

Canadian Winds Article

Pork, Beans & Hard Tack: The Regimental Band of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles

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125 years ago, the officers of a newly-formed Winnipeg regiment purchased used brass instruments for a total sum of \$300. With this first step, they laid the foundation for what would eventually become the Regimental Band of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles, now Western Canada's oldest continuously active band.

The 1880s were adventurous days in Western Canada; the Canadian Pacific Railway was steadily expanding westward, and all along the route settlers were establishing themselves in this new land of promise. The Riel Rebellion of 1869 and the Fenian Raid of 1871 prompted the frontier community of Winnipeg to petition for the formation of a militia unit that could help provide security and protection.

Ottawa granted permission. On 9 November 1883, a group of merchants, engineers, lawyers, and university students gathered to form the 90th Winnipeg Battalion of Rifles, and not a moment too soon. Land disputes continued to escalate along the South Saskatchewan River, as new white settlers arrived and assumed ownership of lands that historically belonged to the aboriginal and Métis populations. In March 1885, news came to Winnipeg that Louis Riel had imprisoned several white men at Batoche, and so began the Northwest Rebellion.



It was over the course of this baptismal campaign that the 90th Rifles gained many of their regimental distinctions. During the attack at Fish Creek, when the brunt of the fighting fell on the men of the 90th, the aboriginal prisoners said of the Rifles: “The

red-coats we know, but who are these little black devils?” They were familiar with the British Forces’ red tunics, but had not yet encountered the dark green and black tunics of the Rifles. The nickname “Little Black Devils” stuck; *Hosti Acie Nominati* or “Named by the Enemy” became the regiment’s official motto. To this day, the Rifles’ badges bear the insignia of a rampant devil with a trident and chalice.

The band was not an afterthought in the establishment of the regiment. From the very beginning, the unit officers recruited

musicians to maintain the troops' morale in the field. Incredibly, the third Bandmaster, Band Sergeant H. Gooding, and his seventeen-piece brass band¹ accompanied the troops on the Northwest campaign. According to the first regimental history published in 1906, the band was the pride and joy of the force. It was said that the playing of the band improved wonderfully during the campaign and that even the enemy – the local Métis – would sneak around camp at night to listen to it play. In the field of battle, the bandsmen performed invaluable service as an ambulance corps and were kept behind the lines, as they were not trained riflemen.

The first mention of the regimental band in public performance was in July 1885: the newspaper article described the victorious celebrations and revelry in Winnipeg upon the return of the soldiers from the Northwest Rebellion. The band entertained with renditions of *See, The Conquering Hero Comes* (from Handel's *Judas Maccabeus*) and *Johnny Comes Marching Home*. At their arrival, the regiment's soldiers revealed their freshly composed homage to the recent campaign, called *Pork, Beans, and Hard Tack*.

Pork, beans, and hard tack (a type of biscuit made from flour, water, and salt that was inexpensive and long-lasting) were the culinary staples of military camp life. The lyrics were written by Lawrence Buchan, a major in the Unit, to the tune of a popular college song, *Old Solomon Levi*. This became the regimental march.

Pork, Beans, and Hard Tack

*When we embarked at Winnipeg, as chirpy as could be,
We thought we were out for a bit of a lark, about a two weeks
spree
But when we got to Fort Qu'Appelle we found it different then,
Our tents in a row we pitched in the snow, just like the real
soldier men.*

*Pork, beans and hard tack, tra la la la la la la
Poor hungry soldiers, tra la la la la la la*

*With blistered feet and aching bones we marched along all day,
And go on piquet all the night, to keep the rebs away;
But when we meet the enemy we do not think of rest,
For whether we march or fight, my boys, we do our level best.*

As a rifle regiment, the Royal Winnipeg Rifles respect traditions and customs distinct from regular Canadian regiments. First of all, the most common marching tempo in the military is approximately 120 beats per minute, but rifle regiments march at 140 and on ceremonial occasions at 180, called a double march, which is an actual run instep. Originally, riflemen provided tactical reconnaissance by deploying ahead of the main body of troops. There was an obvious need for speed and silence, evidenced in rifle drill which economizes verbal commands and extraneous movements. The importance of concealment explains the dark green and black uniforms.

Due to this important and sometimes improvised function on the battlefield, the rifleman was trained to be flexible and resourceful; in short, a thinking soldier. This training was a departure from the fear-based discipline more commonly associated with military instruction, in which individual will is not part of the battlefield equation. Riflemen had an ingrained and individual sense of pride and honour for their regiment, and were encouraged to be free-thinking.

