

Ontario

British Soldier in Canada

Parks Canada Parcs Canada



An officer of the Royal Engineers stationed at Halifax Citadel, *circa* 1782. His dress features a blue coat, faced black; crimson sash; white vest; gold lace and buttons



Cover: The uniform of a private of the *Light Company of Canadian Fencibles*

British Soldiery in Canada

Parks Canada is caretaker for many British fortifications in Canada, ranging from the complexities of Halifax Citadel to the grassy slopes marking the remnants of Fort Amherst, Prince Edward Island. The task of restoring some of these posts has uncovered a number of problems, beyond finding out how many feet of planking were used to erect a structure.

What were the men garrisoned at these posts like? What did they wear, and what did they eat? How did they spend their off-duty time? To provide a working framework for site archaeologists and restoration experts alike, research was done by the Historical Research Section. This major study delved into the social history of the British military garrisons during their 112-year occupation of Canada between 1759 and 1871.

There are many reasons why historians to date have failed to chronicle the daily lives of the several thousand men who linked colonial Canada with Great Britain. For a start, there are few descriptive accounts of life in the ranks, in the way of official documents or personal papers. The British army was an organization interested primarily in materials, economy and numbers, not social profiles.

British army records are usually reports of improper behaviour, as this interfered with smooth operation of the army. There are thousands of accounts of courts martial for desertion and drunkenness, giving us clues to the off-duty activities of the men. Requisitions for medicines and surgical equipment reveal what diseases the men suffered and treatment administered, yielding a glimpse of the living standards the army maintained for rank and file.

So much for the revelations of bureaucratic red tape. Research is further hampered by the scarcity of diaries and memoirs. The British private was usually illiterate. It was not until the Napoleonic Wars that the Horse Guards provided schools where, for a pittance, the men might learn to read and write. Those few privates who did leave diaries, dwelt on the appearance of the Canadian countryside and on the occasional incident that broke the monotony of garrison life. The everyday routine seemed too commonplace to mention.

Many of the officers, on the other hand, literate gentlemen as they were, did leave accounts of their lives in Canada. Whatever the private's daily routine was like, the

officer's was not. They came from very different social classes and the difference in the size of their pay packets alone made it unlikely that they could or would share the same forms of recreation.

Although the common soldier was the mainstay of the British army, British recruiting practices of the 18th and 19th centuries were hardly conducive to attracting good and able-bodied men to the ranks.

