

The Battle of Rockhead, March 1871

Training for War in Mid-Victorian Halifax

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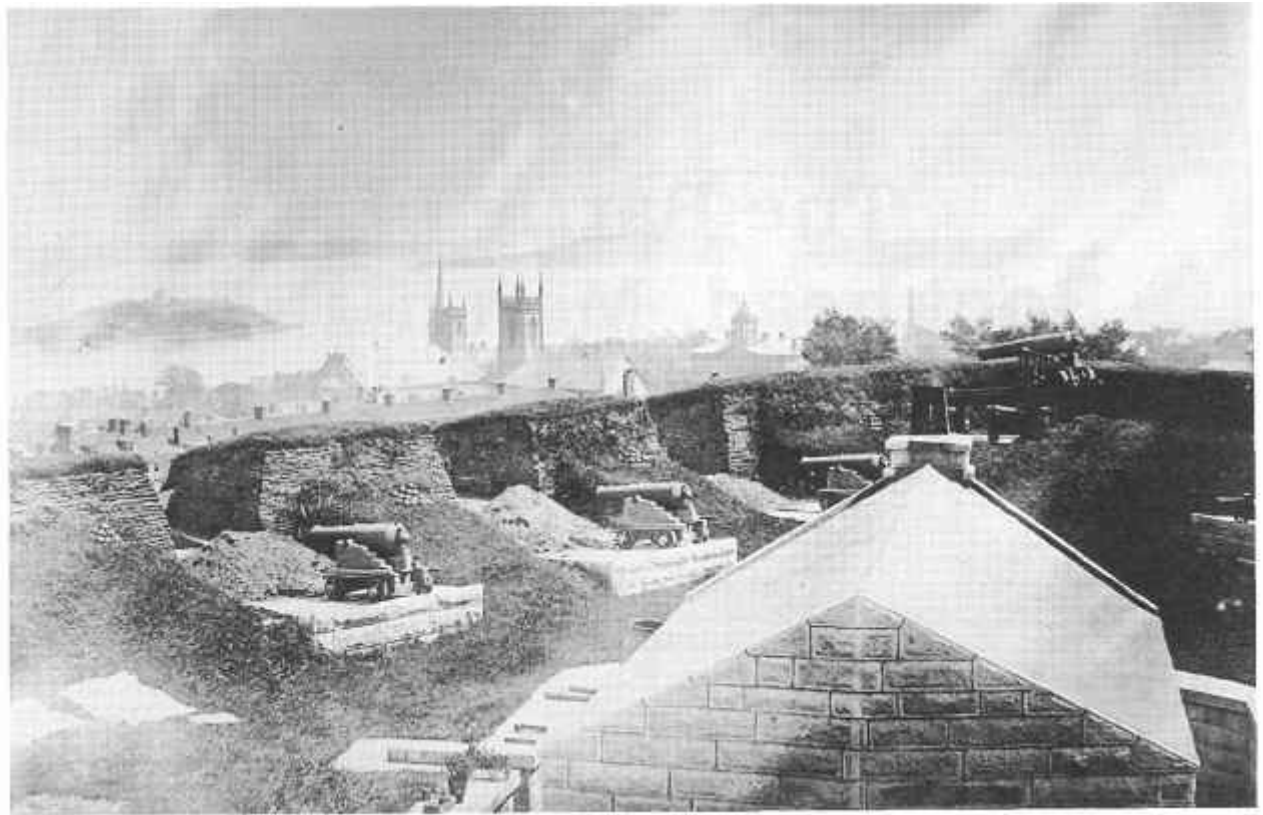
This paper will examine the manner in which the infantry troops of the British garrison in Victorian Halifax prepared themselves to militarily confront an enemy in the field. It is based upon extensive research carried out on the Halifax garrison for the years 1869 to 1871, which covers the time that the 78th Highlanders were in the city. (This of course is the regiment that the re-enactment unit "garrisoning" today's Citadel represents.¹) It will focus in particular on one major exercise that was held in these years in the hope that it will shed some light on the battlefield methods that may have been adopted in the period should the fortress have been attacked. It will be concerned especially with the manner that Halifax military authorities were adapting to the new age of rifled breech-loading small arms, which were then revolutionizing battlefield procedures.

Halifax, the Nova Scotian capital, was at this time a city of 29,000 people, the fourth largest in British North America. Since its founding in 1749 the port had been critical to the Royal Navy's defence of the North Atlantic, and virtually from the beginning the British army had maintained a garrison there to guard against its being taken by an enemy. For 156 years, until its withdrawal in 1905, this garrison waited and kept watch for an attack that never came. The mid-Victorian period is an especially interesting one in the history of the Halifax naval station. This was an age of great technological upheaval, with sweeping changes introduced to the design and



construction of warships as well as to the methods and techniques of artillery and small arms manufacture. Warships were now for the most part steam-powered and iron-hulled, artillery (after a brief and unsuccessful flirtation with breech-loading methods) was muzzle loading and rifled, while the latest small arms were both rifled and breech-loading. These developments had for a time thrown into question traditional notions concerning the relative power of ships versus shore-based defences, and had generated fundamental reappraisals of the manner in which infantry was to conduct itself in the field when facing the enemy. Some attention has been paid to the manner that the artillery and coastal defences of Halifax had been adapted to meet the new conditions, but little or no attempt has as yet been made to assess the manner that the infantry defenders of Halifax were either adapting, or failing to adapt, to the new conditions.² This gap will be filled through a close examination of a large-scale training exercise - the so-called "Battle of Rockhead" of March 1871 - that was held in Halifax at one of the nodal points of this era of uncertainty.