And free-thinking they were: the troops of the 90th Winnipeg Battalion of Rifles demonstrated their broad-mindedness in a virtually unknown achievement, called *The 90th on Active Service: Campaigning in the North-West*, a musical and dramatic burlesque in two acts. This entertaining and semi-autobiographical operetta was literally written by the men of the regiment while they were camped at Fort Pitt, Saskatchewan in June 1885 at the tail end of the Northwest Campaign. It was

replete with musical references to popular music of the day, such as Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, and presented among other lively vignettes all five verses of *Pork, Beans, and Hard Tack*. The burlesque was performed 29 and 30 July 1885 at the Princess Opera House in Winnipeg by the very troops and musicians who had lived it, merely two weeks after their return, with Bandmaster Gooding and the band providing musical support. One is hard-pressed to find another regiment whose men wrote an operetta during a military campaign.

Another rifle regiment tradition is the use of the bugle on parade. Given the spread-out nature of the rifles' function in the field, the bugle was used as a means of basic communication and of relaying orders. It is still used to relay orders on parade today. Eventually, a bugle band, made up solely of buglers and drummers, emerged alongside the 90th Winnipeg Battalion of Rifles Brass Band.

By the early 20th century, both bands played an important role in the local militia and also in the community, performing at important events in Winnipeg and surrounding areas. For example, in Sept 1905, the bands accompanied the 90th Regiment to Regina to take part in the inauguration of the Province of Saskatchewan. One hundred years later, the same band participated in that province's centennial.

World War I

During World War I, the brass band, under the direction of Bandmaster S. L. Barrowclough, and the bugle band accompanied the regiment as part of the Canadian Expeditionary Force overseas. The men of the 90th "participated in every decisive battle of the war, and their casualty list and honour lists give some indication of the measure of that participation" (Winnipeg, 1933). In the trenches, the musicians reprised their role of the Northwest Campaign days and acted as stretcher bearers, while helping boost the troops' morale

behind the lines. Shortly after the armistice was signed in 1918, the Little Black Devils marched across the Rhine to Germany with the band playing none other than Pork, Beans, and Hard Tack. They hail gained many battle honours² without having lost a single trench.

Not much is known about the band during the inter-war period, except that it comprised twenty to twenty-five musicians and rehearsed once per week, while the bugle band supported a healthy contingent of twenty buglers and eight drummers, the Rifles band was now one of 125 militia bands in Canada and, like the rest of the military service, was restricted by a shortage of funds. In 1920, as the Canadian Militia discontinued its system of numerical classification, the regiment shed its label of "90th" and became the Winnipeg Rifles. In 1935, it was conferred the "Royal" designation by King George V for its distinguished service.

World War II

At the outbreak of World War II, the regiment was once again called upon to serve, and bandsmen obliged yet again; both the brass and bugle bands followed the 1st Battalion in 1940 to Camp Debert in Nova Scotia in order to train for deployment. According to reports in Nova Scotia, the 30-piece brass band, under the direction of Bandmaster F. R. Stanford, was invited to town after town to share its talents with the locals during this training period. In 1941, they were deployed to England. The bandsmen who served overseas were paid a total of \$1.55 per day.

Back home in Winnipeg, the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles also supported a brass band which did not sit idle while its counterpart was deployed. The Band of the 2nd Battalion Royal Winnipeg Rifles performed a concert in 1941 at the famed Walker Theatre to raise funds in order to send parcels overseas for the men of the 1st Battalion. This

concert, featuring marches and other military-themed music, also boasted many of Winnipeg's talented artists, including majorettes, comedians, acrobats, an accordion quartet, tap dancers, singers, a contortionist, and of course, the band.

In 1944, the Royal Winnipeg Rifles were key among the forces who stormed Juno Beach in Normandy on D-Day. This was the first of many enemy engagements. The Rifles battled their way through France, Belgium, Holland, and Germany. By the end of WWII, they had accumulated more battle honours than any other Canadian regiment.

By the time the war was over and the troops were coming home, the Band of the 2nd Battalion was kept very busy playing for the many celebratory parades in the city. There were at least three parades to welcome back the troops, not to mention the Victory in Europe Day parade where the streets were so crowded that the trombones had to play with their slides pointing straight up in the air to avoid collisions.

After WWII, the two brass bands of the regiment amalgamated since many musicians and, for that matter, soldiers left the militia. In 1951, the bugle band was disbanded. The average age in the brass band was about thirty and its membership was still open only to males. The pay for a musician in the Rifles Band at this time was twenty-five cents and two street-car tickets per rehearsal (one to get home and another to come back the following week). There was no military training required for the musicians who passed the audition. The remainder of the 1950s brought few changes for the band, except that the entire regiment moved to Minto Armouries, its current home, and the band settled into the south-west tower third-floor band room, where it still rehearses today.

