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James Peters, Military Photography and the Northwest Campaign, 1885

Owen Cooke and Peter Robertson

In June 1884, the noted buffalo hunter Gabriel Dumont led a delegation of Métis from the Batoche settlement, in what is now Saskatchewan, to Montana in the United States to search out Louis Riel. He hoped to persuade Riel to lead them as he had in 1869-70 in their demands for the Canadian government to recognize their land claims and other grievances. Riel reluctantly returned to Canada. The situation worsened until March 1885, when a skirmish between Métis and North West Mounted Police at Duck Lake, near Prince Albert, cost seventeen dead on both sides. The government feared a general Indian rising in the West (although only the Cree bands of Poundmaker and Big Bear eventually joined the Métis), and dispatched a force which eventually numbered over five thousand militia, including all four hundred troops of the infant permanent force, to the Northwest via the still-incomplete Canadian Pacific Railway.

Major-General Frederick Middleton, the British General-Officer-Commanding the Canadian Militia, sent to take command at the seat of the rebellion, was acutely aware of the complete inexperience of most of his militia command. His only fully-trained troops were a handful of British regular officers and men scattered among the militia staff and units. He desperately feared that any reverse inflicted by the Métis might result in a tactical débâcle, as had occurred when the militia met the Fenians at Ridgeway in 1866, and might lead to a strategic disaster in which perceived government weakness could spark a widespread Indian rising. Thus, he adopted a policy of slow advance, training his men as he went.¹ Although, "in the opinion of many, a 'Custer' affair was on the cards," Middleton intended only to attack when he could

be certain of carrying the day.² His slowness at Fish Creek, where an attempted Métis ambush checked the unsteady militia force, and at the four-day siege of Riel's "capital" at Batoche, led to widespread criticism both from his amateur soldiers and from the press in eastern Canada. However, his wisdom was borne out by events at Cut Knife Hill, where a militia detachment of 325 men sent to relieve Battleford attacked Poundmaker's camp and was probably only saved from a severe defeat by the chief's reluctance to countenance a massacre. Major-General T.B. Strange, a retired British officer ranching in the West, who commanded the Alberta Field Force, Middleton's other detached column, followed Middleton's strategic concept and in his only set-piece action at Frenchman's Butte, used artillery rather than attack Big Bear's Crees in their well-chosen defensive position.

Among Middleton's troops was "A" Battery, Canadian Artillery, under the command of Captain James Peters (110 all ranks, two 9-pounder rifled muzzle-loading field guns and eight horses), which had left Quebec City for the Northwest on 28 March 1885. Peters provided the artillery support, and a comparatively well-trained infantry component, to Middleton at Fish Creek and Batoche, and he accompanied Middleton north into the muskeg in June in the pursuit of the fleeing Big Bear. Peters also brought his camera.

Within the narrow confines of the Canadian Militia, James Peters must be considered a well-trained, professional soldier. He joined the 62nd St. John Fusiliers at the age of seventeen when the battalion was called out during the second series of Fenian raids in 1870. He was commissioned a lieutenant in the battalion in



NAC C-10328

1872, but in the same year joined "A" Battery, Canadian Artillery, in Kingston, Ontario, one of the only two permanent units in the militia at that time. He commanded a small artillery contingent in Fort Garry, Manitoba, for six months and returned to Kingston, where he qualified as an artillery lieutenant in 1873. He married in 1876 and was promoted brevet Captain in 1878. A mark of his, and the militia's, increasing professionalism, in 1881 he went to England as adjutant of the first Canadian artillery team to participate in the Shoeburyness gunnery competitions.³

Captain James Peters and the Northwest Campaign would seem to be equally unlikely to illustrate the technological revolution which was underway both in land warfare and in photography. In warfare, at the strategic level, the telegraph and the railway enabled the nation state to assemble, deploy and control massed citizen armies to remarkably tight timetables. Steam-driven iron ships permitted European countries to project their power anywhere on the planet. At the tactical level, the progressive introduction of the percussion cap, the rifled musket, the breech loader and the magazine rifle, coupled with continuous improvement to artillery and the development of early forms of machine guns changed the nature of land warfare. The close-packed columns and lines of long-serving

This appeared in The Dominion Illustrated 4 May 1889 and represents Peters as a major when he commanded the expedition to the Skeena River in northern British Columbia. However, his appearance was probably much similar in 1885, and certainly the camera was the same.

