

# His Majesty's Canadian Regiment of Fencible Infantry, 1803-16 (1)

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In 1984 a small group of re-enactors from Eastern Ontario decided to recreate the Canadian Fencibles — a regiment which overcame early difficulties to prove itself, during the War of 1812-14, the equal of British line regiments by helping defeat United States forces at Chateaugay, Crysler's Farm, Lacolle Mills and Lake Champlain. The group has achieved a very high standard of appearance and demonstration skills; and their uniforms and equipment are entirely relevant to the British infantry as a whole during the greater part of the Napoleonic Wars. In this first article the author discusses the history of the Canadian Fencibles.

On 8 August 1803, orders were issued from the War Office to Col. Thomas Peter permitting him to raise one of four Fencible Regiments approved for the defence of British North America. Though the New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Royal Newfoundland Fencible Regiments were to be raised from within the colonies, both Peter and Lord Hobart, Secretary at War and for the Colonies, had different plans for the Canadian Regiment.

The implementation of the Passenger's Act that same year had halted emigration from Scotland. Thousands of emigrants were left stranded without any means of support. The decision was taken to raise the Canadian Fencibles from this displaced population. However, by the time recruiting parties arrived in the Highlands many of the stranded emigrants were being provided for through local initiatives. With their original recruiting strategy bankrupt, many recruiting agents and officers turned to deception and trickery to fill the regiment's ranks.

On 27 June 1804 the regiment, 700 strong, marched into Glasgow. Shuffling through a heavy rain, without uniforms or arms, and followed by over 1500 dependents, the men were not an

inspiring sight. Poor housing, idleness, and the lack of supplies reduced the corps' morale and discipline to a minimum. The situation was made worse by the presence of English, Welsh and North American officers who were unable to speak Gaelic, creating mistrust and suspicion among the rank and file. Even an officer's simplest commands had to be translated by his sergeants before his men could undertake the order.

As conditions worsened, rumours spread that the regiment was to be sold to the East India Company. On 7 August 1804 the regiment was ordered to march to the Isle of Wight to take up winter quarters. Since the Isle of Wight was a major embarkation point for India, the worst fears of the recruits seemed about to be realized. Many men refused to obey orders, some in a 'very unsoldier-like and unsubmissive manner'<sup>(1)</sup>. On the morning of 22 August, after days of minor disobedience, the regiment was ordered to begin its march. As the first division stepped off, many of the men broke ranks and the regiment dissolved into an unruly mob.

The War Office had had enough of the regiment's problems, and disbanded it in September. The courts martial that followed the mutiny determined that: '...since they





Men drilling in civilian clothes: from *Symptoms of Drill*, published in Glasgow in early summer 1804. When the regiment arrived in Glasgow in early summer 1804 the officers had proper regimentals, and sergeants and corporals had red coats, white knee breeches and varnished hats. The rank and file wore their own clothes, and were issued wooden poles for drill. The appearance of these ragged Highlanders carrying sticks attracted mockery from the locals, and far from improving discipline parades only increased the discontent of the recruits. (Canadian Park Service)

were neither uniformed nor armed they were not subject to that military discipline they might otherwise have accepted.<sup>(2)</sup>

In June 1805 the *Quebec Gazette* reported the arrival in Canada of Lt. Col. David Shank along with other Canadian Fencible officers, and announced their intention to reform the regiment. Although the ranks of the Canadian Regiment were disbanded after the mutiny the corps remained on the Army Establishment, and Col. Peter was given permission to reform it in the Canadas. Disheartened by the initial failure of his regiment, Peter took little part in its rebirth. Instead, almost all his duties were thrust upon Shank. A veteran of the American Revolution and former lieutenant-colonel of the Queen's Rangers in the 1790s, the 48-year-old Shank had the experience to meet the task, but his age began to affect his performance. By 1810 Maj. Gen. Francis, Baron de Rottenburg would report Shank 'unfit to form a new Regiment of that Description'<sup>(3)</sup>.