The strategic context in which Halifax was situated was being rethought by British politicians and defence planners at this time. As noted, Halifax had always been an important factor in the naval defence of the North Atlantic sea lanes; but the prevailing system had until now been one of 'colonial' defence, under which the forces of the British military had been spread



Above: South Ravelin, Halifax Citadel, ca. 1860, looking southeast towards McNab's Island. The scene would have been essentially similar in 1871 at the time of the Battle of Rockhead, except by this time the 32-pounder smoothbore at the salient had been replaced by a 7-inch Armstrong Rifled Breech Loader. The shorter 32-pounder guns in the embrasures along the left face would have still been in place. (They were removed in the mid-1870s).

(Sir Charles Hastings Doyle Collection, National Archives of Canada, C-25755)



Left: Gateway at the Halifax Citadel, ca. 1880.

(NAC PA 119754)

widely throughout the empire acting in many areas in a mostly local defence capacity. With the election in 1869 of the government of William Ewart Gladstone, this began to change dramatically. Many of these localized forces were withdrawn - by the end of 1871 the last British troops had left Canada, with the exception of Halifax. Henceforth, the emphasis was placed on the home islands and upon certain strategic stations along the world's sea lanes from which the ships of the Royal Navy could operate to protect ocean traffic bound for Britain or to interdict that bound for enemy ports. Halifax was

one of these important stations, along with Bermuda, Gibraltar, and Malta. Termed "Imperial Fortresses" these four strategic outposts were deemed critical enough to the defence of the mother country to be maintained on the home, as opposed to the colonial, defence estimates. In other words the context was moving from one of "colonial" to "imperial" defence, as Brian Tunstall, Don Schurman, and Norman Gibbs, amongst others, have discussed at length.³

These new priorities were of course behind the extensive upgrading of the Halifax defences

that was underway at this time, by the end of which the port fairly bristled with the latest in modern armament. Thus batteries of mostly 9 and 10-inch rifled muzzle loading guns were located at McNab's Island and York Redoubt at the harbours mouth, along the shores of Point Pleasant, at Fort Clarence on the Dartmouth shore (on the site of the present-day oil refinery), on George's Island, and along the ramparts of the Citadel. Indeed, when they were completed towards the middle of the decade it can probably be safely stated that for a brief time, the Halifax artillery and coastal defences were "state of the art" (even if lacking in sufficient trained personnel to adequately man them).⁴ The preparedness of the infantry somewhat further inland does not inspire the same degree of confidence, however.

It should be noted that there were always two British infantry regiments in garrison at this time, each numbering about 700 men. During the years in question there were besides the 78th, firstly the 1st Battalion, 16th (Bedfordshire) Regiment of Foot, and latterly, the 61st (South Gloucestershire) Regiment. Besides the infantry there were also three Batteries of Royal Artillery, numbering about 350, and a contingent of Royal Engineers, numbering about 100 men.

The following account makes extensive use of local newspapers as a source of information. Newspapers, of which a total often were published in Halifax at this time, are of course notoriously unreliable in certain respects. In politics at this time they were fervently devoted to espousing the viewpoint of one or other of the two major political parties, a middle ground or neutral position being practically unheard of. Also, in terms of simple description they often got things wrong, depending upon the knowledge or perceptiveness of the reporter doing the describing. Used carefully and in conjunction with other sources, however, they are an indispensable mine of information on the activities of the military within the Halifax community; 'windows into the past' in certain respects, although you can see more clearly through some panes than others. For the events discussed here they are the most fruitful source of information available, the official military documentation being unaccountably silent about them. Thus a number of fairly lengthy descriptions from Halifax newspapers will be quoted below, and then an attempt will be made to draw some conclusions based upon them.

In examining the role of the infantry in Halifax in the Victorian period one does tend to become somewhat bogged down in business associated with military discipline, regimental and garrison administration, and ongoing routines of various descriptions. One tends to forget that the essential reason for troops being in the city was to fight, in the eventuality that the port was ever attacked. In this period the most likely threat still came from the United States. What then can be said about the manner in which they prepared themselves to meet such an eventuality?

In fact, it would seem that the incidences of any such training exercises being carried out at all in Halifax in these years were few. Although fairly large-scale military manoeuvres were carried out in England for the first time in 1871 and repeated over the next three years (when they ceased completely until the 1890s),⁵ reference has been found to only four exercises in these years that can in anyway be construed as field or operational training in Halifax. Two of these were small-scale sham fights which took place in conjunction with winter route marches. The other two are discussed here, one a formalized sham fight on the Common for visiting royalty in August 1869, and the other a much more elaborate affair held in the neighbourhood of Rockhead city prison at the extreme north end of the city in March 1871. Certainly none of these exercises were of the sort that would have adequately prepared the defenders of Halifax to meet a determined, well armed modern enemy.

British tactical doctrine was at this time still coming to grips with the great upheaval in European battlefield practice occasioned by the advent of long-range, rifled, breech-loading fire arms. Although the American Civil War of 1862-65 had amply demonstrated the devastating effects of rifled small arms, these were for the most part muzzle-loading. Rifled breech-loading arms were first widely used by the Prussians in their victory over Denmark in 1864, and they had been deemed a sufficient success that the British army had its muzzle-loading Enfield rifle, first introduced during the Crimean war in the early 1850s, converted into the breech loading Snider-Enfield in 1865. This was the weapon with which the troops in Halifax were armed during the events discussed here. The continued success of this type of arm in Prussia's victory over Austria in 1866 further drove home the lessons of the earlier campaign that the new weapons' range,

accuracy, and above all, speed of fire, and the fact they could be loaded and fired from a prone position, had spelt the kiss of death for older, more formalized battlefield practices.

