



Staff officers photographed at the militia camp, Levis, Quebec, during the early 20th Century.

THE EARLY PROBLEMS OF A FAMOUS MILITIA REGIMENT: WHY THE 86TH REGIMENT WAS DISBANDED

by Doctor Desmond Morton

Most history, Robert Rutherford reminds his readers in *Hometown Horizons*, is local. In 1914-18, as he describes, Canadians lived the First World War in Trois-Rivières, Guelph or Lethbridge – or somewhere else – not as citizens of some imagined world. Exhilaration, anger, bereavement and fear came to them mediated by the institutions, values and economic circumstances of a specific place. While national, and even international, media brought news of the war to Canada at the speed of light, it was filtered into newspapers, billboards, posters and other local media before all but a tiny elite could absorb or understand it. If Canadians debated its significance, they did so conditioned by locality. Voluntary recruiting, or its absence, was even more dependent on a community. The half-million Canadians enrolled as volunteers in the Canadian Expeditionary Force joined, for the most part, units that reflected the intensely local militia or the enthusiasms of local civic leaders, or their absence. When conscription came in 1917, it was deliberately cut off from local administration. *Military Service Act* (MSA) men reported to depots near their military district headquarters, often hundreds of miles away, since in Québec, conscripts were enrolled only in Montréal or Québec City.

Among Rutherford's three Canadian communities, the absence of local military institutions was most pronounced in Trois-Rivières. While Guelph had a long-standing militia artillery tradition, and Lethbridge, in 1914, seemed ethnically

congruent with the kilted battalion its city fathers chose to organize, Trois-Rivières was unique among the three cities in having no militia organization at all. When the Minister of Militia, Colonel Sam Hughes, scrapped the official mobilization plan at the outbreak of war in August 1914, and despatched telegrams to all his militia colonels, summoning them and their men to a sandy plain outside Québec City, among the recipients was Lieutenant-Colonel Louis-Philippe Mercier of Trois-Rivière's 86th Battalion. However, as Mercier promptly reminded the Militia Department, his regiment had been formally disbanded on 1 March 1914, six months earlier. He had been unceremoniously transferred to the Reserve of Officers. He had no battalion to bring.¹

Rutherford offers what seems a persuasive explanation for this state of affairs. Mercier is described as "a staunch Rouge supporter." His predecessor in command, Lieutenant-Colonel Joseph Adolphe Tessier, is introduced as the city's mayor, and as a cabinet minister in the Liberal provincial government of Sir Lomer Gouin. To remind his readers of Colonel Hughes's notorious insensitivity to French-Canadian feelings, Rutherford reminds us of Regulation No. 156, promulgated by the Militia Council at

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The Wabasso Cotton Company mills in Three Rivers, Quebec, circa 1930. The building was previously the militia armouries.

Hughes's behest, rendering even more explicit an earlier rule. Canadian militia under arms were barred from doing duty at religious events, such as guarding the altar during a church parade, escorting the Host in holy processions, and even meeting newly elected cardinals on their return from Rome. As imposed, the new regulation offended devout Québec Catholics, while causing little but approval from English-speaking Protestants.² The militia training camp at Trois-Rivières in the summer of 1914 featured a brief defiance of the regulation, when a young officer from Montréal, Captain Eugène Bourassa, mounted a small armed guard at the site of the camp altar. A more senior officer promptly suppressed the defiance but not before local opinion had been expressed.³ Admittedly, Rutherford draws no connection with Trois-Rivière's 86th Regiment, which had officially vanished some months before Hughes promulgated his notorious Regulation.

