

# Professional Training Put to the Test

## The Royal Military College of Canada and Army Leadership in the South African War 1899-1902

by Major A.B. Godefroy, CD

The detailed analysis of leadership and command in the Canadian Army continues to progress after decades of academic drought that saw little serious consideration or publication on the topic. In addition to the recent release of two well-known volumes, *Generalship and the Art of the Admiral* and *Warrior Chiefs*, a handful of articles have surfaced in related journals such as *Canadian Military History*, *Canadian Military Journal* and *The Army Doctrine and Training Bulletin*.<sup>1</sup> While certainly valuable contributions, these publications are also noticeable by the remaining gaps they identify in this particular field of study. Essentially, the majority of analysis to date deals with the period of the Second World War and after. Canada's First World War leadership has received only passing academic attention from Canadian military historians, and the period prior to that, say from 1855 to 1914, is given even less consideration. As a result, many questions about the history and nature of leadership and command in the Canadian Army remain unexplored.<sup>2</sup>

The existing military schools in both the United States and Great Britain were examined for their feasibility as a role model for the Canadian military school for officers. Though the Dufferin Commission (named for the Canadian governor-general who initiated the study) favoured the British schools, both Colonel Patrick Leonard MacDougall, the adjutant-general of the Canadian militia, and Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Bland Strange, then the senior British officer commanding the Gunnery School at Quebec, proposed that the college be modeled after the West Point Military Academy in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Strange had visited West Point on his own initiative and then argued that the mathematics based curriculum and the fact that West Point trained all arms of the Army (Sandhurst trained the cavalry and infantry officers while the artillery and engineer candidates attended Woolwich) was the best example to emulate. With a limited defence budget and a small officer candidate pool, RMC needed to be able to qualify all arms needed for Canada's infant permanent force.

### *Few publications examine the army officer corps as an institution during its early years.*

Much of the literature on army leadership and command that has been produced to date concentrates either on the theoretical aspects of the topic or a single biographical analysis of a senior army officer. Few publications, if any, examine the army officer corps as an institution or the organizations that fed it during its early years. Less still examine the role of that institution in wartime.<sup>3</sup> The aim of this article is to examine the role of The Royal Military College of Canada (RMC) in providing officers for the Canadian Army during the South African War (1899-1902). By examining both the institution and the army officers it produced, a number of important issues related to the military and political tribulations of training and assigning leadership and command in wartime are revealed, some of which continue to be present in the Army today.

#### **A MILITARY COLLEGE IN CANADA**

In 1869, a Canadian government commission on military education requested a report on the feasibility of establishing a military college in Canada to provide a source of professionally educated and trained officers for service in the British Army and the Canadian permanent force and

West Point believed that it was more important to train the mind than to just give it information. Mathematics was established as the basis of its entire curriculum during the late nineteenth century. This had led to many well-trained men. Unfortunately, the West Point Academy guaranteed no military employment after graduation. As a result the school saw many of its better graduates pursue civilian occupations rather than become career soldiers.<sup>5</sup> The Canadian government sought means to avoid this problem. One solution was to obtain for Canadian officers potential access to British postings and advanced military training courses that were superior to anything in the United States, making a military career in Canada more attractive.<sup>6</sup>

The decision to create a professional school of arms in Canada came from the newly elected Liberal Prime Minister, the Honourable Alexander Mackenzie, who entered office in November 1873.<sup>7</sup> After some consideration and planning, his Minister of Militia and Defence, the Honourable William Ross, entered a bill in Parliament in May 1874.<sup>8</sup> It read:

*An institution shall be established for the purpose of imparting a complete education in all branches of military tactics, fortification, engineering and general scientific knowledge in subjects connected with and necessary to a thorough knowledge of the military profession and for qualifying officers for command and staff appointments. Such institution to be known as the Military College, and to be located in one of the garrison towns of Canada.<sup>9</sup>*

Essentially, the bill called for the combination of the West Point model and the higher-level English military schools into a four-year program. This, Ross felt, would meet Canadian needs for an all-arms school that could turn out any type of officer required.

After some debate over where the new military college should be situated, a decision was made. Partially due to its rich military heritage and partially due

The issue of creating interest in professional soldiering in Canada was a problem. In spite of all the precautions taken by Colonel Fletcher, a Scots Fusilier Guards officer posted to Canada as Dufferin's personal secretary and responsible for recruiting young gentlemen into RMC, it was still difficult to attract men as there was little promise of a military future after graduation. In 1876 the size of the small Canadian regular force was insufficient to guarantee all RMC graduates a career in Canada's military. A proposition was put forward by Colonel Edward Osborne Hewitt, the first Commandant of RMC, for the creation of an expanded Permanent Force that would create futures for his cadets, but the idea was tabled for some time. When the Permanent Force was finally enlarged in 1883, it seemed that many of the available officer positions were given to unqualified individuals rather than professionally trained RMC graduates

units in Canada that might be interchangeable with British units.<sup>12</sup> In reality it only served to ensure that the British Army, not the Canadian Permanent Force, would receive Canada's best potential officers.

The lack of RMC graduates entering the Canadian Permanent Force had received negative public reaction. Captain Ernest F. Wurtele, an RMC graduate of 1882, noted ten years later that for every graduated cadet that was in either the Canadian Permanent Force or the public service of Canada, there were two serving in the Imperial forces and two more privately employed as civilian engineers of some kind. This put into question the whole aim of the college. Many critics saw RMC as nothing more than another tool of the government, a place of political patronage and appointment much like the Permanent Force itself. Even some members of the Canadian military were opposed to the college. The militia battalions, of which there were eighty-nine by the 1890s, argued

---

### ***...creating interest in professional soldiering in Canada was a problem...***

---

to its suitability over the other considered site at Quebec City, Kingston was chosen as the place for the new school of arms.<sup>10</sup> Sufficient room and buildings were available at Point Frederick, on the peninsula next to Fort Henry, to be converted for the college's use. Also a fence was built across the peninsula to control access to the officers' quarters. This fence was later improved into a stronger stonewall. The Stone Frigate was renovated and turned into officer accommodations, and other buildings were constructed as required.