By 1869 the conclusion seems to have been reached within the British army that henceforth all troops should adopt the practices of light infantry. Thus, in outlining the duties of the regimental commanding officer, the 1868 edition of that indispensable text book of approved military procedures, *Queen's Regulations*, noted for the first time that this individual was "to avail himself of every opportunity of practically instructing the officers in the duties of light infantry."

The improved range and accuracy of fire of the arms now in general use [it continued] render it doubly important that every soldier should when skirmishing, be prepared to take such advantage of ground and cover as will enable him, with the least exposure to his own person, to inflict the greatest amount of injury on his opponents; with this view commanding officers are enjoined to lose no opportunity of profiting by all suitable ground in the vicinity of their quarters for the instruction of young soldiers in this important part of their duty; and they should bear in mind that the character of the regiment, as to proficiency in Light Infantry movements, depends mainly on the individual intelligence, skill, and activity displayed by the men.⁶

The officers' main guide to approved procedures both for the parade ground and the battlefield was the publication *Field Exercises and Evolutions of Infantry*. The 1867 edition of this work was used by the forces in Halifax for most of the period discussed here. It contained much on the proper methods of physically handling the new Snider-Enfield rifle, but precious little on the manner in which its use, or for that matter the use of similar weapons by the enemy, affected actual battlefield techniques.⁷ In fact it was the 1870 edition of this work, which first arrived in Halifax in September of that year, that attempted to do this to any significant degree. It contained, for the first time, lengthy sections dealing with the principles of skirmishing, noting that the object was "to enable the soldier to take advantage of cover, and thus inflict the greatest loss upon the enemy with the least amount of danger to himself."⁸ A section entitled "Shelter-Trench and Pit Exercise" even contained a

reference to the desirability under some circumstances of digging in. "Taking into consideration the long range, extreme accuracy, and great rapidity of fire of the rifled small arms now in use," this section began, "it may be desirable to shelter the troops from unnecessary exposure, provided this can be done without harassing the men."⁹

As the caveat in this last sentence suggests, however, although the 1870 *Field Exercises* represented a sizable step forward in adjusting British infantry tactics to the new era, the new techniques still were not embraced wholeheartedly. Indeed many references remained in it to more traditional practices such as forming squares, volley firing, and advancing in formal order. This may have been to some extent due to their continued application in some colonial campaigns, as indeed continued to be the case up to the end of the century. By 1869, however, they would certainly have proved out of date in a war with any European, or more directly relevant to the troops in Halifax, American power.¹⁰

As noted earlier the most common form of battlefield training in Halifax was the field day and sham fight. The latter was almost wholly useless as effective training for battle since it was quite formalized and often resolved itself into movements quite similar to those of the parade square. They are interesting nonetheless, as they show what was still conceived of as probably the ideal manner in which a battle should unfold (although even authorities in Halifax were probably realistic enough to realize that battles seldom developed in an ideal manner).

The clearest description of the classic form of such an engagement is contained in a report in the Halifax newspaper the *Evening Reporter* of one which was held on the Common on 26 August 1869. The occasion was the visit to the city of Prince Arthur, seventh child of Queen Victoria (and later, as Duke of Connaught, Governor General of Canada from 1911 to 1916). The participants were all the British units in garrison - facing west, they were the 78th Highlanders on the right, or north end of the line, flanked on their left by a company of Royal Marines (off the ships of the Royal Navy then in harbour), followed by a company of Royal Marine Artillery with four field guns, then by the 1/16th Regiment, flanked in turn by the Royal Artillery, and on the

left, or south end of the line, 300 sailors from the flag ship of the North American station, the *Royal Alfred*. (With numbers such as these, one can well imagine what a massive military spectacle this would have been.)

The affair began with the Royal Marine Artillery being thrown forward onto the slopes of Camp Hill, site of the present day hospital, but then an unoccupied knoll. As described in the *Reporter*.

The bugle sounds the advance and at the same time the skirmishers open fire. Away scamper the little boys and cows, whose curiosity has led them to wander in front of the advance; but the skirmish line steadily advances and the Snider "Barks" incessantly. The first line of the attack is composed of the Royal Artillery and the 16th Regt., and as the skirmishers cross the stream [that is, Freshwater Brook which then roughly bisected the Common before emptying into Griffen's Pond in the Public Gardens] The line opens fire, and for a minute or two there is one deafening roar of musketry. The skirmish line retire, and the order to charge is given which is done; again the line halts and again it fires a deafening volley. The order to retire is then given and skirmishers are thrown out to cover the retreat. The second line of attack consisting of the sailors and the 78th Highlanders, then advances, and goes through similar manoeuvres. The Marine Battery on Camp Hill opens fire while the Highlanders march to the right of the field. By this time each brigade is formed on its own ground, and the order "prepare to meet cavalry" is given. Squares are immediately formed, and firing commences again. The movement was performed with great precision and alacrity, and was much admired by the spectators.

