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Martin F. Auger  
*University of Ottawa*

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# **French Canadian Participation in the War of 1812 A Social Study of the *Voltigeurs Canadiens***

**Martin F. Auger**

**D**uring the War of 1812, the participation of French Canadians in colonial militia units such as the *Voltigeurs Canadiens* was of great importance for the defence of Lower Canada. The colony's lack of regular British troops combined with the threats of American invasion rendered crucial the mobilization of the local populace, most of which was of French descent. Although lacking the discipline and structure of British regular soldiers, Lower-Canadian militiamen were able to neutralize numerous American invasion attempts. Altogether, this impressive participation in the war effort helped redefine the military character of French Canadians. It also dissipated the British authorities' fears that French Canadians were disloyal subjects. This study analyses the military organization of the *Voltigeurs Canadiens* to demonstrate the importance of French Canadian participation in the war, especially in Lower Canada, their military campaigns and how the *Voltigeurs'* victories became the pride of all French Canada.

In the early 19th Century, the defence of British North America relied on regular soldiers, provincial/colonial (fencibles) soldiers, militiamen and native Indians. The British regular army was the backbone of this apparatus. However, with the advent of the French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802) and the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), Britain kept most of its regular troops in Europe. As a result, the British North American colonies were neglected despite the American threat. By 1812, the

situation became problematic as there were only 9,000 British regulars garrisoned in the whole of North America, of which 4,400 garrisoned Lower Canada. This was a very moderate force, considering that Lower Canada was the economic and political centre of British North America.<sup>1</sup>

Because of the lack of regular soldiers, provincial/colonial regiments, commonly known as fencibles, were raised for local defence among the local population in each of Britain's North American colonies as early as 1793. The structure and organization of fencibles closely resembled that of British regular regiments, and they were subjected to the same laws, regulations and conditions of service as regular units. With fencible regiments, it was felt that each British North American colony had some capacity to defend itself, but there were never enough. For example, in 1812, there were only 700 men in the Canadian Fencibles, a regiment recruited among the Lower-Canadian population.<sup>2</sup>

Although the colonial authorities were well aware of the shortage of regular troops in Lower Canada, they knew they could not depend on reinforcements while Britain was at war with France. Their only alternative was to arm the local population through the institution known as the militia.<sup>3</sup> The fact was that every British subject was a potential militiaman who could be called upon to defend his country or colony in times of crisis.<sup>4</sup> With an average population

of 270,000 *habitants* in 1812, Lower Canada was a perfect reservoir for the militia.<sup>5</sup> However, the problem was that this colony was not like any other. The vast majority of its population (90 per cent) was of French origin. With Great Britain at war with France, the British authorities were fearful of their French Canadian subjects' loyalty. Nobody knew how they would react in the advent of war.<sup>6</sup>

As war with the United States seemed more and more imminent, the Lower-Canadian Legislative Assembly, in consultation with Governor-General Sir George Prevost, authorized the mobilization of the militia in April 1812.<sup>7</sup> Overall, more than 60,000 militiamen could be mobilized in Lower Canada<sup>8</sup> organized in three categories; Sedentary Militia, Select Embodied Militia, and Corps of Volunteers.<sup>9</sup>

The Sedentary Militia was the basis of this system. As the 1803 Militia Act stipulated, every able man aged between 16 and 50 was automatically part of this body. Every April these men registered for a week-end of military training, which often ended in taverns. Each Lower-Canadian parish was organized as a company of the Sedentary Militia. The purpose of this system was to make sure every colonial subject was ready to defend his "homeland." In most cases, these militiamen did *Corvée* work, supplying front line troops with provisions and equipment. Hence, when the war scare of 1812 emerged, these were the first units the Assembly mobilized.<sup>10</sup>

The Legislative Assembly also imposed conscription in order to levy four battalions of what came to be called the Lower Canada Select Embodied Militia. In May 1812, 2,000 bachelors aged between 18 and 30 were drafted for a minimum service period of 90 days and a maximum of two years. Chosen by ballot among the Sedentary Militia, the battalions of the Select Embodied Militia acted as front line units and were mobilized along the American border.<sup>11</sup> Eventually, new battalions were created to counter the American menace which existed in the border regions. Every year, Sedentary Militia divisions each had to conscript men within their ranks for service in the Select Embodied Militia. Overall, eight battalions were raised between 1812 and 1814.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, the government created a volunteer corps. Although similar in organization to regular regiments, such outfits were made up of volunteers who agreed to serve for the duration of the war. Among such outfits was the *Voltigeurs Canadiens*. Acting as front line units, these corps were posted along the American border.<sup>13</sup> The structure of such regiments will be addressed in the subsequent pages as we analyze the organization of the *Voltigeurs*.

The defence of British North America also depended on native Indian allies. In charge of this force was the British Indian Department. Its task was to ensure that good relations prevailed between the Indian nations and the British authorities in North America. On the other hand, its military role was to secure the Indians' alliance in the advent of war with the United States.<sup>14</sup> This was done by supplying the aboriginals with numerous gifts. Because natives hoped for "homelands" to be returned to them in America if the British were successful, they supported the war in Canada. As a result, the Department raised numerous Indian companies to be used as military auxiliaries during the War of 1812. In Lower Canada alone, 770 Indian warriors were mobilized.<sup>15</sup>

All military forces in British North America were under the command of Governor-General Sir George Prevost. Appointed on 13 September 1811,<sup>16</sup> Prevost never got complete jurisdiction over military decision making. Although commander-in-chief, he constantly received orders from British Prime Minister Lord Robert Liverpool; British Secretary of War Lord Henry Bathurst; and Britain's Commander-in-Chief, the Duke of York.<sup>17</sup> The Adjutant General of Lower Canada's militia was François Vassal de Monviel, who monitored all the militia units including the *Voltigeurs*.<sup>18</sup>

The *Voltigeurs* were created a few days after the mobilization of the militia had been ordered by the colony's Legislative Assembly. The idea for raising such a military outfit was proposed by Lieutenant-Colonel Charles-Michel d'Irumberry de Salaberry to Governor-General Prevost on 13 April 1812.<sup>19</sup> The levy of this corps was immediately authorized by the governor on 15 April.<sup>20</sup> Although most of the conditions in de Salaberry's proposal were approved, Prevost

made a few changes. For instance, de Salaberry hoped to raise a "Corps of *éclaireur* or rifle." His goal seemed to be a highly mobile outfit, specialized in skirmishing and scouting operations. As he indicated, "the use of Indians would be necessary for the role and purpose of this unit." Such a clause did not suggest the establishment of a typical infantry regiment, for Indian integration would not have been that crucial.<sup>21</sup>

Prevost responded by approving a "Volunteer Provincial Corps of Light Infantry." This meant a unit whose organization and function was similar to that of the fencibles or other infantry regiments. Since Indians need not be integrated into such regiments, Prevost only attached 60 aboriginal warriors "armed, clothed after their own manner" to the unit. This was probably less than de Salaberry originally expected. Nonetheless, the new corps was given the name *Voltigeurs Canadiens* and began to mobilize.<sup>22</sup>