The first cadets, a class of eighteen young gentlemen, reported to the college on 1 June 1876. Each cadet was issued a college number and given the temporary title of "gentleman cadet." When they had completed their studies four years later, some would become officers as expected, but not all ended up in military careers as hoped. Contrary to logic, political patronage often won out over military professionalism, and no favoritism was shown to the "old eighteen" in guaranteeing military commissions in the Canadian Army following graduation.

for political patronage reasons. Though this was not always the case, there were nevertheless many RMC students who graduated with no hope of ever serving out a military career in the Canadian Army. Colonel Fletcher, therefore, proposed another alternative, even though it was somewhat counter-intuitive. He suggested that RMC graduates might be allowed to apply for commissions in the British and Imperial forces. Though this would definitely attract more men to RMC, it did nothing to build Canada's own indigenous force structure. Colonel Hewitt managed to secure a number of commissions for RMC graduates in the British Army from the War Office in London.<sup>11</sup> When the first RMC class graduated in 1880, there were four commissions available for the best cadets in the Imperial forces. Selby Smyth, the Canadian Minister of Militia and Defence, commented in his annual report in 1878 that this would be "another link in the chain that binds us altogether." It was hoped that this would be a preliminary move towards the establishment of Permanent Force

strongly that their own needs were being largely neglected to maintain RMC and the tiny Permanent Force.<sup>13</sup> Some members of Parliament also brought the issue forward. In June 1895 during a debate in the House of Commons, William Mulock, a Liberal party member from the electoral riding of North York, Ontario, chastised the government for wasting precious government funds on professional soldier development. He complained loudly that the college was perceived as nothing more than "a place where a few young fellows, who have more money than brains, play soldier for four years at the expense of the Canadian tax-payer."<sup>14</sup> Both he and many other politicians and officers felt that it was up to the militia, and not a regular force, to provide for the defence of Canada.

Britain also drew increasing numbers of graduates from RMC into the British Army throughout the 1880s in an effort to respond to gaps in its own order of battle, clearly suggesting the product Canada produced was adequate by British

standards. In some instances, the British relied heavily on the Canadian college to support its own officer corps. A Russian victory over an Afghan force at Penjdeh in Transcaspia in March 1885 caused great concern in the War Office in London about the state of readiness of the British Army. It was felt that if Britain had to engage the Russians again, the Army would suffer large shortages of qualified officers. In response to this potential threat, in April 1885 the War Office offered to Canada an additional twenty-six commissions in the British Army over and above the usual four commissions offered every year. It sought six artillery officers, ten engineers and ten officers of either infantry or cavalry.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, if RMC and its recent graduates could not fill the positions, London was prepared to offer the commissions to officers of the Canadian Permanent Force and active militia. In the end Britain received twenty-eight officers from RMC in 1885. In 1888 another offer was made and again RMC responded. In addition to the usual four commissions, the War Office offered an additional six commissions in the Royal Engineers and two in the Royal Artillery.

Such moves were indicative of Britain's confidence in RMC's ability to produce professionally competent officers for service in either colonial or British forces. Additionally, it also demonstrated that Canada's decision to base its military officer education in mathematics was paying off. Britain needed technically trained officers, and RMC was capable of supplying those gentlemen. Others might argue that London simply had no choice, but it did. There was a plethora of British militia officers to choose from not counting the engineer and artillery graduates of Woolwich Academy. However, those Canadian cadets who had entered into British service to date had performed admirably, and the War Office could see no reason not to continue its exploitation of RMC as a resource for officers. By 1889 Britain had taken seventy-five RMC cadets into its armed force, just over a quarter of all cadets that had graduated from Kingston thus far.<sup>16</sup>

## RMC'S FIRST WAR— SOUTH AFRICA

Repeated attempts by various parties in Canada to get the country involved in Britain's foreign wars had met with little initial success, creating few opportunities for its professional officers and soldiers to put their skills to the ultimate test—battle. For RMC this was both frustrating and challenging, for it brought the whole purpose of the college's existence in question and put it under considerable political scrutiny during the 1880s and 1890s. Canada was unlikely to come under direct threat of attack, and those insurrections and invasions that had occurred in the past were adequately if not effectively handled by the British Army and Canadian militia. Additionally, dubious handling of the college's affairs and poor leadership in the office of the Commandant during this period caused a great deal of concern over RMC's viability. As the century drew to a close, it appeared that there might be no desire, if yet a requirement, to have an institution for the training of professional officers in Canada. However, two factors were critical in changing this view and potentially saving the college from closure. The first was the appointment of Colonel Gerald C. Kitson as commandant, and the second was the beginning of the largest conflict that Canada had fought in since the War of 1812.

The improved direction and success of the Royal Military College was due largely to the efforts of Colonel Gerald C. Kitson, who served as commandant from 1896 to 1900. An officer in the King's Royal Rifles, Kitson had considerable staff experience. After an initial tour as aide de camp to the brigadier-general in Aldershot, and a tour as the General Officer Commanding Western District in 1884-85, he was posted to the staff in India. He served in Bengal as district staff officer in 1890, fought in the Manipur campaign in 1891 and then served as deputy assistant adjutant general at Meerut until 1892. He was promoted to assistant adjutant general and served at Umballa until 1894. Upon taking up the Canadian appointment at RMC, he was promoted to lieutenant-colonel.