professional infantry, supported by *arme blanche* cavalry and smoothbore galloper artillery, the trio of arms which had determined European battle since the seventeenth century, were quickly rendered obsolete. The "thin red line," symbolic of the British way in war, probably reached its epitome at the defence of the British base at Balaclava in the Crimea on 25 October 1854, then was seen no more. Henceforth, masses of skirmishers armed with the latest small arms either attacked in extended open order or increasingly defended from prepared trench systems. In support, although cavalry persisted until the First World War and even after, it was steadily being replaced by mounted infantry who used their horses only to reach the battlefield. Artillery with guns of longer and longer ranges placed themselves behind the infantry line. As ground became dominated by high-powered rifle bullets and explosive artillery shells, battle became an increasingly deadly business. It became foolhardy for men to risk themselves in the open, and the "empty battlefield," so much a feature of twentieth-century warfare, came into being. Peters was probably the first to attempt to document this empty battlefield photographically.

Photography, an art more dependent on technology than any other, developed at an amazing rate from its birth in the late-1830s through the latter half of the nineteenth century. Photography had recorded individual images in the American war with Mexico, 1846-48, at the street barricades in Paris during the revolution of 1848 and the participants of the Second Sikh War of 1848-49. The cumbersome methods which required exposure times of three to five minutes meant that only the dead, the wreckage of war, or the willing sitter could be photographed. By the time of the Crimean conflict, 1854-56, Roger Fenton was able to use the increasingly popular wet collodion process in his 360 famous images of the early part of the war. Although this made possible fine degrees of detailing of line and texture, exposure times of ten seconds still could not capture the reality of the battlefield. Moreover, the nature of the process severely limited what the photographer could do in the field. Not only must he wet and coat the plates in darkness and expose them while still wet, but he must develop

while wet. The result was vast impedimenta, including a bulky wood box camera (although the folding bellows camera came into use about 1860) with tripod and hood and some form of portable darkroom, which for Fenton took the form of a horse-drawn “van.”

In the United States, Matthew Brady, owner of a chain of photographic studios at the outbreak of the Civil War, believed “the camera is the eye of history” and, with support from the Union government, sent a team of up to twenty photographers to record the cataclysmic struggle.⁴ To the north in Canada, military photography, which had begun with studio portraits in the 1850s, moved outdoors with images of the troops called out for service in the Fenian raids of 1866 and 1870.

The widespread appearance in the early 1880s of the gelatin dry plate, on which silver halide crystals were held in a suspension of “ripened” gelatin, decreased exposure times to one-tenth of those required for collodion. The plates could be purchased with their emulsion already prepared, and stored for extended periods before and after exposure. Gone was the bulky paraphernalia. “Detective” cameras, still very large by modern standards, in which glass plates could be fed from a magazine to the focal plane, were reasonably portable. Dry processes and smaller cameras were the instant choice of “expedition” photographers, early versions being chosen in Canada by the Nares Arctic Expedition in 1875-76 and by G.M. Dawson of the Geological Survey in his western surveys of 1878-79.⁵

In 1884, Captain Peters began photographing with a British Marion & Co. Academy camera. Perhaps he was influenced by the advertisement: “For the Tourist, for the Artist and for Military Men it will be found invaluable. The most complete, simple and compact Camera ever invented. Each Camera is fitted with a pair of Lenses and has a Tray which carries 12 Plates, which can be exposed in rotation.”⁶ It was a quarter-plate (3~ x 4~ inch) reflex model, with a rotary shutter mounted in front of the lens, with timed and three instantaneous settings, the whole being mounted in a sizable hardwood box with brass fittings. A straight-through viewing system to a small glass screen on the back of the camera allowed the photographer to focus, although in the field Peters simply marked two distances on the box, one for twelve paces and the other for

infinity. A rack and pinion mechanism permitted the photographer to load twelve glass plates from a plate-changing box beneath the camera in succession into the focal plane by inverting the camera.⁷

In 1884-85, Peters produced conventional, documentary images, demonstrating a knowledge of the interrelationships of contrast, texture and exposure, which recorded garrison life and winter training at the Citadel and city life in Quebec.

