

One Final Battle

“We are the Fenian Brotherhood, skilled in the arts of war. And we’re going to fight for Ireland and the land that we adore. Many battles we have won, along with the boys in blue. And we’ll go and capture Canada, for we’ve nothing else to do.”



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Depicted. A little-known painter, Alexander Von Erichsen, followed the Fenians from Buffalo to Canada and provided a documentary of the events from the planning stages to trials of British commanders. This painting depicts the death of one of the Fenian leaders at the Battle of Limeridge. The identity of the soldier is not known.

By Charles W. Davies

These were the words sung by young Irishmen in the United States of America following the Civil War. Fresh from battle they were determined, under the leadership of Col. William Roberts of New York, to invade Canada and free its people from British rule. Ireland had been taken over by the Act of Union in 1801. In retaliation the Fenian Brotherhood, well organized and funded by Irish-Americans, planned and executed an attempted invasion in June of 1866, expecting many Canadians to join their cause.

On June 1, 1866 at 3 a.m., the silence

of the night was broken by the sound of tugs towing canal boats across the Niagara River. A force of more than 1,300 Irish soldiers, under the command of Gen. O'Neill, landed on the Canadian shore about a mile below the sleeping village of Fort Erie. The invasion had begun; there was no resistance. O'Neill ordered guards posted at the ruins of the Old Fort and at Haggart's Dock; the telegraph lines were cut, a section of the Buffalo and Lake Huron Railway tracks were torn up and Sauerwein's Bridge was burned. Scouts were sent out to determine the location of Canadian

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troops while the main body camped in the orchard of the Newbigging farm near Frenchman's Creek.

O'Neill heard that Canadian columns were headed for Port Colborne and Chippawa; he knew that he had to prevent the junction of the two bodies. When he learned that Canadian volunteers were already on the way from Port Colborne to Ridgeway he decided, without waiting for the more than 10,000-man reserve on the American side, to move toward Ridgeway at 10 o'clock that evening. The stage was set for the Battle of Limeridge.

On Saturday June 2nd, O'Neill, an experienced military strategist, placed his men in position on Limestone Ridge just north of Bertie Road. Elevated about 35 feet above the surrounding country and protected by patches of shrubs and groves of trees, he had a clear view of the land on both sides of the summit and an unobstructed view of Ridge Road. Quickly he ordered his men to construct breastwork and barricades of earth and fence rails. Advance pickets of skirmishers and sharpshooters were set up behind fences on both sides of the road. All he had to do was wait.

Col. Peacocke, commander of the British forces in Niagara, waited with his troops at Chippawa. He sent word to Lt. Col. Dennis and Lt. Col. Booker, who had marched from Port Colborne to

Ridgeway, that they were to march toward Stevensville and meet him there at 11 o'clock. The plan was intended to prevent the Fenians from moving inland. When Capt. Akers arrived at Ridgeway with the orders he found the forces ready to leave. Dennis and Booker had heard from a Mr. Graham of Fort Erie that the Fenians were still at Frenchman's Creek. Peacocke's orders were ignored. Booker left with his contingent for Stevensville at 8 a.m. while Dennis and Akers went with the Dunnville Naval Company and the Welland Garrison Battery on the tug *Robb* to reconnoiter the Niagara River and cut off a Fenian retreat.

Ordering his men to "load with ball and shot," Booker left the Ridgeway Station not knowing where the Fenians were located. He had been told that they were still at Frenchman's Creek but farmers along the route warned him that they were just ahead. The column proceeded with caution; the Queen's Own Rifles led the way with the York Rifle Company just behind.

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As the battle commenced, Col. Booker received a telegram from Col. Peacocke via Port Colborne stating that he was leaving Chippawa at 7 a.m. Booker,

Keeps fighting. One of Von Erichsen's paintings shows a wounded officer of the Queen's Own Rifles maintain the fight with his pistol near the ambush area on the ridge.



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inexperienced on the field of battle, was on his own. Peacocke never arrived.

The Queen's Own Regiment pushed the Fenians back to their main position but having exhausted their ammunition asked for relief from the 13th Battalion under Maj. Skinner. The Queen's Own cheered as the 13th continued to drive the enemy back to their entrenchments.