To command the corps, Governor Prevost appointed de Salaberry whom he found "adequately qualified to command that force because he has the influence and necessary energy to rise such a corps."<sup>23</sup> However, the main reason probably was de Salaberry's great reputation as a military officer. Although a French Canadian, de Salaberry had served since 1793 with the British 60th Regiment of Foot ("The Royal Americans") in Britain,

Canada, Holland and the West Indies.<sup>24</sup> His career in the regular army ended when he was promoted Lieutenant-Colonel of the Militia of the Province of Lower Canada by Prevost on 1 April 1812.<sup>25</sup> Just 33 years of age, de Salaberry was a perfect candidate to command the newly-created *Voltigeurs*. His 19 years of military experience, acquired on the battlefields of Europe and the Antilles also made him aware of the most recent tactic.<sup>26</sup>

Although the *Voltigeurs Canadiens* were to be organized like a regular regiment, they were not part of the British regular army establishment. Like other militia corps of volunteers, they had been "raised to counter the apprehension of war with the United States or actual war." This meant that once the American threat was eliminated, the unit was to be disbanded.<sup>27</sup> Further, the unit was to "serve under the Provincial Militia Law of Lower Canada, and to be guided by the Rules and Regulations therein laid down for the good government of the militia." Also, the bare fact that *Voltigeurs* officers were to be "ranked junior to all officers of their respective ranks in the line of fencibles" demonstrated that the unit was not a regular regiment.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the unit was given a

Private, Canadian *Voltigeurs*, 1813. Reconstitution by G. Embleton. The men's uniform was grey faced with black. The headdress was a visored light bearskin cap.

Chateauguay Battlefield  
National Historic Site, Parks  
Canada





National Archives of Canada, C25697

Lieutenant John Hebdan, Adjutant of the Canadian Voltigeurs, c.1814-1815. The officers had a hussar-style dark green uniform trimmed with black. Print after a portrait.

Recruiting for the *Voltigeurs* began on 16 April 1812. According to the *Conditions for Raising a Corps of Light Infantry (Canadian Voltigeurs)*, issued by Governor-General Prevost on 15 April 1812, the unit was to consist of:<sup>32</sup>

- 1 Major, Commandant
- 6 Captains
- 18 Lieutenants
- 1 Adjutant
- 1 Paymaster
- 1 Quartermaster
- 1 Surgeon
- 1 Sergeant Major
- 1 Quartermaster Sergeant
- 1 Paymaster Sergeant
- 1 Sergeant Armourer
- 1 Bugle Major
- 25 Sergeants
- 25 Corporals
- 10 Buglers
- 475 Privates

Aside from the Sergeants, Corporals and Buglers (Non-Commissioned Officers) and the Privates (soldiers) on the above list, 34 officers were needed. Historians Michelle Guitard and Luc Lépine have found that 54 officers actually served with the *Voltigeurs* during the War of 1812.<sup>33</sup> Officer recruitment for the unit was done by both Charles de Salaberry and François Vassal de Monviel.<sup>34</sup> Their recruiting methods were quite common for the time. Individuals who wished to become officers had “to contact some well placed person who could recommend him to Charles-Michel de Salaberry.”<sup>35</sup> Officers would then be appointed on the understanding that they would not receive their commission until they had enlisted a specific quota of men. In that sense, *Voltigeurs* officers acted as recruiting agents among the Lower-Canadian population. For instance, to obtain a captain’s commission, an officer had to recruit 36 militiamen. To become a lieutenant, the candidate had to enroll 16 soldiers while an adjutant only had to recruit 11.<sup>36</sup> This system enabled only the serious candidates to become officers in the unit.

uniform distinct from that of regular regiments and well in keeping with its light infantry designation. *Voltigeurs* were given a uniform of “grey with black collar and cuffs and black buttons, with Canadian short boots and light bear skin caps.”<sup>29</sup> Officers wore a distinct clothing green hussar-type uniform with black boots and the bear skin cap unique to the unit. The separate uniform worn by *Voltigeurs* soldiers helped develop a regimental identity and an *esprit de corps*.<sup>30</sup>

In order to appreciate the value of French Canadian participation in the War of 1812, it is essential to understand the importance of recruitment in the organizational structure of the *Voltigeurs*. Although the recruiting of officers was done somewhat differently from that of ordinary soldiers, the purpose of recruitment was still the same: persuade civilians to enlist in the military. As a force of volunteers, the *Voltigeurs* were very dependent on effective recruiting, and this was not easy to accomplish.<sup>31</sup>

However, this system did not please all potential candidates. Recruiting men was a hard task. Although bounties were offered, as we will see, officers often had to attract civilians by offering more money. As a result, officers often had to draw from their own pockets to grant such “bonuses.” Further, officers had to feed and lodge recruits until they arrived in camp.

Therefore, many candidates refused officer positions.<sup>37</sup> For example, when 14 Sedentary Militia officers were approached for lieutenant positions in the unit in 1812, only four accepted. Altogether, 12 out of 21 candidates refused commissions in the outfit. Hence, no enthusiasm was demonstrated for commissions in the *Voltigeurs*. This proved that establishing a good and loyal officer cadre was not an easy task.<sup>38</sup>

To become an officer in the *Voltigeurs*, one had to be a Canadian-born subject or detached from a regular unit.<sup>39</sup> Also, officers were to be “selected from the most respectable family of the province and to be nominated by the major commandant, subject to the approval of the Governor-General.”<sup>40</sup> This was not an unusual phenomenon. It was customary procedure to recruit militia officers among the leading classes of colonial society. Since such groups were already in positions of social power, it was felt to be only normal that they be given control of officer positions in the militia. The aim was to exploit the influence such individuals were presumed to have in the social hierarchy and extend it to the militia. The authorities felt comfortable when the militia, especially the Sedentary Militia, was led by officers who had influences in their communities. Furthermore, by granting officer positions to nobles, merchants, bourgeois or professionals, the colonial authorities felt they secured the loyalties of the social elite. For many officers, militia positions also became tools of social promotion.<sup>41</sup>

However, the pressures of warfare changed this dichotomy. As the War of 1812 progressed and more militia officers were needed, the colonial government began to draw officers from other parts of life. Historian Luc Lépine showed this transformation when he analyzed the socio-professional background of the 2,695 militia officers in Lower Canada during the War of 1812. Lépine found that 1,337 of them were farmers, 462 remained unknown, 282 were merchants, 210 were rural non-farmers, 178 were professionals, 153 were Seigneurs, 59 were in the military, 10 were craftsmen, and 5 were chaplains. His conclusion was that the majority of militia officers were ordinary farmers (49.6