#### Second attempt

After the officers' arrival, recruiting parties were dispatched throughout Upper and Lower Canada. In Lower Canada (Quebec) the inability of officers and their Gaelic sergeants to speak French kept recruits to a trickle. In Upper Canada (Ontario), Shank and his fellow North American officers soon found that their former sergeants and privates had turned to agriculture; and



Lt. Col. David Shank in the uniform of the Queen's Rangers, c.1800. His coat is dark green faced with black in Rifles fashion, but its cut and the arrangement of the silver lace follows line officer's style. (Royal Ontario Museum)





The Regimental Colour of the Canadian Fencibles survives, as does the King's Colour: both are displayed in the Canadian War Museum. Each is silk and measures 6ft. x 6ft.6ins. The Regimental Colour is yellow, with the title 'CANADIAN FENCIBLE INFANTRY' in black on white scrolls, surrounded by the royal stem bearing thistles, shamrocks and wild roses embroidered in natural colours. The King's Colour (see colour photograph) is a Union Flag with a central blue medallion charged with the Royal Cypher. Each has a narrow red sleeve for the staff. (Canadian War Museum)

Scottish immigrants from other previously disbanded Highland corps showed little interest in the fledgling regiment. The regiment's misfortunes in Glasgow, which were common knowledge in the colonies<sup>(4)</sup>, must have con-

tributed to the negative appeal of the corps. Despite all of this, the regiment persevered and slowly drew recruits. After a year Shank reported back to Peter that the regiment's strength was a little under a hundred men. 'It is now I think possible to raise the Regiment partially.'<sup>(5)</sup>

With recruits slowly coming in, Shank was faced with a dilemma not unfamiliar to the Canadian Fencibles. Although the regiment was on the Army Establishment, it had not been officially embodied. This state of limbo left recruits without uniforms, arms or pay. Disappointed with this treatment, several of the recruits not unnaturally deserted. Fearing the complete breakdown of military discipline, Shank ordered the issue of about 200 suits of the late Queen's Rangers' clothing to the men. This stop-gap measure proved ineffective to stem the rate of desertion. The only solution to the regiment's deteriorating state was embodiment.

On 22 June 1807 the US frigate *Chesapeake* was stopped and boarded by the Royal Navy. Searching for deserters, the British removed part of the *Chesapeake's* crew and pressed some into service. This incident shook Anglo-American relations, already embittered, and brought both countries to the brink of war. Unprepared for hostilities, Sir James Craig, commander-in-chief of British forces in the Canadas, took swift measures to improve the colonies' defences. Suffering from a shortage of regular troops, Craig asked for and received permission for the embodiment of the now 200-strong Canadian Regiment.

While international tensions on this occasion soon subsided, the fortunes of the regiment continued to improve. Competing recruiting parties

The 5th Regiment of Foot drilling at Fort George, Upper Canada; by Surgeon Walsh, 1806. Between 1805 and 1811 recruiting parties of the Canadian Fencibles operated from Fort George; and in late 1815 the regiment formed the fort's garrison, remaining there until orders for its disbandment arrived in May 1816. (Canadian Park Service)





Canadian Fencibles recruiting notice in the Quebec Gazette, 9 April 1807; a French language version was also published. Besides the bounty, joining the Fencibles had two attractions: the option of enlisting for limited service of seven years; and safety from overseas postings to Europe or the disease-ridden West Indies. Fencible corps were Regular regiments confined to service in a given geographical area, in this case America. (National Library of Canada)

from the New Brunswick Fencibles were barred from the Canadas in 1808. Accompanying this, measures were taken to change the 'foreign' image of the regiment. Sons of prominent French and English Canadian families were commissioned as officers. In addition, more Canadians received the rank of sergeant. Familiar faces and names, speaking their language, made joining the Canadian Regiment more attractive to potential recruits. With the economy faltering and war on the horizon, recruits began to swell the regiment's ranks. By the outbreak of war in 1812 the regiment's strength was 700 uniformed,

Part of a page from the Description Book of Capt. Hall's company, March 1814. Each entry records the details of a volunteer, e.g. John (sic) Bourbon, 25 years old, 5ft.6ins. tall, fair complexion, blue eyes, brown hair, from the parish of Lorette, Lower Canada, a labourer, enlisted 27 February 1809 at Amherst (sic). The names of francophone recruits are all partially anglicised in these records. (National Archives of Canada)

## NOTICE.

*Wanted for His Majesty's CANADIAN FENCIBLE REGIMENT, commanded by BRIGADIER GENERAL THOMAS PETER, now raising in Canada, to serve in America and not elsewhere.*

A FEW young men willing to engage for seven years, in terms of a late Act of Parliament. If under the age of Eighteen years, the difference between that, and the Actual Age of the recruit to be added to the above Period of service.