Disbandment was an uncommon fate in the pre-1914 Canadian militia. Had the 86th suffered for the partisan allegiance of its long-time commanding officer? Why did the local Liberal Member of Parliament (MP), Jacques Bureau, have nothing to say on the subject? Surely a brutally partisan act of oppression would have been more interesting than his brief bleats on behalf of victims of Conservative patronage. An even more surprising silence came from Jean-Yves Gravel, a well-known Québécois military historian and author of a short biography of the 86th Regiment, published in Trois-Rivières in 1981. Indeed, he ignored the entire subject.⁴

Founded on the St-Maurice River, midway between Québec City and Montréal, Trois-Rivières became an embattled outpost of New France under its first governor, Pierre Boucher. By 1871, that heroic history was a distant memory. Since 1851, Bishop Louis-François Laflèche's impressive cathedral had asserted the town's ecclesiastical eminence. The trade in furs up the St-Maurice had been replaced by timber and lumber from water-powered mills. Exploitation of hydro-electricity added textiles and pulp mills to the manufacturing base. The 1911 census found a population of 13,691, overwhelmingly francophone and Catholic.

The 86th Battalion made its first appearance on Canada's Militia List in 1871. Like many other units, it began as a provisional battalion, linking a local militia company from Trois-Rivières with others from Berthier, St-Gabriel de Brandon, and as far away as Rivière du Loup. Soon a company of Irish settlers from Rawdon was added. Like other rural battalions, the 86th took shape chiefly during the annual training camp. When falling revenues forced Alexander Mackenzie's Liberal government to seek economies, camps were allowed only in alternate years, and militia companies were cut from 60 to only 40 men. Only when prosperity returned with the Laurier Liberals after 1896 were annual camps revived.

Initially trained by the British regular army garrison, Canada's militia was left largely to its own devices when the British garrison abandoned central Canada in 1871.

Permanent force artillery batteries at Québec and Kingston provided both training and an example to militia gunners, but only in 1883 were similar schools opened for the militia cavalry and infantry. Three and six-month courses allowed militia officers to qualify for the first class certificates required for lieutenant-colonels and majors, while the second class certificates sufficed for captains and subalterns. Québec militia members were expected to benefit from “B” Company of the Infantry School Corps, located in the old British barracks at St-Jean-sur-Richelieu. Would-be officers attended for three or six months, depending on the certificate sought. Their training program placed a heavy emphasis on close-order drill, memorizing military regulations and procedures, and learning mess etiquette. At St-Jean, instruction was delivered in both French and English, though there was no hiding the fact that the working language of the post-Confederation Canadian militia was English.

Meanwhile, the 86th survived its lengthy hibernations. Its first commanding officer, Major François-Xavier Lambert, lasted a decade until 1891, to be replaced by the Conservative MP for Maskinongé, Lieutenant-Colonel Frédéric Houle from Rivière du Loup, until his sudden death in 1894.⁵ His successor, Lieutenant-

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Colonel Augustus-Frédéric Dame, was a local physician. Under Lieutenant-Colonel Alphonse-Rivard Dufresne, the battalion adopted its own badge and a motto, *ADSUM*, or “Present,” a symptom of growing *esprit de corps* and of the emulation inevitable when neighbouring militia units came together during the

biennial summer training camp.⁶ Within the Canadian militia organization, rural battalions usually regarded themselves as poor relations to city battalions, which normally had their own drill halls, and trained during the winter in their own community instead of recruiting most of their members a few days before the summer camp. City battalions often attracted wealthy officers, whose social standing was enhanced when they fitted out their men in the latest British-style uniforms, or offered them prizes for competing in sports or marksmanship. Regiments like Toronto’s Queen’s Own Rifles and 48th Highlanders, or Montréal’s 3rd Victoria Rifles or 5th Royal Highlanders, added excitement and colour and the sound of brass bands and bagpipes to Canadian urban life in the late 19th Century.

The son of a prosperous family might easily spend a few months qualifying for a militia certificate. So might a farmer’s son during the unprofitable winter months. The same was not true for a young city clerk with his living to



Parade at militia camp, Levis, Quebec, circa 1915.

