THE MILITARY SITUATION IN THE CANADIAN PROVINCES BEFORE THE OUTBREAK OF THE AMERICAN-BRITISH WAR OF 1812–1814

Robert Kłosowicz

The Signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783 confronted the authorities of the British colonies in Canada with the problem of American loyalists, who, being supporters of the British Crown, emigrated from the United States. The majority of them settled in Nova Scotia and Quebec, some on the Niagara Peninsula, some in the West Indies; still some returned to England. It has been estimated that about 40,000 loyalists from the United States arrived in the British colonies in Canada after 1783. The British authorities organized mass sea transport for the supporters of the British Crown, as a result of which 30,000 people were brought to Nova Scotia. The arrival of such a large group of British citizens had a huge impact upon the development of the province, the more so because before the year 1783 the overall population of Nova Scotia was less than 20,000. Nova Scotia benefited from the new inhabitants who were well-educated and politically literate; furthermore, the growth in population made it possible in 1784 to divide Nova Scotia into two provinces, with New Brunswick formed from its north-western part. Refugees from the American colonies also reached Newfoundland, transforming the colony into an area of permanent settlement. The remaining loyalists who arrived in Quebec were in turn allowed to settle in the upper course of the St. Lawrence River and on the shores of Lake Ontario.[1]

The new arrivals transformed the character of the southern part of Quebec, and through the strengthening of the British element became the real founders of the Ontario Province, which would be isolated in 1791 from Quebec as Upper Canada. The settling along the border with the United States of the British citizens who had proven their loyalty during the American Revolution would be of major importance during the War of 1812. Kingston, the capital of Upper Canada (founded in 1783), was to become a leading center of the area. The city, strategically located near the place where the St. Lawrence River flows out of Lake Ontario, quickly became a major military base, and later a military harbor and a shipyard. The influx of dozens of thousands of "loyalists" changed the hitherto existing aspects of the colony and presented London with the necessity of introducing solutions which would reduce possible future tension between the French and the English communities. Another reason for anxiety was the impact of the French Revolution, readily welcomed

[1] D. M'Leod, *A Brief Review of the Settlement of Upper Canada*, Mika Publishing Company, Belleville, Ontario 1972, originally published in 1841, pp. 13–23; J.M. Bumsted, *A History of the Canadian Peoples*, Toronto, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 88–92.

by the francophone community. These were the main reasons for the passing of the above-mentioned Constitutional Act of 1791, on the power of which Quebec was divided into two parts: Upper and Lower Canada. Upper Canada, which encompassed the south-western part of Quebec, was mainly inhabited by people of British origin, and received English law and institutions. The dominant religion was Protestantism. The north-eastern part of Quebec constituted Lower Canada, and was inhabited mainly by people of French origin, who retained French civil law. The dominant religion was Roman Catholicism. Both provinces were to have separate governors and separate legislative bodies. National assemblies, elected by more prosperous citizens, and legislative councils, whose members were mainly appointed by the governors, were formed to assist the provincial governors. The governors had the right to overrule the decisions of both bodies. Both provincial governors were subject to the governor general. Both provinces developed rapidly, which was the result of a continuous influx of new settlers, mainly from the United States. This allowed faster settlement and cultivation of the empty areas of the provinces, the population of which in 1791 was merely 14,000. One of the strong supporters of American immigration was the first governor of Upper Canada, John Graves Simcoe, who had fought in the American War and was the commander of the famous Queen's Rangers Regiment. It was partly thanks to his efforts that in 1812 Upper Canada was already inhabited by 90,000 people. Although in Upper Canada in 1812 only one-fifth of the population were Loyalists, they profoundly influenced Canadian nationalism. During the War of 1812 they demonstrated their loyalty to Great Britain in the struggle in Upper Canada. Great Britain's policy toward its Canadian colonies was to keep them in strict dependence on the metropolis, which was not at all difficult in the case of those scarcely populated provinces in which most of the inhabitants feared the growing political and economic importance of the United States. This led them to seek the support of Great Britain even more.[2]