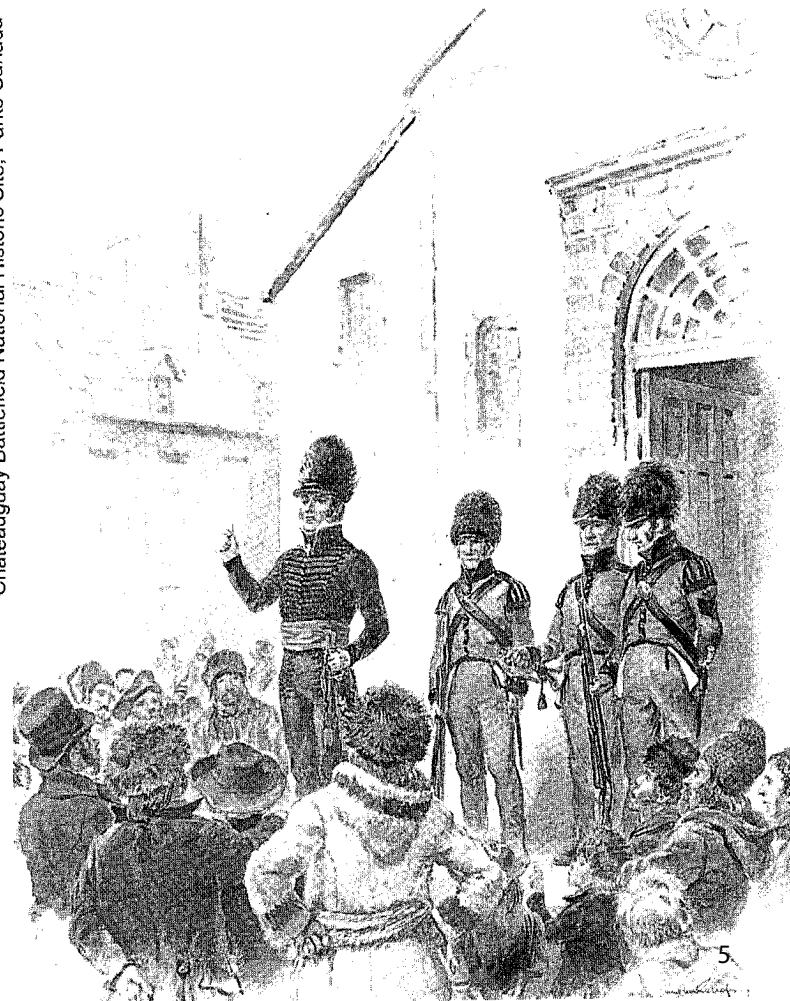
Recruiting party of the Canadian Voltigeurs, c. 1812-1813. Officers had to recruit their quotas of men in order to be confirmed in their commissions. As in the days of New France, much public business was done on the steps of a town's church steps in Quebec. Here we see an officer exhorting the virtues of military life in his company. Reconstruction by Eugène Lelièpvre.

per cent), as opposed to Fernand Ouellet's notion that the great majority of militia officers were either nobles, merchants or professionals.<sup>42</sup> Although the social elite probably held stronger positions in the militia, the core of the officers was made up of ordinary citizens.

Although officers tended to come from different social stratas, most of them lacked a crucial characteristic in times of war: military experience. When war came in 1812, military outfits began to seek officers with military background.<sup>43</sup> This proved a hard task since the colony had not been at war since the American Revolution (1774-1783). Hence, finding veterans or individuals with military experience was almost impossible.<sup>44</sup>

Nonetheless, unlike most militia units, the *Voltigeurs* recruited a good proportion of men with military experience. After having retraced the socio-professional background of the 54 *Voltigeurs* officers, Luc Lépine found that 15 of them had military experience (28 per cent). Of these officers, 9 were English, 5 were French Canadians and 1 was Swiss. This truly proved that the majority of anglophone officers in that corps had military experience. Since the

Chateauguay Battlefield National Historic Site, Parks Canada



*Voltigeurs* were to act as a front line unit, the authorities felt it necessary to grant officer commissions to candidates with military experience. In some cases, officers from British regular regiments even asked for commissions in the *Voltigeurs*. This probably had to do with de Salaberry's reputation and the colonial government's intention to have this regiment led by a cadre of experienced officers.<sup>45</sup>

When we examine the proportion of English-speaking officers in relation to the French-speaking ones, the overrepresentation of the English in the *Voltigeurs* is striking. Luc Lépine found that although the anglophones constituted less than 10 per cent of the Lower-Canadian population, 22.5 per cent of them were officers in the militia. In fact, of the 2,695 Lower-Canadian officers, 607 were English. This disproportion was even more evident in the *Voltigeurs*. Of the 53 officers which served with the corps during the war, 26 were anglophones and 27 were francophones. Hence, 50 per cent of the *Voltigeurs* officer corps was English-speaking.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, we can clearly see that the *Voltigeurs* officer corps was unique in Lower Canada's militia since its proportion of Anglophones and career officers was much higher than in any other unit. In that sense, the *Voltigeurs* resembled regular infantry regiments much more than militia units.

To attract Lower Canadians to the rank and file of the *Voltigeurs*, Governor Prevost relied on certain incentives, especially to attract French Canadians.<sup>47</sup> The recruiting campaign began in April 1812 when the colonial authorities started to offer bounties of œ4, later raised to œ5,<sup>48</sup> to attract volunteers in the *Voltigeurs*. Authorities also offered *Voltigeurs* recruits other benefits such as the same salary as regular troops, and men enrolled in the corps were exempt from Militia Ballot during their service.<sup>49</sup> Thus, soldiers registered in the *Voltigeurs* were not to be conscripted for the Select and Embodied Militia, unlike the men of the Sedentary Militia.<sup>50</sup>

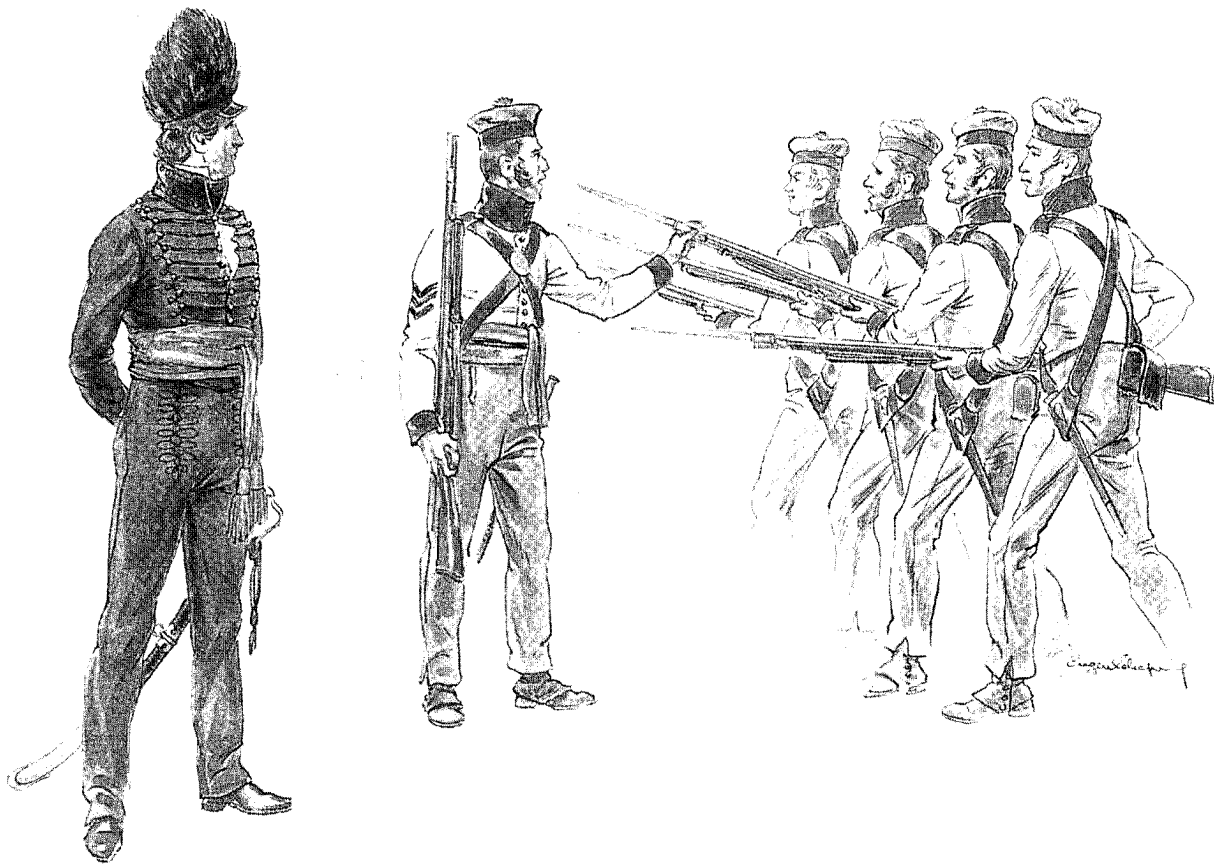
As of May 1812, the *Voltigeurs* began to publish public advertisements to seek out recruits with the emphasis on bounties. However, as the war progressed, the colonial authorities adopted a new tactic. Using newspapers, they attacked the honour and sensibilities of French Canadians, describing

