

The Lower Canada Select Embodied Militia Battalions, 1812-15

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It is a matter of record that in 1813, at the height of the Napoleonic Wars, a unit of French-speaking infantry wearing King George's red coat captured two United States Navy warships. Thanks to the surviving records and a few precious portraits and artefacts, we may attempt a reconstruction of the appearance of these unlikely troops, whose battlefield achievements may have had strategic consequences far beyond the woods of North America.

Early in the year 1812, relations between Great Britain and the United States had deteriorated to the point that the Canadian authorities were contemplating various measures to bolster the small garrison of British regulars. Besides issuing the usual call for volunteers the Province of Lower Canada (today, Québec) opted for a limited draft of 2,000 bachelors aged between 18 and 30 years, to serve for up to two years in wartime. The provincial legislature voted the sum of £60,000, and authorised Governor-General Sir George Prevost to have militiamen selected and embodied into four battalions during April-May 1812. Actual drafting from the militia would not occur unless there was a shortage of volunteers. The embodied militiamen were allowed the same pay and allowances as the regular troops.¹

Captain Jean-Baptiste Larue, 4th Bn. Lower Canada Select Embodied Militia, c.1813-15. He wears a scarlet coat with dark green collar and gorget ribbons; gold buttons and lace; gold wings on a scarlet ground, with a silver grenade; gilt gorget and belt plate bearing a crowned 'GR' cypher. The grenade indicates that Capt. Larue served with the battalion's grenadier company. Unsigned and undated. (Courtesy Maj. Guy Belleau, Musée du Régiment, La Citadelle, Québec)

War with the United States was declared in June 1812; and a fifth battalion was authorised to be embodied on 21 September that year. This battalion was reorganised as a light infantry unit styled 'the Canadian Chasseurs' on 12 March 1814.² Finally, a sixth battalion was authorised on 18 February 1813, formed from the three battalions of Québec city militia, to do garrison duty at Québec from

31 March. There it served until disbanded on 4 September 1814.³

The establishment of each battalion was as follows:

1 lieutenant-colonel
2 majors
10 captains
8 ensigns
1 paymaster
1 adjutant
1 quartermaster
1 surgeon
1 assistant surgeon
42 sergeants
10 drummers
800 rank and file.

(The 6th Bn. had only one major, no assistant surgeon, 32 sergeants and 600 rank and file.)

Each battalion had 10 companies: eight 'battalion', one grenadier and one light infantry. On 24 March 1814 the 6th Bn. was reduced in strength to eight companies

(including the flank companies) and the reduced establishment included 26 sergeants, seven drummers and 424 rank and file.⁴

We should also mention the temporary formation of two 'Militia Light Infantry Battalions' ordered on 1 April 1813. These were formed from the flank companies of the first five battalions. The actual existence of these temporary battalions seems to date from 30 June 1813, when a General Order called for the flank companies of the 2nd and 5th Bns., and the 'first' flank company (presumably grenadiers?) of the 3rd to form the 1st Bn. of Militia Light Infantry at Kingston. The same order called for the flank companies of the 1st and 4th and the 'second' flank company of the 3rd to form the 2nd Bn. of Militia Light Infantry at Chambly. This temporary formation, sometimes confused with an additional militia corps, was dissolved on 25 November 1813 and the companies were returned to their respective battalions.⁵

THE MILITIA ON ACTIVE SERVICE

Except for the 6th Bn. at Québec, the battalions were posted mostly to various locations between Montreal and the American border. Their rôle was essentially to help stop enemy incursions towards Montreal; but some elements were also to be found taking part in offensive operations.

A detachment of the 1st Bn. was posted with six companies of the 100th Foot and a few Royal Artillery at Isle-aux-Noix, a fort built on an island in the middle of the narrows of the Richelieu River just north of the American border (today, Fort Lennox National Historic Park).



¹Superior numerals refer to source notes at the end of this article.

The Richelieu flowed into the St. Lawrence, and was the traditional 'invasion route' up from the south.

On 3 June 1813 some men of the 1st Bn. detachment were happily contemplating their discharge, due that day, when the alarm was given. Two armed schooners flying the Stars and Stripes were sailing up the river. The militiamen of the 1st Bn. volunteered their services, and marched off to do battle with the USS *Growler* and *Eagle*.