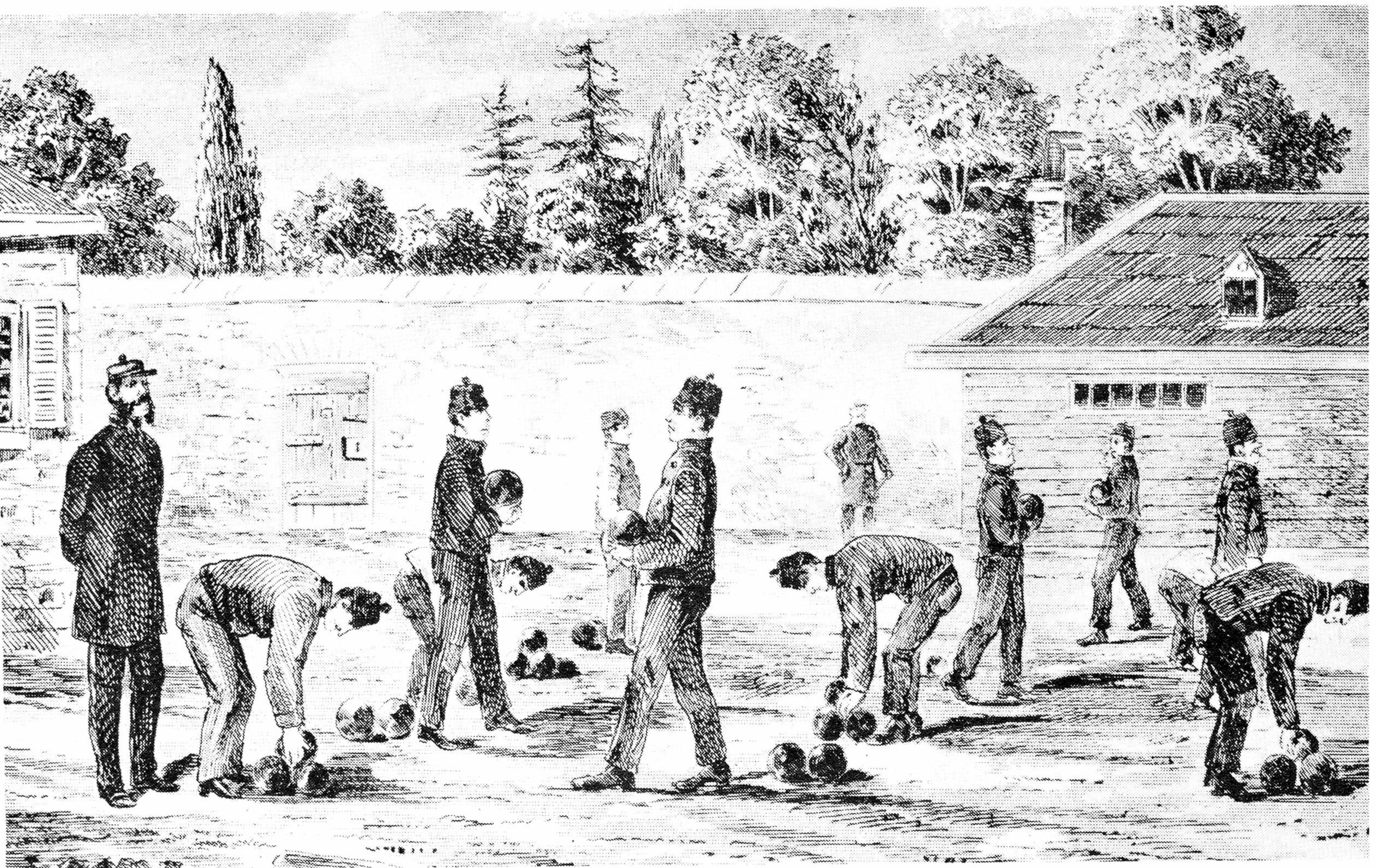
The results of a survey taken in the 1840's shows why men entered the army, and sketches the sort of men found in the ranks of an average British regiment. The survey claims that out of a division of 120 soldiers, the following statistics would be borne out:

80 out of 120	<i>Indigent</i> : embracing labourers and mechanics out of employ who merely seek for support.
2 out of 120	<i>Indigent</i> : respectable persons induced by misfortune or imprudence.
16 out of 120	<i>Idle</i> : who consider a soldier's life an easy one.
8 out of 120	<i>Bad Characters</i> : who fall back upon the army as a last resort.
1 out of 120	<i>Criminals</i> : who seek to escape from the consequences of their offences.
2 out of 120	<i>Perverse Sons</i> : who seek to grieve their parents.
8 out of 120	<i>Discontented and restless</i> .
1 out of 120	<i>Ambitious</i> .
2 out of 120	<i>Others</i> .

(From *Camp and Barrack Room: or the British Army as it is*, by J. MacMullen, staff sargeant of the 13th Light Infantry, published in London, 1846.)

To maintain order among the men, intensive military drills were carried out daily and severe military laws were established. Disobedience and "unsoldierlike conduct", a term defined by the commanding officer of the regiment, met with harsh punishments ranging from lashes to branding to exile to death. Alexander Alexander, a Royal

A sketch from the *Canadian Illustrated News*, December 9, 1871, shows "shot drill" being carried out at the Québec City military prison. The drill, a futile exercise to occupy the soldier's time, involved carrying cannon balls from one designated spot to another (Public Archives of Canada)



Artilleryman, wrote of flogging in the early 1800s: "For petty dismeanors I saw men every day punished with a severity I had never beheld exercised on the slaves in Carriacou. The first man I saw punished, my heart was like to burst. I had hitherto only seen the pomp of war, the gloss and glitter of the army. A poor fellow of the 9th regiment, said to be a farmer's son in Suffolk, had the misfortune to be found asleep on his post. The fellow was tried by court-martial, and sentenced to be flogged; all the troops were paraded to witness the punishment."

