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Tommy Atkins, We Never Knew Ye

Documenting the British Soldier in Canada, 1759-1871; Military Organization and the Archival Record

Timothy Dubé

*For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that,
an' "Chuck him out, the brute!"
But it's "Saviour of [th]is country"
when the guns begin to shoot.*

Rudyard Kipling

Tommy Atkins,¹ the universal British soldier, garrisoned Canada from 1759 to 1871. This paper describes the major series of records at the National Archives of Canada which give personal information about the officers and men of the various British military forces who served in Canada. It tries to summarize in a very few pages a great mass of information on a truly vast subject. Some hard choices have had to be made. This paper deals only with the most important of the military records series whose principal purpose was to record such information, space and time constraints having precluded from discussion those small personal collections of records held. Also my remarks about the various military bodies and their organization, and the military actions in which they were involved should not be considered an exhaustive survey.

1. The term *Tommy*, or more formally, *Tommy Atkins*, the pseudonym or generic name of the British soldier regardless of his origin, dates from August 1815 when individual record-of-service books were first given to each man in the ranks. The specimen form sent out with the book showed at the place where a signature was required the hypothetical name *Thomas Atkins*. The term *Tommy* was later popularized by Rudyard Kipling and was readily accepted by the British soldier as his own.

On a more positive note, I hope to introduce you to the key military records series, to give you an inkling as to what we have and more importantly what we don't have, and to give you an appreciation of the nature and variety of personal information in these military records.

Military Organization

The defeat of the French in Canada was a combined effort of British regulars, colonial militia, and volunteers. From 1759 until 1871 the British North American Provinces of Canada, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, and Prince Edward Island would be garrisoned by British regular and fencible regiments, with the addition of several other ancillary or auxiliary military bodies. In addition, for much of that period all male residents in the colonies between the ages of eighteen and sixty were liable for service when the colonies were in danger, while many men also served for brief periods of time or in volunteer roles.

Thus the possibilities of some kind of military service in Canada are numerous and must be sorted out properly before any records can be consulted in a meaningful way. For this reason before commencing with a discussion of the military service records available, an overview of the organization and structures of the various military forces in North America is presented,

because the type of records created and their relative survival rate follow directly from the record-creating bodies. I need hardly remind you that archives are not libraries. Information is not stored according to neat little subject categories. Archives are maintained largely in the order in which they were created. Herein lies the necessity of understanding the various military organizations.

In the British American colonies defence had rested largely upon the local militias and volunteer forces. The charters of the Royal Provinces had from the earliest times provided for the creation of a militia, while a similar authority was assumed by the non-royal colonies. In addition, volunteer or independent companies were formed in the more thickly populated areas by the wealthier citizens. These were a decentralized force, locally raised, independent and self-contained, and as such, records are generally unavailable. Those records that do survive will generally be found in state archives or historical records societies.

A number of these local forces were placed on a more permanent footing. In 1717, the 40th Regiment of Foot was raised by Richard Philips to be maintained as a regular British regiment from four independent companies at Annapolis Royal and four other independent companies at Placentia. The 40th Foot served in North America until the beginning of the nineteenth century. After the capture of Louisbourg in 1745 by the colonial militias, William Shirley and William Pepperill were each authorized to raise a regular regiment of infantry from the colonists who had taken part in the expedition. These became, respectively, the 50th and 51st Regiments of Foot. In 1756, the 60th or *Royal American Regiment* was raised in Pennsylvania, to be maintained as a regular British regiment. It was composed largely of Germans, many of whom came direct from Germany and Switzerland. Records for these American-raised regiments will be covered below in my description of British-paid officers' and enlisted men's records.

When major operations were undertaken against the French in North America, regular British units began to be sent out. As noted earlier, the defeat of the French in Canada was a combined effort of British regulars, colonial militia, and volunteers. Many of the British

regulars took their discharge in North America after 1763. In the subsequent Indian rising, the burden of the fighting fell on the remaining British regulars. This prompted the British government to propose the permanent quartering of 10,000 troops in North America, to be paid for in whole or in part by the colonists in the form of increased taxation. This came to be one of the principal grievances of the Americans which led to open revolution in 1775.