Upon receiving his orders to take the field, Peters took his camera and 120 plates with him to the Northwest. In addition to leading his battery, and writing as a military correspondent for the *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, Captain Peters carried his camera and photographed from before the battle of Fish Creek through Batoche to the end of the pursuit of Big Bear. Never using a tripod, often snapping from the saddle, he produced 63 successful images of the rebellion. He noted that,

the regimental blanket was the only changing tent to be obtained. My plan of pitching it was to lie on my back on the prairie after dark – in fact, I often combined the operation with the details of preparing for bed...by a delicate sense of touch I generally managed to get most of my plates into the box, with a fair proportion having the film side to the front. Unfortunately, many were destroyed from the fingering necessary to make sure the correct side to be placed toward the shutter. Necessarily I had many failures... One valuable batch was lost to me for ever, from the fact that as soon as the changing was completed I fell fast asleep through fatigue...and next morning my valuable plates were all kicked out in the long grass and ruined.⁸

He made no attempt to develop or print the plates himself, but sent them in a cartridge box to a Quebec City photographer.⁹

What one historian has termed Peters “fuzzy photographs” tell us a great deal about the campaign and about modern war.¹⁰ In fact, when viewed as the original prints, which Peters did not enlarge, they are not particularly fuzzy, but most researchers have worked only from modern, often enlarged, reproductions.¹¹ Although many of the images are very powerful in their own right, their documentary importance is enhanced by the captions Peters provided for them.

* * * * *

NAC C-4520



"Sewing Up the Dead"



NAC C-3458

"Burying the Dead"

Peters' service was within a conventional framework of nineteenth century colonial war. Many of the images have a great deal in common with contemporary themes in military photography. The horror of war as expressed through the dead, a theme common in American Civil War photography, is also evident here. Although a Canadian, Peters saw life and death as a Victorian officer. In these two photographs Peters accords dignity to the militia fatalities of Fish Creek. The captions for these photographs and those following were Peters' own, from his album.

NAC C-4523



"He Shot Capt French"

By contrast with the militia casualties in the previous two images, the Métis enemy have more in common with the anonymous dead photographed at Gettysburg. Indeed, the body of old Alexander Ross, one of the last Métis killed in defence of Batoche, lies nameless and without sympathy, recorded only as "He Shot Capt French." "For the live rebels," Peters noted, "I generally...took them from a distance, as far and as quickly as possible."¹²

NAC C-4522



"Asleep in the Trenches"

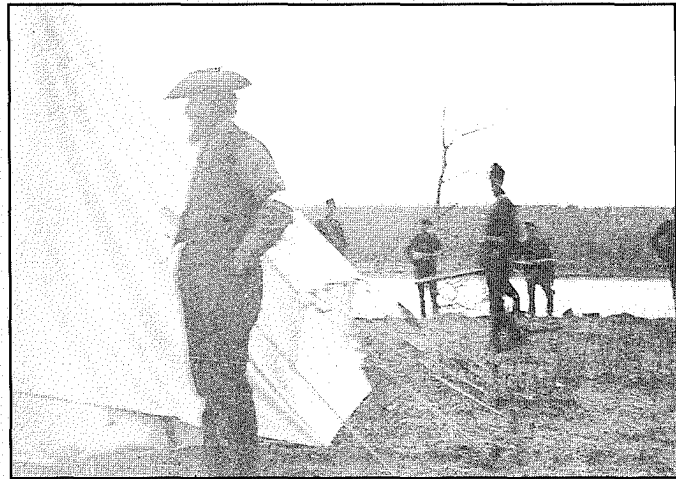
Peters also recorded military life within the confines of what other photographers had already done. This shot catches the spirit of troops becoming accustomed to campaigning, and is reminiscent of Fenton's images from the Crimea. Moreover, it also illustrates another feature of the campaign for us. In reality it is not in the trenches at all, but shows a corner of Middleton's "zareba", a term he borrowed from North African warfare for a shelter constructed of circled waggons reinforced with boxed supplies and hay bales, supported by well-sited rifle pits. As a place of refuge at night, it was, perhaps, analogous to the Roman fortified camp. It protected the militia's soldiers, horses and supplies from nighttime depredations by the Métis, whom Peters saw as "the best skirmishers in the world."¹³

NAC C-4593



"Poundmaker in Blanket"

