Raising the Regiment

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The Royal Newfoundland Regiment has become the iconic embodiment of a deep tradition of service to king and country that exists in Newfoundland and Labrador. From the mid 1700s to present day, Newfoundlanders and Labradoreans have served in many units, and in many wars, conflicts, and peace keeping missions around the globe. Until the late 18th century men served in the various regiments of the British army that recruited on the island. In 1795, amidst growing fears of attack by revolutionary France, Newfoundland formed its first professional regiment of the line. The raising of the first Royal Newfoundland Regiment established a tradition of regiments that have drawn parentage from this unit, most notably the regiment that was raised and served with distinction during the Great War. The current Royal Newfoundland Regiment continues to send its soldiers abroad for service in places such as the former Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. The existence of a Royal Newfoundland Regiment has been a conduit through which Newfoundland and Labrador has expressed its commitment to both empire and country and it has been an institution through which Newfoundland has acted on the world stage. The successes and tragedies of the regiments who have borne the title Royal Newfoundland have been keenly felt by many Newfoundlanders and Labradoreans and have formed part of our collective identity, an identity and connection that began in 1795.

A History of Service to King and Country

Service in the King’s army was far from a foreign concept in 1795. Men from Newfoundland had served in large numbers in the ranks of many British regiments. In 1756, faced with yet another war in the Americas and decreasing enlistments at home, the British government authorised the large scale enlistment of colonials into the ranks of their regular regiments. Shortly thereafter recruiting parties were in Newfoundland enlisting men for the 40th Regiment of Foot. Eight companies of the 40th were raised from men in Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and other areas. The regiment served throughout the Seven Years War in various Atlantic garrisons and were present for the 1758 capture of Louisbourg.

The outbreak of war with revolutionary America saw a renewed fervour in the recruitment of colonials. During the war recruiting parties from a number of regiments were sent to Newfoundland. Between 1775 and 1780 recruiting parties for the Royal Highland Emigrants, Royal Fencible Americans, Nova Scotia Volunteers, and the Kings Orange Rangers were active on the island.

The most prominent regiment recruiting in Newfoundland during the war was the Royal Highland Emigrants. In 1775, shortly after the regiment was raised, they pulled 150 men from the islands of St. John (P.E.I.) and Newfoundland. Later that year the Emigrants recruited another 50 men from Newfoundland. Letters from Governor Montague indicate that the regiment was actively recruiting on the island in 1776, 1777, and again in 1779 after General Frederick Haldimand, the governor of Canada, instructed the Emigrants to increase the size of

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5 PANL, G.N. 2/1/a, Volume 6&7.
their companies.6 In August of 1780 they were back on the island recruiting in areas such as Mortier where, according to Governor Edwards, an Emigrant recruiting sergeant by the name of John Young organized and lead the defence of that town against an attack by American privateers.7

The regiment raised in 1795 was not the first Newfoundland regiment. In 1778 the chief engineer in St. John’s, Captain Robert Pringle, advocated for and successfully raised a unit of local volunteers for the defence of the town. By 1779 Pringle’s handful of volunteers were officially sanctioned by Governor Edwards and became known as the Newfoundland Volunteers. Although they were the first unit to formally bear the name Newfoundland they were not recognized by the British government. Officials in London argued that their status as a corps of volunteers, subject to martial law only under emergency situations when they were called out, did not warrant payment of the bounty promised to the men for enlistment.8

On September 20th, 1780, after intercepting an American ship off Newfoundland with letters from the newly formed congress destined for France advocating a joint attack on the island, Governor Edwards wrote to Pringle authorising him to raise a regiment of 300 men for service on the island to defend against invasion.9 Like its predecessor, the Newfoundland Regiment of Foot received little support from London. Upon receiving notice of his actions in raising the regiment Edwards was reprimanded for his extravagance and ordered to reduce the size of the regiment. The Newfoundland Regiment of Foot was quickly disbanded once hostilities ended between Britain and America.10

With the outbreak of war against France in 1793 a volunteer Newfoundland regiment was once again raised for defence of the island. As with the preceding Newfoundland units, they received little attention from the British government, who refused to go beyond supplying the troops with uniforms and rations when on duty. Although the volunteers existed until 1797 or 1798, the details surrounding their disbandment are minimal at best; they were overshadowed by the establishment of a locally raised line infantry regiment.