At the beginning of the 19th century American and British political relations entered a critical phase. While the American Congress struggled with internal contention between the supporters and the opponents of the war, the British authorities in Canada were preparing the colonies for the invasion, which they had long been expecting. With Wellington's advances on the Spanish Peninsula and Napoleon's expedition against Russia, the war with revolutionary France was approaching its climax. While fighting Napoleon, the British left the defence of Canada to its inhabitants and the British troops, that were already stationed there. London had no intention of carrying out major military operations in the New World; the undertaking of such operations would force the British to transport at least some of its regiments involved in the European theatre of war to North America.[3]

---

[2] T.H. Raddall, *The Path of Destiny, Canada from the British Conquest to Home Rule: 1763–1850*, Toronto 1957, pp. 99, 105–106; Henryk Zins, *Historia Kanady*, Wrocław: Ossolineum 1975, p. 84; C.M. Wallace, R.M. Bray, *Reappraisals in Canadian History: Pre-confederation*, Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice Hall Allyn and Bacon Canada 1999, pp. 203–205; Jan Grabowski, *Historia Kanady*, Warszawa 2001, pp. 85–88, 122–124; R.D. Bradford, Historic Forts Ontario, Belleville, Ontario 1988, p. 113.

[3] Liverpool to Prevost, 15 May 1812, Public Record Office, Colonial Office 43/23, pp. 58–60.

In 1812 the British possessions in North America were composed of five colonies: Upper and Lower Canada, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Newfoundland. The main government rested in the hands of Governor George Prevost, who was nominally responsible for the defence of all of Canada; however, many decisions were actually made by Isaac Brock, the governor of Upper Canada, and John Sherbrook, the governor of Nova Scotia. The British had 6,000 regular troops scattered in small units throughout Upper and Lower Canada, along the vast border with the United States. The posts were located at great distances from one another; thus it was not infrequent for the soldiers to desert. Drinking was a permanent element of serving at these isolated posts, lost in the middle of nowhere deep in huge forests. Another problem was the lack of good, experienced officers. Ambitious officers preferred to be found at that time by Wellington's side in Spain; Wellington also preferred to command the best. Brock said that the 41st Regiment stationed in Canada was "(...) poorly commanded, (...) and the soldiers confirm with their service that we have garbage in our army in all Canadian departments."[4]

It was no better in the case of the militia. Each community had a standing militia of all able-bodied men, between the ages of sixteen and sixty, each of whom was to own a musket and was required to serve in one or two annual musters. Such militia organizations were lax in training and uniform. Prevost described the militia in Lower Canada as "lacking discipline", but it was this very militia that the long-term defence of the British possessions in North America had to depend on. Thus it was decided that wing companies of militia would be formed and trained for 6 days a month. Two such companies would be assigned to each battalion. In Lower Canada the French population had no reason to sympathize with the English and were not excessively enthusiastic about fighting; in addition, the British authorities were anxious about the American emigrants, whom they did not fully trust. Gen. Brock was worried by the number of "doubtful characters in the Militia", and required of the militiamen to abjure allegiance to any foreign country before being given arms. Also, he asked for power to suspend the writ of *habeas corpus* if war conditions should require it. He complained: "My situation is most critical, not from anything the enemy can do, but from the disposition of the people. The population, believe me is essentially bad."[5]

On the verge of war, the English had a 2,000 mile stretch of border to defend, from Halifax in Nova Scotia on the Atlantic to Fort St. Joseph, east of Michilimackinac, in the distant northwestern corner of Lake Huron. Halifax was a sea base for the British North American Squadron. From the west, the areas were protected by wild, untrodden woods; from the east they were guarded by the British navy. Most inhabitants of Canada lived in the area between the St. Lawrence River, Quebec and Montreal, and these areas were of key importance for the conquest of Canada. However, Montreal had no strong fortifications and was dependent on the British control of the St. Lawrence River and the Richelieu River. The experiences from the last war made the British expect that Americans might make use of the natural for-

[4] Ferdinand Brock Tupper, *The Life and Correspondence of Major General Sir Isaac Brock*, London 1847, pp. 33–37.