When the American Revolution broke out in April 1775, the British Army consisted of approximately 48,000 troops, of which about 8,000 were in North America. To conduct the war, military *Commands* or *Departments* were organized in North America. The *Central Department* was the occupied zone around New York City; the *Eastern Department* was Nova Scotia; the *Northern* or *Canadian Department* was Quebec; and the *Southern Department* was Florida. From these headquarters, military forces were despatched. The Commanders of the *Central Department* were the Commanders-in-Chief.

In nearly every colony, Loyalist Associations were formed. *Provincial* or *Loyalist* regiments and corps were attached to each of the four geographic Departments. Initially, Loyalist or Provincial regiments and corps were recruited from a specific area and had fairly uniform membership. Later, Loyalist units had their numbers made up from the many homeless refugees crowding New York and the other British centres. Able-bodied men were encouraged to enlist in one of these units if they wished to be fed. As a result, it was not unusual for a man to have served in two or three Loyalist's units in more than one Command during the course of the war. Many of these units were unincorporated. By the end of the war, approximately 8,000 Loyalists had served under arms.

Besides the Provincial or Loyalist regiments, formed to serve anywhere ordered, militia companies were formed to perform garrison duties in British-held territories.

Beginning in 1779, several of the provincial corps were placed on a more permanent footing. A new *American Establishment* was created, and the *Queen's Rangers* became the *1st American*

Regiment; the *Volunteers of Ireland* became the 2nd; the *New York Volunteers*, the 3rd; the *King's American Regiment*, the 4th; and the *British Legion*, the fifth. More importantly, the granting of permanent rank and half-pay for Provincial officers resulted in more records being kept for both officers and men.

From this, it was a logical progression to being placed on the *Regular Establishment*. The *Royal Highland Emigrants*, raised in Canada by Allan McLean, would become the 84th Regiment of Foot, while the *Volunteers of Ireland* were now called the 105th Regiment of Foot. Others were placed on the Regular Establishment under their old names. These included the *Queen's Rangers*, the *British Legion*, the *King's American Regiment*, and the *Royal Garrison Battalion*.

When the Revolution ended the 48,000 British troops of 1775 had increased to 110,000, of which 56,000 were in North America. The Provincial regiments and corps were quickly disbanded, while many of the regular regiments were reduced in numbers. Troops of the *Central* and *Southern Departments* were evacuated, since these areas passed from British control. Some of these troops were resettled in Nova Scotia, while others helped found New Brunswick. Most of the Provincials in the *Northern Department* were resettled in what is now Ontario. A system of privileged or preferential land grants, based on a series of Royal Instructions issued in 1783, was instituted in all the provinces of British North America to encourage settlement by loyal refugees. Free Crown land grants remained available to rank and file military settlers in Canada until 1834 and officers continued to receive a remission of part of the purchase price of land after that date.

The remaining British North American Provinces of Canada, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, and Prince Edward Island were subsequently garrisoned by rotating drafts of British forces. Commands were again put in place: the *Canada Command*, consisting of present day Ontario and Quebec; the *Nova Scotia Command*, including Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick; and the *Newfoundland Command*, made up of Newfoundland and Bermuda. British regulars would continue to garrison the scattered outposts

along the Canadian-American border until 1871, when they were withdrawn, leaving the general defence of Canada to local forces. Thereafter, British forces were limited to garrisons at Halifax and Esquimalt for the protection of the naval stations. With the evacuation of Esquimalt in 1906, the last British troops left Canada.

Two British regular regiments in Canada deserve special attention. The *Royal Canadian Rifle Regiment* was formed in 1840 for local service from volunteers from the British regiments then serving in Canada. The regiment continued in service until 1871, when most of the men took their discharge in Canada. Another British formation, the 100th *Royal Canadian Regiment*, a British regiment formed of Canadians, was raised in 1858 for overseas service.

In addition to these regular regiments, there were bodies of fencible regiments; regiments raised for service in the colonies but paid for by the British. Initially raised in the 1790s, these included the *Queen's Rangers*, the *Royal Canadian Volunteers*, the *Canadian Fencibles*, *New Brunswick Fencibles*, *Nova Scotia Fencibles*, and the *Royal Newfoundland Companies*. During the War of 1812 and the Rebellions of 1837, several other fencible corps were raised for active service. Amongst these were the *Glengarry Fencibles* and *Canadian Voltigeurs*.