In 1795 London authorised the raising of a regular regiment of infantry in Newfoundland. This regiment was a marked departure from all previous Newfoundland units. It was the first to be financed from the outset by the British government and not by a local resident. It was the largest unit to have been raised on the island up to that point. As a line regiment it consisted of one company of Grenadiers, one company of Light Infantry and eight Battalion Companies. It was encouraged to recruit on the island and was provided with money to pay out for enlistment bounties. The men were to receive the same pay, clothing, arms, accoutrements, and rations as those in other line infantry regiments. Most importantly it was the first regiment to be designated the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, and the first to be authorised for service outside of Newfoundland. Men who joined the regiment faced the very real possibility that they could be sent to posts throughout British North America.11

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6 PANL MG 23 File 1, p. 7.
7 PANL, MG 729 David Webber Collection, Box 4, File 5, Montague to Germain, 1 August 1780.
9 PANL MG 729 Box 4 File 5 American Revolution 1775-1783, Pringle’s Regiment 1780-1783.
The regiment’s service during the French Revolutionary War was spent largely in Newfoundland, serving in the St. John’s garrison. Though stationed at home, conditions in the regiment were taxing and desertion common. The most infamous desertion to occur was that of April 20th, 1800 under the auspices of the Society of United Irishmen. Though loosely connected to the United Irishmen and the 1798 rebellion in Ireland, it was exaggerated by certain officials to seem more important and seditious than it actually was. In reality very few men actually deserted, and those that did were motivated more by deprivation and the application of strict discipline by the regiment’s new Commanding Officer, John Skerrett, than they were by revolutionary ideals. After the incident the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was sent to Halifax to serve out the rest of the war. In July of 1802, after the signing of the treaty Amiens, the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was disbanded.12

Peace, however, was short lived and the following year as war resumed between Britain and France, London again authorised the raising of a regular regiment of infantry in Newfoundland. Once again designated Royal, the regiment was raised along the same guidelines as the 1795 incarnation. Many of the officers and men from the previous regiment re-enlisted for service in 1803. Unlike the first Royal Newfoundland Regiment, this unit spent most of its existence off the island and it was the first to see combat. The 1803 Royal Newfoundland Regiment was heavily employed during the war with the Americans between 1812 and 1815. The regiment served with distinction and played a prominent role in many key battles. It returned to Newfoundland at the conclusion of the war and was disbanded in 1816.13

Newfoundland did not field another combat regiment for almost 100 years. In 1914 the colony enthusiastically answered the call to arms and raised an infantry regiment for service overseas. During the course of the war over 6000 men served in the regiment and they fought with distinction in Turkey, France and Belgium. In 1917 the Newfoundland regiment had again been awarded the prefix of Royal. By 1919, however, the regiment was disbanded and was not raised again for another 30 years.

Newfoundland chose not to send another infantry regiment for front line service during the Second World War; instead they fielded two artillery regiments. Under the Terms of Union agreed to during confederation with Canada, Newfoundland committed to raising reserve units as part of the Canadian Defence Force, one of which was to be an infantry regiment. On October 24th 1949 the Newfoundland Regiment was officially added to the Canadian Army. In December of that same year King George VI granted the regiment the Royal prefix.14

Understanding the Cultural Connection to 1795

With a deep and ingrained sense of tradition at the heart of the regimental system that exists in the British and Canadian armed forces, the officers and men of subsequent Royal Newfoundland Regiments have easily understood the importance of the connection to the 1795 regiment. The development of esprit de corps is key to the functioning of regiments in battle and the development of regimental esprit de corps has largely rested on reputation, self-image, and traditions; especially the traditions of loyalty and courage. While some British regiments are

14 Ibid., pp. 511 – 520.
among the oldest corporate institutions in Europe, and some Canadian regiments among the oldest in this country. Others like the Royal Newfoundland Regiment have had a fractured history of service, yet in such regiments lineage and tradition are equally important. Regiments draw enormous strength in war and peace from their assumption of the name, tradition, and fighting records of their regular parent regiments and military culture has established this as a central tenet of the regimental tradition. This understanding has not always been as self evident in the public consciousness of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Many studies of the regimental system highlight the development of a close relationship between regiments and their regional recruiting areas, a relationship that often led to these areas seeing the regiments as their own. The cultural connections and sense of identity that existed between the raising of the 1795, 1803 and 1914 Royal Newfoundland Regiments were markedly different. Little is currently known about public reaction to the raising and existence of the early regiments. The fractured nature of the early incarnations of this regiment, as its existence was tied directly the duration of wars, makes it difficult to determine the extent to which the connection between unit and local populace existed. The 1795 and 1803 regiments were raised and funded by the British government out of necessity to defend areas of their empire and to allow them to effectively engage in a North American war, while the main bulk of their army was tied up in campaigns in Europe. The push for the initial raising of the regiment came from military leaders on the island over growing fears on its state of defense. Sean Cadigan has argued that local merchants in St. John’s came to support the idea of a locally raised regiment during the French revolution more out of fear over potential mutiny on naval vessels than invasion. For them the regiment was seen as a necessary tool of civil control, rather than an embodiment of Newfoundland identity.