Kitson was well aware that the solution to turning out better officers from RMC did not lie in the promise of a commission in the Permanent Force or the British Army. This may have well been the end, but it was not the means. Even if all the officer positions in the Permanent Force had been reserved for RMC graduates, there still were not enough places to post them all in proper positions. Kitson instead turned his attention towards improving the overall reputation of the college, which he hoped would lead to the decision to expand Canada's Permanent Force if he could provide the qualified officers to command it. A direct means of accomplishing this aim began with the improvement of the college's quality of education. Kitson retained RMC's unique combination of military training and general and technical (civilian) skills. He released ineffective instructors from the faculty and staff and replaced them with more competent professors, many of whom were serving British officers with operational experience.<sup>17</sup> Kitson was not totally free of the political gaming that surrounded affairs at the college, but he managed to accomplish many of his goals in spite of it. It was through his improvements that RMC was able to attain the level of effectiveness required to meet the demands of war.

There is no doubt Kitson's new policy and direction also accounted for the large turnaround in college attendance. His efforts to improve the image of the college as a viable institution for Canadian defence met with great success and resulted in increased attendance between 1896 and 1900, from an average of forty-five cadets a year to well over seventy. In 1900, the college boasted a battalion of seventy-six cadets, not including another twenty-four cadets that were commissioned that year into war service without graduating.

Part of Kitson's success as commandant can be attributed to his good working relationship with the General Officer Commanding (GOC) the Canadian militia, Major-General Sir Edward Thomas Henry Hutton. Kitson had been a brother officer of Hutton in the 60<sup>th</sup> Rifles and addressed him as "my dear old Curl." When Hutton was

chosen for the appointment of GOC, Kitson was delighted.<sup>18</sup> The two collaborated on many projects for improving the overall level of Canadian officers, including the establishment of a staff course program modeled after the course pursued at the British Staff College at Camberly, England. Officers were trained in movement of troops, military history and the framing of orders. Theoretical work was then complemented by practical “staff rides.” The first course was held in Kingston in February 1899, which proved to be very successful and graduated twelve officers.<sup>19</sup> As an aside, to ensure that Kitson would be senior to the members of the staff courses at RMC, Hutton promoted him to full colonel.<sup>20</sup> This promotion was authorized through the War Office in London as the Canadian Militia Act did not make provisions for promotion beyond the rank of lieutenant-colonel, however, Kitson, who Hutton regarded as his de facto second-in-command in Canada, had deserved this recognition for his success at training officers through RMC.

In addition to improving commissioned officer career training Hutton also made significant changes in the future career progression of officer cadets. Following a report on Canada’s defence preparedness prepared by a combined British/ Canadian government commission, Major-General Hutton implemented a series of recommendation aimed at creating viable military careers for RMC graduates. In 1899, the GOC announced that beginning that year the Permanent Force and the Instructional Corps would be largely officered from then on by RMC graduates. All of the Royal Canadian Artillery positions and half of the Permanent Force cavalry and infantry officer positions were to be reserved for RMC graduates. Also two Army Service Corps commissions in the British Army would be reserved for RMC, increasing the number of annual positions available from five to seven. These improvements to officer career progression could not have come at a better time, with war breaking out in South Africa that same year.

In a war whose roots were over half a century old, Canada’s involvement only came at its watershed. Historians often disagree upon whether the South African war merits interpretation in



**The Ablest Officer to Command the Canadian Militia: Major General Edward Hutton served as General Officer Commanding the Canadian Militia from 1898 to 1902 and did much to enhance officer training, and supported the efforts to improve the Royal Military College. (Courtesy National Archives of Canada)**

socio-economic or ethno-cultural terms or even as a piece in the larger European rivalry over the partition of the continent. Debating the true nature of the origins of the war lie outside the scope of this article, however, a brief overview of the origins of the conflict and Canada’s relationship to it is germane to this discussion.<sup>21</sup>

Dutch peasants arrived in South Africa when the Dutch East India Company established a strategic post and provisioning station at the Cape of Good Hope. The British arrived soon after, and their presence was solidified after England’s purchase of the colony in 1815. In 1820 the first of four thousand British immigrants arrived, and almost immediately an acrimonious relationship was established between the two groups. A major irritant to the Boers was the intrusive nature of the British settlers and British law, which altered the economic and social relationship of the colony.

British law caused further discomfort with Parliament’s abolition of slavery in 1833. The Boers, whose livelihoods depended to some extent on slave labour, saw this move as an open threat to their material existence in the

colony. Distraught by British bullying, over five thousand Boers and as many slaves, largely from the Graaf Reinet district of Cape Colony, moved to the interior of the continent to free themselves of British legal and administrative control. Once across the Orange River, the Dutch established the Orange Free State and the Transvaal.<sup>22</sup>

The subsequent troubled triangular relationship between the British, Boers and the Bantu people further worsened after the British annexation of Natal in 1843. Though the Boers sought to retain their independence from any British relationship, fighting with the Zulu in 1877 forced them to seek British military and monetary assistance. This cooperation, however, was short-lived, for the Boers under Paul Kruger and Piet Joubert led a successful rebellion to free Boer territories and economic activity from British control in 1880-81. Soon after, the Transvaal began to prosper and increase its economic power with the development of gold and diamond mining and the public support of Germany. Britain saw this development as a bona fide threat to its own power in the region and sought means to challenge Boer supremacy on the South African coast.<sup>23</sup>

In 1899 Britain invoked policy over the equality of the white races in Africa, designed more to protect the rights of British colonists in the Transvaal, that directly challenged Boer politics and policy. After a failed diplomatic attempt to resolve the issue, Britain increased its South African garrison and made plans for the transfer of further troops to the peninsula. Seeing the obvious military threat, Kruger demanded the immediate withdrawal of the additional British forces. His demand was ignored. Seeing no other alternative for their survival, Boer troops moved into British territory on October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1899.