At various times in the history of Canada the need for military reinforcements lead the British government to also turn to foreign troops as a source of recruits. During the American Revolution, agreements were signed with a number of the German princes to supply bodies of troops. By these arrangements, Britain obtained the services of some 30,000 men. Of these, only about 17,000 returned to Germany following that war; a number of the men having died or taken their discharges in North America. During the War of 1812, Britain again turned to foreign troops, employing two Swiss-raised regiments -- de Meuron's and de Watteville's -- in Canada. The personnel of these regiments came from Germany, Poland and France and other European nations. Disbanded in Canada in 1816, more than half remained in the country.

From the time of the Seven Years' War, there also existed on the Great Lakes a naval service known as the *Provincial Marine*, administered by the Quartermaster General's Department of the Army, whose main purpose was military transport. During the War of 1812, it became evident that a more efficient naval force was required. In 1813, accordingly, the Provincial Marine was placed under the supervision of the Royal Navy, and early in 1814 its ships became part of the Royal Navy, while those members of the Provincial Marine who could render useful service were absorbed into the Navy.

Another source of British military strength in the colonies was the *Indian Department*, which had been formed in 1755. Working closely with the British Army and with the support of the local tribes, the Indian Department played a significant military role. During the American Revolution, throughout the later struggle for the Ohio valley, and finally during the War of 1812, officers of that department lead native warriors into action against the frontier American states. Fort Niagara served as the active headquarters of the Indian Department and the rendezvous for its raiding parties during the American Revolution. Detroit, and later Fort Malden at Amherstburg, was the key Indian centre during the struggle for the Ohio valley and the War of 1812. Lieutenants and Captains of the Indian Department held rank by commission, while interpreters were appointed by warrant. Such were not officers of the army, although they held military ranks.

Finally, although not properly part of this study, all male residents between the ages of eighteen and sixty were liable for service when the colonies were in danger. The various provincial *Militias* were called out during the War of 1812, as a result of the Rebellions of Upper and Lower Canada in 1837 and 1838, and again during the Fenian Raids scares of 1866 and 1870.

The Archival Record

Having thus outlined the service of British-paid units in North America, I will now describe the major series of records which give information about officers and men of these British forces. For ease of organization and because the records generally dictate this arrangement, I will divide

my description of sources into those providing information on officers and those providing information on enlisted men. Records relating specifically to Loyalist or German troops are detailed separately. Records relating to the Canadian militia are outside the bounds of this study.

Records giving personal information about an officer were created routinely upon the granting of his commission, his promotion, his resignation, or his being placed on the half-pay list. But the starting place for a search is the *Army Lists*. Manuscript lists of officers were kept from 1702 to 1752. These are held in the Public Record Office in the class War Office 64. Since 1754, *Army Lists* have been published and are available in larger reference libraries. They have appeared in several different formats over the years but all are arranged by regiment and give the date of the officers' commissions. Appendices record officers dying or resigning in the last year. After 1766, the volumes are indexed. Some record the Command to which the regiment is attached. Several volumes were produced for those officers serving in America during the American Revolution, and some of these include the names of officers and staff of the Loyalist regiments and corps. These American lists do not include officers in Canada. In addition to the official *Army Lists* are a set of unofficial lists, initially produced by Lieutenant-General H.G. Hart. Beginning in 1839, *Hart's Army Lists* include details of officers' war services.

T.W.J. Conolly's *Roll of Officers of the Corps of Royal Engineers from 1660 to 1898* (Chatham: Royal Engineers Institute, 1898) provides lists of officers of Engineers on the various establishments, dates on which each military rank was granted, with details of the individual's war services and fate. The service of officers of the Royal Artillery, the movements of the various companies of the Regiment, with the Public Record Office class and volume numbers for every company formed up till 1 July 1859, can be found in M.E.S. Laws' *Battery Records of the Royal Artillery* (Woolwich: Royal Artillery Institute, 1952).