Over-zealous US Navy officers aboard the schooners had ventured too far. Three gunboats, each mounting a 6-pdr. gun and manned by regular troops, pulled out to engage them. They decided to withdraw; but the river proved too narrow, and when the Americans neared the shore in the course of their awkward manoeuvre, the men of the 1st Bn. posted on the banks poured musket fire into the schooners, which were eventually obliged to strike their colours.

Now enjoying 'naval superiority', the British soon mounted a raid on Plattsburgh, New York, which included small detachments from the 1st and 2nd Battalions. They landed there on 30 July; the American militia vanished; and the British party destroyed all naval and military installations and such booty as could not be shipped back to Isle-aux-Noix. (A small share of prize money was eventually awarded for this action.)

THE BATTLE OF CHÂTEAUGUAY

A far more serious threat was the American attempt to capture Montreal in October 1813. The US Gen. Wade Hampton moved slowly up the Châteauguay River, crossing into Canada with about 5,000 men. Canadian pickets, including two companies of the 2nd Bn., skirmished with US advance parties near Odelltown. On 26 October the Americans came within sight of the first line of *abatis* field fortifications across the road which followed the west bank of the



Officer's gilt gorget and belt plate of the 6th Bn., 1813-14. The belt plate is gilt with a silver crown, lettering, numeral and scroll. (M.S.M. Ferguson Coll., Ottawa; photo Parks Canada)

Below left:

Brass belt plate for rank and file, 1st Bn. Lower Canada Select Embodied Militia, c. 1812-15. (Parks Canada)



river, manned by companies of the Canadian Voltigeurs and the Canadian Fencibles. Succeeding lines were held by most of the 2nd Bn. SEM and a company of the 5th.

A 1,500-strong American column was sent into the woods on the east bank to turn the Canadian position. But it was in these woods that the Canadian commander, Lt. Col. Charles de Salaberry, had posted the light companies of the 1st and 3rd Bns. and a company of hastily-raised local militia ('*Habitants Chasseurs*').

Capt. Daly's light company of the 3rd Bn. and Capt. Bruyère's *Habitants Chasseurs* engaged the head of the United States column, which had become lost in the woods, and a series of sharp squad encounters followed among the trees.

The American soldiers were taken by surprise, but Col. Purdy of the 4th US Infantry rallied his men. By then the main American force was deploying in front of the *abatis* on the west bank, and firing had broken out there as well. Sensing the critical

moment, De Salaberry shouted across the river to Daly in French, telling him to press the flanking American troops.

With considerable courage Daly and Bruyère rallied their little force — about 90 men only — and formed them into line under the trees. They advanced; fired a volley into the Americans; and then charged them with fixed bayonets. Daly and Bruyère fell wounded almost at once, and Lt. Dezery of the 3rd Bn. shortly afterwards. Lt. Schiller assumed command; and is said to have actually beheaded an American officer during the hand-to-hand fighting which followed. More US troops were now coming up, and the Canadians were forced to give ground slowly; but as Purdy's men emerged from the cover of the woods on to the open river bank, they were caught by a withering enfilading fire from De Salaberry's men across the narrow river. They scattered, and fell back into the woods in some confusion.

The American flanking movement had failed; the US forces called it a day, and retreated to their border. Capt. Daly's company of the 3rd Bn. SEM had suffered two officers wounded, two rank and file killed, and 10 wounded or missing out of about 50 men engaged; half of the total Canadian casualties.⁶

By European standards the battle of Châteauguay was a small skirmish; but its strategic results were important. Not only had a powerful

American column been thwarted; but its planned junction with another and even stronger force (under Maj. Gen. James Wilkinson, moving towards Montreal from Sackett's Harbour) had been averted. Had Montreal fallen, Canada would have been cut in two; and for Britain, that might have meant the end of the main source of timber used to build the Royal Navy's ships.

In order — among other objectives — to secure that supply, some 13,000 men from Wellington's Peninsula army were shipped to Canada in 1814. An attack on Plattsburgh was decided upon; but Sir George Prevost, while an able administrator, was no Wellington, and this attempt was defeated in September 1814 by the brilliant young American Brig. Gen. Alexander Macomb (later to become C-in-C of the US Army). The 3rd Bn. SEM formed part of Prevost's 10,000-man force, but had no chance to distinguish themselves. With the rest of the army they marched back to Canada, from what turned out to be the last campaign of the 'American War'.⁷

UNIFORMS

A few inspection reports have survived, and give us a glimpse of the conditions prevailing in the battalions. In August 1812 the 1st Bn. was found with weapons in bad repair, and its clothing and accoutrements were also described as 'very bad'. In December things had not improved markedly: Gen. de Rottenburg 'found the 1st Batt. Incorporated Militia in so filthy a state, and so very deficient in necessities . . .'. The 2nd Bn. was in fairly good order in August 1812, but with weapons in bad

repair. In July 1813 Gen. Sheaffe reported 'that progress has been made both in its discipline and its interior economy'.