As the South African crisis developed, Ottawa found itself under pressure to make public its position in the affair. As a loyal member of the British Empire, the Canadian Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier openly expressed his sympathy for Great Britain in her efforts to secure equal rights for British subjects in the Transvaal.

However, he was faced with the difficult task of demonstrating solid support that would satisfy the majority English-speaking population that favoured the war, while not isolating the smaller yet significant French-speaking population that did not. However, as the war drew closer, demand for direct participation grew in English speaking Canada. The government found it had little choice. Canada was not yet sure it would be able to survive without British protection, which meant in return it had to ensure some contribution to the system of mutual Imperial defence. On October 13<sup>th</sup>, 1899, two days after the war began, Sir Wilfrid Laurier announced that Canada would dispatch a force not to exceed one thousand men in support of British operations in South Africa. The following day orders were issued for the enrollment of volunteers.

Once the decision had been made to commit troops to South Africa, the next issue to come to the fore was that of who should command the force and its components. The number of

Francois-Louis Lessard the cavalry detachment. Overall command of the force was bestowed upon Lieutenant-Colonel William Dillon Otter. A number of additional officers were also slated as supernumeraries or as “special duty” officers within the contingent. Furthermore, the contingent itself was structured into a regiment of two battalions, permitting the need for a regimental administrative structure and hence many more Canadian officers.<sup>24</sup>

The impact of the South African War was felt immediately at RMC. When the war broke out, Kitson suddenly found himself with the additional tasks of procuring horses and other materials for the new Canadian contingents deploying to South Africa. Other members of the staff also quickly found themselves with additional duties connected with the organization of forces for the war.<sup>25</sup> It seemed that Hutton had placed his faith solely in Kitson and his staff to get things ready in time. The situation worsened, however, when almost all the British officers serving at the

cadets. Kitson described them as “an exceptionally fine lot of men” and recommended nine of the class for commissions in the British Army.<sup>26</sup> In September, with the new recruits, the college had a strength of eighty-seven cadets, but this changed when the war started a month later.

Colonel Hubert Foster had been tasked to organize the first Canadian contingent to South Africa in October 1899 as the GOC was absent in British Columbia. Foster completed his task and then proceeded to England for an interview with the Commander-in-Chief, Lord Wolsley, to determine what further effort Canada might make in terms of military support. Wolsley inquired whether or not Kitson could supply an amount of reputable young men for commissions in the British Army. Once again, the strain that war placed on England’s officer corps was felt, and it needed to fill the many gaps that existed within its own army. Wolsley admitted to Foster that the War Office was at the end of its resources for officers and was now giving active

---

***The struggle between politics and military professionalism is clearly evident.***

---

people seeking a commission in the Canadian South African contingent far exceeded the initial number of positions available, and this led to a considerable amount of squabbling over exactly who should be chosen to go. Naturally, many prominent families immediately sought to use their political patronage to secure commissions for their sons, however, such an approach was not always successful. In the end the officer corps of the Canadian contingents deployed to South Africa came from a variety of backgrounds.

Command of the first contingent was based on a plan authored by Colonel Hubert Foster, chief staff officer to Major-General Sir Edward Thomas Henry Hutton, the General Officer Commanding the Canadian militia. It was decided that Lieutenant-Colonel Charles W. Drury would command the artillery detachment, Lieutenant-Colonel Lawrence Buchan the infantry, and Lieutenant-Colonel

college were ordered back to their units in England, and many of them headed for South Africa or other postings. The second staff course then underway at the college had to be cancelled when Kitson lost his British instructors and many of the officers attending the course had to return to their units for duty in South Africa or elsewhere. However, eight of the twelve officers that had graduated from the first course were selected for service in South Africa, attesting to the value of the staff course at RMC and ensuring its continuation when circumstances permitted it. In addition six officers of the Royal Canadian Regiment who were taking the militia long course at RMC were also ordered to return to their respective depots in October. For the time being, Kitson’s plan to reform the Canadian officer corps had to wait.

The cadet body was also greatly affected by the war. In June 1899, RMC graduated fourteen officer

service commissions to untrained British militia officers. Wolsley further indicated that he was seeking twenty or thirty RMC cadets fit for British regular army commissions. Foster replied, “certainly,”<sup>27</sup> and promised to forward the request to Canada’s governor-general, Lord Minto.<sup>28</sup>

The request only furthered the difficulties for getting RMC graduates into Canadian service. Despite every effort towards making RMC the main source of officer candidates for Canadian units, the first contingent deploying to South Africa acquired most of its officers from other sources. For example, of the forty-nine officers assigned to the 2<sup>nd</sup> (Special Service) Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment of Infantry, only nine were graduates of RMC. The remainder were drawn from the Canadian militia. The reality of the matter was that the Canadian government at first did not call on RMC to provide professionally trained officers for its field force, as it

expected to fill its officer positions using select members of Canada's Permanent Force and through various patronage appointments. Rather, RMC called on the government for consideration in the planning and appointment of officers for the contingent. On December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1899, Captain Ernest F. Wurtele, the secretary-treasurer of the RMC Club of Canada, forwarded a list of graduates who had contacted him offering their services for South Africa to the Minister of Militia and Defence and the General Officer Commanding the militia. The reply was as follows:

*Sir,*

*I am desired by Major General Hutton to acknowledge the receipt of your telegram of the 21<sup>st</sup> inst. [sic], in which you state that graduates of the Royal Military College are offering for service in South Africa, and expressing the readiness to forward the names if required. The Major General Commanding has been much pleased to note the many loyal and patriotic offers from graduates of the Royal Military College which have reached him. While he will be glad to receive the list of graduates you refer to, he cannot hold out encouragement to you to expect that any selections can be made from among them at present, as the list of officers is about completed.*

*I have the honour to be,*

*Sir,*

*Your obedient servant,  
B. H. Vidal, Lieutenant Colonel  
Chief Staff Officer*<sup>29</sup>

The struggle between politics and military professionalism is clearly evident in this issue. While the South African war gave the Canadian government full potential to make use of its officer resources, it missed the opportunity to do so. Foster, who had been responsible for planning the command and order of battle of the first Canadian contingent, failed to make use of the officer resources at RMC to complete this task. At the same time, he attempted to keep Wolsley and the War Office in London pleased with a steady stream of technically trained officers from

Canada. The reasons for taking such actions are not very clear. The report of the GOC in years 1899 and 1900 state that he was pleased with the fact that so many of the cadets had received commissions in the British and Imperial services, "prov[ing] the excellence of the education afforded by the curriculum of the college."<sup>30</sup> However, he was also distraught at the fact that so few of the RMC graduates went on to serve in Canada's Army. He advised, "that in view of the cost to the state of the education of these young gentlemen, it would be a national economy to offer them some practical inducement to secure their services to the Active Militia and the Permanent Corps."<sup>31</sup> Foster may have simply made a poor decision, or perhaps he felt he was acting in Kitson's best wishes by ensuring more Imperial commissions for the college. To make matters more complicated, Hutton seemed to contradict his own report when, prior to leaving Canada in February 1900, he persuaded the Earl of Minto to inform Wolsley that RMC would indeed furnish the required officers.<sup>32</sup> Whatever the case, in the end the Canadian military was being sapped of its own ability to enhance its forces in the field.

Kitson was furious over the issue. After receiving a wire from the Minister of Militia and Defence asking for detailed information about cadets of two years standing or more, Kitson and his staff adjutant, Major McGill, realized that they were being kept out of a decision over the commissioning of cadets. Kitson had repeatedly insisted that he and his officers have control over this issue, otherwise the discipline of RMC would falter when lucrative Imperial commissions were offered even to those cadets at the bottom of the class. With no sense of competition, the cadets would have little reason to strive for excellence.

When instructions did finally arrive at RMC to select candidates for the extra Imperial commissions being offered, Kitson encountered some difficulty in getting "decent cadets" to accept them.<sup>33</sup> He later noted, "unfortunately our present senior class are a very poor lot, and apparently their parents are afraid of their boys being shot in South Africa."<sup>34</sup> However, the junior classes held a number of suitable applicants if

the War Office was willing to accept gentleman cadets of one and half year standing. Kitson sent his reply and recommendations to London and waited for an answer. The reply and confirmation of actual offers for specific commissions came only after considerable delay, and while Kitson waited, parents anxious to secure their son's futures continually harassed him.

The argument of getting RMC graduates into officer positions in Canadian contingents going overseas was now completely overshadowed by the issues surrounding the award of Imperial commissions. Kitson began to suspect that political patronage might affect the college's share of the Imperial commissions even though RMC was expected to be the main source to fill these positions. The recommendations Kitson forwarded to the Chief Staff Officer were returned to him, and he was told that Canada had not yet formally accepted the offer to supply candidates for those commissions. He began to suspect that the Minister of Militia and Defence might use the commissions for his own political purposes. To avoid this problem, an agreement was settled upon only after Kitson made his reservations loudly heard. In the end, Imperial officers in Canada were to recommend applicants to the Minister of Militia and Defence for whatever Imperial commissions may be offered, while the Minister could then reserve the right to deny any recommendations he saw unfit. However, the Minister could not make his own nominations, thus avoiding "official" political corruption in the issue.<sup>35</sup>

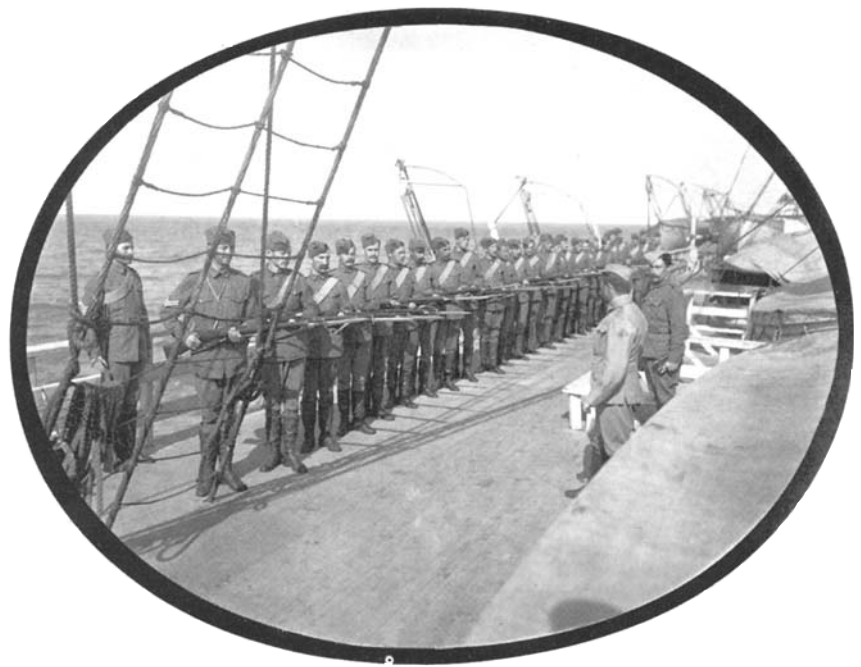
The political controversy over commissions at RMC had mixed results on the cadets. In March 1900, four cadets of the second class were commissioned in each of the Army Service Corps and Royal Artillery branches. In May, another four from the same class also went to the Royal Artillery. Of the three commissions offered in the Royal Engineers in June, cadets in the graduating class filled only two. The third went to a member of the second class. One member of the graduating class received a commission in the second Canadian contingent heading to South Africa.<sup>36</sup> Eight cadets commissioned later in the year all came

