

A History of the Regiment

What's in a Name....

The regiment we refer to today as the Royal Newfoundland Regiment has been known by various titles since 1780 and more informally before that.

Our association re-enacts the War of 1812 (1812-1814) unit which was created in 1795 and ultimately titled the 'Royal Newfoundland Regiment of Fencible Infantry'. The brief history that follows references the various names used prior to, during and following the War of 1812. In many cases the names 'Newfoundland Regiment' or 'Royal Newfoundland Regiment' were common terms used when referring to the Newfoundland unit whose formal title might have been different at a given time. The title '(Royal) Newfoundland Regiment' was often used as a colloquial form...leaving off either 'Royal' or 'of Fencible Infantry' or simply 'fencibles' as being understood. For example, in April 1812, in supporting Major-General Brock's suggestion - Governor of Lower Canada and Commander in Chief of HM forces in the Canadas, Sir George Prevost's letter to the secretary of war, the Earl of Liverpool - refers to the 'Royal Newfoundland Regiment' and its posting of five companies to the Provincial Marine. As will be seen in its various incarnations the unit was sometimes raised initially without the honorific 'Royal', which was granted by the king later.

Origins

Newfoundland's military history can be traced back to 1775 when Britain declared war on her thirteen colonies. A militia of the thirteen colonies was formed under the command of Virginian George Washington who consented that Benedict Arnold lead an expedition to invade Lower Canada, the target being Quebec. With the help of First Nations allies the British found out and as a result Colonel Colin Campbell recruited between 150 and 200 Newfoundland fishermen to help defend Quebec. On New Year's day 1776 the Americans were defeated with Newfoundlanders in the thick of the fighting.

Later in 1780 'His Majesty's Newfoundland Regiment of Foot' was raised and maintained until 1783.

In 1795, in response to threat of war with the French Republic, part of Britain's strategy was to raise a body of fencible troops to defend its oldest colony - Newfoundland. Thus on April 25, 1795 Major Thomas Skinner, Royal Engineers, was authorized to raise the Newfoundland Regiment of Fencible Infantry, often known colloquially as Skinner's Fencibles, stationed at Fort Townsend, St. John's.

'Fencibles' were British militia units raised in the United Kingdom and colonies for 'defence' against enemies of the crown. The term 'fencible' derived from the word 'defensible' and indicated service for the country in which it was raised: that is, not for overseas service. Britain utilized fencibles in the Seven Years' War, American War of Independence, French Revolutionary Wars, Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812.

For example, the Scottish highlands provided over twenty fencible regiments in the latter half of the 18th century.

By 1796 the strength returned of the regiment numbered 35 officers and 615 men the bulk of which were stationed at Signal Hill. Then in September of that year the entire garrison, comprised of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment and the Royal Newfoundland Volunteers was deployed to Signal Hill to ward off threat of attack by French Admiral Richery. The French landed at Bay Bulls but seeing the deliberately devised large British encampment on Signal Hill, did not advance...retiring to St. Pierre. This would not be the only time Newfoundlanders took part in an effective strength deception: Major-General Brock would employ another deception tactic at Fort Detroit in 1812!

In 1797 Governor Vice-Admiral Waldergrave employed the Newfoundlander's Grenadier company to board HMS Latonia and assist Marines to quell a possible mutiny.

In May 1799 Brigadier-General William Skerret was appointed commanding officer of the Newfoundland garrison, which was under the regional commander in chief in Nova Scotia. Skerret, who in April 1800 had just returned from suppressing the armed violence in Ireland, now faced a mutiny plot involving upwards of fifty Newfoundlanders sympathetic to the United Irish Movement. Ultimately eight mutineers were hanged: five in St. John's and three later at Fort George on Citadel Hill, Halifax. The Newfoundlanders had been posted to garrison Halifax in July 1800 due to Skerret's concern over the regiment's loyalty given it's mostly Irish descent. This regiment, called the 'Royal Newfoundland Regiment', was disbanded in 1802 following the Treaty of Amiens.

However, eight months later Britain was again at war with (now Napoleonic) France and four regiments of fencibles were ordered for the Canadas situated in: Newfoundland, becoming the subject of this history; Nova Scotia, the Nova Scotia Fencibles (Royal Nova Scotia Regiment); New Brunswick, becoming the New Brunswick Fencibles and ultimately the 104 Regt. of Foot; and Upper Canada, becoming the Canadian Fencibles.