them as a passive, un-military and lazy people. The aim was to prime French Canadians to avenge such unrealistic statements.<sup>51</sup> When the *Quebec Mercury* wrote that French Canadians were a bunch of military degenerates, the Lower-Canadian population responded just as the government hoped it would. Historian Fernand Ouellet well described the emotion behind such accusations: "Ces accusations, portées publiquement ou non, avaient vivement ému, si ce n'est la masse, du moins l'élite. La guerre apparaît-elle à plusieurs comme une occasion unique d'infliger un éclatant démenti à ces jugements prématurés."<sup>52</sup>

The Catholic Church also played an important role in recruiting men in the parishes. Since militiamen were needed, the clergy acted as some sort of recruiting agency. Priests, in their sermons, incited their parishioners to enlist by emphasizing the honor and pride in being a French Canadian, greatfulness for the British Crown's paternalism, and respect of religious obligations, which ordered absolute obedience to the King.<sup>53</sup> Priests further incited parishioners by emphasizing that an American invasion of the colony would mean the end of Catholicism in Lower Canada.<sup>54</sup> As the war progressed, public prayers for the men on the front lines also served as a reminder that the war was still raging and that men were needed for the defence.<sup>55</sup>

However, despite such propaganda, the recruitment of troops for the *Voltigeurs* was not a rapid and easy process. Although de Salaberry counted on the popularity of his officers to accelerate recruitment, this did not materialize. To fill their quotas, officers had to roam cities and parishes seeking recruits who met the minimum requirements: Canadian-born, aged between 17 and 35 and no less than 5' 3" (160 cm) in height.<sup>56</sup> Plenty of men met the standards, but getting them to enlist often took a lot of time and effort.<sup>57</sup> Also, some officers tended to be lazy in recruitment. For instance, during the entire month of January 1813, only 10 men were recruited by a *Voltigeurs* officer in Quebec City. De Salaberry even told his father; "It is a great misfortune to have officers, who care for nothing but their pleasures."<sup>58</sup>

As a result of these problems, the corps was very slow to reach its authorized strength of 500<sup>59</sup> so Prevost reduced this to 350 in early



Canadian Voltigeurs training, c. 1812-1813. Reconstruction by Eugène Lelièvre.

June 1812.<sup>60</sup> Later that month, the strength of the unit was limited to 300 men. The main reason for such reductions in strength had to do with the “exhausted state of the military chest.”<sup>61</sup> However, the stabilization of the *Voltigeurs*’ 300 men did not accelerate recruitment. When the unit was inspected by Governor Prevost in the summer of 1812, it was still incomplete. Most of its officers were still out recruiting when Prevost ordered the general inspection.<sup>62</sup> By October 1812, the strength was only of 270 men. This only proved that recruitment problems were a terrible Achilles’ heel for the unit.<sup>63</sup> Reforms in recruitment methods had to be introduced to attract men. De Salaberry understood this when he indicated in November 1812: “I am going to recruit as fast as possible and the officers have entered in an agreement to make up among ourselves the recruiting money to œ7-8-9 per men, in order to push on the recruiting.”<sup>64</sup> Governor Prevost later authorized de Salaberry to give an addition of 10 shillings on the bounty of every men recruited. Further, the Governor ordered that each new recruit be given 50 acres of land, to be distributed after the war, in addition to the individual’s financial bounty.<sup>65</sup>

This “bounty reform” was beneficial since de Salaberry recruited about 100 new men in late November alone.<sup>66</sup> Although many deserted, this increase was a sign that recruits actually sought bigger gratifications in order to join. Nevertheless, the *Voltigeurs* continued to grow in the subsequent months: from 320 men in January 1813,<sup>67</sup> to 393 in February<sup>68</sup> and 438 in March.<sup>69</sup> In only a few months, 168 new recruits were enrolled, increasing its strength by one third.<sup>70</sup> Hence, we can clearly see that French Canadians tended to join when gratifications were high enough. In a sense, they acted as war profiteers rather than highly motivated recruits who wished to prove their loyalty to the British authorities.

The *Voltigeurs*, like most Lower Canada militia units, were predominantly French Canadian. However, many Anglophones served in its ranks. As Michelle Guitard found in her study, some 144 Anglophones saw active service with the *Voltigeurs* during the war.<sup>71</sup> In addition, the unit had to function in English because British military commands and maneuvers were given in English. This constituted a problem since many of the *Voltigeurs* officers and men



did not understand nor speak English. Therefore, company orders had to be given in both languages. However, speaking French proved advantageous in battle. For example, during the Battle of the Châteauguay (26 October 1813), de Salaberry and some of his officers gave their orders in French to ensure that the enemy would not comprehend them.<sup>72</sup>

Overall, more than 700 men served in the ranks of the *Voltigeurs* during the conflict.<sup>73</sup> It is interesting that most came from the colony's cities. According to historian Michelle Guitard, Montreal and Quebec city furnished 59.8 per cent of the total *Voltigeurs* corps. As she demonstrated, 344 of the 700 *Voltigeurs* were urbanites. This was impressive if we consider that only 25 per cent of Lower Canada's population was urban.<sup>74</sup> Perhaps this can explain the good proportion of anglophones who served with the unit during the war.