Systematic records of officers' services were introduced early in the nineteenth century. These consist of several periodic series of returns, principally in the War Office classes WO 25 and

WO 76. The National Archives has acquired in microfilm format a large portion of the WO 25 *Description and Succession Books* (MG 13, WO 25, Volumes 226-558, 579, 632-634, 677-683, and 686-688; Microfilm Reels B-5411 to B-5514, and B-5517). These registers are arranged by regiment with the officers' records set out in alphabetical order or with an index. These registers usually give dates and places of birth, and particulars of marriages and children, as well as of military service.

Although not providing much genealogical information, the War Office *Monthly Returns* (MG 13, WO 17, Volumes 1489-1580, 2241-2293, and 2356-2412; Microfilm Reels B-1566 to B-1585, B-1587 to B-1604, and B-1606 to B-1613) record the effective strength of all ranks in each regiment and the regiments' stations, with the names of all commissioned officers present and absent. Postings and death dates of any officers dying since the last return are also included. These are arranged by Command, and the National Archives' holdings include Canada, 1758-1865; Newfoundland, 1812-1865; Nova Scotia, 1807-1865; and British, Provincial, and German Troops serving in Canada, 1776-1786.

In cases where an officer died on service or half-pay and his widow applied for a pension or application was made for a child's compassionate allowance, material may be found in the War Office class *Certificates of Birth, etc.* (MG 13, WO 42, Volumes 52-63; Microfilm Reels B-4682 to B-4694). These include, as the title implies, certificates of birth, baptism, marriage and death, with wills, administrations, statements of service, and personal papers of officers and their families. Listings of half-pay officers can be located in the War Office class *Establishments*. The National Archives has acquired selections from various of these for Loyalist Regiments, 1783-1789 (MG 13, WO 24, Volume 748; Microfilm Reel B-3332).

Records of enlisted soldiers are arranged for the most part by regiments, and so it is almost essential to know the regiment in which he served in order to trace his record. If the place he served at a particular time is known, it may be possible to identify his regiment from the War Office *Monthly Returns*, described above. John M. Kitzmiller's *In Search of the "Forlorn Hope": A Comprehensive Guide to Locating British*

Regiments and Their Records, 3 Volumes, (Salt Lake City: Manuscript Publications Foundation, 1988) is useful for determining the location of British regular regiments.

The most detailed records of an enlisted soldier's service are the attestation and discharge documents, which constitute the War Office class *Soldiers' Documents* (WO 97). The documents are annotated to give a record of service and all except a few of the very earliest give place of birth, age on enlistment, and details of physique and appearance. Only the records of those soldiers discharged to pension survive. The records of soldiers who died whilst serving or who took an early discharge, and thus never received a pension, were destroyed. Few records of Loyalist rank and file have been located in this class. The National Archives of Canada has acquired microfilm copies of those regiments with long service in North America (MG 13, WO 97; Microfilm Reels B-5518 to B-5689). An information leaflet provides more details about this collection.

Less detailed but more inclusive is the War Office class *Royal Hospital Chelsea Regimental Registers* (MG 13, WO 120, Volumes 1-70; Microfilm Reels B-5690 to B-5714). These provide brief personal and service details of all enlisted regular, fencible and foreign soldiers on the British pay rolls who were discharged to pension from 1713 to 1868. Recorded in several overlapping series, arrangement is by the regiments in which the soldiers last served and by their admission date to the hospital.

Many of the War Office *Description and Succession Books* (WO 25), described earlier under the officers' records, also provide details about enlisted men. Such details as physical size, appearance and age at enlistment, and more importantly the place of enlistment are given.

If no record of service can be traced, a soldier's enlistment, his movements in the army, and his discharge or death can be traced, providing his regiment is known, in the regimental pay lists and muster rolls. It should be noted, however, that muster rolls and pay lists generally provide little information beyond name, rank and period of service. For this reason, the National Archives has acquired few copies of muster rolls

of British regular units. We do, however, hold microfilm copies of muster rolls of the de Meuron and de Watteville regiments (MG 13, WO 12, Volumes 11960-11972, and 12018-12033; Microfilm Reels B-110 to B-118), and transcript selections of rolls for those regiments at Quebec in 1759 (MG 13, WO 12, Microfilm Reel C-9202).

