

NOTE

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Directorate of History
National Defence Headquarters
Ottawa, Canada
K1A 0K2

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Canada's First Military Attache

1. One of the first and very hesitant short steps taken by Canada into the arena of international affairs was the dispatch of an official military observer to the scene of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905.

2. The outbreak of this war in the far east had been anticipated by the Great Powers of the western world. Ever since Russia had forced China to lease her Port Arthur in 1898, and a branch line connected the Trans-Siberian Railway with this ice-free port on the Yellow Sea, providing easy access to the Northern Pacific Ocean, tiny Japan had been biding her time until she should be strong enough militarily to defeat the Russian giant in a limited war for control of Manchuria. The moment came on 8 February 1904, three days after protracted Russo-Japanese diplomatic negotiations were broken off. Warships of the Imperial Japanese Navy made a surprise attack on the Russian naval squadron at Port Arthur and achieved a modicum of success. Transports then began landing the First Imperial Japanese Army in friendly Korea. Its role was to march north into Manchuria. Here three Japanese field armies would act as a covering force, while a fourth army reduced Port Arthur. War was belatedly declared on 10 February 1904.¹

3. Then began a race by war correspondents to see who could get to the battle zone first and begin sending back authentic reports to newspapers in the western world. The accredited military observers, or attachés, of the Great Powers proceeded more sedately towards their approved

destinations with either the Japanese or Russian armies in the field. The British groups scheduled to serve with the 1st and 2nd Imperial Japanese Armies were headed by Lieutenant-Generals Sir Ian Hamilton and Sir William G. Nicholson respectively.

4. No one doubted that there would be much to observe that was new and only partially understood. Since the American Civil War, 1861-1865, and the Franco-Prussian War, 1870-1871, there had been a steady development in armaments. The small bore magazine rifle and smokeless powder, first employed extensively during the South African War, 1899-1902, made it possible for concealed defenders to decimate the ranks of any enemy advancing in close order across open ground. Even more devastating as a killer of advancing soldiers was the Maxim machine-gun used by both sides in South Africa. The question of artillery deployment required serious consideration. With the development of quick-firing field guns that could be fired by indirect gun-laying from a concealed position, there no longer might be any need to mass an army's artillery in open view of the enemy in order to support an attack.² Advanced military thinkers were convinced that the days of artillery driving up and unlimbering in the open were as dead as would be the battery which attempted to do so during a battle.³

5. Equally anxious to observe this conflict between white and yellow races was Colonel William D. Otter in far away Toronto, Canada. This very keen officer in Canada's tiny Permanent Active Militia had attracted considerable attention to himself during both the North-West Rebellion and the South African War. Now District Officer Commanding, Military District No. 2, with headquarters in Toronto,

he had let it become known to local newspapermen that he was interested in becoming a military attaché.⁴ Otter even spoke to the Minister of Militia and Defence, Sir Frederick Borden, and to Major-General The Lord Dundonald, the British officer then serving as General Officer Commanding the Canadian Militia. Lord Dundonald, however, told Otter that he was interested in sending only artillery officers and did not want to send a senior officer.⁵

6. Other interested permanent force officers, according to a news story which appeared in The Mail and Empire of Toronto on 12 February 1904, were Colonel C.W. Drury who was Director of Artillery at Militia Headquarters in Ottawa and Colonel T.D.B. Evans of the Royal Canadian Mounted Rifles. Equally interested officers of the Non-Permanent Active Militia were Colonel Sam Hughes, M.P. and Captain E.W.B. Morrison of the Ottawa Citizen.

