

Regimental History

Abridged Regimental History

The 90th “Winnipeg” Battalion of Rifles came into being on 9 November 1883, born in a troubled period that had its seeds in the 1869 provisional government of Louis Riel and the 1871 Fenian Raids that alarmed the frontier community of Winnipeg. The Métis, fearing that their homesteads were being threatened with confiscation under new survey regulations, and seeing the encroachment of a new era that placed their old ways in jeopardy, were restless.

As the Regiment was being formed, a request for its services came from an unexpected quarter: Lord Wolseley, fighting the Dervishes (Mahdists) in the upper reaches of the Nile, asked for a contingent of Canadian voyageurs to assist in the relief of General Gordon at Khartoum. Lieutenant Colonel William Nassau Kennedy led the Winnipeg contingent – the first to serve beyond the shores of North America – in 1884. He died on the homeward journey in London. Lieutenant Colonel Kennedy had previously distinguished himself by being elected the second mayor of the City of Winnipeg.

While the first group of servicemen from the Regiment were in Egypt, trouble at home was increasing. Louis Riel, who had been teaching at St. Peter’s Mission in Montana after fleeing Manitoba over a decade earlier, was asked by Gabriel Dumont to return and help his food-scarce people. He arrived at St. Laurent (Batoche) on 1 July 1884 and while his first words counselled moderation, Batoche soon became an armed camp as Riel formed a new provisional government.

This then was the backdrop for the men of the 90th undergoing training. In March 1885 the Regiment left for Qu’Appelle, the nearest rail point to Prince Albert. From then on, it was campaigning of a rigorous nature; housing in bleak weather in immigration sheds, the start of a gruelling 540 kilometre march on 6 April through snow and blizzard, ending on 23 April 1885, with the famous Battle of Fish Creek, where the Regiment’s nickname, the Little Black Devils, and the motto – *Hosti Acie Nominati* – were born.

It was at Fish Creek where the Regiment received its baptism by fire. The Regiment fought that day without food or drink, and battled a prairie fire set by the Métis leader Dumont. To them went the brunt of the fighting during the advance on the Métis trenches. It was here that captured prisoners, awed by the cool, steady advance of the sharp shooting Rifles said afterwards, “The red coats we know, but who are those little black devils? ”

Two weeks after the first engagement, the Rifles joined in the final four-day assault on Batoche, and from 7 to 11 May completed the job by driving the enemy from the little capital of their new provisional government. To the Rifles went the task of forming Riel’s guard when he was taken to Regina for trial.

The Regiment was still only 16 years old when it dispatched a 35-man contingent back to the African continent, this time to South Africa in 1899, to serve with the Royal Canadian Regiment in the Boer War. Smaller drafts were subsequently sent to reinforce the expedition.

"No one who was present at the old drill hall on Broadway, recounts an earlier history, will ever forget the fateful 4th of August when Colonel O'Grady entered and spoke to the members of the Regiment who were assembled awaiting news of impending developments."

"Ninetieth Winnipeg Rifles, he said, I have offered the Regiment not only full strength but one thousand strong. Who Goes? The reply was... a spontaneous outburst of patriotic enthusiasm.. "

By Tuesday night, 6 August 1914 the 90th was in camp at St. Charles, one of the first Canadian units to be under canvas and training for active service. The Regiment was designated in the CEF as the 8th Canadian Battalion, 90th Winnipeg Rifles, and was on its way to Camp Valcartier on 24 August, less than three weeks after the outbreak of war.

For the 8th, the days from the disembarkation at Plymouth on 17 October 1914, the training on Salisbury Plain over a wet winter, and the move, one platoon at a time, into quiet sectors of the western front to accustom them to trench routine, was a prelude to the 14 April 1915 entry into the Ypres salient where it formed a part of the 2nd Brigade.

At 0400 hrs on the morning of Saturday, 24 April 1915, a blue-green-yellowish cloud was seen rolling over No Man's Land towards the battalion trenches. It was the second enemy gas attack. Half the battalion succumbed to the poisonous fumes. The battalion on the left was obliged to retire and Colonel Lipsett's 8th Battalion found itself in danger of being surrounded. But it held on. While supporting battalions were preparing new defences in the rear, the men of the Regiment kept up a withering fire on the enemy, drove off an attack on its front and withstood fearful enfilade fire from left and right, and this from an enemy force five times its size.

Thus began a tradition of never losing a trench to the enemy, a tradition never to be broken throughout the war's duration.

With the early morning of the 25th came relief troops from the Durham Light Infantry, but only for three companies of the battalion. Number 4 Company, on the right, under Captain George Northwood, saw its relief start forward and then turn back. As the day wore on and the battle's intensity did not relent, the Durhams were seen gradually falling back. By 1800 hrs there were no troops left on the front line except 4 Company and the machine gun section of the battalion. A letter from Major Munro at the time tells of the final act of that terrific engagement "George Northwood stuck it out at the trenches until the last and fought like a tiger, as did Owen, Bell and young Andrews, all of whom we believe are captured. Only the Colonel, McMeans, Morley, Scott, McLeod and myself were in the line-up with two hundred and thirty-one other ranks on Tuesday evening when we re-assembled at Wieltj. "

After the war David Lloyd George paid the battalion this tribute: "The 8th, by steadiness under strain, was the focal point of saving the channel ports and removing the danger to England of invasion. "