To further increase the strength of the *Voltigeurs*, Governor Prevost began recruiting men of the Select Embodied Militia as of March 1813. Conscripts who were willing to extend their military service period were to be free from restrictions if they wished to volunteer in the *Voltigeurs*. Also, these new recruits were to receive the usual œ5 bounty. Each Select and Embodied Militia Battalion was expected to furnish a maximum of 25 men for the *Voltigeurs*. This was a radical measure, for it was illegal to do so according to the Militia Act.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, all of these measures strengthened the unit, which by late October 1813 numbered 576 men.<sup>76</sup>

So confident became de Salaberry of his unit's strength that in 1814, he

proposed to the colonial authorities to convert the *Voltigeurs* into a "corps of regular troops." In other words, he hoped to transfer the *Voltigeurs* onto the British establishment as a regular regiment of infantry. The new unit was to consist of 480 men, who would all have enlisted for a service period of seven years. In the end, this project was refused by the authorities.<sup>77</sup> Historian Michelle Guitard believes that this rejection was due to the changing European situation. With France having been defeated by Great Britain, British regular troops could now be sent to North America. With this in mind, converting the *Voltigeurs* into a regular British unit was no longer a necessity.<sup>78</sup>

The *Voltigeurs* had a great reputation for discipline since De Salaberry was very strict and the corps was trained much like a regular regiment.<sup>79</sup> This may have been a doubled sword: too harsh for many and not hard enough to keep them in line. Mutinies, desertions, insubordination, and many other breeches of discipline were common to the *Voltigeurs*, as

they were to other militia units. For example, on 16 June 1812, the *Voltigeurs* camp in Chambly fell victim to a small mutiny when soldiers refused to obey orders. This small insurrection was caused by problems in the distribution of bread and pork, by rumors that the officers hoped to enroll the *Voltigeurs* as regulars and by the camp's lack of essential equipment such as beds for the barracks.<sup>80</sup> Upon receiving news of the mutiny, Governor Prevost reported his "extreme concern at the circumstance of insubordination in the Canadian *Voltigeurs*." He asked de Salaberry to order a Regimental Court Martial to judge the offenders. As Prevost



The Provincial Corps of Light Infantry (Canadian *Voltigeurs*); painting by Robert J. Marrion.



A detachment of Canadian Voltigeurs in pursuit of deserters, c.1812-1813. Reconstruction by Eugène Lelièvre.

indicated: "The men are to be convicted and sentenced to confinement and will be lodged in jail at Montreal."<sup>81</sup> The *Adjutant's Monthly Roll of the Canadian Voltigeurs Regiment* for the month of June 1812 well demonstrated the importance of the mutiny, for 21 individuals were convicted by court martial.<sup>82</sup> The execution of this sentence proved two things; that disciplinary measures were to prevail and that the unit was not immune to the harsh reality of military insubordination.<sup>83</sup>

Desertion was probably the *Voltigeurs* worst problem during the War of 1812. Lépine found that there were 299 cases of desertion during the war: 87 in 1812; 99 in 1813; and 103 in 1814. Considering that 700 men served with the unit during the war, this means that the desertion rate of the *Voltigeurs* was 42.7 per cent – although some may have deserted many times.<sup>84</sup> Many reasons can explain this high level of desertion. Attracted by bounties, recruits were often not ready for the hardships of military life and many deserted upon receiving their bounties.<sup>85</sup> For many, military discipline and the "impersonal nature of military leadership" were frightening experiences. This perhaps explains why de Salaberry tried to learn the names of all

of his men. As historian Patrick Wohler described; "His capacity for remembering names stood him good stead and helped to reduce the impersonal nature of military leadership which was always frightening to militiamen." Although this relaxed the stressful environment of military life, it did not stop men from deserting.<sup>86</sup> Also, the bare fact that *Voltigeurs* soldiers had to serve for the duration of the war, unlike normal militiamen, probably caused the greatest discontent. If we consider the annual proportion of deserters in Lépine's study, we can clearly see this as the number of deserters tends to increase as the war drags on.

Homesickness was certainly a major incentive for desertion. Away from their families and with no easy means of communication, men often felt the desire to "visit" their relatives while on duty. As Colonel Lacroix of the Select Embodied Militia stated: "la plupart de ces jeunes gens 'n'ont pas réellement déserté,' mais sont partis 'voir leurs pères & mères comme des jeunes gens qui n'ont pas encore sorti.'"<sup>87</sup> Further, since most militiamen were farmers, the long months of military service constituted a problem since nobody was running the farm in a society which depended on agriculture to

survive.<sup>88</sup> Although militiamen often sent their salaries to their wives, this was not enough to suffice the needs of their families. Hence, wives and children were in most cases without resources. Some *curés* even talked about the impoverishment of the families whose men were in the militia.<sup>89</sup> This situation probably drove many soldiers to desert and head back to their families. However, such “leaves of absence” were not accepted by the military authorities. As it was said: “désertre à sa femme, c’est désertre à l’ennemi.”<sup>90</sup>

Military life was not easy and this probably pushed many soldiers to desert. Troops were often subjected to both the pressures of war and the constraints of nature as they manned the front lines. This was especially true of the *Voltigeurs*. During operations, the unit was often positioned in swamps or in dense forests, waiting for the American invader.<sup>91</sup> Further, men were often subjected to bad weather, especially as they campaigned during the fall season. During operations in Autumn 1813, for instance, de Salaberry told that his troops had their “knees in mud and water” and were “drenched through with heavy rain.”<sup>92</sup> Another example of exposure occurred in January 1814 as de Salaberry and a small force of *Voltigeurs* walked 65 kilometres in deep snow to reach Salmon River, an area the Americans were believed to attack. During this long march, the unit lost 30 men to frostbite.<sup>93</sup> There are no doubts that such conditions

deteriorated the morale and health of militiamen.

The campaign of 1813 was the worst in terms of living conditions. This had to do with logistical problems in supplying de Salaberry’s army which was stationed in the Chateauguay valley south of Montreal. The problem accentuated when Governor Prevost kept the army mobilized well into December. This meant that the force was subjected to winter temperatures. As a result, the health of the troops deteriorated as fevers and rheumatism began to spread.<sup>94</sup> De Salaberry himself fell victim to rheumatism, experiencing “low fever and bowels complaints.”<sup>95</sup> As a result, morale was at its lowest in 1813. Even de Salaberry’s morale began to drop as he felt his corps being ill-treated by the Governor. De Salaberry even stated; “Tant qu’a mon régiment il Prévost doit bien savoir les désagréments éternels que j’ésuis avec eux, et qui si cela n’avait point été pour ma fermeté, il y a longtemps qu’il n’aurait plus de régiment Voltigeurs, où pour mieux dire d’esclaves de l’armée.”<sup>96</sup> His morale was so low that he told his father that he was thinking of resigning from the military.<sup>97</sup> According to de Salaberry, Prevost lost a lot of popularity among the troops.<sup>98</sup>

The desertion of *Voltigeurs* soldiers was accentuated by the fact that their unit operated on their own territory. Surrounded by a sympathetic population, deserters could easily

Posting the night pickets, c. 1812-1813. Reconstruction by Eugène Lelièpvre.



find shelter in nearby homes or with local families. The billeting of deserters among locals became so common that de Monviel offered “une récompense de quatre piastres allouées à toute personne n’étant point en service actuel, qui arrêtera un déserteur de la milice incorporée et le conduira devant un juge.” The aim of such a measure was to stop this billeting of deserters.<sup>99</sup> Further, any person found lodging a deserter was to be given a fine of 20 to 40 *piastres*.<sup>100</sup>