The soldier stood stripped to the waist, in wind and sleet, arms tied above his head to the halberts. Alexander continues: "The soldier was a fine-looking lad, and bore an excellent character in his regiment; his officers were much interested in his behalf, and made great intercession for him to the General. But all their pleading was in vain.... The poor fellow got 229 lashes, but they were uncommonly severe. I saw the drum major strike a drummer to the ground for not using his strength sufficiently."

At length the surgeon interfered; the soldier was taken down and carried to the hospital where he died eight days later. Remarks Alexander, "It was the cold I think that killed him; for I have often seen 700 lashes inflicted but I never saw a man's back so horrible to look upon."

The officer class, on the other hand, led a more charmed existence. Officers were generally the second and third sons of wealthy aristocratic families, their names linked to past military engagements. (Through primogeniture the eldest was heir to his father's estate and his "career" was predetermined.) There were few socially acceptable career choices for the sons of an earl or marquis, and business wasn't one of them. The "suitable" careers lay in the Church of England hierarchy, in Parliament or the army.

The army was a particularly popular choice. During the early part of the 18th century, doting parents and godparents bought their toddlers army commissions, increasing their contributions over the years so that by the time a lad reached the age of fifteen he had attained the rank of lieutenant without ever donning a uniform. Buying a commission, like buying blue chip stock, was a sound investment for the future. A man willing to barter away his rank of colonel, for example, could demand a good return

in the fixed price for his rank, as well as under-the-counter “interest”.

To advance his career, it also helped the officer to have well-placed friends in London to keep an eye on the military gazette for announcements of promotions, retirements and deaths. Each opening brought a flood of applications from ambitious buyers. It was not until a century ago, after the British army had left Canada, that the practice of purchasing commissions was abolished and all promotions were gained by merit.

All army ranks were bought back by the Crown, never to be sold again.

The Privileged

Officers in the British Army in Canada

“The Friendly and intelligent gentlemen of the garrison had little to do save read, hunt for fossils, fish, shoot, cut down trees, and plant potatoes.” *

This picture of the life of British army officers is corroborated by other observers and by those officers who wrote memoirs. Life for the commissioned ranks of the British army stationed in Canada was easy; their job made few demands in peacetime and their many privileges made leisure enjoyable.

In contrast to the men they commanded, officers received leave almost as frequently and for as long as they wanted. Some of their autobiographies do not even mention work but rather are accounts of fishing and hunting expeditions or trips touring the United States. Work, the job of training and commanding the rank and file, was pictured as an intrusion upon their social life.

Most officers were second or third sons of the English upper class and if not already independently wealthy, were invariably provided with generous allowances. This, in addition to the ample sum they received in daily wages and allowances, permitted them to indulge in their every whim. One improvident young man who had drawn his father's censure, bemoaned the fact that he was too poor to join his comrades on yet *another* tour of the United States.

Most officers had sufficient funds to maintain several horses and a sleigh. With these accoutrements they formed sleighing clubs and entertained the daughters of the wealthier merchants and politicians of the colonies. These young women, commonly known as “Miss Muffin”, frequently were escorted by the officers on excursions out of Quebec City. The sleighs, replete with hampers of food and wine, would leave the city to spend the day at the ice cone at Montmorency Falls or inspecting the Indian village at Lorette. When the commanding officer realized that a particular Miss Muffin was becoming more than a diversion, the smitten young officer was sent back to England on a special duty, for marriage with a colonial was considered a very improvident step by the military. The girls' parents, naturally, held a totally divergent opinion: marriage with a young officer, a man from a good

*from *The Shoe and Canoe or Pictures of travel in the Canada's*, vol. 2, p. 139, Chapman and Hall, London, 1850.