[5] G.M. Craig, *Upper Canada. The Formative Years 1784–1841*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1979, pp. 70–71; P. Kather, *The American War 1812–1814*, London 1990, pp. 35–36.

mation of the Hudson Valley and Lake Champlain as a direct route to their conquest of Canada. It was planned that about 12,000 militia squads would be formed in case of attack to protect the areas. Quebec was seen as the heart of the defence of Canada; thus it was there that troops and weapons were most greatly amassed. They were to ensure military success of the defence. It was further planned that Quebec would be the base for future offensive military operations aimed at the recovery of territories previously intercepted by Americans.[6]

Prevost was pessimistic about the chances of a successful defence of Upper Canada. Fort Malden in Amherstburg, situated 17 miles south of Detroit upon the Detroit River, seemed particularly endangered. Prevost entertained similar fears in respect to Fort George, Fort Erie and Fort Chippawa located along the Niagara River, inadequately prepared for defence, and to take the first impact of the American attack. In June 1812 the British transferred their warships from the Atlantic Ocean to Lake Ontario and Lake Erie to provide better protection for Upper Canada.[7]

The regular troops stationed in Upper and Lower Canada were comprised of the 8th, the 41st, the 49th and the 100th Regiments, and the 10th Royal Veteran Battalion. Altogether there were 4,000 men. Canadian regular troops were composed of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment and the Glengarry Light Infantry. The artillery encompassed 450 people divided into four companies. Altogether the British forces numbered about 1,600 people, out of which 1,200 were stationed in Upper Canada. In Nova Scotia, which was not a part of Upper or Lower Canada, there were 161 officers and 4,220 soldiers serving in the 98th and the 99th Regiments of infantry. The 104th Regiment of infantry was stationed in New Brunswick; 300 soldiers were serving in the Bermudas. Great Britain had, in all of its North American provinces together, about 10,000 regular troops, the quality of which left a lot to wish for. The 41st Regiment was to a great measure composed of soldiers well advanced in years; the 49th Regiment, stationed in Canada for 10 years, had a high rate of alcohol abuse; the 100th Regiment, formed in 1805 as Prince Regent's County of Dublin Regiment, was comprised of young Irishmen and had a reputation of being the most unruly one. The 10th Royal Veteran Battalion formed in 1808 was composed of soldiers who had either long since entered the service and were advanced in years or who could not serve in front-line units due to prior war injuries. Nevertheless, these were experienced soldiers who could successfully perform sentinel duty. Each of the 10th Battalion's soldiers had received 200 acres of land in Canada, had settled down, and was running a farm; nevertheless, each was ready to appear in unit when summoned. The Canadian militia numbered 86,000 poorly trained and inadequately armed people. In addition to that, a ship sent from Bermuda to Halifax carrying 6,000 a stand of arms foundered in a storm.[8]

---

[6] *American Military History*, Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History 1989, pp. 126–127.

[7] Prevost to Liverpool, 18 May 1812, PRO, CO 42/146, pp. 197–202.

[8] H. Adams, *History of the United States of America during the Administration of James Madison*, New York: The Library of America 1986, pp. 514–515, orginally 1889–1891; Philip Kather, *The American War 1812–1814*, London 1990, pp. 3-4; Harry Coles, *The War of 1812*, The University of Chicago Press 1965; *American Military History*, Washington, D.C.: Center of

War news reached Canada with astounding speed. Commercial enterprises in Montreal received the news from New York as early as 24 June, five days after the proclamation. Canadian authorities immediately undertook preparations aimed at repelling the American invasion. But already during the first days of mobilisation it seemed that the blackest scenario of the British authorities in Canada would come true owing to militia from settlements in the Montreal area. Not wanting to obey the orders which incorporated part of them into regular units, the militiamen caused disturbances which, however, were quickly and firmly quelled. The following day about 400 people from the Montreal militia joined regular troops. This French-Canadian reaction fulfilled American expectations, but was an isolated case. Usually, the militia obeyed the orders of the British authorities without any major resistance. Even in Upper Canada, where the British authorities feared many settlers of American origin, there were no problems with forming squads of militia which were to repel the American invasion. Apart from the Montreal incident, the British authorities were satisfied by the attitude of the Canadian militia.[9]