Such was the stirring baptism by fire of this battalion during the First World War. By the time it was over the 8th Battalion had won 20 battle honours for the Regiment and 431 decorations, including three Victoria Crosses (CSM F.W. Hall, Corporal A.P. Brereton and Corporal F.G. Coppins). Two former members of the 90th, Captain C.P.G. O'Kelly and Sergeant R. Spall, won Victoria Crosses while serving with other battalions. Action followed action: Festubert in May 1915; Givenchy in June; Mount Sorrel the following June; the Somme in September of 1916 with the 8th Battalion attacking on the Zollern Redoubt and Hessian and Regina Trenches. Then came the April 1917 attack on Vimy Ridge in a blinding snowstorm under withering fire, onward the capture of Arleux; then Fremoy, Lens, Hill 70, followed by the mud and death of Passchendaele in November. In 1918 came the return to the Somme to blunt a German attack on Amiens, and on to the Last Hundred Days – the battle of Arras to turn the flank of the Hindenburg Line, Drocourt-Queant in order to cross the fire swept Canal du Nord, the Battle of Cambrai which pierced the Hindenburg Line which allowed the Pursuit to Mons.

The years between the two world wars involved training against the backdrop of further military threats. At home, the Regiment celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 1933 and two years later was awarded the prefix 'Royal' for its distinguished service.

The nature of the Second World War was such that the Regiment spent its first three and a half years in England (from September 1940 to early June 1944). It engaged in anti-invasion training during the German threat to England, and sophisticated assault training as it prepared to be in the spearhead of the invasion force against Festung Europa aimed at the beaches of Normandy.

For the Rifles, the battle started before the assault craft touched shore on the morning of 6 June 1944. It was one of the few units to come under really heavy fire before landing, as the fire support failed to strike its targets and not a single enemy emplacement was hit. The leading companies had to wade ashore and storm their positions cold. This they steadfastly did as the vanguard of the Rifles, a unit of the 7th Infantry Brigade, 3rd Canadian Division.

The next day the battalion fought its way forward through the cushion between the beach defenses and the strong enemy mobile reserve. At Putot on 8 June the first inland battle was locked. The 21st Panzer Division and the fanatical Hitlerjugend of the 12th SS Division viciously counter-attacked the Rifles salient with tanks and infantry using a high complement of automatic weapons. The Rifles, without tank support, were cut off, and three companies were decimated, with only D Company remaining, until a tank-supported counter-attack by the Canadian Scottish restored the situation. Of the few souls left alive to be taken prisoner, some were summarily executed under the order of General Kurt Meyer, who commanded the 12th SS Division.

The Regiment's course can be followed to the hinge city of Caen, key to the

whole Normandy campaign, and the bitter, gallant battle it made to take nearby Carpiquet Airport. In the Falaise Pocket it attacked through wheat fields, sunken woods and towns to destroy the enemy in the Trun gap. Crossing the Seine, it moved to the channel ports, overran V-1 rocket sites and captured, after bitter fighting, the Port of Calais before heading east again to assault across the Leopold Canal into the flat, artillery-swept country of the Scheldt, leading to the opening of Antwerp Harbour.

After wintering near Nijmegen, Holland, the Regiment assaulted across flooded land in Buffaloes (amphibious tracked craft) to reach the northern end of the Siegfried Line and penetrate the first major defenses within Germany itself. Heavy, constant fighting, mainly against German paratroopers, brought the Regiment to the Rhine River. The 27 March 1945 attack, and the vigorous pursuit of the enemy along the Germany-Holland border, brought the Regiment to the edge of the German town of Aurich, on a peninsula between Emden and Wilhelmshaven. As the Regiment was preparing a cross-canal attack against this heavily-fortified town, the order was given to cease hostilities. Two days later, the documents of surrender were signed and the war was over.

At home, the unit later assisted with dyking and the guarding of installations during the 1950 Winnipeg flood. During 1951-53, the Regiment provided the third company of each of the newly formed 1st and 2nd Canadian Rifle Battalions. These battalions later became the 1st and 2nd Battalions of The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada. The 1st Battalion served with the 27th Brigade in Europe as part of NATO and the 2nd with the 25th Brigade serving with the United Nations forces in Korea.

In 1955 the Winnipeg Light Infantry amalgamated with The Royal Winnipeg Rifles bringing together the histories and traditions of two great military units. On 11 September 1967 the Regiment was authorized the right to perpetuate the 44th Battalion, CEF which had formerly been perpetuated by the Royal New Brunswick Regiment.

The Regiment has continued the high traditions upon which it was founded. On 6 June 1964, a commemorative monument was erected on the beaches at Courcelles-sur-Mer, where the Regiment had stormed ashore 20 years earlier. On 26 May 1968, in recognition of the close association between the Regiment and the community, the City of Winnipeg bestowed the Freedom of the City upon the unit – the first ever granted. The occasion was also used to re-dedicate the Volunteer Monument of 1885. On 9 November 1973 the Regiment celebrated the 90th Anniversary of the 90th. The unit was presented with new Regimental drums on 9 May 1976, now inscribed with the battle honours from the Second World War.

A distinctive honor was accorded the Regiment in 1978 when Her Majesty the Queen consented to His Royal Highness, The Prince of Wales, becoming the Colonel-in-Chief of The Royal Winnipeg Rifles. On his first visit to his Regiment on 4 April 1979, he addressed all Riflemen present with the words, "I have been called many things...but never a Little Black Devil".

The Regiment was again selected for singular distinction by being requested by the Colonel-in-Chief to provide a contingent to line the processional