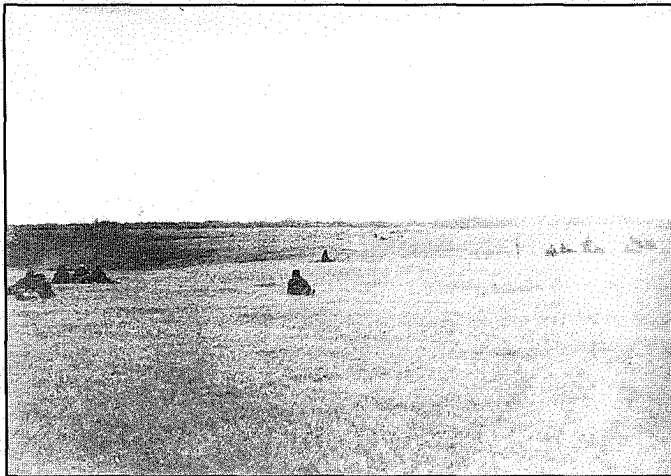
Peters produced a number of photographs of the Indian chiefs coming to headquarters either to surrender or to proclaim their loyalty. These catch the ambivalence of powerful men caught in the uncertainty of a position which they cannot control and their attempts to retain their dignity.



"Riel a Prisoner"

This often-reproduced image depicts the Métis leader as a lone and mystical figure, as he so often was before and during the rebellion, while his militia guards look on in some awe from the distance.

NAC C-3459



"First at Fish Creek"

Much more important for the military historian than the previous photographs are the sometimes-blurred shots of action itself. Most instructive are a sequence taken at Fish Creek. The militia's scouts in their advance to contact tripped the Métis ambush. In "First at Fish Creek" we see the militia vanguard gone to ground, unfortunately skylined for the Métis hidden in the wooded, reverse slope coulee in the background. In "A Battery Supporting the Guns" is the reality of late nineteenth century infantry tactics -- skirmishers firing prone toward an unseen enemy. Both these images bring us much closer to the "empty battlefield" of the twentieth century than to the massed infantry of the Crimea or even of the American Civil War.



"A Battery Supporting the Guns"

"Grenadiers Relieving the 90th Fish Creek"

By contrast with the other two Fish Creek shots, this is fairly teeming with figures, but illustrates the tactical dilemma becoming apparent for all commanders: troops must disperse to survive, but must be concentrated to control their firepower and maintain discipline.



NAC C-3455



NAC C-3462

"General Meeting Priests"



NAC C-3463

"Shelling Batoche, Last Shot before the Attack on the Guns"

The images taken at Batoche also illustrate the new warfare. "General Meeting Priests" is a jerky shot, but has a certain immediacy as Middleton is before the Roman Catholic clergy in front of the Batoche Rectory. The normally prudent general is pictured again running into a trap. Father Fourand later reported,

The general seems very worried, looking right and left for the enemy who were not revealing their presence anywhere. He arrives at the mouth of the Métis guns without knowing where they are. We tell him: Beware, you are at Batoche, you are expected on all sides.¹⁴

Only seconds after this shot was taken, the Métis opened fire on Middleton, on Peters and on the front of the column. A resulting photograph is most evocative of all. In "Shelling Batoche, Last Shot before the Attack on the Guns" the photographer has portrayed a part of his own command in the heat of action in a situation fraught with danger. In the next few minutes, Peters' personal example in clearing the Métis infiltrating close to his unlimbered guns rallied Middleton's surprised militia force.¹⁵



NAC C-18942

"French and his Men"



NAC C-17611

"Scouts on Lookout"

One last aspect of the campaign highlighted by these photographs is the changing nature of cavalry late in the nineteenth century. The troopers seen here are not the beaux sabreurs of the Napoleonic Wars, but frontiersmen with rifles in workaday cowboy dress, mounted on prairie ponies, men whom Middleton found infinitely more useful than the militia cavalry sent from the East, much to the latter's chagrin.¹⁶

At the end of the short campaign, Captain Peters, like all the militia soldiers, returned east, back to his station in the Quebec Citadel. He continued in the service, commanding the newly-formed "C" Battery sent to Victoria, British Columbia, in 1887, then in a variety of staff appointments until his retirement as a colonel in Victoria in 1910. He continued to photograph, showing at the exhibition of the Photographic Society of Philadelphia in 1886 and becoming the first president of the Quebec Camera Club in 1887. In 1888 he commanded an aid to the civil power expedition to the Skeena River by "C" Battery and HMS *Caroline*. The expedition was a peaceful occupation, but twelve of his images were published in *The Dominion Illustrated*.¹⁷ Photography was only one of his hobbies, along with, in his younger days, rowing, horsemanship (his horse twice won the Queen's Plate) and hunting and, in his mature years, golf and fishing. Many of his photographs record fishing and hunting expeditions.