Now is your time loyal Canadians to shew yourselves worthy of the glorious constitution under which you enjoy so much happiness. The Lieutenant Colonel requests that none will offer themselves but Canadians; the sons and relations of actual settlers in the Canadas, or other British American Colonies, and natural born subjects, as none of a different description will be acceptable or sought after. Every man who enlists will receive a bounty of FIVE POUNDS, and six pence sterling appropriated according to the Recruiting Instructions. No man will be taken who is above thirty years of age, or under five feet three inches high. Such as are qualified to act as non-commissioned Officers, and who prove themselves intelligent and active may expect speedy promotion, and all may rest assured of the best usage, and will receive every advantage granted to His Majesty's Forces in this Country.—Application to be made to LIEUT. COLONEL SHANK at Three Rivers, or to the different Recruiting Parties in the Country.

**GOD SAVE THE KING.**

*Quebec, 9th April, 1807*

armed and equipped men.

### Composition

The Canadian Fencibles entered the war as a patchwork of soldiers from differing ethnic backgrounds. The 1810 Inspection Returns show recruits of Canadian origin constituting the bulk of the regiment (58%). The second largest group (19%) was made up of 'foreign'-born recruits, many of them loyalists or

immigrants who had chosen to leave the United States after the American Revolution. Other foreigners in the regiment included men born in Prussia, Finland, Bermuda and South America. The remainder of the regiment was filled by recruits born in Scotland (10%), Ireland (8%), and England (5%). Because of its earlier recruiting attempts in Scotland the regiment's

sergeants continued to be predominantly Scottish: of the 29 sergeants, 16 were Scots, six Canadian, five 'foreign', and two Irish.

The 1814 muster role of Capt. Hall's company of Canadian Fencibles sheds more light on the subject of ethnicity. From a company strength of 68 men, 47 were born in British North America (43 of them in Lower Canada).

*Description Roll of Captain Hall's Company*

<i>Names</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Complexion</i>	<i>Eyes</i>	<i>Hair</i>	<i>Parish</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Trade</i>	<i>When</i>	<i>Where</i>
<i>Louis Bonenfant</i>	<i>20 5 7</i>	<i>Fair</i>	<i>Grey</i>	<i>Brown</i>	<i>St. Louis</i>	<i>Canada</i>	<i>Labourer</i>	<i>29 Aug 07</i>	<i>St. Louis</i>
<i>John Bourbon</i>	<i>25 5 6</i>	<i>Fair</i>	<i>Blue</i>	<i>Brown</i>	<i>Lorette</i>	<i>Canada</i>	<i>Labourer</i>	<i>27 Feb 09</i>	<i>Amherst</i>
<i>Joseph Britton</i>	<i>18 5 6</i>	<i>Fair</i>	<i>Blue</i>	<i>Brown</i>	<i>St. Louis</i>	<i>Canada</i>	<i>Labourer</i>	<i>28 March 08</i>	<i>St. Louis</i>
<i>Louis Britton</i>	<i>20 5 6</i>	<i>Fair</i>	<i>Grey</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>St. Louis</i>	<i>Canada</i>	<i>Labourer</i>	<i>20 Feb 08</i>	<i>St. Louis</i>
<i>King Charles</i>	<i>15 4 11</i>	<i>Fair</i>	<i>Blue</i>	<i>Light</i>	<i>St. Louis</i>	<i>Canada</i>	<i>Labourer</i>	<i>11 Dec 08</i>	<i>St. Louis</i>
<i>Joseph Charter</i>	<i>27 5 8 1/2</i>	<i>Dark</i>	<i>Brown</i>	<i>Dark</i>	<i>St. Louis</i>	<i>England</i>	<i>Labourer</i>	<i>11 July 07</i>	<i>St. Louis</i>
<i>John Christie</i>	<i>15 5 7</i>	<i>Fair</i>	<i>Blue</i>	<i>Dark</i>	<i>St. Louis</i>	<i>Scotland</i>	<i>Labourer</i>	<i>11 Dec 08</i>	<i>St. Louis</i>
<i>Joseph Collins</i>	<i>20 5 5</i>	<i>Dark</i>	<i>Brown</i>	<i>Brown</i>	<i>St. Louis</i>	<i>Canada</i>	<i>Labourer</i>	<i>3 Aug 13</i>	<i>St. Louis</i>