from junior classes. The remainder of the graduating class of 1900, over half of the whole class in fact, chose to pursue careers other than the military.<sup>37</sup> Kitson felt dejected and that his work to improve the college had been in vain. He left the office of Commandant later that year with a bittersweet taste in his mouth, commenting that he was “pretty sick of this school” and had done all that was possible to make it a better institution.<sup>38</sup> In the end, he should not have felt so bad, for fifteen of the thirty-one recruits who entered RMC in 1897 (the first class under his direction) served in South Africa with either the British or Canadian Army. For the period, it was better than average results.

### STRATHCONA’S HORSE

When prominent Canadian Donald A. Smith, better known as Lord Strathcona, put forward his proposal to dress and equip a unit of mounted rifles for service in South Africa, he reserved for himself the right to approve the nomination of all officers. Of course, the final judgement was left up to War Office in London, who throughout the selection process for Strathcona’s Horse denied only one officer recommendation. The man’s name was E. C. Parker, and he had raised a troop from Fort Steele, British Columbia, which he intended to command. Parker had previously been forced to resign from the British Army for conduct unbecoming an officer, and therefore his commission for lieutenant was refused. In the end Parker reverted to the rank of sergeant so he could serve anyway. There was no stopping his trip to South Africa.

Lord Strathcona’s reasoning for the strict officer selection policy was that “the matter was to be entirely non-political, the only qualification being the thorough fitness of the officers and men for the service required.”<sup>39</sup> Not wanting to leave himself open to charges of favoritism, Lord Strathcona even left the matter of choosing the commanding officer of the regiment to the Canadian military authorities.<sup>40</sup> After much consideration, Superintendent Samuel Benfield Steele of the North West Mounted Police was selected to command the unit. He, in turn, selected Constable Sergeant Robert Belcher to be his second-in-command. Belcher and Steele had



**Soldiers of Strathcona’s Horse training en route to South Africa. Reservations that the quality of unit officers were unfit to lead soldiers proved groundless. One quarter of the original 28 officers of the Regiment were RMC graduates, while 10 others were experience NWMP officers. (Courtesy Lord Strathcona’s Horse (Royal Canadians))**

worked closely for years and knew each other well.<sup>41</sup>

Steele’s selection of officers was done with equal care and consideration of the needs of the unit and the mission. The rank and file of Strathcona’s horse was handpicked for their ruggedness and skill as rangers, frontiersmen and cowboys. The men were all comfortable in the saddle and prone towards the outdoors. Almost all ranks had been drawn from the western provinces or the northwest mining towns. Accordingly, the officers had to meet the same standards.

However, the eastern military establishment expressed many reservations about the fitness and quality of the officers selected to lead what was considered by military standards of the day a rather unconventional force. The *Canadian Militia Gazette* commented in an article on February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1900, that:

*With the exception of Lieutenant Colonel Steele and three or four others, the selection of officers for the Strathcona Horse has been a distinct disappointment, and trouble may yet arise. In a case like this, when men are asked to take charge of irregular troops, there might have been some*

*deference paid to their wishes in the matter of choosing their staff. The material of the squadron is the very best that Canada could offer, magnificent fighting stuff, and it will be a shame if they are hampered and vexed by the placing over them of men whom they do not wish to follow. These westerners are not little lambs, and it is a dangerous proceeding to impose upon them young and inexperienced officers. They are not accustomed to take many orders from anyone, and when they do, it must be from a man who can show them his fitness to lead...<sup>42</sup>*

Such criticism was unfounded. Ten of the original twenty-eight officers were former members of the North West Mounted Police (NWMP). All of the officers had either police or militia service, and many had seen action in the Northwest Rebellion of 1885. Several had also served previously with the British regular army. Others still were graduates of RMC. The true crux of the matter was that there were, in fact, many men still desperately trying to secure commissions for themselves or their sons, most if not all of whom had no military training or experience whatsoever. Lord Strathcona had effectively pulled the rug out from

under their attempts at patronage within his unit.

Despite the clear intention of Lord Strathcona not to allow political patronage to affect the decision-making process, many military authorities were irritated by his organization, including Kitson. He was concerned that available Imperial commissions, especially for active service in South Africa, were not going to be given to RMC but rather to whoever was able to get at them first. Kitson had warned Minto that all the best young officers of the Canadian militia were already in South Africa, and many there would give anything for a permanent Imperial commission. Kitson believed that unless the selection of applicants for commissions from the War Office were made by Imperial officers in Canada, "the British army [would] be shot with all the useless ruffians, the lame, halt and blind that were piled into Strathcona's Horse."<sup>43</sup>

He should not have worried. The Royal Military College was well represented in this South Africa bound contingent. Of the original twenty-eight officers of the Strathcona's Horse, seven were RMC graduates. Four more RMC graduates served in the rank and file. The senior of the RMC group was No. 20, Major R. C. Laurie, who had graduated from the second class at RMC in 1881 and was serving with the North West Mounted Police at Foothills City when Steele arrived to recruit him. Laurie himself was then immediately dispatched to British Columbia to begin recruiting men for "C" Squadron of the regiment. The other RMC graduates included No. 251, R. M. Courtney, No. 290, J. E. Leckie, No. 332, G. H. Kirkpatrick and No. 375, H. S. Tobin. Ironically, Leckie's classmate, No. 291, P. W. Bell and Kirkpatrick's classmate, No. 339, A. W. Wilby both served in the ranks of Strathcona's Horse, as there was simply too few officer positions available to have them all commissioned for service. In fact, the original officers of the Strathcona horse were arguably the best and most experience group assembled for the South African contingent.