Peters was not the first photographer of Canada's armed forces, but he was certainly a pioneer in capturing action on the battlefield in an era in which the nature of that action was changing drastically. Indeed, it is not until 1898 at San Juan Hill in Puerto Rico and in 1900 in South Africa, that the camera again succeeds in capturing the immediacy of combat.

Notes

1. To his horror he found that many of the militiamen had never before fired live ammunition.
2. T. Bland Strange. *Gunner Jingo's Jubilee* (London: Remington, 1893), p.415.
3. Lilly Koltun, ed., *Private Realms of Light: Amateur Photography in Canada, 1839-1940* (Markham, Ont.: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1984), p.323; H.J. Morgan, *The Canadian Men and Women of the Time* (Toronto: 1898), p. 817; [Canada, Dept. of Militia and Defence], *The Quarterly Militia List of the Dominion of Canada*, Corrected to 1st January 1909, pp.39, 311.
4. Helmut Gernsheim, in collaboration with Alison Gernsheim. *A Concise History of Photography* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), p.142.
5. Ralph Greenhill, *Early Photography in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), pp.58-59.
6. Transcript in office file PH1-1527. Peters, James, Photography Acquisition and Research Section, National Archives of Canada.
7. Peter Robertson. *Irréductible vérité: les photographes militaires canadiens depuis 1885/ Relentless Verity; Canadian Military Photographers since 1885* (Les Archives publiques du Canada/Public Archives of Canada Series; Québec, Qué.: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1973), p.93; Bill Belier, "James

Peters: Canada's First Military Photographer," *Photographic Canadiana*. X (May-June 1984), p.8; "Photographs Taken under Fire," *The Canadian Militia Gazette*, I (15 December 1885), transcript in PH1-1527; Brian Coe. *Cameras; from Daguerreotypes to Instant Pictures* (n.p.: Crown Publishers, 1978), pp.147-148.

8. "Photographs Taken under Fire," op. cit.
9. "Photographs in Action," *The Morning Chronicle* (Quebec, Que.), Saturday, 20 June 1885, clipping in PH1-1527. Peters' lack of paraphernalia may be contrasted with Fenton, whose "van" attracted Russian artillery fire in the Crimea, and with Matthew Brady, whose developing waggon overturned in the chaos of the Northern defeat at the First Manassas in July 1861.
10. Quoted in R.H. Caldwell, "Butcher or Bolt: Responses to Nineteenth Century War in the Canadian North West in 1885" (Unpub. M.A. thesis, Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston, Ont., 1987), p.8.
11. The original prints exist in two albums within the Frederic Hatheway Peters Collection, National Archives of Canada. At least one other set of prints exists, a presentation album made for Sir Adolphe Caron, Minister of Militia and Defence in 1885, now held at the Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston, Ont. Peters disposed of his negatives after his retirement.
12. "Photographs Taken under Fire," op. cit.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Quoted in Walter Hildebrandt. *The Battle of Batoche: British Small Warfare and the Entrenched Métis*, rev. ed. (Studies in Archaeology, Architecture and History; Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites, Canadian Parks Service, Environment Canada, 1989), p.45.
15. *Ibid.*, pp.46-52.
16. Sir Fred Middleton, *Suppression of the Rebellion in the North West Territories of Canada, 1885*, G.H. Needler, ed. (University of Toronto Studies: History and Economics Series, vol. XI; Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1948), p.10; C.P. Stacey, ed., *Introduction to the Study of Military History for Canadian Students*, 6th ed., 4th rev. (n.p.: Directorate of Training, Canadian Forces Headquarters, n.d.), p.79; George T. Denison, *Soldiering in Canada; Recollections and Experiences* (Toronto: G.N. Morang, 1900), pp.283-285.
17. *The Dominion Illustrated*, 27 October 1888, pp.264-265, copy in PH1-1527.

Owen Cooke served as Chief Historical Archivist at the Directorate of History, Department of National Defence, until his retirement in 1996. He is the compiler of the three editions of the bibliography, *The Canadian Military Experience*. His interest in James Peters began while studying photography at the Ottawa School of Art.

Peter Robertson recently retired after 32 years as an Archivist within the Photography Acquisition and Research Section of the National Archives of Canada. He is the author of *Relentless Verity: Canadian Military Photographers since 1885*, in which several of the photographs of James Peters first appeared.