"Cavalry! Look out for cavalry!" This cry came back along the ridge. Booker took the appropriate action to prepare for a charge. He shouted, "Prepare for Cavalry!" Immediately the reserve along the ridge formed a "square." But there was no cavalry. Several mounted Fenians had appeared on the road giving the impression of a larger force. The cry was a false one. As soon as Booker realized what had happened he tried to "Reform Column," to extend the square to avoid being outflanked. It was too late. In the confusion the rear portion of the "square" started to retire. When the left wing of the 13th at the rear saw the four companies of the Queen's Own retreating, they thought a retreat had been ordered. Bugles sounded and they ran in a panic. Companies 1 and 2 of the Queen's Own fell back and seeing the reserve fleeing, they became demoralized. It was impossible for Booker to pull his forces back together. The Fenians took full advantage of the disorder and increased their rifle fire. Although the Canadian officers tried to check the retreat, it was impossible. They moved back in an orderly manner, stopping a few times to return fire.

The Fenians followed as far as Ridgeway then turned east and made their



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Overwhelmed. *Capt. R.S. King, head of the Welland Field Battery, was wounded and captured by Fenians at the Fort Erie dock after his 30 men were overwhelmed by the retreating Fenian force of nearly 1,000 men.*

way back to Fort Erie.

After the battle, Gen. O'Neill praised the Canadians highly for their courage and steadiness. He had mistaken inexperienced volunteers for British troops, admitting that if they had fought five minutes longer his men would have given way.

While events unfolded at Limeridge, the tug *Robb* with Dennis and Akers aboard along with Capt. L.M. McCallum's Naval Brigade and the Welland Field Battery under Capt. R.S. King, about 70 men in all, entered the Niagara

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Re-enactment

On June 15th and 16th, 1991, a re-enactment of the Battle of Ridgeway was conducted through the joint efforts of the Museum Board and the Bertie Historical Society. Well researched and presented, it was attended by thousands of people from Canada and the United States. Museum records, videotapes and pictures provide a complete account of the event.



River. They found no Fenian encampment at Frenchman's Creek. They returned to Fort Erie to wait for Booker to arrive. At this juncture, Col. Dennis made a decision to land 50 soldiers and divided them into two groups, one led by Capt. Akers and the other by Capt. King. They were to patrol northward on foot from Fort Erie and rendezvous with the *Robb* at Black Creek. It was a dangerous move behind enemy lines that could have cost the lives of his men. Later Maj. G.T. Denison said, "It was unfortunate that Col. Dennis and Capt. Akers so exceeded their instructions as to land their command at all. . .there was no object to be gained by it."

The *Robb* picked up Akers and King and their men along with a few prison-



Anniversary. This arch of flowers over Ridgeway Road in Ridgeway and soldiers of the Queen's Own Rifles, Royal Grenadiers and 176th Battalion greeted Canadian veterans of the Fenian Raid on the 50th anniversary in 1916.

Local Observers

Ten-year-old Jimmy Stanton watched his mother serve breakfast to Fenian soldiers in the kitchen of their home on Battery Street. He talked of the experience when he returned from Texas in 1939 for the opening of the restored Old Fort Erie.

William Gorham as a young lad watched the Battle of Limeridge from the roof of his father's barn at the corner of Nigh and Gorham Roads.

Dr. N. Brewster of Ridgeway treated the wounded on both sides. In his account, written for the Ridgeway Historical Society in 1911, he described his personal observations of the effects of the conflict on the community during and following the battle. A full account is in the archives of the Bertie Historical Society.

Rhoda Bowen, who lived at 206 Dufferin St., recalled the members of the Queen's Own Band singing, "Tramp, tramp, tramp the boys are marching. Cheer up, let the Fenians come. For beneath the Union Jack, we shall drive the Fenians back, as we fight for our beloved Canadian homes."