A ball at Halifax, N.S. in honour of Prince Arthur, from *The Illustrated London News*, October 2, 1869, p. 324 (Public Archives of Canada)



Officer's Trophy Room, by Cornelius Krieghoff (Royal Ontario Museum)





family with excellent prospects was an eminently suitable match that could well provide the Canadian family with useful English connections.

Hence British army officers found themselves welcome guests in Canadian homes. Balls, dinner and card parties were held regularly and the officers often abetted these social functions by lending the regimental band.

When officers were not invited out, they had the comforts and companionship of the regimental mess. Each officer contributed a portion of his pay towards equipping and running his mess, many of which had fine china and crystal to embellish the meals. Unlike their poor subordinates sitting down to boiled beef and soup, the officers' mess usually had a menu of several choice dishes and a wine cellar that included port, claret, and champagne.

After the officers retired from their mess each evening they had two alternatives, their library or their individual rooms. Cornelius Krieghoff's painting of *An Officer's Trophy Room* is a depiction of opulent clutter. The walls are covered by oil paintings and sports equipment, particularly bridles and reins for his horses. There is a book-

*A Picnic to Montmorency – Captain Buzbie Drives Miss Muffin, watercolour by
A. Killaly (Public Archives of Canada)*



case whose contents have spilled on to the table. Furs are spread over some of the furniture and a dog enjoys the freedom of the room.

Obviously this officer preferred an untidy room or he would have ordered his servant to clean his quarters. Each officer was allowed one private to act as his personal valet and the senior officers sometimes had several servants. These servants relieved the officers of the tedium of caring for their uniforms and horses, allowing them more leisure to indulge their hobbies.

Many officers were amateur painters who have left us a record of our country in watercolours and oils. A recent exhibit at the Public Archives of Canada, "Image of Canada", featured a large proportion of military artists. Frequently their training in military draftsmanship is readily apparent: buildings resemble an engineer's sketch and the settings are military encampments.

In one other area British officers contributed significantly to Canada's artistic heritage. During the 18th and 19th centuries amateur theatre was a popular pastime in England, and the officers fostered it in Canada. Garrison theatricals were a frequent event open to the public. Sometimes these productions were organized as a benefit for a local cause, but usually they were just an outlet for the energy and amusement of the officers.

Life for these privileged men was not just makebelieve and diversions. A few were sustained by an overwhelming sense of purpose, the preservation of the British Empire or the conversion of man to their concept of Christian morality. Nevertheless many of them drifted through their time in British North America enjoying lives of self-indulgent pleasure so markedly in contrast to the men they commanded.

The Deserter

The British government sent soldiers to Canada to defend it, and preserve it as part of the Empire. But the men who garrisoned the posts here saw little action. The periods of fighting or real alarms amounted to less than 15 years (out of the major period of British occupation 1759–1870), the Seven Years' War, the American Revolution, the War of 1812, the rebellions of 1837, and the Fenian raids.

Between incidents, military authorities expected men to be content with drills, guard duty, and a few drinks every night. Books were forbidden until 1840 since they inculcated republican ideas — ideas which might lead to rebellion and mutiny. Recreation facilities followed even later, but meanwhile there was not enough money left from a private's pay after stoppages* for men to buy anything other than a few beers or some feminine company. To put it bluntly most soldiers were bored. Their only hope for any relief from the daily routine might come in a new posting, and a new town to explore. But even if the men were bored, the officers demanded that discipline be maintained. The least laxity or disturbance (frequently the result of overindulgence in alcohol) resulted in a punishment out of all proportion to the crime. Bloodybacks was a term which referred to the colour of a man's back as well as to the uniform which covered the welts left by the lash.

Yet relief from this existence seemed close at hand. If only a man could cross the river or the lake or a few hundred miles he might reach the land of freedom, the United States. Desertion was probably easier here in Canada than anywhere else the British Army was posted in the 19th century and a soldier knew that he would be deserting to a society similar to his own. Once across a frontier that was partially wilderness he could find a job, settle down, be happy, and never again apply pipe-clay to his trousers.** It was a dream that many men contemplated and large numbers tried to implement.