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Another parade shot taken at the Levis militia camp, circa 1915.

earn and an employer unlikely to indulge a young man's military ambitions. In French Canada, as Gravel argues, military spirit was represented by two "city battalions," the 65th Carabiniers Mont-Royal and Québec's 9^e Voltigeurs, both units called out for the Northwest Campaign of 1885.⁷

British visitors to Canada often commented on the relative poverty of the Canadian elite. In Québec, wealth was usually more evident among the English-speaking minority than among the francophone majority. So was enthusiasm for military institutions slavishly modelled on Queen Victoria's Imperial army. With uniforms imported from England, and altered instantly to conform to the latest quiff in imperial military fashion, officers of "good city regiments" could imagine themselves indistinguishable from the newest heroes of the Northwest Frontier or the latest campaign in the Sudan. These were aspirations shared by some young French-Canadians, but very few. Still, the case for transforming the 86th of ambitious Trois-Rivières into a "city" battalion must have seemed irresistible. The deed was accomplished in 1902, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel John Houlston, an 1890 graduate of the Royal Military College of Canada at Kingston. The new 86th Regiment was expected to recruit only four

companies, or about 250 all ranks, from a city of upwards of 10,000 people. It hardly seemed an insuperable task, but Houlston soon began to appreciate certain difficulties. A uniform, comradeship and 50 cents for each drill attracted men to the ranks. It was not even difficult to persuade young men from the city's Catholic college cadet corps to accept commissions in the regiment.

But to convince new officers to qualify for their rank was another matter. Would-be officers were obliged to spend months far from home and work, at St-Jean or in Québec City. Montréal and Québec might have enough parents – and even employers – willing to tolerate and even subsidize such absences; Trois-Rivières did not. The problem was not unique and, increasingly, it was solved by persuading the permanent corps to detach enough staff to run a local "provisional school." No one could pretend that such schools offered training remotely as thorough or rigorous as the official course, but better something than nothing. However, the 86th faced another problem. With inadequate manpower and many demands for provisional schools, the permanent force had to set priorities. With its single, undersized regiment, Trois-Rivières did not rank very high, particularly after officers who had been provided

with training next protested that it was unreasonable to expect them to take the time to travel all the way to Québec City or to St-Jean to pass the formal exams for their certificate.

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Colonel Houliston found a personal solution to his problem by being accepted as an officer in the Permanent Corps. His successor, in March 1906, was Lieutenant-Colonel Gustave-Adolphe Tessier, already a major figure in Three Rivers society as the city’s solicitor and its Liberal member of the provincial legislative assembly. It must have seemed an ideal appointment, particularly since Tessier possessed a commanding voice, a big moustache, knowledge of drill and a first-class certificate from the military school at St-Jean.⁸ The trouble was that Tessier was almost unique in the regiment. As the Militia List soon revealed, only two of his four captains had qualified, and the best that could be said of the two others was the claim that they “take a lively interest.” Not one of the regiment’s eight lieutenants ranked as more than “provisional.” The regiment had no adjutant or signalling officer and no qualified non-commissioned officers, though its paymaster, Captain L.B. Dallaire, was highly praised for his interest and expertise. So were the 24 wind and brass players in the joint town and regimental band.⁹ A series of annual inspections found much to criticize in the rest of the regiment. A perennial complaint was the physique of the troops. Québec battalions seldom drew praise for being physically robust or even mature, but some members of the 86th were described as mere children. Suspicions were even raised about the qualifications of Dr. Georges Bourgeois, the regimental medical officer, who had certified most of them as fit for service.

A colonel, a paymaster and a band may have been all that a cynic would demand of a Canadian militia regiment, but, in an age of rising military enthusiasm, Canada expected more. In 1907, only one of the four company commanders, Lieutenant Robillard, even attempted to drill his company. Practising the regiment in extended-order manoeuvres, an obvious requirement of modern warfare, was impossible, insisted Colonel Tessier, unless Ottawa purchased open land closer to the downtown drill hall. What about the militia camp and Three Rivers Exhibition ground on the outskirts of town, only a mile-and-a-half away? Certainly the lack of space was a problem, admitted Colonel François-Louis Lessard, the Adjutant General of the Militia, “but should not the regiment be taken once in a while to the extensive camp grounds at Three Rivers where the annual camps are held? ...Could not this at least be tried?” It was too far, explained Colonel Tessier, for a unit that could only train in the evenings. It would be dark by the time the regiment reached the campground, and the men’s effort would be wasted. A similar problem prevented any member from qualifying as a rifle shot. Trois-Rivières had a rifle range but it, too, was outside the town limits and too remote for convenient walking.