In Newfoundland, Brigadier-General Skerret was still in command and charged to raise the fencible regiment there. In June 1803 the regiment was reconstituted as the 'Newfoundland Regiment of Fencible Infantry' and included 60 men from the recently disbanded 'Royal Newfoundland Regiment'. By 1806 the regiment numbered six hundred and eighty-three men and... King George III conferred the honorific 'Royal' upon the regiment once again.

This regiment, the 'Royal Newfoundland Regiment of Fencible Infantry' was involved in most engagements of the War of 1812. It was in all respects on the same footing as a regular regiment of the line, having one grenadier and one light company and eight line(or battalion) companies, the same uniform, pay and discipline.

However the regiment was not deployed as a single fighting unit. Rather, it's companies were disbursed to various deployments, the largest of which was five companies to naval and Provincial Marine duty due to their maritime experience.

War of 1812 Engagements

1806 – Garrisoned Halifax, Nova Scotia, while the Nova Scotia Fencibles coincidentally moved to garrison St. John's.

1807 – Posted to Quebec until 1812. As part of its strategy to blockade France, Britain began stopping all high seas shipping - which included that of the United States - and impressing sailors into the Royal Navy. This would be a factor in the United States' decision to declare war in June 1812.

1812 May – Due to the threat of war with the United States, Major-General Brock posted five companies (360 men) of Newfoundlanders to the Provincial Marine (taking advantage of their maritime experience). As of July 1, Major Heathcote was in command of the Kingston marine detachment with 19 officers and 349 other ranks. They were assigned to such vessels as the Royal George, Gloucester, Earl of Moira and Prince Regent.

1812 June 18 – United States declared war on Great Britain

1812 July-August – Fort Detroit – Major-General Brock captured Fort Detroit. Brock, with only four hundred militia and three hundred regulars, was aided by Tecumseh whose six hundred First Nations allies were deployed repeatedly to trick U.S. General William Hull into surrendering his army of 2500 after only one night of bombardment.....a bloodless victory!

Brock's regulars included fifty Newfoundlanders under Captain Mockler serving aboard the Queen Charlotte and General Hunter as sailors and marines. The Newfoundlanders captured eleven bateaux in the Detroit river, then became part of Brock's core force to attack Fort Detroit. Three Newfoundlanders were awarded general service medals and others were mentioned in dispatches for this engagement. Brock wrote; the Royal Newfoundland Regiment "is deserving of every praise for their steadiness in the field as well as when embarked in the King's vessels".

1812 October – Rochester N.Y.- On October 1, ship's boats from the 22 gun Royal George (crewed by Newfoundlanders) seized the schooner Lady Murray, a US revenue cutter and a third smaller craft.

On October 9 the American's launched a raid from Black Rock N.Y. to recapture the prize brig Detroit. Of the prize crew of twelve, ten were Newfoundlanders one of which was killed and five others wounded.

1812 October 13 – Battle of Queenston Heights. Although light and grenadier companies of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment were deployed to the Niagara

Peninsula during the winter of 1812-13, they are not thought to have been involved in this battle, which was a British victory.

1812 November 28 – Defence of Fort Erie – The Royal Newfoundland Regiment light company under the command of Captain John Whelan (consisting of fifty men) were responsible for holding Fort Erie against an American second attempt to cross the Niagara river at Frenchman’s Creek.

1812 December 21 – The Royal Newfoundland Regiment strength was twenty-eight officers and 515 other ranks. Thirteen Newfoundlanders had died or been killed since war was declared.

1813 January 22 – Battle of River Raisin – Frenchtown, Michigan Territory – The RNR was involved in two actions at the south-west end of Lake Erie. In December 1812 a company of sixty Newfs formed sleigh units to drag British guns across the lake and discouraged the American attack. In January 1813 two companies of Newfoundlanders participated in the capture of Frenchtown.