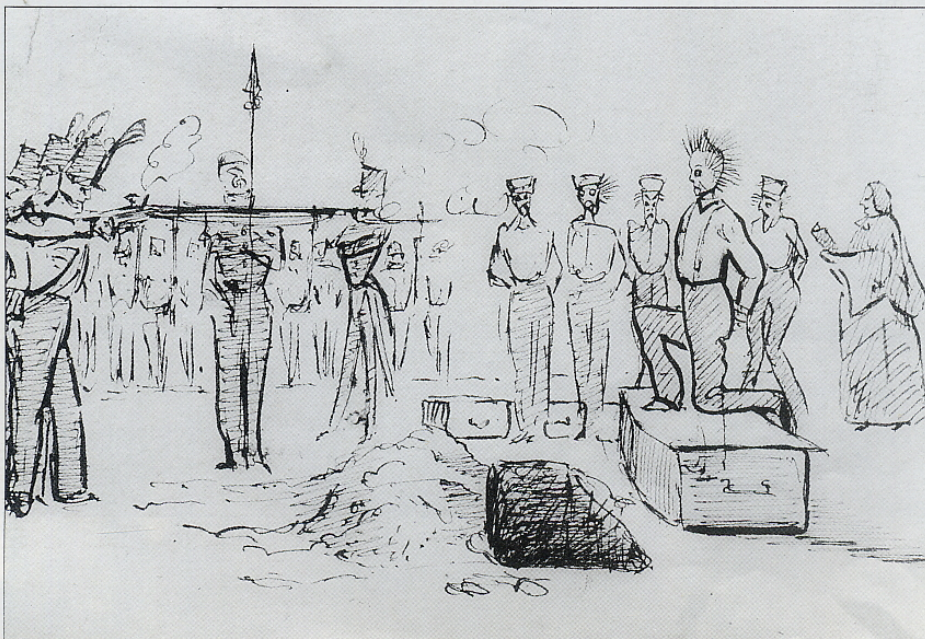


*The recreated Canadian Fencible Regiment take part in the 175th anniversary celebrations of the battle of Crysler's Farm. (Cornwall Journal)*

Of that number, 36 possessed French last names, along with typical French first names but with English spellings. In his report to the War Office in June 1810, Isaac Brock suggested that training problems in the regiment were created by the difference in language among many of the recruits.<sup>(6)</sup> By the outbreak of the war recruits had been conditioned by continuous drill to respond to the English orders of their officers.

### THE WAR OF 1812

The American declaration of war on 18 June 1812 left British military officials in the Canadas in a very precarious position. With only 5,600 Regulars to defend a border over 1,500 miles long, the successful defence of Canada seemed impossible. To overcome the shortfall in manpower two new Colonial corps, the Glengarry Light Infantry Fencibles and the Canadian Voltigeurs, were quickly raised in 1812. To speed their formation the Canadian Regiment transferred several officers and experienced sergeants to assist in recruitment and training. In addition to the new corps, an élite group of Regulars was assembled in the colonies. Adhering to the General Order of 30 June 1812, the Canadian Grenadier and Light Infantry companies were combined with the flank companies of the other Regular regiments in Lower Canada to form a Flank Battalion. Under the direction



*Executions at La Prairie, 1812-13: a cartoon which includes chillingly convincing details of a military execution of the day, with the victim kneeling on his coffin behind an open grave. Lesser punishments which could be inflicted on men of the Fencibles included transportation to Australia, transfer to a line regiment, or the lash. One deserter was ordered 'to be marked [tattooed] on the left side, two inches below the arm pit, with the letter D, such letter not to be less than half an inch long.' In January 1812 the Canadian Fencibles were criticised by Horse Guards for the 'frequency of punishment' in the corps. The soldiers waiting to be executed seem to wear a 'pork-pie' style of forage cap. (National Archives of Canada)*



of Maj. Gen. De Rottenburg, this élite battalion took up its post south of Montreal to check any American thrust from Lake Champlain.