Desertion may also have plagued the *Voltigeurs* because, as a militia unit, it was not subjected to the same “iron discipline” as regular regiments. Militia punishments were less severe than those of the regular army, and cases of corporal punishment were rare. In fact, the discipline of militia units fell under Provincial Militia Laws instead of the British army’s War Act or Mutiny Act. Hence, the punishment of a militiamen was not the same as a regular soldier. For instance, a regular soldier would be sentenced to 100 or 300 lashes for desertion while a militiamen would only be condemned to a few days in prison.<sup>101</sup> In fact, militia punishments for mutiny or desertion were similar. The offenders could be imprisoned for periods of two years and be subjected to extremely expensive fines. Also, they could be sentenced to forced labour, such as chopping wood, or working in the King’s works.<sup>102</sup> In one such case, a militiaman who was court-martialed for starting a mutiny was sentenced to “payer dans les rangs du Premier Bataillon, les mains liés derrière le dos. Delà, il sera reconduit à la maison de correction la plus proche pour y être détenu 9 mois et employé à un travail dur après quoi il sera reconduit à son bataillon pour y servir trois mois de plus que les autres miliciens.”<sup>103</sup> In other cases, mutineers were “conducted, handcuffed, to their battalion to ask pardon for their misbehavior on their knees, and to be confined afterwards in a cell of the Common Gaol of the district for three months.”<sup>104</sup> Although some offenders were pardoned for desertion, most were sentenced to forced labour and solitary confinement.<sup>105</sup> One such example occurred in 1813 when a *Voltigeurs* deserter was sentenced to “four months labour in the King’s works at Quebec, and to solitary confinement during the nights, after which he will be reconducted to his battalion, and will pass in the ranks, handcuffed, and a log tied to his feet.”<sup>106</sup> In another

case, a deserter was sentenced to eight days solitary confinement, fed only with bread and water.<sup>107</sup> Although death was to be the ultimate punishment, it was never imposed on a militiamen.<sup>108</sup> These punishments proved how slack militia discipline really was. In almost no cases were offenders subject to corporal punishments or death. Deserters had nothing to lose in trying to escape. Therefore, this may explain why desertion was so high in the *Voltigeurs* during the war. Overall, there were more than 1,620 cases of desertion in Lower Canadian militia units during the war.<sup>109</sup> The authorities knew full well that drastic measures and corporal punishments would only bring opposition from the entire Lower-Canadian population.<sup>110</sup>

Other disciplinary problems had to do with the corps’ disrespect of the local populace. Although militia regulations approved the quartering of troops in the houses or barns of local inhabitants, the men were to behave and were to respect the owners and their property. As regulations specified, no man was to take any “wood for fuel or provisions or in any way to injure or destroy the property of the inhabitants.” Any soldiers who misbehaved were to be punished and to “make due compensation to the proprietor.”<sup>111</sup> The problem was that such regulations were not respected. In the Châteauguay valley a lot of property was damaged by militiamen. Further, there were many cases of looting and foraging. Hence, the situation turned into a disciplinary problem.

The lodging of troops during the war of 1812 was problematic, especially on the front lines of the Châteauguay Valley, where the *Voltigeurs* were stationed. Since no barracks existed, the soldiers lived in small tents. However, since such facilities did not protect them from damp or cold weather, soldiers remained extremely dependent on the climate.<sup>112</sup> Since they were authorized by Militia Regulations to find shelter in the houses or barns of local residents, many militiamen exercised this right when weather was bad.<sup>113</sup> Eventually, the quartering of troops on local properties led to some problems and exaggerations. For instance, one Joseph Primeau claimed that some 30 soldiers were quartered in his house during the war.<sup>114</sup> Other owners further claimed that their properties were used by militiamen for periods longer than 10

months.<sup>115</sup> In other cases, troops would use local farms to house and feed their horses. This was the case of an individual who claimed that *Voltigeurs* officers' horses were housed in his barns and stables. Further, the individual indicated that he had to feed the animals with his own corn, oat and hay.<sup>116</sup>

The quartering of troops on local farms often caused great damage. Houses and furniture were broken, while the presence of soldiers in the fields often meant the destruction of crops. Troops stole farm produce and equipment to meet to their needs. In many cases, tools such as axes, saws and hammers were taken.<sup>117</sup> Wooden fences and domestic firewood were taken to be burned.<sup>118</sup> Soldiers even stole two canoes at some point, which they used to transport provisions on the rivers.<sup>119</sup> There were many cases of unauthorized foraging,<sup>120</sup> as *Voltigeurs* looted corn, wheat, barley, oats, tobacco and vegetables, and stole chickens, pigs, sheep and even oxes.<sup>121</sup> At one point, troops stole a calf, two turkeys, 13 chickens, two potato pouches and some logs from one single farmer.<sup>122</sup> Troops habitually took hay to feed their horses.<sup>123</sup> All this proved that some disciplinary problems existed in the *Voltigeurs*.

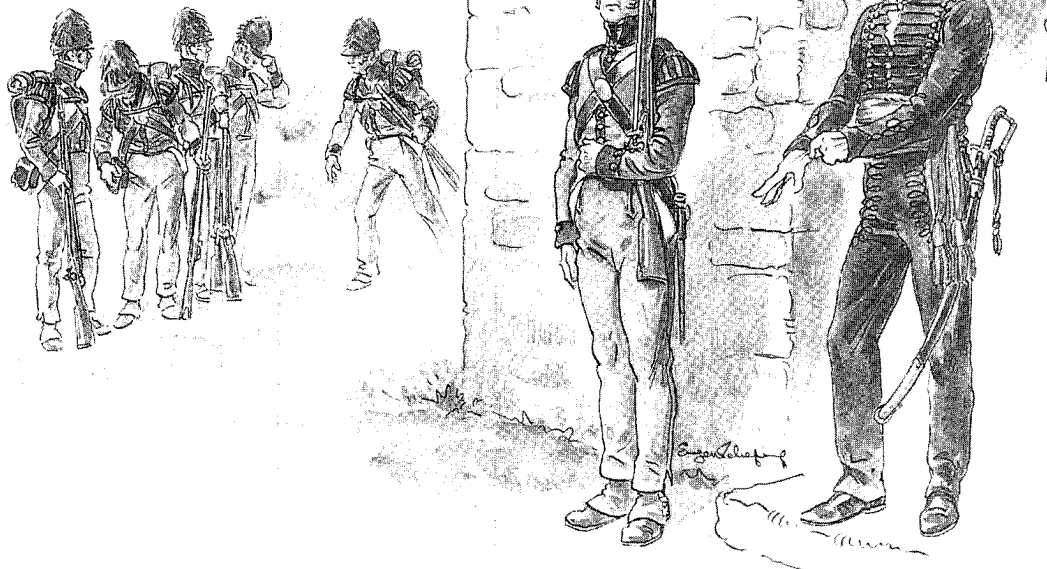
Many of the problems of discipline and desertion in the *Voltigeurs* stemmed from the fact that they had a long and busy war, campaigning along the border with the US and even into Upper Canada. The aim of Governor Prevost was primarily to use the *Voltigeurs*, numerous militia battalions and some Indians as a defence force in the Chateauguay valley, south of Montreal. In charge of this small army of 1,200 men, de Salaberry told his father: "I am something of a bit of general. I have carte blanche from General de Rottenburg to act as occasion may require, without waiting for his orders."<sup>124</sup> This small army, 90 per cent French Canadians, defended the main corridor of invasion into Lower Canada<sup>125</sup> with no cavalry or artillery units in support.<sup>126</sup>