## CONCLUSION

To meet the demands of both Ottawa and the War Office in London,

between 1899 and 1902 RMC commissioned forty-three cadets directly into British and Canadian units heading for South Africa, in addition to the thirty-nine RMC graduates already serving with various dominion units that were sent to the war. Likewise, forty-three RMC graduates were serving directly with the Canadian contingents. Of those serving with the Canadians, fifteen went overseas with the 2<sup>nd</sup> (Special Service) Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment of Infantry, seven with the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Mounted Rifles, five with the Royal Canadian Field Artillery, eleven with Strathcona's Horse and five with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Mounted Rifles.

These 'RMC' officers repeatedly proved themselves in the field. Many of them were recognized for their efforts, while others were wounded or killed in the process. Like their comrades and the soldiers they led, these young men suffered from sickness and disease and the hardships of campaigning on the veldt. Those who returned to Canada had much experience and, in turn, ensured that those lessons learned in the war were reflected in the improvement of the Army at home. Like all lessons in war, however, they were not free and were paid for with young lives.

Politics aside, the war in South Africa was the first real test of RMC's ability to produce professionally trained soldiers. Though several ex-cadets had already proven themselves in the British Army, it was the first time the college drew directly from its graduating ranks and from its cadets not yet graduated. One then asks was the college capable of providing a sufficient number of officers for the Canadian expeditionary force for South Africa? On the surface, one could easily argue yes it did. In fact there were more than enough cadets and RMC graduates to fill Canadian officer positions, causing a good deal of competition for those spots that had not already been reserved for various patronage appointments. Not all RMC graduates that wanted to serve as officers in the Canadian contingents were able to do so. In some instances ex-cadets even resigned their militia or Permanent Force commissions to join one of the contingents as a private soldier.<sup>44</sup> As can be seen, however, there was no guarantee even in

wartime that military education and training would lead to a military career or operational service.

The South African war also brought an increased amount of attention to the college and its value as an educational institution. It was becoming increasingly evident that a young Canadian gentleman with an RMC diploma could do well either in the military or in civilian life. The college also provided a high quality education at relatively little expense, making it both affordable and attractive to many. In his report submitted to the House of Commons on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1900, the Honourable F. W. Borden, Minister of Militia and Defence (and later Prime Minister of Canada), stated that:

*It is a source of gratification that the excellence of the general and technical education imparted in the Royal Military College and of the training given therein is becoming year by year more widely known and more fully appreciated. A proof of this is found in the fact that last year there were more applicants for admission than there was accommodation for.<sup>45</sup>*

The downside to this was that still many of RMC's graduates were not pursuing military careers following graduation. The war may have attracted many young cadets to the college and to active service, but when it passed its climax, few from RMC were interested in pursuing the bush war and policing that followed the larger battles. Canada was still an uneventful military posting, and though many cadets wished to serve his Majesty, they wished to conduct that service anywhere other than in Canada. At home, an officer looking for adventure, operations and career advancement was left wanting.

Nevertheless, the war in South Africa impacted not only RMC but also the Canadian officer corps in general. In the wake of a war that opened the eyes of Britain to Canadian military capability, Canada's eyes were likewise focused on the needs and merits of a professionally led army. There was a new form of warfare brewing in the twentieth century, and while British



technology, doctrine and tactics were suitable for waging war against less talented adversaries, any fight against an equal would require greater mobility, firepower and, above all, professionally trained and competent leadership and command.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR...

Major Andrew B. Godefroy joined the Canadian Forces in 1991 as a field engineer. Since 1997 he has devoted his career to the tactical exploitation of space in support of military operations and is currently officer commanding the Canadian Forces Joint Space Support Team at the CFJOG, Kingston. Maj Godefroy holds a BA from Concordia University and a MA in War Studies from RMC. He is currently completing his PhD (on his own time) in the same field, specializing in science and international relations. A three-time recipient of the DND Security and Defence Forum scholarship, Maj Godefroy has written numerous articles on Canadian military history and strategic studies and currently serves on the editorial board of the *Canadian Military Journal*. He has had a long interest in the history of the early formation of the Canadian Army and is the author of *For Freedom and Honour? Canadians Executed in the Great War* (1998) and the forthcoming *Making Deadly Gentlemen: RMC and the Graduate Officer in the First World War* (2004).