As soon as a regiment reached North America there was a flurry of desertions. The malcontents fled at the first opportunity to be joined by those who had enlisted

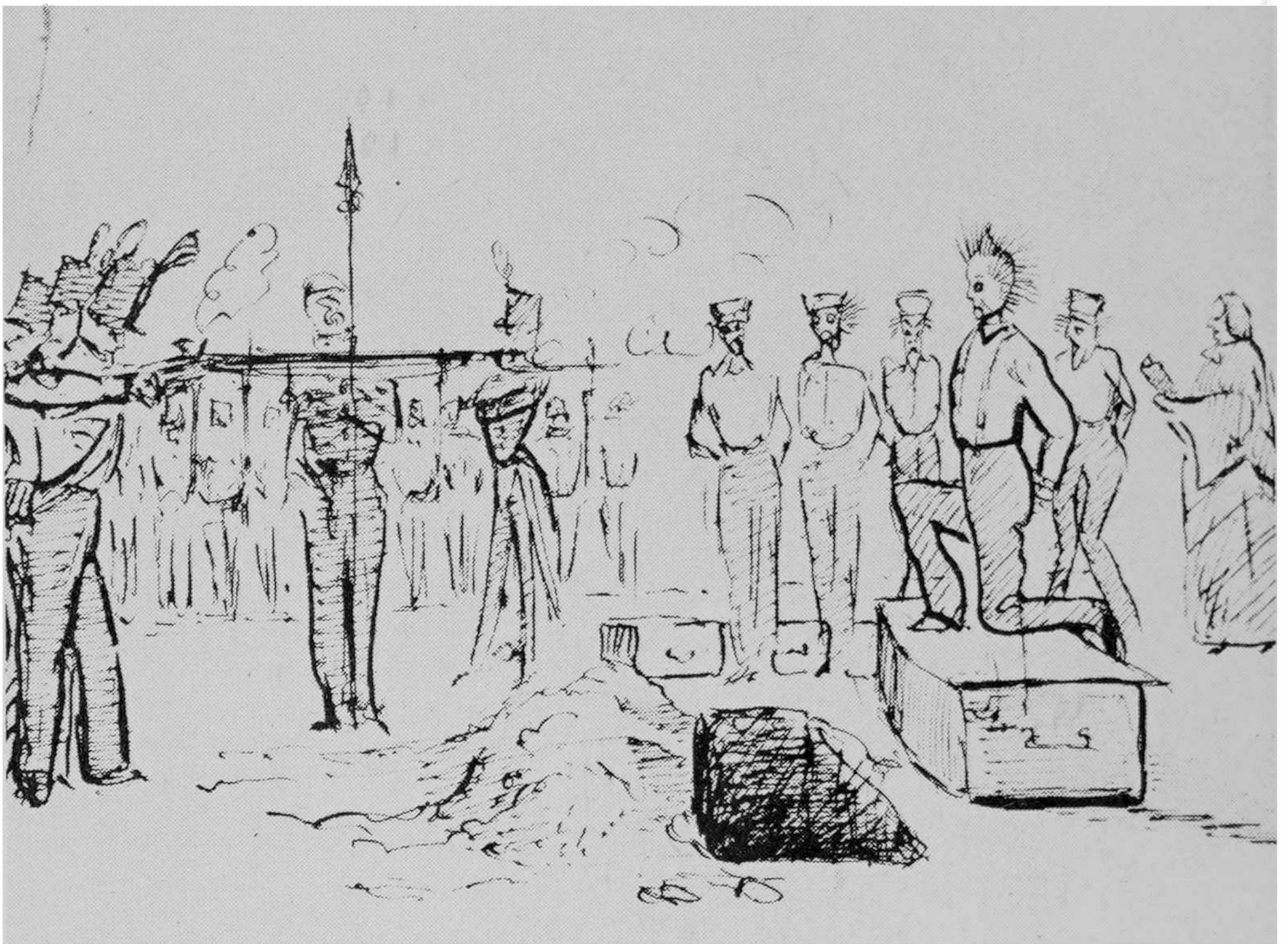
*Stoppages: those items, food, clothing, barrack damages etc. which were deducted from a man's pay before he received it at the daily parade.