7. This intelligence caused Otter to write a personal letter to Lord Minto, who was Governor General and Commander-in-Chief of whatever armed forces Canada might have at any one time. Minto replied that neither Drury nor Evans was being considered: only one junior officer, if any, would be sent from Canada as a military observer.⁶

8. Actually Lord Minto had already telegraphed the Colonial Secretary, Mr. Arthur Lyttleton, that the Canadian Government was anxious to send an artillery officer, not above the rank of major, to serve as a military attaché with the Japanese Army in the field. Minto strongly supported the request, which would appear to have originated with Lord Dundonald,⁷ and suggested that the Canadian officer should accompany the British attachés. Lyttleton immediately minuted the telegram, which reached the Colonial Office on 12 February, to both the Foreign Office and the War Office where it was favourably received. 8

9. Lord Dundonald selected Captain H.C. Thacker, R.C.A., a promising young artillery officer who had completed the British Army's gunnery staff course at Shoeburyness, Kent, England as recently as 23 December 1903. Herbert Cyril Thacker was a son of Major-General T. Thacker of the Indian Army. Although born in Poona in 1870, young Thacker had attended Upper Canada College in Toronto and the Royal Military College at Kingston. Commissioned into the Royal Canadian Artillery as a lieutenant on 10 October 1893, and immediately given a brevet captaincy, he had served creditably with the Yukon Field Force during the Gold Rush, 1898-1899 and in the South African War, 1899-1900. Effective 1 March 1901, he had obtained the substantive rank of captain. At the moment, Thacker was enjoying some leave in Toronto.

10. If Sir Frederick Borden showed little interest in the dispatch of Captain Thacker to Japan there were very good reasons why. The Minister of Militia and Defence had made some politically rash commitments when he had attended a meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence on 13 December 1903, during the course of an official visit to London, and he was now doing his best to have them omitted from the official minutes. There were also many changes to be made in the proposed new militia bill, if it were to conform to the reforms proposed for the British Army by the Esher Committee and state clearly that control of the militia was vested in the Canadian Government.⁹ In consequence, Lord Dundonald wrote directly to the Prime Minister, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, on 18 February as follows:

With regard to sending an officer to Japan. I think it would be very desirable to attach a young artillery officer to the British Staff out

there; I have selected Major [sic] Thacker who has just done very well in England in Artillery subjects, and whilst studying artillery he could study transport and other matters, he would of course act under Sir William Nicholson officially it would be stated I conclude "that Canada had sent an officer Major Thacker to be attached to Sir William Nicholson's Staff in Japan." I do think it would be wise to send this young officer and done in this way, I think the possible objections of certain people as to Militarism might be avoided. I spoke to His Excellency some time ago about the desirability of sending a young officer. The Imperial authorities are willing I hear. 10

11. No publicity was given to Captain Thacker's departure for Japan. On 2 March the Ottawa Citizen mentioned that two British officers en route to the far east as military observers had stopped off in Ottawa briefly to visit Lord Dundonald. On 4 March the Adjutant General advised the heads of the several directorates and services at Militia Headquarters of Thacker's mission and suggested that they submit a list of the topics about which they would like to be informed.¹¹

The Russo-Japanese War continued to occupy most of the front page of the Mail and Empire and other Canadian daily newspapers, but the wildest rumours were being printed because there was strict censorship of the press in Japan and foreign correspondents were not permitted to go where the fighting was until the last week in March.¹² By that time the First Imperial Japanese Army was functioning smoothly and unlikely to commit any blunder that would cause the Japs to "lose face" in western eyes.

12. On the other hand, British naval officers had witnessed the first Japanese landings in Korea and Lieutenant-General Sir Ian Hamilton's group of British military observers was following the First Army north to the Yalu River, where it decisively defeated the Russians on 30 April- 1 May 1904. Such preferential treatment could be justified by the fact of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 30 January 1902, and the

fact, later expressed by Sir Ian Hamilton, that the "Continental [i.e. German] army taken as her model by Japan regards the British army as nullity - a myth and non-existent."¹³

13. On 27 March Captain Thacker reached Tokyo. On the following day he reported to the military attaché at the British Embassy and was told that his attachment had been authorized by London.¹⁴ Thacker thereupon became a member of the group of foreign military attachés which would observe the operations of the Second Imperial Japanese Army in Manchuria. Headed by Lieutenant-General Sir William G. Nicholson, it included Colonel J.C. Hoad (Australia), Lieutenant-Colonel J.A.L. Haldane (General Staff and late infantry) Lieutenant-Colonel W.G. Macpherson, (Royal Army Medical Corps), Lieutenant-Colonel J.W.G. Tullock (Indian Army infantry) and two officers from each of France, Germany, Spain and the United States of America. It was 27 July, however, before General Nicholson's party was permitted to leave for the front.