1813 – February 22 – Ogdensburg N.Y. – In February 1813 the Governor General of the Canadas, Lieutenant-General Prevost passed through Prescott while on a review of the Upper Canada situation. He brought reinforcements and left Lieutenant-Colonel ‘Red’ George MacDonnell in charge with instructions to attack Ogdensburg only if the US garrison was reduced. MacDonnell attacked Ogdensburg across the frozen St. Lawrence river with a company of the Glengarry Light Infantry (GLI), 70 militia and two light guns mounted on sleighs as his centre.... and his main column consisting of 120 of the 8th (King’s), 30 Newfoundlanders and 230 militia attacking the flank from down river.

The Americans were used to seeing the British drill on the frozen river and so were surprised when they actually attacked. US Forsyth’s Rifles held out against the GLI centre assault mainly due the British guns difficulty in deploying. However the US troops withdrew as the British main flank column threatened to surround them. Forsyth’s Rifles withdrew into the town and ultimately to Sacket’s Harbor.

1813 April - Fort York – Following promotion from Major, Lieutenant-Colonel Heathcote was ordered to move his headquarters from Kingston to York. Subsequently the Newfs light company was deployed at Fort Erie under Captain Whelan. A line company was deployed at Fort Amherstburg under Captain Mockler and another at York with Heathcote. On April 26 Major-General Dearborn led 1700 US troops to attack York. The British had 800 troops, one company (92) of which were Newfoundlanders.

The Newfs were sent to delay the American advance from Humber Bay and lost 36 killed or captured in this action. Outnumbered, the British the blew up the magazine killing numerous Americans and causing an explosive concussion that was heard as far away as Fort George. The British withdrew to Kingston.

1813 – April – Fort Meigs, Ohio – Also in April 1813, during the battle at Fort Meigs, Lieutenant LeBreton of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment led a bayonet charge to recapture British artillery overrun by the Americans. The Americans fell back to Fort Meigs. British General Proctor wrote - “besides my obligation to Captain Chambers, I have to notice his gallant conduct in attacking the enemy near the batteries, on which he was well supported by Lt. LeBreton of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment – Lieutenant LeBreton by his unswerving exertion rendered essential service. The Royal Artillery were well assisted by the Royal Newfoundland Regiment as additional gunners under Lieut. Garden. To Captain Mockler of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, who acted as my aide-de-camp, I am much indebted for the assistance he afforded me”.

1813 – May – Fort George – Following the victory at York, US General Dearborn mounted an assault on Fort George led by distinguished US Colonel Winfield Scott. Like the defence of York, once again a Newfoundland flank company was deployed against the US landing. The Newfoundland grenadier company lost 21 killed and 12 wounded and as the British again withdrew, were part of the rearguard covering their retreat to Beaver Dams.

1813 – Sacket’s Harbor, N.Y. – Meanwhile British governor Prevost launched an attack from Kingston against the US naval headquarters at Sacket’s Harbor, New York. Three Royal Navy ships and other transport craft were crewed by 230 Newfoundlanders. The raid failed costing nearly 300 British losses, four of which were Newfoundlanders. Of note is that this action included personnel from all Maritime and Canadian fencible units: the Royal Newfoundland Fencibles, the Nova Scotia Fencibles, the New Brunswick Fencibles, the Canadian Fencibles and the Glengarry Light Infantry Fencibles.

1813 – September - Lake Erie – Put-In-Bay, Ohio. – In this battle over 100 Newfoundlanders were involved on Royal Navy ships as gunners and marines. This was also a loss for the British as nominal commodore Barclay’s six vessels lost to US Captain Oliver Perry’s superior fleet of nine vessels. The Newfoundlanders lost 14 dead and 25 wounded and taken prisoner. The strategic loss of Lake Erie forced the British develop an alternate route to support the upper lakes and Fort Mackinac. This would result in the creation an overland route through the Wasaga area and the development of the supply depot Fort Willow.

1814 – Fort Willow – U.C. – At the beginning of 1814 approximately 200 Royal Newfoundlanders and a party of Royal Navy marched 300 miles from Kingston to the Wasaga area to create Fort Willow, a supply depot to support the British garrison at Michilimackinac (Fort Mackinac). This location was on the nine-mile portage from Lake Simcoe to Georgian Bay. One of the officers was Captain Bulger a native of Newfoundland. Over the winter and early spring the Newfs built 29 bateaux. On April 19 they started down the Nottawasaga river entering Lake Huron on April 25. They then sailed and pulled the bateaux carrying 30 tonnes of

supplies to Fort Mackinac at the western end of Lake Huron in one month arriving May 18, 1814.

