (Royal First Warwickshire) Regiment of Foot formed in 1841, the expeditionary force numbered 382 all ranks under the command of Lt. Col. John Ffolliott Crofton. Arriving at Lower Fort Garry on September 17, the contingent divided—some of the officers and men remaining there, the others continuing the 19 miles further south to the Upper Fort. To a man the members of the 6th Foot comprising the three companies were good soldiers and exemplary in conduct. They wore red coats and from then on the Western Indian identified all Her Majesty's soldiers with that colour. Entering into the social life of the forts, the new-comers mingled affably with the toqued voyageurs and buckskin-apparalled pioneers and by their presence generally improved those little havens in the wilderness.

The need for troops at Red River Settlement passed as soon as the Oregon boundary dispute was settled, but the 6th Foot remained on for two years in the interest of law and order; then to the great disappointment of everyone, especially the Indians, they were replaced by a corps of 70 pensioners, whose strength was doubled the next year.

The replacements, whose function was that of a police force rather than of a garrison, were quartered throughout the settlement, not at the forts, and being a contented middle-aged "job lot" they settled down more or less quietly in their new locale. "Compared with the gallant band who have left us", a contemporary writing says, "the pensioners cut rather a poor figure both in point of numbers and appearance." Far from being a success, the pensioners were disbanded seven years later when their term of engagement expired.

Rifle corps, no doubt following the precedent set by archery battalions from the days of the legendary Robin Hood in Sherwood forest, wore dark green uniforms. In