This was the last manoeuvre of the "engagement" after which the imaginary enemy was presumably declared defeated, and the troops reformed back into columns and proudly marched off to their respective quarters.¹¹

Reaction to this public demonstration of military fire power and manoeuvre was mixed. The effect that such displays doubtless had on some who witnessed them can probably be summed up in the words of the reporter for the *Citizen* newspaper, who declared:

although we never forget that it was all a pageant, yet so attractive is the very mimicry of war, we were moved at the sight, and proud that

our interests are so deeply identified with a country that wields a power like this.¹²

In fact the movements here were all very much Napoleonic (or more properly Wellingtonian) in nature. The skirmishers thrown in advance of the various movements were almost certainly those that had preceded the advancing lines in the old smooth-bore, muzzle-loading era. The firing seems to have been all in volley, and the forming of squares was one of the classic manoeuvres of the older era. Thus the reporter for the *Acadian Reporter* newspaper was probably more militarily astute than his *Citizen* counterpart when he commented that: "As a military show the affair was quite good, but as a display of military tactics it cannot be denied that it was a blundering concern."¹³

This was, of course, a spectacle put on for the benefit of visiting royalty, and it doubtless had much of the formalized pageant about it. Another sham fight that was held about a year and a half later on 16 March 1871. After the arrival in Halifax of the 1870 drill book, and after the Franco-Prussian War had reemphasised all the lessons of the new era, it is probably of more military interest. This exercise was dubbed "The Battle of Rockhead," by the local press after the city prison under whose glowering walls it was mostly "fought." It doubtless had much more of a real field situation about it, and was taken much more seriously by those who participated.

In addition to the British regulars, all the local militia units took part, which made it one of the largest military exercises yet to be held in Halifax in time of peace. The militia's involvement was something of a departure for this period, for the operations of the local forces and the regulars were usually kept quite distinct from one another. Indeed, the two were regularly brought together only once a year, for the celebration of the Queen's birthday on 24 May, and then only for such ceremonial procedures as an inspection, a march past, and the firing of *a feu de joie*. In his M.A. thesis, "Local Boys and Red Coats," Roger Sarty attributes this lack of co-ordination to two main factors: first, the Canadian federal government's concern at this time that its militia forces not be seen as simply an adjunct of the imperial power; and second, the British military's failure to adequately address the problems of defending

coastal fortresses in the new technological age, and thus not being prepared to push the issue (and pay the costs) of militia-imperial troop co-operation. This, of course, resulted in a situation that was somewhat bizarre to say the least, for it was taken for granted by both Canadian and British authorities in these years that in the event of the Halifax fortress ever being attacked, the chief role of the militia would be to come to the aid of the British regulars. Yet it was not until the 1890s, and the implementation of formal defence scheme exercises, that they began to be joined together for operational or field training on any sort of a regular basis.¹⁴ That the 1871 exercise was held at all is probably a tribute to the diplomatic and persuasive skills of the British general officer commanding in Halifax, Lieutenant-General Sir Charles Hastings Doyle.

Doyle, the mastermind behind this exercise, remains an intriguing character, and merits some brief attention. A mixture of curmudgeon and charmer, a deft hand with the ladies but a lifelong bachelor, something of military martinet but capable of great generosity and good humour, he was one of the great characters of Confederation-era Canada. Yet, he has not received his due from historians and/or biographers, although admittedly their efforts would be hampered by the fact that there seems to be no surviving collection of Doyle papers.¹⁵ Doyle had been commander-in-chief in Halifax since 1861, and had firmly established himself on both the local military and political scene. Indeed since the day that confederation was enacted (1 July 1867) he had also served as the province's lieutenant-governor. In this capacity his role was to do what he could to reconcile Nova Scotians to the newly-enacted constitutional arrangements, which a majority in the province found unacceptable. Through exercising a judicious blend of tact and firmness in his handling of the anti-confederate Nova Scotian government, he was able to significantly advance this cause. At the same time, by capitalizing on a longstanding friendship with the leading Nova Scotian anti-confederate, Joseph Howe, and a mutually respectful relationship with the Canadian prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, he played a significant behind the scenes role in the negotiations leading up to the 'better terms' deal worked out between Howe and Macdonald in January 1869, and also in Howe's successful bid for election to the federal



Charles Hastings Doyle, ca.1870, commander of the Halifax garrison, 1861-1874, and lieutenant-governor of Nova Scotia, 1867-1874. Doyle planned and organized the "Battle of Rockhead" in 1871.
(NAC C-10106)

parliament in a by-election in Hants County in April of that year.

As the scion of a prominent Irish military family, however, Doyle's first love was soldiering. Thus in the four years that he remained in the province after Howe's by-election victory he concentrated most of his energies upon his role as commander-in-chief. Doyle was a capable and energetic soldier, and, evidently chafing at the lack of opportunities to display this in his normally quiet command, he eagerly seized upon chances to do so on the rare occasions that they presented themselves. Thus during the famous Trent crisis of 1862, he gained distinction for his mastery of the logistics involved in transshipping troops arriving in Halifax across the snows of New Brunswick to Quebec. And in April 1866, when a large force of Fenians massed menacingly along the Maine-New Brunswick frontier he responded with alacrity to the request of the New Brunswick lieutenant-governor to send aid. He quickly assembled a large force

consisting of 59 artillery with field guns, 80 Royal Engineers, plus a full regiment of infantry, and personally leading them to the scene of the troubles.¹⁶ The Battle of Rockhead was evidently another opportunity for Doyle to display his talents.