Tessier’s explanation did more to undermine the 86th Regiment than its colonel could have realized. City-based militia regiments all faced problems finding training grounds and rifle ranges. Before the Boer War, few had noticed or cared. It was enough to parade smartly.

However, after a few thousand Canadians had experienced war in South Africa from 1900 to 1902, parades and foot drill were no longer enough. Soon, city regiments would be expected to go to camp like rural militia, to the annoyance of employers who began to make difficulties for militia volunteers who needed time off work. For the stripling soldiers of Three Rivers to appear unable to march only a mile-and-a-half raised serious questions about their utility.

Not that Tessier lacked for other excuses. The local drill hall had been a casualty of Trois-Rivières’s disastrous 1908 fire. The regiment’s lost uniforms and equipment were soon replaced, but his unqualified officers had no idea how to reconstruct the regimental books and documents that had been destroyed. Political influence helped get a high priority for rapid rebuilding of the badly-damaged armouries, but serious training could hardly be expected in the construction interval. Another argument was that members of the regiment, in their red tunics, were demoralized by being confused with the slovenly, dissipated rural militia soldiers who thronged the streets of Trois-Rivières during the annual summer camp. Surely it would be fair to convert the 86th to the dark-green uniform of a rifle regiment, like the 9th Voltigeurs or the 65th Carabiniers? Militia officials were unimpressed. Would the considerable cost of providing a complete set of new uniforms really be worth the trouble? Some may even have wondered whether the callow youths in the unit, or its untrained officers, would be able to manage the 140 paces to a minute demanded by the prescribed rifle regiment drill.

Inspection Reports survive for the 86th Regiment from 1907, when Colonel Tessier took command. The corresponding reports for adjacent militia regiments echo many of the same criticisms about unqualified officers, undersized soldiers and inadequate numbers. It was no secret that the militia in Québec struggled with low morale and limited public support and enthusiasm. The cadet movement had been warmly embraced by Québec’s Catholic *collèges* in the 1870s as a federally subsidized reinforcement for student discipline and physical fitness. Otherwise, military institutions that operated in English and drew their inspiration from the British Army had no obvious roots in an increasingly self-conscious French-Canadian culture. Still, the 86th Regiment’s problems both exceeded tolerable limits and showed absolutely no signs of improvement. In January 1908, Colonel Lessard did his best to stir the ghosts of history:

The Hon’ble the Minister & Members of Militia Council regret to find that a Regiment, the successor of probably the very oldest militia organization in Canada should not have secured a more creditable report from the Inspector General.”¹⁰

Despite the chiding and encouragement, the 86th decided not to train in 1909, and again in 1911. In 1909, Brigadier-General W.D. Otter, the militia's senior Canadian-born officer, with a reputation as a martinet, had become Inspector General.

He soon discovered that no recent report had been received on the 86th and demanded one at once: "You will see that delay occurred in the receipt of a similar report for 1908, and when such was received, the condition of the regiment was found to be poor." It was poor again for 1909. During three years, the Three Rivers Regiment had trained only in 1910, and even then with a reported lack of interest. For Otter, spending public funds on such a regiment brought no apparent public benefit.

Still, Militia Department culture discouraged precipitate action. As a last chance, the 86th would be assigned a bilingual sergeant-instructor on condition that Colonel Tessier provided a daily strength return, showing precisely who was benefiting from the instruction. Tessier was also required to submit a report on how training in extended-order tactics and musketry was to be achieved. Once again, there was disappointment. A sergeant duly reported in early September 1911, and got to work two days later. No strength returns arrived for 10 days. It then emerged that only a handful of soldiers, and no officers, had appeared. Apparently, the 1911 election campaign had proved too much of a distraction for Tessier's soldiers. After a personal visit to Trois-Rivières, General Otter had had enough: "I think this unit is in a very poor condition and (is) at present of little use to the country."