A memorial plaque honouring those who died in the battle may be seen inside the entrance of Ridgeway Memorial United Church.

ers and returned to Fort Erie where it docked at the wharf. The prisoners were taken ashore and placed under the guard of the Welland Field Battery under Capt. King. The *Robb* would return to Port Colborne to gather information. King and Reeve Kempson objected to this. If the Fenians returned, the small party could not hold the prisoners and defend the village. Before Dennis could leave with the *Robb*, word of the disaster at Limeridge arrived.

On June 2nd, a second encounter occurred on the River Road in the Village of Fort Erie pitting 70 Canadian volunteers against 1,000 Irishmen. A Fenian advance came along the road from the south. Dennis with 52 artillerymen and 18 naval corps tried to take a stand, but when he saw hundreds of Irish soldiers moving north along the ridge above him, he realized his force

would be surrounded. He fled with two of his men. Some accounts say that he disguised himself to avoid capture. Capt. King, with 30 men, gave the order to scatter and fight independently. During this encounter throngs of spectators and cheering Fenians gathered on the American shore to watch the action, which lasted less than an hour.

Gen. O'Neill set up camp at the ruins of the Old Fort where he waited for reinforcements from the American shore. They never came. American authorities took steps to block further crossings employing the gunboat *Michigan* to patrol the river. O'Neill and his men returned to the States bringing the attempted invasion to an end.

By the time Col. Peacocke, camped at New Germany, ordered an advance on Fort Erie at 5 a.m. Sunday, the Fenians had left.

Canadian losses at the Battle of Limeridge numbered 10 killed and 38 wounded. At Fort Erie there were none killed, 6 wounded and 36 captured. Fenian losses were not tabulated. (Detailed accounts of both battles may be found in the listed reference sources.)

SOURCES

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Consequences and conclusions

By David Owen

Gen. John O'Neill's Fort Erie campaign to seize and hold a bridgehead for a larger force which never arrived is a fascinating one. He marched his largely veteran soldiery some 40 km (25 miles) with little food and rest, and with a quick eye for both terrain and tactics, he achieved two tactical victories in less than two days. Finding that he was to be unsupported, he made the militarily correct decision to retire, but this withdrawal meant that the campaign in Niagara was to be a strategic failure. In spite of periodic sabre-rattling, the Fenians were never to return to Niagara, but they left behind an interesting study in tactical land use as well as a major effect upon Canadian nationalism which lasted to this day.

Ironically, the Fenians' desire for an Irish national government fostered a greater sense of nationalism amongst Canadians. The Canadian Confederation process, already initiated in the early-mid 1860s, was seriously accelerated by the need for defence against the perceived post-Civil War American invasion threat, a considerable portion of which was posed by activities of the Fenian Brotherhood. The Dominion of Canada was created less than thirteen months after the major Fenian invasions attempts in 1866.

The Fenian campaign in Niagara in 1866 had a tremendously positive effect upon the Canadian forces. The Canadian citizen soldier was suddenly very popular and many militia regiments returned to their hometowns to receive massive displays of public appreciation

for their efforts on the frontier. Even more importantly, the operations in Niagara had illuminated the inadequacies of the defence of the provinces, particularly at a high level, concerning such areas as equipment, supporting services and to some extent, command. The issue of national defence was brought before the Canadian public at a fortuitous time when it was both willing and able, with Confederation imminent, to attend the situation. Within five years of the Fenian invasion, a Canadian professional force was born.

It is interesting to note that the accounts of both Canadian soldiers and civilians who were in contact with the Fenians in Niagara express a quite consistent opinion concerning their general good conduct during the invasion. In the words of Major George Denison, who spent some time in Fort Erie in the summer of 1866: "They have been called plunderers, robbers and marauders, yet, no matter how unwilling we may be to admit it, the positive fact remains that they stole but few valuables, that they destroyed, comparatively speaking, little or nothing, and they committed no outrages on the inhabitants, but treated everyone with unvarying courtesy. It seems like a perfect burlesque to see a ragged rabble without a government, country or flag affecting chivalrous sentiments and doing acts that put one in mind of days of knight-errantry."

Source

David A. Owen, *The Year of the Fenians*, Buffalo: Western New York Heritage Institute of Canisius College and the Fort Erie Museum Board, 1990, pp. x, 21, 86.