Doyle had travelled to Britain in the fall of 1870, and while he was there the Franco-Prussian War had broken out, with the French army defeated by the Prussian at Sedan on 1 September (although Paris did not fall until January 1871). Britain, and indeed all Europe, was shocked by the results, for in a short decisive campaign the expertly mobilized and brilliantly led armies of Prussia had completely routed those of France, hitherto considered Europe's best. Two of the lessons that this war were considered to have taught was the necessity of exercising large numbers of troops together, and since the Prussian military organization was based upon a system of reserves, of bringing regular and reserve forces together more closely. Such considerations certainly lay behind the sweeping reorganization of the British army that the Liberal Secretary of State for War, Edward Cardwell, was at that moment undertaking in Britain, and evidently they were the lessons that Doyle concluded needed to be learned in Halifax.¹⁷

To this end, upon his return to Halifax he set to work organizing a large military enterprise for which he ensured the participation not only of all the imperial forces in the city - the 78th Highlanders, the 61st Foot, and the 3rd and 4th Batteries of the 3rd Brigade Royal Artillery - but also all of the local militia units - the 63rd Halifax Rifles, the 66th Halifax Battalion of Infantry, the 1st and 2nd Brigades Halifax Garrison Artillery, and the Halifax Field Battery. The "enemy" was to be composed of members of the Royal Engineers and some Royal Artillery, although for the most part the opposing forces were composed of what were termed "imaginaries" - that is they were nonexistent. Altogether it is estimated that about 2,500 real troops took part.

This large force was assembled on the Grand Parade - that is the open area that separates Halifax City Hall from St. Paul's Church, between Barrington Street and Argyle Street - on the morning of 16 March. The 78th and 61st regulars, forming up at the south end in front of St. Paul's had, according to the reporter for the

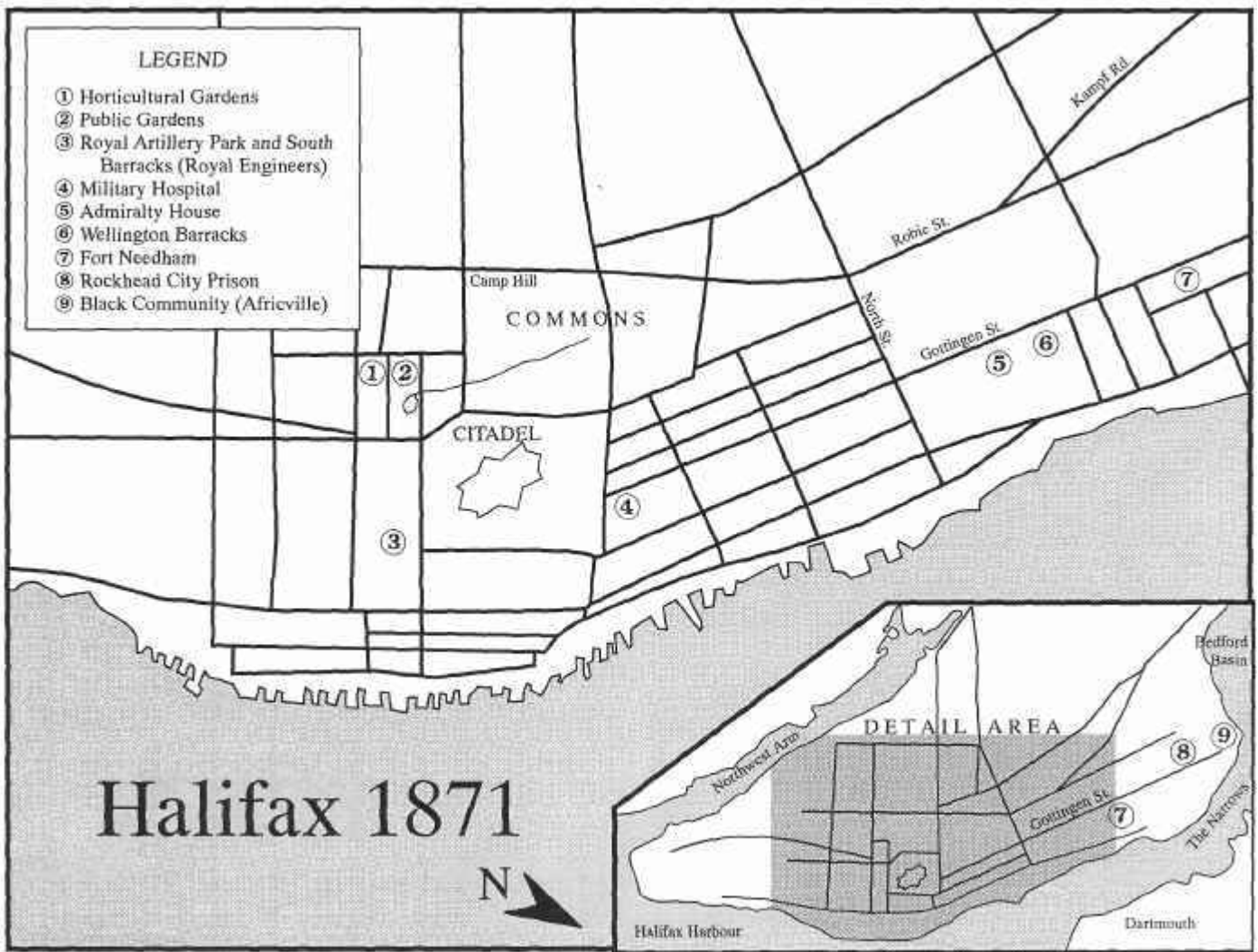
Morning Chronicle, doffed their winter greatcoats for the occasion, and presented a "pretty sight as they stood in a solid body, with uniforms of scarlet and other bright colours, and 'fixed' bayonets flashing in the sunlight."¹⁸ (The men of the 61st were wearing for the first time in Halifax the new dark blue glengarry style forage caps which had been introduced in 1868. The 78th would have been wearing their own traditional glengarries with Highland diced border, and trews, not kilts which they gave up wearing in Halifax during the winter period.)