As a defensive force, de Salaberry and his men had to adopt defensive strategies and tactics.<sup>127</sup> Anticipating American invasions, as enemy units constantly assembled across the border, de Salaberry began to prepare his positions in the autumn of 1812. Knowing full well that his force was too small to fight a large American army, de Salaberry began resorting to

guerilla tactics. As a result, he kept his force constantly in movement along the front lines to keep American intelligence from knowing how small his force really was.<sup>128</sup> As historian Benjamin Sulte described: "C'est un camp volant qui s'éparpillait, se rassemblait, prenait mille formes, était partout, ne paraissait nulle part en une seule masse et faisait croire aux américains que c'était l'avant-garde d'une armée solide."<sup>129</sup>

Guerilla methods also meant frustrating the enemy. In that sense, scorched-earth policies were adopted. For instance, orders were given to destroy all bridges "for a distance of a league and a half in advance" of the army's positions.<sup>130</sup> As Louis de Salaberry, father of Charles de Salaberry and commander of the 1st Battalion of the Select and Embodied Militia<sup>131</sup> told his wife in September 1812: "L'ordre est donné, et l'on commence demain à l'exécuter, pour rompre tous les ponts d'ici aux lignes, gâter, briser les chemins, les obstruer par des abbatis d'arbres... Cela peut toujours retarder leur Américains marche."<sup>132</sup> However, such operations also had their downsides, as Louis de Salaberry told his wife in another letter: "On achève aujourd'hui de détruire les chemins, ponts, chaussées. L'on a brulé un très beau pont et tout neuf. - C'est réellement grand dommage qu'une telle destruction. Tout cela un ouvrage immense à réparer et coutera infiniment quand la paix reviendra. Mais la nécessité, dit-on, ne connaît plus de loi. Les habitants sont stupéfaits de tout les ravages."<sup>133</sup> In some cases, scorched-earth policies meant the burning and destruction of crops, as it occurred in the Chateauguay valley during the autumn of 1813.<sup>134</sup>

The *Voltigeurs* became reknown as great skirmishers and bush fighters. They understood guerilla warfare and used it to the best of their advantage. Historian Ronald L. Way well described this when he talked about how *Voltigeurs* elements operated during the battle at Chrysler's Farm in Upper Canada on 11 November 1813, "...they had skillfully utilized the cover of rocks, stumps, and fences and in their drab uniforms were almost invisible."<sup>135</sup> Andrew Cochran, a Lower-Canadian bureaucrat, even wrote that French Canadians were superb guerilla fighters.



Canadian Voltigeurs getting ready for the morning inspection, c.1812-1813. Reconstruction by Eugène Lelièvre.

The fact is that the Canadians were competent to defend their own soil and they have the courage to do it. Few creatures can bear more hardships with less refraining than a Canadian - none can render a more ready obedience to what is required of them - none will be more persevering in what he undertake - and none are better calculated for the partisan warfare & bushfighting by which the progress of an enemy through that part of the country is to be checked than a Canadian farmer.<sup>136</sup>

During the war of 1812, the *Voltigeurs* fought numerous engagements, some in Upper Canada and even the United States. In the end, the unit fought at the battles of Salmon River (23 November 1812), Sackett's Harbour (29 May 1813), Châteauguay (26 October 1813), Chrysler's Farm (11 November 1813), Missisquoi Bay (26 March 1814), LaColle (30 March 1814), Cape Vincent (14 May 1814), Lake Champlain (26 June 1814), Oddelltown (28 June 1814), and Plattsburg (6-11 September 1814).<sup>137</sup> Some *Voltigeurs* even served on the gunboats which patrolled the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes to compensate for the lack of sailors.<sup>138</sup> Nevertheless, of all these battles, Châteauguay remained the most important and a major victory for French Canadians.

In the Battle of the Châteauguay of 26 October 1813, de Salaberry's little army

neutralized an American invading army almost seven times its size.<sup>139</sup> At the time, de Salaberry's force numbered approximately 1,700 men while the American army, under the command of General Wade Hampton, numbered approximately 5,500 men. Although both armies were considerable, only 2,000 Americans and 300 Canadians actually fought, the rest were placed in reserve.<sup>140</sup> Outnumbered, de Salaberry's small force inflicted a crushing defeat on the American army using guerilla methods and skirmishing tactics. Overall, the Canadian force lost only five men while the Americans lost at least 50.<sup>141</sup>

The battle of Châteauguay became a symbol of French Canadian pride and a tool of nationalism. As the *Gazette de Québec* observed in November 1813:

L'Affaire près de la ligne sur la rivière Châteauguay est la première où il y ait eu un nombre considérable d'habitants du pays d'engagés avec les Américains depuis le commencement de la guerre. Dans cette affaire notre force entière, avec très peu d'exceptions, depuis le commandant jusqu'au dernier était des canadiens... Ceci, aussi bien que d'avoir repoussé l'ennemi, est une preuve évidente que nous avons de bons officiers et de bons soldats..

The Lower Canadian Legislative Assembly also recognized the importance of this victory when



Canadian Voltigeurs skirmishing in the woods, c. 1812-1813. Reconstruction by Eugène Lelièvre.

it stated on 25 January 1814: “La Chambre reconnaît sensiblement la valeur distinguée et la discipline qu’ont montrées les officiers non-commissionnés, - soldats et miliciens de la petite bande sous le commandement immédiat du Lieutenant Colonel de Salaberry lors de l’action de Châteauguay.”<sup>142</sup> In one such letter to the King, the Assembly wrote:

Nous, les fidèles sujets de Sa Majesté, les Communes du Bas Canada,...supplions très humblement qu’il plaise à votre altesse Royale de prendre en sa très-gracieuse considération les services que le Lieutenant Colonel Charles de Salaberry a rendus à son pays, tant par son habileté que par son courage, dans l’affaire glorieuse...sur la rivière Châteauguay....C’est pourquoi les fidèles Communes de Sa Majesté supplient très humblement votre altesse Royale de vouloir bien prendre en considération ces services distingués, et pour inciter à l’avenir l’émulation de nos compatriotes pour la défense de cette province contre les ennemis de Sa Majesté....Nous saisissons cette occasion pour renouveler à Votre Excellence l’expression de nos sentiments de gratitude pour avoir, par votre prudence, par la sagesse de vos mesures, et par votre habileté, conservé ces provinces importantes à l’Empire, et pour la sollicitude paternelle avec laquelle Votre Excellence a veillé au bonheur des sujets de sa majesté, et pour prier Votre Excellence d’être assurée que ces

bienfaits resteront pour toujours profondément gravés dans le cœur canadiens.<sup>143</sup>