14. Since the Second Imperial Japanese Army had commenced landing at Pi-tzu-wo, only 45 miles north-east of Port Arthur on 5 May, the military attachés in Tokyo became more and more frustrated as the days passed. There is a hint in Thacker's despatch of 10 June that the restrictions placed on Nicholson's group of attachés was "due partly to the many nationalities represented, & that they [the Japanese] cannot make an exception of the British without causing ill-feeling."¹⁵ His letter of 19 July to the Director of Intelligence in Ottawa evidenced his frustration:

The long delay of four months in Tokyo has been extremely unsatisfactory, & productive of practically no original information. Every difficulty was placed in the way of our making any observations as to the methods employed in

the mobilization, entraining, & embarkation of troops. As you will observe in the first paragraph of the Report of Lieut. Col. Macpherson, R.A.M.C., a copy of which is enclosed, this desire to maintain everything in absolute secrecy extends even to their Medical arrangements. Any requests to visit Ports of Embarkation, or any of the Military Institutions or Establishments in Japan have been either promptly refused, or pigeon-holed. I trust that when we get to the front a fair degree of latitude may be allowed us. I understand that a very strict censorship will be exercised over all our correspondence while at the front, therefore many details may have to be kept back pending our return. 16

What Thacker had been able to send back were copies or digests of specialist reports made by British officers - Lieutenant-Colonel Macpherson, for example - accounts released by Japanese officers in the field, and a few notes of his own.¹⁷

15. On 27 July Nicholson's party finally left Tokyo to join the 2nd Japanese Army. Three Japanese staff officers and two senior civil service interpreters were assigned to the party. Each military attaché was supplied with a horse, saddle and a groom by the Japanese war department. The most relevant paragraph in Nicholson's instructions follows:

It is understood that officers selected to represent the Army in India & H.M.'s Canadian & Australian Forces have received instructions regarding the points to which they should specifically direct their attention from the Commander-in-Chief in India & the General Officers Commanding the Canadian and Australian Forces respectively. Their Reports & Notes will therefore be forwarded in the original to the Q.M.G. in India & the General Officers Commanding the Canadian & Australian Forces, as soon as copies have been made or extracts taken for the information of the War Office. 18

On 8 August the party reached army headquarters which was then at Hai-cheng. On 26 August the attachés accompanied the advance towards Liao-yang, but they were unable to observe

closely the fighting which preceded its capture from the Russians. For one thing, they were kept too far back; for another, the local crop of grain, which grew to a height of 12-15 feet, simulated jungle conditions. Conditions were much more favourable in October, after the local crops had been harvested and during the fighting known as the Battle of Sha-ho. The previous restrictions were relaxed and it was possible to watch the troops manoeuvring in the open countryside. On 16 October the 2nd Army Headquarters and the attachés were established in the village of Shih-li-ho. They were still there, when Thacker was evacuated to Japan on medical grounds on 10 November.¹⁹ Lieutenant-Colonel Macpherson had decided that minor surgery and rest in Japan were the only sensible solution. Since Thacker would not be able to return to duty for a considerable period, and it appeared likely that the Russians were bound to lose this limited war, Sir William Nicholson decided that he should return to Canada after a suitable period of convalescence.²⁰ In consequence, Thacker missed the greatest battle of the war, fought at Mukden between 23 February and 10 March 1905 and with both sides entrenched. Since Thacker had been allocated to the 2nd Imperial Japanese Army, he would not likely have been able to observe the protracted siege of Port Arthur, where lessons more applicable to the trench warfare of the Western Front, 1914-1918, could have been studied. Japanese mass attacks against forts, the defences of which had been strengthened by an outer ring of barbed wire entanglements, were repulsed without too much difficulty by the defenders' magazine rifles, machine guns and quick-firing guns. For the first time in history, large searchlights were used to light up no-man's-

land and frustrate night attacks. Eventual Japanese success owed a great deal to extensive tunnelling, which enabled them to explode mines under hitherto impregnable strong points and demolish them. The other principal ingredients of Japanese success were their heavy artillery bombardments and the shortage of food within Port Arthur, which finally surrendered on 4 January 1905.²¹ Actually the war would drag on until 5 September 1905, when a Peace Treaty was signed at Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