Increased American activity on the upper St. Lawrence River in the fall of 1812 considerably alarmed military officials. Being the only supply link with Upper Canada, the St. Lawrence had to be protected. For the safety of supply flotillas travelling the river a Canadian Fencible company was dispatched to perform as marines. Along with these duties the Canadian Regiment was called upon early in the war to provide militia administrators and instructors, to act as artificers and assist the Royal Artillery.

#### Lake Champlain

In July 1813 it was decided that British forces in Lower Canada would take the offensive on Lake Champlain. It was hoped that a diversionary offensive would provide some relief to

the hard-pressed forces in Upper Canada. With little over 1,000 Regulars, including the Canadian Grenadier and Light companies, a flotilla of sloops and gunboats sailed out on to Lake Champlain on 29 July. Two days later Plattsburg, New York, was easily captured and its fortifications and stores destroyed.

Detachments torched blockhouses, barracks and storehouses all along the lake. Even Burlington, Vermont, which contained several thousand troops, was fired upon. When the flotilla returned north it brought with it nine American vessels, most containing stores for the American army.

The Canadian Regiment's service changed dramatically in late 1813 as the American campaign focused on Montreal. The capture of Montreal would cut off Upper Canada and starve it into submission. To accomplish this the Americans decided on a two-

pronged attack. An army of 10,000 men under Gen. James Wilkinson prepared to descend the St. Lawrence on Montreal from Lake Ontario, while another 5,000 Americans under Gen. Wade Hampton marched north from Plattsburg. Instead of taking the traditional Richelieu River invasion route, Hampton chose to move down the less defended Chateauguay River.

#### Chateauguay

Warned of the American advance on his position, Lt. Col. Charles-Michel de Salaberry ordered his small force of 300 to fortify themselves with felled trees and entrenchments. Behind their abattis the Canadian Regiment's Light company, two Voltigeur companies, and a group of Sedentary Militia prepared to meet Hampton's army. On 25 October the Americans attacked. Lt. Pinquet of the Canadian Fencibles later wrote to his

brother:

'We had to contend with two thousand infantry and two hundred cavalry. We lost no time. All of our men fired from thirty-five to forty rounds so well aimed that the prisoners told us next day that every shot seem to pass at about the height of a man's breast or head. Our company was engaged for about three-quarters of an hour before reinforcements

*Front and rear views of a contemporary regimental surgeon's coat — here, that of the 75th Regiment. Coats worn by surgeons varied from regiment to regiment; this example is decorated with gold twist braiding on collar, breast, pockets, and in the small of the waist (even though the 75th wore silver metal). The style worn by surgeons of the Fencibles is uncertain, but was probably the typical plain single-breasted type with twist of the ground-colours. For winter dress single-breasted surgeon's greatcoats were ordered in 1811. In the rear of this example the false pocket flaps conceal three regimental buttons each — oddly, there are no buttonholes to expose them. (Private collection: Peter Tivist)*







**A**

(A) Two Canadian Fencible privates in summer dress, 1812. Left is a light company man, with green wool shako tuft and shoulder wings to his jacket; right, a battalion company man with white-over-red tuft and a tufted shoulder strap; the shape and position of jacket pockets also distinguished the Light company — uniform details will be given in Part 2 of this series. (Photo: Janice Lang)

(B) Detachment of battalion company soldiers of the recreated Canadian Fencibles prepare to receive cavalry, with their King's and Regimental Colours. (Photo: Robin Morris)

**B**







(C) Detachment of Canadian Fencibles, in greatcoats, with the Colours in proofed linen cases with brass tops. After the battle at Cryslers Farm the American Gen. Wilkinson retreated across the frozen St. Lawrence to French Mills, opposite Cornwall. When he decided to fall back to Plattsburg, NY, in February 1814 four companies of the Canadian Fencibles, and other Regulars, crossed the river and attacked his rearguard, capturing 100 sleigh-loads of supplies and pursuing the Americans to within a few miles of Plattsburg. (Photo: Janice Lang)