The policy of friendly relations with Indians was now to bring fruit for the British. Indian allies were ideal partners considering their knowledge of the wild territories. The British Indian Department, which had continued to maintain official relations with various tribes and enjoyed the trust of their chiefs, called on them to declare themselves against the United States. The western tribes of Wyandots, Hurons, Ottawas, Chipawas, Miamis, Shawnees, the Pottawattomi, the Kikapoo, Mascoutens, the Winnebago, Saks, Foxes and Mohawks promised to take the side of the British. Hunters and warriors, the Indians were used to moving through the thick of the forests, carrying out unexpected attacks and setting ambushes. In addition, their reputation as vicious beasts cruelly murdering prisoners of war and civilians alike, including women and children, demoralized the American soldiers and militia, who were far from being seasoned soldiers. This paid off on more than one occasion during the war, when American units surrendered to often less numerous British to avoid fighting Indians, out of fear of being massacred. Despite the unquestionable usefulness of the Indians to the British troops, their presence posed a problem. The Indians were an element which did not give in to any, let alone military, discipline. On some occasions, for example while intoxicated with alcohol or in a killing frenzy after a victorious battle, they totally escaped control. Indians were strangers to tactical and strategic goals; they went to war to gain fame and loot. After a battle they often decided to carry the loot back to their villages and thus made it impossible for the British regiments to make use of the temporary success. Only the Indian units commanded by Tecumseh were distinguished by a certain degree of discipline and organization. Also, the presence of Indian allies posed a serious logistic problem.

Military History 1989, pp. 123–126; A. Andrews, *Brave Soldiers, Proud Regiments. Canada's Military Heritage*, Ronsdale Press 1997, p. 74.

[9] Lady Edgar, ed. *Ten Years of Upper Canada in Peace and War, 1805–1815*, Toronto 1890, pp. 129–131; Prevost to Liverpool, 25 June 1812, PRO, CO 42/147, pp. 1–2; Prevost to Liverpool, 25 June 1812, PRO, CO 42/147, pp. 15-18; Brock to Prevost, 2 July 1812, Tupper, *The Life and Correspondence*, op.cit., pp. 194–195.

The Indians constantly awaited gifts from their "British brothers", and requested food for both the warriors and the families who accompanied them.[10]

REFERENCES:

Primary Sources

Ontario Archives, Toronto, Strachan Papers, MS 35 RI.

Public Record Office, London, Colonial Office,CO/42/146; CO/42/147; CO/43/23.

Tupper F.B., *The Life and Correspondence of Major General Sir Isaac Brock*, London 1847.

Secondary Sources

Adams H., *History of the United States of America during the Administration of James Madison*, New York: The Library of America 1986.

Allen R.S., *His Majesty's Indian Allies, British Indian Policy in the Defence of Canada*, 1774–1815, Toronto: Dundurn Press 1992.

American Military History, Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History 1989.

Andrews, *Brave Soldiers, Proud Regiments. Canada's Military Heritage*, Ronsdale Press 1997.

Bradford R.D., *Historic Forts, Ontario*, Belleville, Ontario 1988.

Bumsted J.M., *A History of the Canadian Peoples*, Toronto, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Coles H., *The War of 1812*, The University of Chicago Press 1965.

Craig G.M., *Upper Canada. The Formative Years 1784–1841*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited 1979.

Elting J.R., *Amateurs to Arms, Military History of the War of 1812*, New York 1995.

Grabowski J., *Historia Kanady*, Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka 2001.

Kather P., *The American War 1812–1814*, London: Men-At-Arms Series 1990.

Lady Edgar, ed. *Ten Years of Upper Canada in Peace and War, 1805–1815*, Toronto 1890.

M'Leod D., *A Brief Review of the Settlement of Upper Canada*, Ontario: Mika Publishing Company, Belleville 1972.

Raddall T.H., *The Path of Destiny, Canada from the British Conquest to Home Rule: 1763–1850*, Toronto: Doubleday Canada Limited 1957.

Wallace C.M., Bray R.M., *Reappraisals in Canadian History: Pre-confederation*, Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice Hall Allyn and Bacon Canada 1999.

Zins H., *Historia Kanady*, Wrocław: Ossolineum 1975.

[10] *List of Indian Warriors as They Stood in 1812 at the Time War Was Declared*, Ontario Archives, Strachan Papers, MS 35 RI. More in: Robert S. Allen, *His Majesty's Indian Allies, British Indian Policy in the Defence of Canada, 1774–1815*, Toronto 1992; J.R. Elting, *Amateurs to Arms, Military History of the War of 1812*, New York 1995, p. 12.