**In order to keep their white trews trim and spotless, soldiers rubbed them with wet white clay (the kind used in making clay pipes). Most often this clay was applied immediately prior to parade which, on a cold winter morning often resulted in severe chilblains.

*A Detachment in Pursuit of Deserters, St. Andrews, N.B., watercolour by
Lieut. J.C. Clarke*



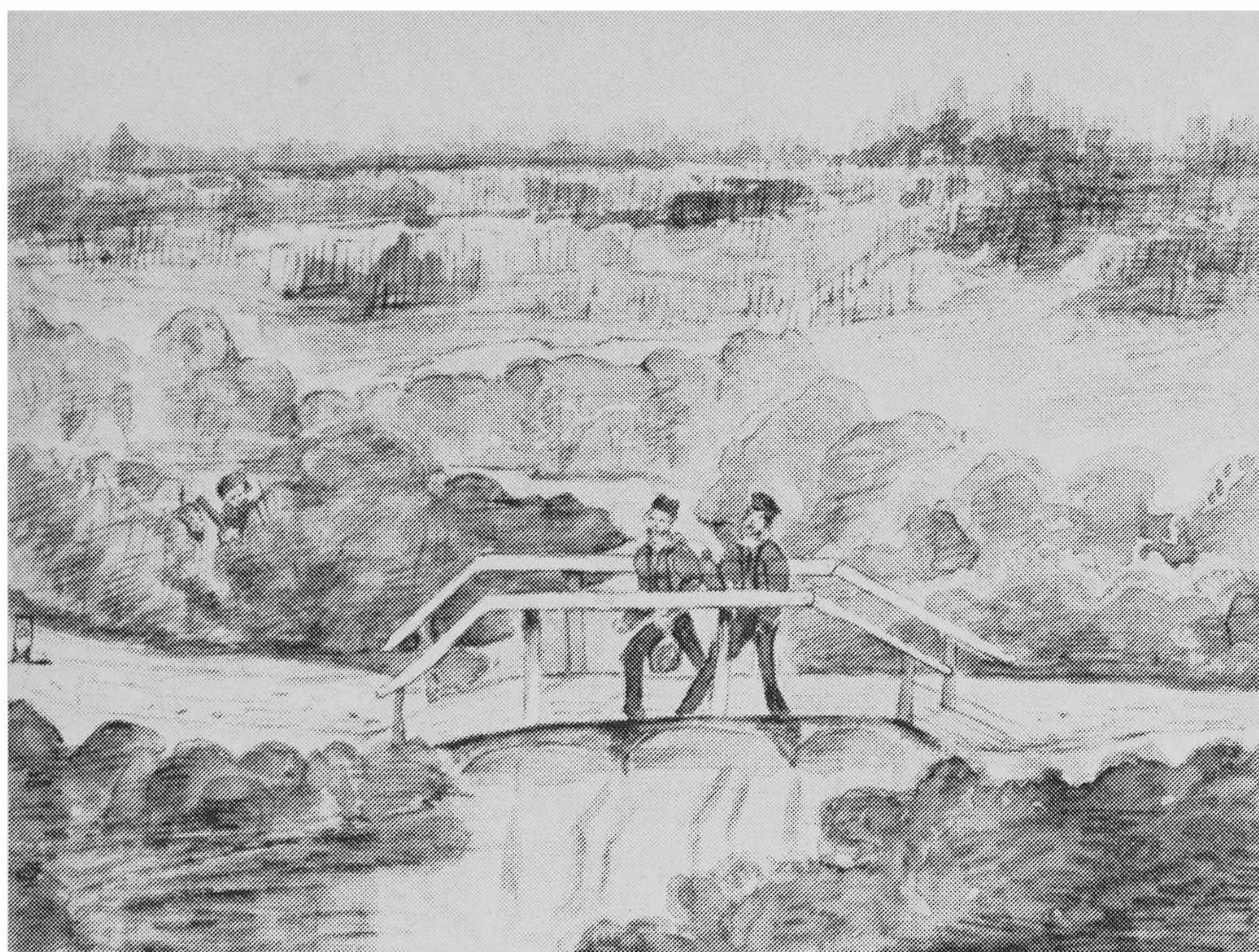
From British Military Records, "C" Series, *Scenes at La Prairie 1812--13*, a "hair raising" pictorial account of the fate of the deserter in times of war



