

The Officers and Gunners of A Battery

In 2021, we will celebrate the 150th anniversary of A and B Batteries' founding with the UBIQUE 150 events across Canada. The original officers and gunners of A and B Batteries represent the first full-time and permanent Canadian military elements. In 1871, the officers and gunners came from across Ontario and Quebec to complete garrison duties and train in gunnery science. After training, they went back to militia units across Canada and spread what they had learnt. Through the formation of A and B Batteries and the transfer of knowledge, the Canadian Artillery became much more ubiquitous in Canada. Yet who were these original Gunners, and how did they help make the Canadian Artillery UBIQUE?

From the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, England and France at various times had Imperial soldiers in Canada. A major military shift occurred in 1853-54 when most of the remaining British regulars left the Canadian colonies to fight in the Crimean War or to defend other colonial outposts. In response, the Province of Canada passed the Militia Act of 1855, which authorized an active volunteer militia of up to 5,000 officers and men, including cavalry, field artillery, garrison artillery and infantry. In 1867, the Confederation of Canada started the process of establishing a responsible government. After Confederation, Canada as a self-governing nation, became responsible, in part, for national defence. The formation of new batteries of artillery and schools of gunnery became part of this required contribution. The first post-Confederation Militia Act of 1868 placed all the active militia on an equal footing. By 1869, no less than 28 batteries of artillery existed across Canada.

In February 1870, the British started removing their Imperial troops from Canada which continued until November 1871. On 20 October 1871, Militia Order 24 authorized raising two garrison artillery batteries in Kingston and Quebec. The new units would provide for the care, protection, and maintenance of the two forts, perform garrison duties, and serve as gunnery schools. When the British left, they also closed the artillery school that had operated since 1864. The new garrison soldiers were also the students in the schools. The new roles created full-time and regular responsibilities at the two garrisons in Kingston and Quebec. Each battery had two divisions, the mounted field artillery with four 9 pounder smooth bore cannons, and the dismounted as garrison artillery with two 24 pounder smooth bore howitzers and dozens of older mounted 32 pound smooth bore cannons. For both A and B Batteries, the school's commander was an officer of the Royal Artillery qualified through Shoeburyness, England, seconded from the Imperial authorities. He would oversee instruction, drill, and discipline at the school. The first commanding officer of A Battery, Lt-Col (later Major-General, Sir) George A. French, was an energetic and imposing leader. He obtained his Royal Artillery (RA) commission



A Battery, circa 1870s.



A photo of MGen Sir G. A. French.

in 1860 and was an adjutant with the RA in Kingston from 1862-66. Next to be appointed was the first surgeon at A Battery, O. S. Strange.

In 1871, the military districts of Ontario and Quebec requested volunteers, officers and men, in the active militia to join A and B Batteries for instruction and duty. From the returns, they selected the top candidates. Among the requirements was to be in good health, at least 5 foot 6 inches tall, and at least a 34-inch chest. They also requested that they belong to the 1st or 2nd class of Canadian militia. Upon arrival, they were to be examined by a medical officer. The officers initially joined for the short course of instruction totalling three months, with a reduced pay rate of \$1 per diem. If they showed an aptitude for future military service, the school retained them for the long course for an additional nine months. After passing the short course, they would pay them the entire allotted amount for a given rank. In 1871-72, a captain received \$2.82 per day, the assistant surgeon received \$2.43, a battery sergeant major at \$1, a sergeant at .80, a corporal at .70, a bombardier .60, and gunners at 50 cents a day. In addition to the daily pay rate, each enlisted soldier received 11lb of meat and 11lb of bread. They also received barrack accommodations, which included fuel for heat and light. Those who had horses also received forage.



An A Battery Officer, RCHA, 1913.

The men signed up for 12 months of service. After twelve months, both officers and gunners could leave and return to their prior active militia, or on the commandant's recommendation, be retained indefinitely. Most of these officers and gunners performed garrison duty and attended artillery training for approximately one year. After the training, most of the soldiers would go back to their original militia units to transfer the skills they learned. This system kept most officers and gunners for a short duration and returned them to their prior militia units. It allowed for a steady flow of soldiers, which aided in spreading knowledge throughout Canada. However, there was another group of gunners at A Battery that trained the soldiers. Those who trained the incoming soldiers tended to stay at A Battery indefinitely as the first full-time and permanent militia elements.



A Battery Staff Sergeants and Sergeants, 1887.

The original soldiers who came to A Battery were not fresh recruits. Many of the early men to join A Battery were ex-British regulars that had taken part in the Red River Expedition in 1870. After the Wolseley Force disbanded, many decided to remain in Canada, while others came from British units that had disbanded or left Canada. A Battery had 37 men who had served in the Imperial Army (WO's and NCOs). who then enrolled in Ontario's active militia. The training provided modelled British gunnery principles and expectations, and the seasoned instructors ensured that the students did not receive inadequate training. The men from A Battery came from many parts of Ontario. Of the first 106 men, 63 came from the Kingston Field Battery, 19 from the Toronto Field Battery, and nine from the

Wellington Field Battery. Other batteries and garrison included: four men from the London Field Battery, three from the Ottawa Garrison Artillery, two from the St. Catharines Garrison Battery, one from the Hamilton Field Battery, four from the Toronto Garrison Battery, and one from the Cobourg Garrison Battery. The point is that they came from far and wide to join A Battery. They also were hand-picked, and the militia selected the best candidates.