This French Canadian pride in the victory of Chateauguay was further propagated in French Canadian nationalist historiography. In this “myth of Chateauguay,” de Salaberry was a hero and the *Voltigeurs* symbols of French Canadian participation in the war. The whole affair became a source of intense nationalism. For example, in his *Histoire de la Milice Canadienne Française* (1897), Benjamin Sulte wrote: “Parmi les actions remarquables de cette guerre, nous choisissons de préférence celles où les Canadiens Français ont brillé Châteauguay, pour faire comprendre au lecteur que notre élément a accompli son devoir en conscience, durant ce conflit où l’on craignait de nous voir engager, par suite de fausses impressions répandues sur notre compte, grâce à une certaine école de politiciens.”<sup>144</sup> Even the clergy used the Battle of Châteauguay as a nationalist tool. In his *Histoire du Canada*, C.S. Viator wrote in 1915 that the battle “prouva surtout la loyauté et le patriotisme des Canadiens Français.”<sup>145</sup> However, no historian or writer can compare with historian Thomas Chapais, who wrote in his *Cours d’histoire du Canada*, II: “Châteauguay...Ce fut essentiellement une victoire canadienne-française. Elle est bien à

nous et personne ne peut nous la ravir... Châteauguay, c'était notre vengeance. Châteauguay, c'était notre indéniable loyalisme et de notre patriotisme ardent."<sup>146</sup>

While it lifted French Canadian spirits, the Battle of the Châteauguay also proved to British authorities that French Canadians were not "silent enemies" of Britain, nor were they potential traitors. It had proved that francophones were willing to defend their "homeland" just as much as the anglophones. Governor Prevost was the first to recognize the importance of French Canadian participation in the War of 1812. The *General Orders of the Militia* of 27 October 1813 well demonstrated Prevost's gratitude towards French Canadians:

Son Excellence, le Gouverneur en chef et commandant des forces...se fait un devoir et un plaisir de payer le tribut d'éloge qui est si justement dû au...Lt. Colonel De Salaberry pour sa conduite judicieuse et digne d'un officier... Son Excellence doit encore les plus grands éloges à toutes les troupes de cette station, pour leur confiance, leur discipline, et leur patience à endurer les fatigues et les privations qu'elles ont éprouvées. Leur détermination à persévérer dans cette conduite honorable ne peut manquer d'assurer la victoire aux braves et loyaux Canadiens, et de jeter le trouble et la confusion dans le coeur de l'ennemi, s'il pensait souiller de sa présence cet heureux pays.<sup>147</sup>

Governor Prevost also noted on November 4, 1813:

His Excellency the Governor in chief and Commander of the forces, has the highest pride and satisfaction in declaring His acknowledgemnt to the loyal and brave Militia of Lower Canada, for the zeal and alacrity with which they flew to their posts, and for the patience and firmness with which they have endured, in this inclement season, the severe hardships and privations to which they have been exposed; the steadiness and discipline of the whole have been conspicuous; and the undaunted gallantry displayed by six companies, almost to a man, composed of Canadian Fencibles and Militia, under the immediate command of Lieut.-Col. de Salaberry, in repelling with disgrace, an American invading army, twenty times their numbers, reflects unfading honor on the Canadian name.<sup>148</sup>

King George III acknowledged French Canadian participation in the war effort and the Battle of Chateauguay. His comments were

presented in the *General Orders of the Militia* on 26 March 1814:

Son Altesse Royale a observé avec la plus grande satisfaction l'habileté et la bravoure qui ont paru dans les officiers et les hommes qui composaient le détachement de troupes opposées à l'Armée du Général Hampton. La résistance qu'elles ont opposée avec succès à un ennemi aussi disproportionné a abattu la confiance de l'ennemi, déconcerté ses plans, et a mis en sûreté cette partie des frontières canadiennes. Son Altesse Royale voit avec un plaisir particulier que les sujets canadiens de Sa Majesté ont eu enfin l'occasion (que son Altesse Royale désirait depuis longtemps leur être procurée) de réfuter par leurs propres glorieux efforts pour la défense de leurs pays, les accusation calomnieuses de désaffection et de déloyauté que l'ennemi avait avancées avant sa première invasion de la province...Vous ne manquerez pas d'exprimer au Lieut. Colonel De Salaberry en particulier, et à tous les officiers et hommes sous son commandement, en général, la très-gracieuse approbation de son Altesse Royale de leurs services méritoires et distingués. Son Altesse Royale vous envoie, par la première occasion sûre, les Drapeaux que vous avez sollicités pour les Bataillons de Milice Incorporée, sentant qu'ils ont montré une habileté et une disposition à les défendre d'insulte, qui leur donnent le meilleur titre à une pareille marque de distinction<sup>149</sup>

It is ironic to note that the authorities believed that the French Canadian participation in the War of 1812 was a perfect example of their "loyalty" to the British Crown. "Loyalty" was perhaps a strong word. As Jean-Pierre Wallot indicated: "Ce qui motive d'abord les Canadiens en 1812, c'est la 'fidélité à eux-mêmes', 'la résolutions toujours la même de rester dans leur pays et d'avoir une vie à eux.'"<sup>150</sup> French Canadians were more inclined to fight for their own interests than those of the British crown, and in this they resembled most other colonial militias in 18th century North America. As author René Chartrand described when quoting a British officer: "perhaps they did not love the English Government or people, but they loved the Americans less."<sup>151</sup>

Fernand Ouellet agrees, "La guerre crée un danger extérieur auquel toutes les classes de la société sont éminemment sensibles. L'Américain, ce n'est pas seulement l'envahisseur, c'est le porteur de valeurs que le milieu canadien-français rejette."<sup>152</sup> Ouellet further specified that French Canadians fought because they feared



that American commercial and industrial capitalism, combined with the ideologies of Republicanism and Democracy, might destabilize, if not destroy, the economic and social infrastructure of French Canada.<sup>153</sup> Feeling threatened by the American invader, the security of Great Britain was perceived as the only means to defend their interests. For many French Canadians, "la puissance maritime et militaire de l'Angleterre procure à la fois sécurité et réconfort aux coloniaux."<sup>154</sup> Nevertheless, the War of 1812 led the British authorities to be somewhat more tolerant, for a time, of their French Canadian subjects.

The War of 1812 came to an end on Christmas eve 1814 with the signing of the Treaty of Ghent. As a result, both Great Britain and the United States accepted the *status quo ante bellum*.<sup>155</sup> With the hostilities over, the *Voltigeurs* were disbanded on 15 March 1815.<sup>156</sup> With the disbandment of the unit came the end of a proud regiment, but one which had created a rich and enduring legacy for French Canada.

The *Voltigeurs* proved to be good fighters, and their victory at Chateauguay was a fine example of their efficiency in combat. For French Canadians, Chateauguay also became a symbol of pride, and it convinced British authorities that French Canadians were not "disloyal" subjects. Therefore, despite all the problems encountered by the *Voltigeurs* during their existence, they made an important contribution to colonial defence, and a lasting impression on French Canadian self-esteem.

### Notes

I am indebted to Professors Jean-Pierre Wallot and Jeffrey Keshen of the University of Ottawa as well as Mr. René Chartrand for their insightful comments which helped to strengthen this work.

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Martin F. Auger is a doctoral student in history at the University of Ottawa. His interests are in Canadian military and diplomatic history. His M.A. Thesis (2000) entitled "Prisoners of the Home Front" examined the structure of the German internment camps of Southern Quebec, 1940-1946. He is currently working on his doctoral thesis which focuses on Canada's military-industrial complex during the Second World War.