16. Captain Thacker's return to Canada seems to have attracted as little attention as had his departure. Undoubtedly officers at Militia Headquarters must have become more secretive after the War Office had complained in early October, 1904 that extracts from official reports had appeared in both English and Canadian newspapers, which was "contrary to the etiquette observed by attachés of Powers attached to belligerent bodies in the Field."²² At the meeting of the Militia Council on 31 January 1905, the Chief of the General Staff, Brigadier-General P.H.N. Lake, read an extract from a letter written by Lieutenant-Colonel J.A.L. Haldane who was still in Manchuria:

Sir W. Nicholson asked me to write some little time ago to recommend Captain Thacker, Royal Canadian Artillery, to you, who recently returned sick from here. He has the makings of a good Intelligence Officer; is painstaking and neat with his pen at map work, and so on; he also seems to have a good knowledge, above the average officer, of the technique, &c., of artillery. 23

This commendation may be verified by perusing Thacker's several reports which are now held in the Public Archives of Canada.²⁴ For one reason or another, however, none of them was printed in the two large volumes of British Officers' Reports which were published after being cleared with the Japanese authorities; nor did any of the Australian military attaché's efforts get into these volumes. Thacker was

permitted to accept and wear the Order of the Sacred Treasure, 4th Class, which the Emperor of Japan awarded to the foreign military attachés, and the Japanese war medal.²⁵ Militia General Order No. 242 of 22 October 1904 had posted Thacker to No. 1 Company, Royal Canadian Garrison Artillery at Quebec City. He was promoted to the rank of major, with effect from 1 May 1905.

17. Thacker seems to have spoken to small groups of officers about his experiences in the Russo-Japanese War, but he was loath to give a public lecture in Ottawa.²⁶ The Chief of the General Staff insisted, however, so Thacker spoke in St. George's Hall on Saturday evening, 6 April 1907, to an audience which must have been mostly militia officers and their wives, because of the cursory manner in which it was reported by the Ottawa newspapers.²⁷ In consequence of the lack of publicity surrounding Thacker's foreign venture there were very few Canadians who could criticize Sir Wilfrid Laurier for authorizing the dispatch of a military observer to the Russo-Japanese War - either Quebec nationalists who would have deplored the fact that a Canadian junior officer had been closely associated with older and more knowledgeable British officers, or Ontario imperialists who would have seen no need for a Canadian officer to have a separate identity from Sir William Nicholson's staff and to have reported back to Ottawa direct rather than through the War Office and Colonial Office in London. In consequence, readers must ask themselves, what exactly had the Canadian Government achieved? Such pussy-footing contributed nothing to the long and uphill political struggle to achieve Canadian autonomy. By giving Thacker's quite interesting reports only restricted circulation,

interested militia officers had to turn to the published British Officers' Reports, from which they could obtain a much better all-round picture of the war anyway.

18. On the other hand, there can be no doubt that Thacker benefitted personally from his tour of duty in the far east and close association with knowledgeable British officers. During the Great War, 1914-1919, Thacker served successively as Brigadier-General Royal Artillery of the 2nd and 1st Canadian Divisions in France and Flanders. He was promoted to the rank of Major-General in 1921, while serving as District Officer Commanding, Military District No. 6. His final appointment was Chief of the General Staff from 1 June 1927 to 31 December 1928. He died in 1953.²⁸

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21. Fuller, The Decisive Battles of the Western World, III, 153-164.
22. Drury to Director of Intelligence, 25 Oct 1904, HQC 225 (PARC).
23. Minutes of the Militia Council, January 31, 1905, 9-10.
24. Reports are on HQC 225 (PARC).

25. See HQ 1461-3, vol. 1, which is still held by the Department of National Defence (DND).
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid. Also the Ottawa Journal, 4 and 8 Apr 1907.
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