As overheard by the reporter for the *Acadian Recorder*, Doyle called the officers forward and made some preliminary remarks to them before ordering them to move off, to the effect that:

the battle... about to be waged was arranged on the principles evolved during the campaign recently closed between France and Germany. He observed that the great success of Von Moltke and Bismarck, the real victors in the war, was owing to the systematic manner in which their plan of operations was laid out and that as clockwork were all the contrivances resorted to by which the immense German Army was controlled.¹⁹

For the purposes of the exercise, it was assumed that the enemy had landed and taken possession of a small village occupied by Blacks that was situated on the shore of Bedford Basin just inside the narrows. This, of course, was what became commonly known as Africville around the turn of this century, and that continued to be one of the city's more notable black communities until it was demolished and its population dispersed during a process of so-called urban renewal in the 1960s. Before the name of Africville took hold it was known simply as Campbell Road, after an old road that ran near-by, although whether it had this name at the time of the events discussed here is not known (it was not so-called in any of the newspaper accounts).²⁰

The position of the black inhabitants of the settlement in the day's events (the newspapers are typically devoid of any direct reference), will not be discussed here nor will an attempt be made to ascertain what the episode might reveal concerning the state of relations between the black and white races in Halifax in this period. While certainly interesting and important, it



opens up a whole new area of discussion that is quite tangential to the main concern here, however much it cries out to be addressed.

From the Black settlement the enemy was presumed to have pushed inland, and to have occupied in force the ground around Rockhead city prison, on the heights above. Rockhead, a large granite Victorian 'pile' of a building, with two wings extending off a central octagon structure, had been opened in 1860 and continued to serve as the city's main place of confinement for city felons into the 1960s. The building was finally demolished in the same program of urban redevelopment that witnessed the eradication of Africville. From the grounds of this imposing structure he was presumed to have despatched small parties as far forward as Fort Needham. This was then as now an unoccupied hillock (the site of an old fort) off Gottingen Street just north of and within site of one of the major military establishments in Halifax, Wellington Barracks (on the site of present-day CFB Stadacona).

The fullest accounts of the day's action appeared in two of the city's major newspapers: the *Citizen* and the *Acadian Recorder*. Somewhat tongue-in-cheek in approach, and heavily biased in favour of the accomplishments of the local militia forces as opposed to the British regulars, inevitably these accounts omit much that is of interest to the military historian. Nonetheless they are written with a certain amount of colour and verve, and they are the only record that we have of the event. Hence their accounts will be quoted at some length.

With General Doyle and his staff in the lead, followed immediately by the 78th and the 61st Regiments, the defending forces advanced along Gottingen Street to meet the invaders. As they passed by Wellington Barracks and neared the enemy, the 78th and the 66th Halifax Battalion were thrown off to the left to occupy a crucial position on a spot known as Meizner's Hill, which overlooked the entire peninsula thereabouts and which unaccountably the enemy had failed to



Rockhead City Prison. Opened in 1860, Rockhead remained the major place of confinement for those convicted of city crimes into the 1960s. During the 19th Century a goodly portion of its inmates were soldiers of the British garrison. Around its walls swirled the "Battle of Rockhead" of 1871.

(Public Archives of Nova Scotia Collection N-989)

occupy. Then a thrust was made up the slopes of Fort Needham, dislodging his advance party, and a couple of Armstrong field pieces mounted thereupon to cover the advance.

Thereafter, for the first time serious opposition was encountered. The advance from that point is graphically described by the *Acadian Recorder*:

The fire opened by the enemy upon our centre columns just as we moved to the Westward of Fort Needham. And much distressed our centre was too. No wonder; for there they were thus wedged into a sort of funnel, opposed to a concentrated fire from the enemy, with no room to deploy, and for a long time without a gun in position to cover or aid their advance. The enemy had thrown up barricades quite across Gottingen Road, opposite Merkel's gate, thus completely entrenching himself we may say. From this barricade the fire was particularly galling. At length a half battery of the 1st Halifax Brigade of Artillery under Captain Albro, acting as Light Troops made a dash at the provoking barricade and carried it at the point of the bayonet. It was one of the finest things in the whole engagement. It turned the tide for the day; for, really up to that point things were looking critical. The success of this exploit seems to have demoralized the enemy;

for, from that point they gradually fell back from one good cover to another in an almost unaccountable sort of way.²¹

With the troops moving on, the stage was then set for the crucial action around Rockhead. (According the *Recorder* the enemy at this point consisted of a small force of Royal Artillery with a cider barrel as its sole piece of heavy armament!) The geographical situation here was roughly as follows: Rockhead prison sat on the northern extremity of Gottingen Street and in front of it toward the basin was a short plateau which then sloped off fairly dramatically towards the Basin and the Black community on its shores. On the other side of the village towards the water ran the tracks of the Annapolis-Halifax Railway, which wended their way on to Richmond Depot further on in the city's northern suburbs. Here the action unfolded, according to the account in the *Citizen*:

The Volunteers with skirmishers thrown out right and left, advancing valiantly towards Rockhead. Rapidly extending along the Prison enclosure on the left, supported by a field piece, the skirmishers were soon hotly engaged; their comrades of Rifles on the right were also

energetically pressing the enemy's sharpshooters, and steadily advancing over the uneven ground. Meanwhile the skirmishers on the left were pressed, but the main body of the centre came up in the nick of time, and as the skirmishers fell back, the artillery opened on the advancing enemy with their Armstrongs, and after a hot fire compelled them to evacuate their position. The prison thus being released from the grip of the foe, the centre followed up the advantage by rapidly marching to *the* open plateau in front of *the* Prison overlooking the basin.²²

Meanwhile, *the Recorder* noted *the following* incident in the midst of the fray:

At *the* very gate of Rockhead the reckless dauntless Taillebois of the Cider-Barrel Brigade took his stand with an obstinacy as if he would never yield another point. This began to look so serious that even *the* Commander-in-Chief and his Staff were provoked into charging upon the now-to-be-immolated Taillebois. He was utterly routed and driven from the field.²³

The *Citizen's* account continued:

The Artillery were stationed on the road, commanding the advance, here the troops were halted while they poured in a steady and well directed fire upon *the* enemy who fell back upon the railway, partially sheltered by *the* houses of *the* Black settlement. The order to advance then rang out and over the rocks, broken ground, slush, snow and clumps of trees, resolutely marched *the* men. By the time the precipice overlooking the settlement and the shore was reached, matters wore a dark and dirty aspect.²⁴

And on the left, the *Recorder* observed that:

In the midst of the enemy's discomfort at the fall of Rockhead, the 66th (Bremner's Regt.) as yet in reserve, was ordered up, much to the delight of the men and their gallant commanding officers. They and the 78th Highlanders, whom they supported, re-opened the contest by a real infantry "set-to" with the enemy. Then again was to be seen that "thin red line" of which history speaks, and which has such a terrible meaning to the foes of our country. Nothing could resist it in this instance. Away went *the* enemy - no longer retiring in order, but pell mell, and as their retreat was down a steep hill, the effects of it were all the more apparent.²⁵

And the conclusion, reported in the *Citizen*:

The 61st Regt. had by this time, it appears, succeeded in turning the enemy's right, and were in full possession of the village, when the new battlefield came into view. Forming in line on the

railroad skirting the village, the 61st and the Volunteers poured into the discomfited ranks of the enemy terrific volleys, while Volunteer Artillery, on the heights above, thundered out round after round with terrible effect.

...The enemy was driven clear into the water. The troops [then] reformed, *the* 61st marching home by Richmond Depot, Royal Artillery and Volunteers by the three mile house road and Gottingen Street. There were a number of spectators on the battlefield who like the U.S. Senators, Congressmen, and others at the battle of "Bull Run" were attracted there to see the fun. ...We heard one old "cuss" express his indignation at the battle. He was an ex colonel of militia and said he was at a loss to tell which was in more confusion, the defeated enemy or the victors, when the climax of the fight was reached.²⁶

What then are we to make of this exercise? Unfortunately there are no afteraction reports by the military to allow us to ascertain exactly what they thought of it, nor, as far as can be found, does Doyle make any further reference to it (which may itself be a comment). Certainly the newspapers tended to emphasize the exercise's farcical element, although one should be leery about accepting this too readily as a valid measure of its military value, as many Halifax reporters in this era tended to specialize in this style of writing in describing military events of this nature. There seemed to have been something in their purposefulness, their seriousness of intent, their grandiosity perhaps, which awakened in them a desire to deflate.

One can certainly tell from these accounts, however deficient they may be in certain respects, that the battle of Rockhead was a departure from the usual style of sham fight described earlier. Indeed what seems to have been a more open, fluid style of movement may have been an attempt to utilize tactics similar to those employed in the campaigns recently waged in Europe, and as recommended for adoption in the most recent editions of *Queen's Regulations* and the *Field Exercises and Evolutions of Infantry*. Breech-loading artillery was used extensively but probably not in as intensive concentrations as was now being recommended, although this may have merely reflected the number of guns that were available in Halifax at the time. Also the fact that there were no references to squares having been formed is a favourable sign, the role of cavalry on the modern battlefield having by now been proved practically hopeless.



Above: *The entrance to Wellington Barracks, ca. 1870. The Citadel and Wellington Barracks were the British garrison's two main infantry barracks at this time. The first building inside housed the rank and file; the building further in, visible through the archway, housed the officers. At this time the barracks were occupied by the 78th Highland Regiment of Foot. One of its members can be seen standing outside in walking out dress; members of the barracks guard in full dress can be seen inside the gate.*

(NAC PA 119660)

Right: *Men's Quarters, Wellington Barracks during troop review, ca. 1863.*

(NAC PA 143690)



On the other hand there is not much evidence of the troops involved seeking cover, and this may reflect an initial misapprehension about the effect of the new weapons that became widespread in the wake of the rather speedy Prussian victory over France - that is that they favoured the attack over the defence. Analyses that pointed out the error of this interpretation were to appear in Europe before long but probably none would have been known in Halifax by the time of the Battle of Rockhead. Thus with hindsight one can say that however valiant the bayonet charge by Captain Albrow and the Halifax Artillery against the barricade on Gottingen Street may have been,

its end results almost certainly would have been suicidal. All in all then the affair was rather a headlong rush to victory, entailing few attempts to deal with really serious difficulties, and of itself does not seem to have been the type of exercise that would have prepared Halifax defenders to meet a truly determined enemy, even one so foolhardy as to attempt a landing in Bedford Basin.