Later 20th Century

The 1960s were tumultuous years for the Royal Winnipeg Rifles and the band. Following an unsuccessful attempt by the

government to disband the unit on grounds that enrolment was too low, the Army then demanded that musicians undergo basic military training. This caused at least half the band members to quit, and left the band with only about twelve to fifteen musicians. It was also during this decade that the band took on the form of a mixed "concert" band, officially permitting woodwind players to join.

A highlight for the band and the regiment was the investiture of His Royal Highness Prince Charles as the regiment's Colonel-in-Chief in 1979, an event that warranted his visit that year. By this time, the armed forces had begun to let women join, but only in some non-combat trades, such as musician or clerk. The title "Director of Music" slowly began replacing "Bandmaster'," and only commissioned officers could be appointed as such. 1983 saw a first for Army Reserve³ bands in Canada when the Rifles welcomed their first female Director of Music, Capt. Sheila McPherson, who led the band for the next 15 years. Today, the band counts more women in its ranks than men, and even the coveted role of the bugler on parade has been in the hands of a number of female musicians for several years.

Through the 1990s and into the new millennium, the band continued to fulfill its mandate of supporting military events and creating a community footprint through its sixty-plus engagements per year. It is the only brass/reed band of 38 Canadian Brigade Group, which spans Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Northwestern Ontario. As such, the band has found itself at many exciting events, such as royal visits by HRH Princess Anne and HRH Prince Edward, in addition to international concert band festivals all over Canada.



New Millennium

In 2003, the band was especially honoured to travel to Normandy, France to perform in the opening ceremonies of the Juno Beach Centre, the Canadian war memorial commemorating our WWII veterans. During this trip, the musicians paraded through many of the towns in which the regiment earned its battle honours. Members of A company (infanteers) accompanied the band on this momentous return, including the band's ceremonial attachment called the Pioneers.

The Pioneers hold a special place in the regiment's tradition. Historically sent ahead of the troops to clear the brush and undergrowth, their official duty is now to protect the regiment's drums at all times. Being a rifle regiment, the unit has no colours⁴ as such, but its battle honours are emblazoned on the drums. For this reason, the Pioneers flank the drum rank on either side of the band for all parades and are highly recognizable: they carry large axes.

Today

Currently, the Regimental Band of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles counts thirty-five members, and is made up of army reservists who have all done basic military training. Many of the band members have completed non-musical army reserve courses which

allow them to fulfill other duties such as driving and instructing on military courses. The band members come from a wide variety of backgrounds: some are students, and many work full-time as teachers, police officers, avionics technicians, and research scientists, among other diverse occupations. Several band members have university degrees in music, but others simply play as a hobby.

A few retired members of the band continue to volunteer on a regular basis, and some of these dedicated musicians have been with us for many years. One in particular deserves special recognition: Master Warrant Officer Jack Walton, a trumpeter, has been playing with the band for 63 continuous years. MWO Walton joined the band as a boy soldier at age 13, and his first engagement was the VE Day parade in 1945. MWO Walton's dedication and loyalty to the Royal Winnipeg Rifles continues to be an inspiration to the musicians in the band and the soldiers of the regiment.

125th Anniversary

As 2008 unfolds, the Little Black Devils are looking forward to celebrating their 125th anniversary this fall. To commemorate this special milestone, the band is in the process of recording its third CD. This disc will tell the story of the regiment through music, presenting selections that represent each era in the regiment's history. In addition, the band will premiere its first commissioned piece, *The Old Ninetieth*, by the esteemed Canadian composer, Howard Cable.

From day one, the founding officers of the Royal Winnipeg Rifles created a band to be part and parcel of the regimental family. When the band dons the green and black uniform, it becomes part of a tradition that is larger than the musician or the band. And this tradition continues: the riflemen who are being deployed to Afghanistan this year will, no doubt, add to the rich legacy of the Little Black Devils. At home, too, the band will continue to do its part, as it always has.

References

1. Although the band was always referred to as a brass band, many pictures show that throughout its history, and as early as 1904, there were at times clarinets and saxophones as well.
2. A battle honour is a military tradition practised in the Commonwealth and awarded by the reigning monarch to a unit for its achievements and distinction in a particular battle or campaign. It is usually awarded in the form of the name-place where the battle occurred, and the unit need not have defeated the adversary in order to receive the citation.
3. "Reserve" has now replaced the term militia in common practice. It refers to the force of part-time, trained soldiers of the Canadian Forces.
4. A regiment's colours or emblem are normally displayed on a flag or banner, and traditionally served as a rallying point in battle.

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