(D) A wounded soldier of the Canadian Fencibles being brought into hospital. The orderly wears the regiment's fatigue dress, a white forage jacket faced yellow at collar and cuffs. (Photo: Janice Lang)



came up. The enemy lost about five hundred in killed, wounded, and prisoners.<sup>(7)</sup>

With Hampton halted by this skirmish with Canadian troops on the Chateauguay, it was up to Wilkinson to take Montreal. By the night of 6 November Wilkinson had descended the St. Lawrence to just above the village of Ogdensburg, New York. There he disembarked his army from their flotilla of 300 craft and marched around Ogdensburg to avoid the guns of Fort Wellington across the river at Prescott. After the empty vessels had passed under the guns



of Fort Wellington the army re-embarked. This delay provided valuable time for British and Canadian forces to concentrate and then check the enemy's advance.

#### **Crysler's Farm**

The following day a British force arrived at Prescott aboard a naval squadron from Kingston under Lt. Col. Joseph Morrison of the 89th Regiment. There the corps of observation, which consisted of detachments of the 49th and the 89th Regiments, was joined by a company of Canadian Fencibles, along with detachments of Voltigeurs, artillery and militia. Continuing their pursuit of Wilkinson, Morrison's force of 850 engaged the enemy's rearguard near the farm of John Crysler on 11 November. After several hours of stiff fighting the American force of 1,800 retired from the field. During the course of the battle the Canadian Fencible company, in conjunction with the flank companies of the 49th, made a gallant charge on the enemy guns. In this engagement the detachment of Canadian Fencibles lost about 35% of its strength in casualties including two officers killed. For the Americans, the loss of close to 500 dead, wounded and prisoners of war in the Battle of Crysler's Farm, and the news of Hampton's failure on the Chateauguay, convinced Wilkinson to abandon the 1813 campaign.


Determined to gain a victory over the British, Wilkinson re-entered Canada from Plattsburg early in 1814. On 30 March, with 4,000 Americans, Wilkinson attacked Lacolle Mills, which was defended by detachments of the 13th Regiment, Royal Marines, and militia: 180 men in total. The garrison was quickly reinforced from Isle Aux Noix, just north of Lacolle, and the alarm was spread throughout the area.

#### **Lacolle**

The Grenadiers of the Canadian Fencibles and a company of Voltigeurs were ordered to the battle. A rapid thaw that day had turned most roads into rivers, offering the

Grenadiers and Voltigeurs little choice but to wade to the waist in icy water. Led by Capt. Edward Cartwright, the two companies reached the besieged garrison an hour before sunset. Perceiving the danger the enemy guns posed to the garrison, 'Captain Cartwright of the Canadian Fencibles with the Grenadiers of this Corps and a company of Voltigeurs twice charged the enemy's guns with great spirit and would have procured them but for the very great superiority opposed to him.'<sup>(8)</sup> With night falling, and after suffering 170 casualties, Wilkinson retreated back across the frontier. This was the last engagement of the Canadian Regiment.

A year before its disbandment, the *York Gazette* reported in April 1815: 'his Excellency Lieut. General Sir George Murray reviewed the battalion of Canadian Fencibles now doing duty here, and was pleased to express his approbation of their steady discipline and soldier-like appearance.'<sup>(9)</sup> Much had changed since that band of destitute and suspicious Highlanders, lacking both uniforms and arms, entered Glasgow in the pouring rain eleven years before.

**To be continued:** *The next part of this series will describe and further illustrate the uniforms and equipment of the regiment.* 

#### **Notes:**

- (1) J.M. Bumsted, *The People's Clearances: Highland Emigration to British North America*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1982, p. 178.
- (2) J. Prebble, *Mutiny: Highland Regiments in Revolt, 1743-1804*. London: Secker and Warburg 1975, p. 487.
- (3) PRO, WO27/101, De Rottenburg's inspection of the regiment in Quebec, 28 November 1810.
- (4) NAC, RG8, vol. C-363, p. 42.
- (5) NAC, RG8, vol. C-795, p. 46.
- (6) PRO, WO27/99, part 1, Brock's inspection of the regiment, 25 June 1810.
- (7) Royal Canadian Military Institute Selected Papers from the transactions # 11 and 12, 1902-1903.
- (8) NAC, RG8, vol. C-1227, p. 55.
- (9) National Library of Canada, *York Gazette*, 29 April 1815.