Tessier's term as commanding officer expired in 1912, in time for him to be chosen as mayor by his fellow Trifluviens, and, in 1913, to be appointed Québec's first Minister of Highways. After the Conservative victory in the 1911 election, it was unlikely that any voice would be raised to seek an extension of his colonelcy. Obviously, as Otter wrote, "... everything depends upon the selection of his successor and second-in-command – if really capable, energetic officers are appointed, there is hope for the efficiency of the regiment; if not the better to postpone action by temporary disbandment rather than risk similar conditions to the present." Tessier's official second in command was Major Frank Ritchie, a single man of 27 who had taken no steps to qualify himself for the appointment. Next in line was Captain Louis-Philippe Mercier, one of the two company commanders who had secured a second-class certificate and who was regularly described as the keenest officer of his rank in the 86th. Still, neither he nor his closest competitor, Captain Loutwood, had qualified for regimental command, or even for the equitation certificate required for a field officer or an adjutant.

As on other occasions at Militia Headquarters, the *dénouement* involved confusion. First, the 86th Regiment was disbanded in order to be reorganized. Next, a slate of officers, headed by newly promoted Lieutenant-Colonel Mercier and Major Loutwood, was published in Militia General Orders. Could the newly authorized

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regiment train in 1913? No, because as soon as it had been disbanded, its budget allocation had been cancelled and re-assigned. Yes, because that act of bureaucratic efficiency had been corrected – but not before Colonel Mercier

acknowledged the immense difficulty of recruiting his 250 officers and men anew, much less persuading any significant number of them to take the trouble to get qualified. By the time the confusion was resolved, the 86th had not trained in 1912 or 1913, and the Regiment was substantially weaker than before. Hence, the final order for disbandment on 1 March 1914.

The 86th, of course, was not dead, but only briefly dormant. On 8 October 1915, more than a year after the First World War began, the regiment was reconstituted under Charles Whitehead, a manager at Wabasso Cotton who had organized and armed a wartime Home Guard in Trois-Rivières. Whitehead's slate of officers was, like him, English-speaking and even included a Protestant chaplain.¹¹ As such, the unit returned to the Militia List and served as a part-sponsor for the 178^e batallion Canadien-français of the CEF, raised largely in Sherbrooke and the Cantons de l'Est. Reinforcements from the 178th finally reached the 22nd Battalion, the sole French-speaking unit to serve in France in the Canadian Corps. They arrived just as the offensives of the last Hundred Days began on 8 August 1918 at Amiens. "AMIENS," famously proclaimed the 'Black Day of the German Army' by General Ludendorff, eventually became the 86th Regiment's first and only battle honour.

After the war, a new policy for naming militia units allowed the 86th to drop its number and become the Three Rivers Regiment, with officers drawn largely but not exclusively from the city's English-speaking minority.¹² Perhaps the most dramatic event in the history of the regiment was Ottawa's decision, in 1936, to designate it and a small number of other militia units from smaller Canadian cities like Windsor, Calgary and Oshawa as "Tank" regiments, though without going to the trouble and expense of buying the regiments any tanks. In 1939, the Three Rivers Regiment was mobilized at the outbreak of war as the 1st Canadian Division's tank regiment. As the regiment's most famous officer, Jean-Victor Allard, recalled in his memoirs, another consequence was that the regiment again became almost systematically English-speaking as it sought officers and soldiers with the necessary mechanical training and experience to repair and maintain its armoured fighting vehicles. As adjutant of the peacetime regiment, Allard had tried in vain to persuade Maurice Duplessis, Three River's latest Member of the Legislative Assembly and premier of Québec, to open a suitable mechanical trades school in his town.¹³ Allard himself was one of the casualties of his regiment's anglicization, and he built his distinguished fighting career as commanding officer of the Royal 22^e Régiment while the Three Rivers Regiment was fighting nearby, through Sicily, Italy and North-West Europe.