The 3rd Bn. had dirty weapons in bad repair and very bad clothing and accoutrements in August 1812, and no real improvement was noted by December. The 4th was reported 'clean and in high order' in December 1812.⁸ On 30 October 1813 the 5th Bn. was reported as being without knapsacks, arms in tolerable order, accoutrements showing neglect, the barracks 'not in good order', and 'those of the few officers present, did not seem occupied'.⁹ Only the 6th Bn. seems to have won acclaim, with its 'appearance . . . very little inferior to that of Regiments of the Line', according to the *Quebec Gazette* of 23 September 1813.

A good many of the problems revealed by these reports were the result of insufficient supplies during the first year of the war, as well as of inexperience. In the 5th Bn. (nicknamed 'The Devil's Own', because most of its officers were lawyers!), progress was fairly good. Most of the officers were replaced after about a year, however, and from being one of the best units the 5th then deteriorated to being the worst during the latter part of 1813. It was finally reorganised as the 'Canadian Chasseurs' in March 1814, and took part in the Plattsburg expedition of September 1814.¹⁰

The first uniforms worn by these battalions are obscure. We know that in spite of the *habitant's* dislike of the red coat,¹¹ the supplies for the first 2,000 levies included 'red cloth . . . brown linen for lining . . . trousers . . . buttons . . . hats or caps . . . cockades . . . private's loopings', and haversacks, as well as fifes and drums and sergeants' pikes.¹² There is no definite information on the facings of the battalions in 1812, except the instructions for the officers' uniforms of the 2nd Bn., which called for a red coat with white collar, cuffs

Pierre-René Boucher de la Bruère of the 2nd Bn., who was listed as captain on 25 May 1812 and major on 25 March 1813. Here he wears the scarlet coat faced with white recorded as worn by officers of that battalion in 1812-13. During that period there is some evidence that the rank and file wore olive green faced with red. In March 1814 the battalion was ordered red coats faced with yellow. The Musée Pierre Boucher in Trois-Rivières has this officer's 1814-15 coat, which is scarlet faced with pale yellow, with gold buttons and gold lace on the collar; the crimson sash worn in this portrait is also preserved in the museum. (Painting by J. Girouard, 1813, in the Musée du Québec)



Left: Officer, Light Company, 3rd Battalion, Lower Canada Select Embodied Militia: the company which distinguished itself in the skirmish in the woods on the east bank of the Châteauguay River on 26 October 1813. Officers of these units bought their uniforms from tailors in Montreal and Québec who usually imported gold lace, buttons, wings, epaulettes, sashes, etc. from England. From some portraits and surviving uniforms it can be seen that a popular and inexpensive way to trim officers' uniforms, especially for wear in the field, was to edge the collar and cuffs with gold lace, as illustrated here. Laced buttonholes were, of course, also popular. (G. A. Embleton, courtesy Parks Canada)



Above:

Private, Light Company, 3rd Battalion, Lower Canada Select Embodied Militia, 1813. At a glance, the uniforms worn by these men followed standard British Line practice. Some details are worth noting, however. There is no evidence that coloured lines were incorporated into the weave of the 'lace', which appears to have been plain

white throughout. Blue trousers were issued in 1813, instead of the grey ones we normally associate with British infantry. Muskets seem to have been old when issued in 1812, and we have shown here the 42-in. Short Land Pattern instead of the newer India Pattern. (G. A. Embleton, courtesy Parks Canada)

and lapels; thin gold lace edging collar and cuffs; hat according to British regulations; but no epaulettes or sashes for captains and subalterns 'for this year'.¹³ Portraits of officers of the 2nd Bn. show that epaulettes and sashes were in wear by 1813.¹⁴