## ENDNOTES

1. See Harris, S. and Horn, LCol. B. eds. *Generalship and the Art of the Admiral*, (St. Catharines: Vanwell Publishing, 2001); and *Warrior Chiefs* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2001).
2. There has yet to appear any detailed academic analysis of leadership and command of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in the First World War, and earlier period studies are likewise scarce. See Miller, Carmen. *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899-1902*. (Montreal, McGill-Queens U Press 1993); and though dated, the most detailed study of the origins and expansion of the Canadian Army remains Harris, S. *Canadian Brass: The Making of a Professional Army, 1860-1939*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).
3. By contrast the United States has developed a healthy study of its army leadership institutions both in war and peacetime. For examples see Atkinson, R. *The Long Gray Line: The American Journey of West Point's Class of 1966*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1989); Waugh, John C. *The Class of 1846: From West Point to Appomattox—Stonewall Jackson, George McLellan, and Their Brothers*, (New York: Ballentine Books, 1994); and Yenne, B. *"Black '41": The West Point Class of 1941 and the American Triumph in WWII*, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1991).
4. The 1<sup>st</sup> Marquis of Dufferin, Frederick Temple Hamilton-Temple Blackwood, served as Canada's governor-general from 1872-1878. He was determined to strengthen Canada's connection with Britain and felt this could be best achieved through the improvement of the country's weak military.
5. Government of Canada. *Parliamentary Papers, 1870*, XXV, 635-637, Colonel P. MacDougall. Account of the System of Education at the United States Military Academy at West Point. Precise in *Militia Report 1873*, appendix No.9, pp. 221-223.
6. Preston, Richard A. *Canada's RMC*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), p. 17.
7. The Honourable Alexander Mackenzie (1822-1892) was Canada's Prime Minister from November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1873 to October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1878.
8. William Ross (1825-1912), Member of Parliament for Victoria, Nova Scotia, Minister of Militia and Defence (November 1873-September 1874) and lieutenant-colonel in the Canadian militia.
9. Canada. *Acts of Parliament of the Dominion of Canada*, 27 Vict. C.36, (Ottawa, 1876).
10. The proposed location and buildings at Quebec were already in use by the School of Gunnery.
11. Preston, *Canada's RMC*, pp. 66-68.
12. *Ibid.* p. 66.
13. Penlington, Norman. *Canada and Imperialism, 1896-1899*. (Toronto, 1965), pp.14-15. See also Debates of the House of Commons, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1895, pp. 2199-2200, William Mulock (Liberal, North York, Ontario).
14. Penlington, *Canada and Imperialism*, p. 14.
15. Colonial Office papers. CO 42/783, 69-75. See also Preston, *Canada and "Imperial Defence"*, pp. 162-163.
16. By 1889 a total of 302 cadets had been allotted numbers at the college of which 292 entered for studies.
17. Preston, *Canada's RMC*, pp. 149-160.
18. Canada. *Hutton Papers*, May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1898, p. 341.
19. Canada. *Hutton Papers*, February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1899, pp. 735-739.
20. Canada. *Hutton Papers*, September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1899, 66; and Canada. *SP. GOC's Report*, 1899, p. 27.
21. See Miller, Carmen. *Painting the Map Red*. Miller's book is the most comprehensive study of Canada's role in the war to date.
22. Miller, *Painting the Map Red*, p. 11.
23. *Ibid.* p. 12.
24. *Ibid.* pp. 50-51.
25. Preston, *Canada's RMC*, p. 172.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
27. Canada. *Hutton Papers*, December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1899, pp. 615-616. See also Preston, *Canada's RMC*, p. 173.
28. John Elliot Gilbert, Earl of Minto, GCMG, KG, (1845-1914), Scots Guards, served in Afghanistan (1879), and Egypt (1882); Military Secretary to Marquis of Lorne (1883-86), and Chief of Staff to Lord Middleton on the Canadian Northwest Rebellion campaign (1885); governor-general of Canada (1898-1904), and Viceroy of India (1905-1910).
29. RMC. *Proceedings of the Royal Military College Club of Canada, 1899*. No. 16, (Montreal, Chronicle Printing Co. 1900), pp. 122-125.
30. Canada. *SP.No.35. Report of the General Officer Commanding, January 1901*, (Ottawa, King's Printer 1901), p. 31.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
32. Canada. *Minto Papers* Vol.17, January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1900, p. 26.
33. Preston, *Canada's RMC*, pp. 173-174.
34. *Ibid.* p. 174.
35. *Ibid.* pp. 174-175.
36. RMC Archives. Cadet file No.515 Loudon, W. J.; See also RMC Review, (November 1921); and, *As You Were!*, p. 182. Gentleman cadet No.515 W. J. Loudon entered RMC in August 1899 and graduated with his Certificate of Military Qualification in December 1901. He was immediately appointed a subaltern in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Canadian Mounted Rifles, and sailed for South Africa with his new regiment in January 1902. Loudon fought at the Battle of Harts River where he was wounded. Returning to Canada at the end of the war, he went to work for the Canadian Pacific Railway in Montreal as a civil engineer.
37. *As You Were!* p. 175.
38. *Ibid.* p. 176.
39. Fraser, W. B. *Always a Strathcona*. (Clagary, Comprint Publishing Co. 1976), pp. 24-25.
40. It is no secret that Lord Strathcona would have like to see his old friend Colonel Sam Hughes command the unit, however to be fair and avoid personal attacks of patronage he resisted the temptation to become directly involved in the decision making cycle.
41. Fraser, *Always a Strathcona*, p. 26.
42. *Ibid.* p. 28.
43. Canada. *Minto Papers*, Vol.17. War Office. Cable from Grove, military secretary, to Kitson, March 20<sup>th</sup>, 1900, pp. 119-123.
44. For example, Gentleman Cadet No.491 K. Magee proceeded to South Africa as a corporal in 2RCRI, while No.341 F. E. Leach went as a private in 1CMR. In total 15 ex-cadets sailed for South Africa holding non-commissioned ranks. Some of these men later received commissions in the field or with the British army.
45. Canada. *Sessional Papers No.19, Report of the Deputy Minister, Department of Militia and Defence, April 1900.*, (Ottawa, Queen's Printer 1900), p. 64.