Muster rolls and casualty lists of the various German regiments in North America during the American Revolution have been copied from the Provincial Archives of Wolfenbuttel, Germany (MG 23, K 35; Microfilm Reels K-145 and K-146). Acquisition agreements have limited the availability of these records to research at the National Archives of Canada. Microfiche copies, with English translations, of reports, correspondence, order books, and muster rolls for these German regiments have recently been made available by the G.K. Hall and Company as the *Hessian Documents of the American Revolution, 1776-1783*. Land records, described below, also provide important details about the services of those German soldiers petitioning for land as *Military Claimants*.

Records relating to the Provincial Marine on the Great Lakes will be found in several different collections. For the period of the American Revolution, the papers of *Sir Frederick Haldimand* (MG 21, Add. Mss. 21801-21805; Microfilm Reels A-738 to A-740) offer the greatest concentration of documentation. For the period after the Revolution until the Provincial Marine was placed under the supervision of the Royal Navy, the *British Military and Naval Records* (RG 8, I, "C" Series, Volumes 722-742; Microfilm Reels C-3242 to C-3246) should be consulted. The *Military "C" Index* includes nominal and subject references to these latter records. References are generally limited to pay lists and establishment totals, and to the correspondence and reports of the officers. Detailed service records are unlikely to be found. Records relating to the *Royal Navy Lake Establishments* from 1814 will be found with the *British Military and Naval Records, Admiralty Lake Service Records* (RG 8, III A). Again, detailed service records are not held.

For the British Indian Department, petitions, commissions and certificates, returns, and the correspondence of officers, dating from 1794, will be found in the *British Military and Naval*

Records (RG 8, I, "C" Series, Volumes 247-271; Microfilm Reels C-2848 to C-2858). Many biographical details will be found scattered through these volumes, as will copies of treaties with long lists of Indians, many including their totems. Accounts and other financial records, including payrolls for the period 1786 to 1805, will also be found (RG 8, I, "C" Series, Volumes 1147-1166; Microfilm Reels C-3496 to C-3501).

For Loyalist military personnel of the American Revolution, service records are usually limited to muster rolls and pay lists. Complete, centralized records do not exist. Few records for the militia men of the American Revolution are known to exist. For those interested in searching for an individual who took part in the Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution, Murtie June Clark's *Loyalists in the Southern Campaign of the American Revolutionary War*, 3 Volumes, (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, Inc., 1981) is a good place to start. For the *Northern Department* during that war, a useful place to start is Mary Beacock Fryer's and William A. Smy's *Rolls of the Provincial (Loyalist) Corps, Canadian Command, American Revolutionary Period*, (Toronto: Dundurn Press Ltd., 1981).

Registers of naval and military commissions issued from 1777 to 1784 in the *Northern Command* can be found in the papers of *Sir Frederick Haldimand* (MG 21, Add. Mss. 21745; Microfilm Reel A-677). Included are copies of the commissions and a list of all commissions signed by General Haldimand. This list is arranged by regiment with the names of the officers, their rank and dates. The War Office *Headquarters Records* (MG 13, WO 28, Volumes 2-10; Microfilm Reels B-2862 to B-2867) include returns of various of the *Northern Command* units, while muster rolls of a number of Loyalist regiments and corps, particularly those units from the *Central* and *Southern Commands*, can be found in the *British Military and Naval Records* (RG 8, I, "C" Series, Volumes 1851-1908; Microfilm Reels C-3873, C-3874, and C-4216 to C-4224). Most importantly, the *Military "C" Index* provides nominal and subject references to these two collections. Although detailed service records are unlikely to be found, no search should fail to include these important records. *The Ward Chipman and Family Papers* include some muster and

settlement rolls, and related financial records which were accumulated by Ward Chipman, Senior, while Deputy Muster Master General of Provincial Forces, for those Loyalist regiments disbanded and settled in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick (MG 23, D 1, Volumes 24-30; Microfilm Reels C-9818 to C-9820). A nominal index to these has recently been completed, however, its use is currently limited to research at the National Archives.