Red cloth soon became scarce, and in 1813 we find evidence that green was used for the enlisted men's coats in some battalions. Deserters from the 2nd Bn. were described in May and June 1813 as wearing round hats; olive-coloured jackets faced red and trimmed with lace; and blue pantaloons.¹⁵ The 3rd Bn. received in May 1813 green jackets; blue pantaloons; caps [shakos] without 'feathers rosettes & tufts'; and moccasins.¹⁶ The company of the 5th present at Châteauguay was also dressed in green.¹⁷ The 1st Bn. managed to find red cloth, purchased old coats of the 103rd Foot, and was even hoping for surplus coats from the 8th Foot in March 1813, and thus probably did not wear green.¹⁸ The 4th Bn. was clothed in an unspecified colour during June 1813, but later embellished its uniform with 'wings' for the whole battalion.¹⁹

During the summer of 1813 a considerable quantity of militia clothing arrived at Quebec from England. On 30 June the flank companies of the first five battalions and the complete 6th Bn. were ordered an issue of these stores, comprising: 'Caps & plumes, Red Coats, Waistcoats with sleeves, Blue Trowsers, Forage Caps, Gaiters, Linen Shirts, Stocking, Shoes, Knapsacks', and 'Stocks and Clasps'. The facings were directed to be as follows:²⁰

- 1st Bn. . . . Blue
- 2nd Bn. . . . Light green
- 3rd Bn. . . . Yellow
- 4th Bn. . . . Dark green
- 5th Bn. . . . Black
- 6th Bn. . . . Black

We have seen that the first five battalions had been clothed earlier in the year, some in green, but they were probably missing accessories, since 'boots, trowsers, gai-



Louis J. De Beaujeu, 2nd Bn. Lower Canada SEM, wearing scarlet faced with white, gold buttons and lace — note collar trim. De Beaujeu was named captain on 25 May 1812 and major on 17 October that year. (Painting by J. Girouard, 1813, in the Musée du Québec)

ters, Caps Compleat and Forage Caps' were ordered issued to their battalion companies on 1 August 1813.²¹

The last issue to the battalions appears to have been made in March 1814, consisting of 'Regimental Coats, Trowsers, gaiters & Bucket Caps'. The facings were then directed to be as follows:²²

- 1st Bn. . . . Blue
- 2nd Bn. . . . Yellow
- 3rd Bn. . . . Green
- 4th Bn. . . . Green

The coats were red, as in the previous issue; and the 'trowsers' may have been blue and/or grey.²³

The general style of the uniforms was obviously very close to British Line infantry; however, it seems that they never wore the 'Belgic' or 'Waterloo' shako. Canadian officers, too, tried to emulate their British counterparts in their uniforms, the details no doubt being dictated by the length of one's purse as much as by the breadth of one's fancy. It seems that the officers of all battalions wore gold buttons and lace.²⁴

The battalions did not carry colours. Prévost wrote to England on 30 October 1813 asking for five pairs of colours as a reward for the good conduct of the Select Embodied Militia at Châteauguay; but England had more urgent worries, and the colours arrived only in October 1818!²⁵

Front and rear views of a remarkable relic of the battle of Châteauguay. Lt. (later Capt.) François Dezery of the 3rd Bn. was wounded in the action on the east bank of the river on 26 October 1813, probably in the left arm or shoulder — bloodstains can still be seen on the lining in this area, and it seems obvious that the left sleeve was torn out at the seam in order to treat the wound. The coat is of the older pattern with long tails, and thus predates British 1812 regulations — though to what extent these would have been obeyed in Canada is questionable. It is scarlet with yellow cuffs, lapels and collar and white lining. The lace is silver with a black central line, instead of the more usual gold lace. Note the crude 'double heart' turnback devices; and the fact that only the top four buttonholes on the lapels are laced, confirming that the lapels were habitually worn buttoned closed except for two small exposed triangles of facing at the top. In all likelihood this is a second-hand Army officer's coat purchased by Dezery, possibly for field use. Cf. The British Infantry Officer of the Peninsular War, 'MI' Nos. 2 & 3. (Canadian War Museum, National Museum of Canada 79-4799 & 79-4801)



The remaining four battalions of Select Embodied Militia, together with all other Provincial corps, were ordered disbanded by General Order on 1 March 1815 as a result of the signing of the Treaty of Ghent which ended

the war with the United States.²⁶ Much less well known than the Canadian Voltigeurs, yet also composed largely of French Canadians, these battalions represent an important if somewhat forgotten chapter in the military heritage of early Canada. **MI**

Sources:

- (1) *Some account of the Public life of the Late Lieutenant General Sir George Prevost, Bart.* (London 1823), pp. 19-20; L. H. Irving, *Officers of the British Forces in Canada, 1812-1815*, pp. 118-130 lists the names and dates of commissions of the officers (Welland, 1908); *Montreal Gazette*, 13 April 1812.
- (2) Public Archives of Canada, (henceforth PAC), RG8, C1171, p. 207; Irving, pp. 130, 133.
- (3) *Quebec Gazette*, 25 March 1813; *Le Spectateur*, 13 September 1814.
- (4) PAC, RG8, C1220, p. 318; RG9, IA3 vol. 5, p. 231; *Quebec Gazette*, 25 March 1813. Each battalion had a sergeant major, a quarter master sergeant, a drum major and the usual proportion of corporals, etc., as in the Line.
- (5) PAC, RG8, C1220, p. 318; Irving, pp. 116-117.
- (6) Purdy's force in this action comprised some detached companies of the 5th, 12th and 13th Infantry. He was to write of Hampton's force as a whole that it was '... composed principally of recruits who had been but a short time in the service, and

had not been exercised with that rigid discipline so essentially necessary to constitute the soldier. They had indeed been taught various evolutions, but a spirit of subordination was foreign to their views.'

(7) J. M. Hitsman, *The Incredible War of 1812* (Toronto, 1965) pp. 137, 145; W. James, *A Full and Correct Account of the Military Occurrences of the Late War Between Great Britain and the United States of America* (London, 1818) p. 305; Irving, p. 124; PAC, RG8, C703, p. 188; C1172A, p. 26; C1221, p. 10; Victor Suthren, 'The Battle of Châteauguay', *Canadian Historic Sites*, No. 11 (Ottawa, 1974) pp. 133-135.

(8) PAC, RG8, C677, pp. 240, 248, C703, p. 114; RG9, IA1, vol. 79, pp. 68-70.

(9) PAC, MG24, G45, vol. 8, p. 1873.

(10) Etienne Pascal Taché, *Quelques réflexions sur l'organisation des volontaires et de la milice de cette province* (Québec, 1863), pp. 7-9; Irving, p. 133.

(11) PAC, RG9, 1A1, v. 3, Lt. Col. Hertel de Rouville to François Vassal de Monviel, Chambly, 17 May 1812.

(12) PAC, RG8, C1218, pp. 235, 279, 320.

(13) PAC, RG9, 1A1, v. 3, de Rouville to de Monviel, 13 June 1812.

Irving, op. cit., and CCP Lawson's *A History of the Uniforms of the British Army* (London, 1967), vol. V, p. 114

give the four battalions facings obviously based on Prevost's request for uniforms from England, written on 21 November 1812 at Chambly,

for 2,000 Embodied Militia 'one quarter of the whole to be with blue facings, one quarter with green facings, one quarter with light buff facings, and one quarter with black facings.' (PAC, Q119, p. 50). This

and other requests resulted in the 1813 shipment of uniforms. Except for the 2nd Battalion, there is no direct evidence as to the facings in

1812.

(14) Watercolours of officers of the 2nd Battalion by J. Girouard, 1813 in the Musée de Québec.

(15) PAC, MG23, G111, v. 2, p. 253; RG9, 1A1, V. 72, de Monviel to Lt. Col. Noel, Québec, 14 June 1813.

(16) PAC, RG8, C703, p. 85.

(17) PAC, RG8, C680, p. 333.

(18) PAC, RG8, C1220, p. 250; RG9, 1B4, v. 4, Lt. Col. Robinson to Lt. Col. Foster, York, 8 April 1814.

(19) PAC, RG8, C703, p. 251; RG9, 1A1, vo. 10, Lt. Col. Royer to Monviel, 11 September 1813.

(20) PAC, RG8, C1170, p. 493; C1221, p. 71.

(21) PAC, RG8, C1203S, p. 90.

(22) PAC, RG8, C1223, pp. 10-11. The 4th Battalion reported in September 1814 that it had not received any clothing since June 1813.

(23) PAC, RG8, C1221, p. 283.

(24) Gold buttons and lace are shown on portraits by Girouard of officers of the 2nd Battalion; tunic attributed to 3rd (Château Ramezay, Montréal); an officer's tunic of the 6th (Perth, Ontario Museum).

(25) PAC, RG8, C704, p. 295; Q122, p. 255.

(26) PAC, RG8, C1172, p. 128a.