1814 – August/September – Fort Mackinac - The Newfoundlanders stayed at Fort Mackinac to relieve the garrison comprised of the 41st Regt (44), 180 Canadian Voltigeurs and 400 First Nation allies. The relieving force totalled approximately 140 regulars from the Royal Newfoundland Regt., Glengarry Light Infantry, Michigan Fencibles, plus one six pounder and one three pounder Royal Artillery field gun, and 350 First Nations allies. The US force comprised five ships had 750 men. The US landed on the north side of the island and proceeded south. Lt-Col. McDouall of the Glengarrys was commanding and repulsed the attack with the regulars and militia in front and a flank attack on the US right by the First Nations. The Americans withdrew but left two sloops to blockade the island. Later in September, led by Captain Bulger the Newfs captured the two US blockading sloops: the Tigris and Scorpion. This party lost one seaman killed, eight Newfoundlanders wounded including Captain Bulger. After reporting the action to his superior, Lt-Col. McDouall wrote to Kingston: “...with the detachment of the brave Newfoundland Regiment merit my entire approbation”. Fort Mackinac remained British until the end of the war.

1814 – December 24 – Treaty of Ghent and War's end. The Royal Newfoundland Regiment was deployed back to St. John's for garrison duty.

After the War of 1812

Following the Treaty of Ghent in 1814, the Royal Newfoundland Regiment of Fencible Infantry was disbanded in 1816. The 60th and 74th regiments took over garrison duties for Newfoundland. In 1824 the Royal Veteran Companies arrived from Britain and stayed for eight years (likely being known as Royal Newfoundland Veteran Companies) and were formally renamed the Royal Newfoundland Companies in 1842, and this unit was finally incorporated into the Royal Canadian Rifle Regiment in 1862.

Thus there was formally no Newfoundland named military unit in Newfoundland from 1870 until the outbreak of the first world war in 1914.

In September 1914 the Dominion of Newfoundland mustered the 'Newfoundland Regiment'. The first 500 lacked khaki material for their puttees and substituted navy blue making them affectionately known as the 'blue puttees'. This Newfoundland Regiment served with Commonwealth forces in most major battles from 1914 to 1917 including the murderous battles of Gallipoli and Beaumont-Hamel. Two weeks after the 1917 battle of Cambrai, King George V awarded the Newfoundlanders the title 'Royal' in recognition of their outstanding gallantry....the only regiment to be given this distinction during conflict. With war's end the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was again disbanded in August 1918.

Thus between WWI and WWII there was no standing Newfoundland military force. When war was declared in 1939 Newfoundland responded by forming the Newfoundland Militia which was renamed the Newfoundland Regiment in 1941. At the end of WWII in 1945 all militia units were once again disbanded.

When the Dominion of Newfoundland joined the Dominion of Canada in October 1949, King George granted permission to re-muster the Newfoundland Regiment as a militia unit and in November further re-granted the title ‘Royal’.

Finally in 1953 Queen Elizabeth II officially recognized an alliance between the Royal Newfoundland Regiment and the Royal Scots honouring the affiliation of both regiments throughout two hundred years of military service. The Royal Scots indeed also served in the War of 1812. In the British army order of precedence the Royal Scots are first. Due to Newfoundland’s late union with Canada in 1949, the Royal Newfoundland Regiment’s order of precedence in the Royal Canadian Infantry (reserve) Corps, Canadian Army, is 49. However, it is an interesting anecdote that through the Queen’s official recognition, what is in effect Canada’s oldest regiment, (by virtue of Newfoundland being Britain’s oldest colony with it’s military service starting in 1775), that the inheritor of Newfoundland’s varied military service ‘The Royal Newfoundland Regiment’ has a recognized alliance with the oldest regiment (the Royal Scots) of the British military tradition.

Today the ‘Royal Newfoundland Regiment’ serves as a reserve infantry regiment comprised of two battalions currently in 37 Brigade Group, Canadian Army.