knowing the regiment was soon to be posted to the Canadas. This second group were invariably poor Irish who saw enlisting in the Army as the cheapest way to cross the Atlantic. Once here many deserted to the United States, found work, and saved to bring their families over.

After the first year in North America, desertion subsided unless a "crimp" appeared in the neighbourhood. A shortage of Union soldiers during the American Civil War eventually led to universal conscription and every American called up had to serve or provide a substitute. Many of these substitutes were men who had been encouraged to desert the bright red uniform of Her Majesty to don the blue and follow Ulysses S. Grant. These men were sometimes paid large sums of money (one commanding officer reported sums of \$4 to \$700) and helped to cross the border by "crimps", men who received a commission for finding substitutes. Help consisted of money, transportation and clothes, the latter being particularly necessary. No member of the rank and file in British regiments had any civvies: they were forbidden to own any clothes other than their regulation dress, which was all stamped with their regimental number, and there was almost no way a

Ambush. Capture of Deserters. St. Andrew's Road the Bridge Called 'Bayants' Going to the West, watercolour by Lieut. J.C. Clarke



private could save the money to buy any clothes for his escape. No man wanted to make a dash across the border in a scarlet tunic. He could be spotted much too easily by lookout parties of his comrades, detached to patrol the main desertion routes or by civilians who knew there was a £5 bounty for capturing a deserter.

If caught, a deserter was court martialled, and then sentenced. In war, that sentence was usually the firing squad, while in peace it could vary from the lash to transportation to death. Being transported to the penal colonies of Australia or for service in the British army in west Africa for seven or 14 years of life was a common punishment. They were first imprisoned in the hulks rotting off Bermuda before being shipped to their final place of banishment.

Regardless of the punishment allotted, a captured deserter would be branded. The letter D would be imprinted on his breast by an iron with projecting needles. If he had been found guilty of stealing or some other crime in conjunction with desertion, he might also be branded BC for bad conduct. These brandings marked a man for life as untrustworthy and disloyal so that even if he were subse-

quently drummed out of a regiment for incorrigible behaviour, he carried his record with him, making it difficult to establish himself in any community.

These punitive measures made desertion a hazardous as well as an unethical action. Nevertheless many men risked everything on stealing a boat to cross the Niagara River or stowing away on a boat bound from Halifax to Boston. Stations closest to the border, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Kingston, and Prescott, were the most popular desertion points, so much so, that Niagara was eventually garrisoned by a regiment raised to prevent desertion. The Royal Canadian Rifle Regiment consisted of steady men near retirement with a great deal to gain by remaining loyal to the Union Jack, for they were mostly married men who were given some relief from the normal barrack room routine. Indeed married soldiers were less inclined to desert. Once a man reached American soil, he became a momentary hero, an escapee from insensitive, undemocratic Britannia. He was welcomed to the fold, but many found when they began searching for employment, that their record for disloyalty and unsteadiness deterred employers. Some joined the American army, while a few came back hoping for amnesty. The testimonies of those who returned were often circulated to try and deter others.

The British army tried many tactics to prevent desertion, look-out parties, the Royal Canadian Rifles, and severe punishments as a deterrent. No doubt each of these methods had some success but desertion continued. The real problem, the contrast between life in the United States and the routine of the British army, was never altered. As long as men felt they were locked into a boring, brutal system with no chance to rise out of it except desertion, some sought ways to escape.



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