By 1968, the Three Rivers Regiment had long since evolved into the 12th Canadian Armoured Regiment of the Canadian Army (Militia). In July 1968, Allard had become Canada's Chief of the Defence Staff. That same month, after the Canadian Forces had finally met the challenge of the *Official Languages Act* by creating French-Language Units (FLUs), Allard's old Three Rivers Regiment became the 12^e Régiment blindé du Canada, replacing the Winnipeg's Fort Garry Horse in Canada's regular army. There it remains, in partnership with its parent unit in the militia.

The regiment's brush with oblivion in 1914-1915 has been airbrushed from its history. There may well be a case for leaving parts of our past in oblivion. Although Colonel Sam Hughes had no direct connection with the disbandment of Trois Rivières' only militia unit, as Robert Rutherford may believe and certainly implies, the experience of the 86th Regiment underlines the systemic difficulties in raising volunteers for the CEF from Québec's volunteer militia units. The 86th was only a relatively extreme case of a regiment with unqualified officers and NCOs, who felt too little incentive to sacrifice

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themselves and their families to collect a military certificate from a distant school of instruction. While French Canada was far from a classless society, few in Québec's francophone elite identified a militia commission as a badge of social status worthy of sacrifice, and few at Militia Headquarters or in the government recognized a problem. In only a few years of the World War, the lack of indigenous military institutions in French Canada would contribute to a nationally crippling crisis. The memory remains in Canadian military consciousness as politicians and commanders measure the participation of women, First Nations, and visible minorities in the present-day volunteer forces, recruited primarily from small towns, rural regions and economically depressed areas.

Armed forces in a democracy, however unmilitary that democracy may profess to be, must be a mirror of their society. Canada has had painful reminders of this principle in two world wars. Replacing easy generalizations about the fate of the 86th Regiment with a closer examination of its problems is part of taking a continuing issue seriously.



Officers of the 89th Regiment, taken during the militia camp, Levis, Quebec, circa 1915.

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NOTES

1. Robert Rutherford, *Hometown Horizons: Local Responses to Canada's Great War* (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2004), pp. xvi, 11-13.
2. Ibid. pp. 11-12. See *La Presse*, 8 June 1914; Desmond Morton, "French Canada and the Canadian militia" *Histoire sociale/Social History*, April 1969 (translated and published as "Le Canada français et la Milice canadienne (1868-1914)" in Gravel, Jean-Yves, *Le Québec et la guerre* (Montréal: les Éditions de Boréal Express, 1974), pp. 44-45.
3. Rutherford, pp. 13, 68.
4. Jean-Yves Gravel, *Les soldats-citoyens: Histoire du Régiment de Trois-Rivières, 1871-1957* (Trois-Rivières, P.Q., Éditions du Bien Public, 1981), pp. 22-25.
5. *The Canadian Directory of Parliament, 1867-1967* (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1968), p. 278.
6. See National Library and Archives, R.G. 24 Vol. 197, p. 263.
7. Gravel, p. 25.
8. On Tessier, see *Who's Who and Why*, Vol. 5, 1914; *Who's Who in Canada*, 1926, 1337.
9. See Inspection report for 1907, R.F. 24, Vol. 4467, M.D. No. 4, 6-22-31-1, 50-9-1-4-Vol. 2, ff. 183.
10. Lessard to Officer Commanding Québec Command, 8 January 1908, R.G. 24 Vol. 5880, HQ 7-88-4.
11. Rutherford, p. 218.
12. Colonel Whitehead's five successors between the World Wars included Lieutenant-Colonel Frank Ritchie, who had failed to qualify during the Tessier years, and only one French-Canadian, Lieutenant-Colonel Raoul Pellerin. See Gravel, annexe G.
13. See Serge Bernier (ed.) *The Memoirs of General Jean V. Allard* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988). On Allard's pre-1939 experiences, pp. 20-21 and on mobilization, pp. 26-30.



Sikorsky Photo

The Sikorsky CH-148 *Cyclone*, Canada's new maritime helicopter and the chosen *Sea King* replacement.