It did, however, give the British regulars and the local militia a chance to work together in something other than a parade situation, and to this end it almost certainly would have been

useful. Indeed, it was probably an example of the type of exercise which needed to be repeated with much more frequency and with greater sophistication, if the diverse forces responsible for defending Halifax were to learn to function together cohesively and effectively. But as has been seen, this was the only exercise of this scope to be held in this era, and as such must be seen mostly as a lone instance of the ripple effects of the Franco-Prussian War on Halifax. Certainly it would appear that Hastings Doyle, the commander of the Halifax garrison, was well aware of the significance of this campaign as a military event. Nonetheless, despite his commendable feat of getting the event in Halifax organized at all, it would also seem that the opportunity had been missed of ensuring that the forces under his command were able to benefit from some of the tactical lessons that the Franco-Prussian War as well as earlier campaigns had taught regarding the deployment of troops on the modern battlefield.

Notes

1. Much of the material in this paper began life as part of a background study for Parks Canada in support of the animation programme at the Citadel National Historic Site. I remain grateful to Parks for allowing me to indulge my foibles, and become much more interested in the life of the garrison in this period than probably they ever intended.
2. For the Artillery defences of Halifax in this period, see A.J.B. Johnston, *Defending Halifax: Ordnance, 1825-1906*, Papers in Archaeology and History No.46, (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1981), pp.20-51.
3. W.C.B. Tunstall, "Imperial Defence, 1815-1870" in J.H. Rose, A.P. Newton, E.A. Benians, eds., *The Cambridge History of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940) Vol.11; D.M. Schurman, *The Education of a Navy* (London: Cassell, 1965) esp. pp. 16-35; Norman Gibbs, *The Origins of Imperial Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955).
4. See Johnston, *Defending Halifax*, pp.20-51.
5. See Gwyn Herries-Jenkins, *The Army and Victorian Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977) pp.193-201; Edward Spiers, *The Army and Society, 1815-1914* (London: Longman, 1980), p.22.
6. *The Queen's Regulations and Orders for the Army, 1868* (London: HMSO, 1868) pp.115, 145.
7. *Field Exercises and Evolutions of Infantry, 1867* (London: HMSO, 1867)'pp.115-175. Those pages that deal specifically with the rifle exercises are reprinted in John Walter, éd., *Arms and Equipment of the British Army, 1866: Victorian Military Equipment from the Enfield to the Snider* (Chippenham: Greenhill Books, pp.199-272.
8. *Field Exercises and Evolutions of Infantry, 1870* (London: HMSO, 1870) p.53.
9. *Ibid.*, p.280; for the most comprehensive section on skirmishing, see pp.205-230.
10. For a general discussion of British infantry tactics in this era, and the different emphases of colonial and European fighting, see Frederick Myatt, *The Soldier's Trade: British Military Developments, 1660-1914* (London: Macdonald & Jane's, 1974), pp.185-203; see also Howard Beales, "Technology and Tactics in the British Army," in R. Haycock and H. Ion, eds., *Men, Machines & War* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988) pp.23-47. On the tactical debate within the army one of the more lucid discussion remains that in Jay Luvaas, *The Education of an Army: British Military Thought, 1815-1940* (London: Cassell, 1964) Chapter 4, "The New School: Major General Sir Patrick MacDougall," pp.101-129.
11. *Evening Reporter*, 26 August 1869, p.2.
12. *Citizen*, 26 August 1869, p.2.
13. *Acadian Recorder*, 26 August 1869, p.2.
14. Roger Sarty, "Local Boys and Red Coats: The Relations of the Militia in Nova Scotia and the British Garrison at Halifax, 1860-1906," unpublished Master of Arts Research Paper, Duke University, 1976, pp.30-56.
15. Ron McDonald's biography in *The Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol.XI (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982) pp.278-281, and the same author's "The Public Career of Major-General Sir Charles Hastings Doyle, 1863-1871," (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Dalhousie University, 1969) are the most comprehensive accounts. This author is urged to give us more on this fascinating and important figure.
16. On the Trent Crisis see Kenneth Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America, 1815-1908* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), pp.218-232; for the Fenian crisis in New Brunswick, see Herald A. Davis, "The Fenian Raid on New Brunswick," *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol.XXXVI, 1955, pp.211-230.
17. On the reaction within the British military to the war, see Field Marshal Sir Garnet Wolessley, *The Story of a Soldier's Life* (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1903) Vol.11, p.227.
18. *Morning Chronicle*, 17 March 1871, p.2.
19. *Acadian Recorder*, 16 March 1871, p.2
20. On Africville, see Donald Clairmont and William Magill, *Africville: The Life and Times of a Canadian Black Community* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), particularly Chapter 1, pp.39-53, for its history; for the origins of the name see pp.51-52.
21. *Acadian Recorder*, 16 March 1871, p.2.
22. *Citizen*, 17 March 1871, p.2.
23. *Acadian Recorder*, 17 March 1871, p.2.
24. *Citizen*, 17 March 1871, p.2.
25. *Acadian Recorder*, 16 March 1871, p.2.
26. *Citizen*, 17 March 1871, p.2.

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