Provision lists, muster rolls, correspondence, petitions for pensions and assistance or compensation for British and Loyalist forces of the American Revolution are scattered in several other large collections. *The British Headquarters Papers* (MG 23, B 1, Volumes 1-107, and Supplementary; Microfilm Reels M-341 to M-370) include rolls of refugees evacuated from New York in 1783, and various records relating to temporary assistance and pensions. A nominal index to these records has recently been constructed by the *Sir Guy Carleton Branch, United Empire Loyalists' Association of Canada*, and funding is being sought to publish the index. Four volumes relating to Loyalist refugees provisioned and settled in Canada, along with muster rolls and other records relating to Loyalists, are to be found amongst the papers of *Sir Frederick Haldimand* (MG 21, Add. Mss. 21826 to 21828; Microfilm Reels A-751 and A-752). Included in the Treasury Office *Miscellaneous Documents Relating to Refugees* (MG 15, T 50, Volumes 1-56; Microfilm Reels B-1614 to B-1620) are records of provisioning and transport provided for refugees, chiefly in the Carolinas, as well as of certain pensions paid in Great Britain. Some muster rolls of units active in the Carolinas and Georgia are also found within this series.

Claims for compensation for losses suffered and services rendered, military or otherwise, during the American Revolution are preserved amongst the records of the Audit Office (MG 14, AO 12, Volumes 1-146; Microfilm Reels B-1154 to B-1183; and MG 14, AO 13, Volumes 1-140; Microfilm Reels B-2176 to B-2216, B-2284 to B-2297, B-2331 to B-2346, B-2416 to B-2445, and B-2551 to B-2580). Nominal indexes to the claims and some explanatory notes are also available (Microfilm Reel C-9821). The claims and petitions submitted constitute an important source for the documentation of military service and are almost

the only source for Loyalist officers and men, and those officers of the British Indian Department.

Land records constitute an important source for documenting the military service of individual soldiers. The *Upper Canada Land Board Minutes and Records* (RG 1, L 4, Volumes 1-16; Microfilm Reels C-14026 to C-14028), the *Upper Canada Land Petitions* (RG 1, L 3), and the *Lower Canada Land Petitions* (RG 1, L 3 L) are massive series formed of the petitions and requests for land grants, leases, and confirmation of titles, reports, and other documents related to the early settlers in what would become Upper and Lower Canada. The three series are available on microfilm, as are their nominal indexes. Since Upper Canada was not separated from Quebec until 1791, there are some petitions relating to Ontario Loyalists and military claimants in the Lower Canada land records. Loyalists and military veterans claiming the privileged grants for military service often presented both extensive biographical details about their service and certificates in support of their claims. Only the more important officers skipped the biographical details, knowing that their friends did not need reminding. Similar series of land records are held by the provincial archives of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick for their respective provinces. Regrettably, time and space constraints preclude a further discussion of these records.

* * * * *

Before concluding, allow me to make a few general comments about military records and research. In archival research the onus rests with the researcher. I cannot emphasize too strongly the need for preparation in secondary sources before tackling original records in an archives, and this is especially true in the military area. Military organization, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries, was complex. The possibilities of some kind of service are numerous and must be sorted out properly before the records can be consulted in a meaningful way. Remember, too, that many men served for brief periods of time or in volunteer roles. When duty was done, they returned to the obscurity of everyday life. Government had no need to keep a record and, therefore, there isn't one.

An additional important point should be noted when reading this paper. Throughout the body of the text, references will be found to records available on microfilm. Microfilm may be borrowed for your use by any institution possessing a microfilm reader and participating in the interlibrary loan arrangement. Requests for loans must be submitted by the borrowing institution, on authorized forms, clearly specifying the sources and reel numbers required. Requests should be directed to the Inter-Institutional Loans Unit, Reference and Researcher Services Division, National Archives of Canada, 395 Wellington Street, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0N3.

And finally, I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Patricia Kennedy of the Manuscript

Division, who provided a number of the Loyalist and land-related references in this paper. The comments and advice offered by the various members of the Genealogical Services Unit were also important and appreciated. The errors are mine alone.

Timothy Dubé is Military Archivist of the Manuscript Division, National Archives of Canada. Starting next issue Tim will contribute a regular column to keep us abreast of developments at the National Archives.

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