In 1914, however, the situation was much different. Newfoundland had been functioning under self rule for quite some time. A large percentage of the population was native to the island and a definite ‘Newfoundland’ identity had been forged. When war came, commitment to the empire was strong. Though the original pledge of Newfoundland support to the war effort was given by Governor Walter Davidson, the British government’s representative on the island, his decision to raise an infantry unit sparked an outpouring of commitment on all levels of society across the island. The level to which the local population embraced the regiment was unprecedented and organizers were adamant that they raise a Newfoundland regiment, rather than simply provide men for British and Canadian units.

Participation in the Great War and the distinguished actions of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment firmly cemented military service as an integral part of Newfoundland’s collective consciousness, as David Facey-Crowther has pointed out, the actions of the regiment between 1914 and 1918 became part of Newfoundland and Labrador’s sacred memory.

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18 Sean Cadigan, Newfoundland & Labrador A History, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2009), p. 82.
the regiment by the local population during and after the Great War in turn led to a burgeoning importance in establishing of the lineage of the regiment in the collective consciousness of the island.

The Royal Newfoundland Regiment’s of 1795 and 1803 received little mention in the historical record prior to the Great War. In two of the noted early histories of Newfoundland, Lewis Anspach and D.W. Prowse both mention the French revolutionary war and the war of 1812, but neither mentions the raising of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment as their discussions center largely on Naval response and the economic impact to the fishery. In the wake of the Great War, however, there is a definite push to establish the legitimacy of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment as a long standing unit that could rival the lineage of many of the British regiments they served with during the war. In 1921 Dr. Gustave Lancton wrote an article for the Canadian Magazine entitled “When Newfoundland Saved Canada” in which he outlined the history of the Newfoundlanders who had enlisted in the Royal Highland Emigrants during the American Revolution. Using language familiar to his audience he triumphantly stated that the Newfoundlanders who left the island in October of 1775 in the ranks of the Emigrants were Newfoundland’s “first expeditionary contingent” who had departed to fight for king and empire. Between 1950 and 1964 The Newfoundland Quarterly published a series of articles entitled “When Newfoundland Helped to Save Canada” which discussed the actions of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment during the War of 1812. The author provided a bombastic account of the events which he stated “ought to move us with great pride as native Newfoundlanders.” The drive to establish the lineage of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment in the public consciousness has continued in recent years leading one author to refer to the Royal Highland Emigrants as the first Newfoundland regiment.

Conclusion

The Royal Newfoundland Regiment has been a fixture of Newfoundland and Labrador’s history for over 200 years. Though its lineage has not been unbroken, it has lived on through the shared memory and traditions of the regimental system in each successive manifestation of the regiment. While the military has always understood the importance of this continued regimental identity, it was not until after the Great War that the raising of the regiment in 1795 began to play a prominent role in the broader cultural identity of Newfoundland and Labrador.

The formation of the first Royal Newfoundland Regiment was a marked departure from what came before. For the first time in the island’s history it tied service to King and Country with a local geographical location. Men were now able to join a regiment in which a shared geography allowed them to form a distinct collective identity within a larger military complex. This identity was remembered and built upon time and again when the regiment was re-raised. Eventually this connection to place allowed for the development of a strong bond between the

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21 Lewis Anspach, A history of the Island of Newfoundland Containing a Description of the Island, the Banks, the Fishery, and the Trade of Newfoundland and the Coast of Labrador, (London: Sherwood, Gilbert and Piper, Paternoster- Row. 1827); D.W. Prowse, A History of Newfoundland From the English, Colonial and Foreign Records, (London: MacMillian and Co. 1895)
22 R.J.D Saunders, “When Newfoundland Saved Canada,” The Newfoundland Quarterly 49.3(1949), pp. 11-13
resident population and the regiment. In the post Great War years this connection led to the establishment of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment as major element in the collective identity of Newfoundland and Labrador.
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Books

Anspach, Lewis. *A history of the Island of Newfoundland Containing a Description of the Island, the Banks, the Fishery, and the Trade of Newfoundland and the Coast of Labrador*. London: Sherwood, Gilbert and Piper, Paternoster- Row, 1827.


Articles


Unpublished Papers


Raising the Regiment (Prologue). Daniel S. (Hobby). Apr 2, 2019·6 min read. Realm of Ghyran. The wind muttered around the ruins of Erynost. On the walls, a sentry wrapped his cloak a little tighter around his shoulders. Thoran raised the mask to her face, tightening its strap to hold it firm. Raising her arms, she began to sing, in a low, mournful tone. Beneath the brambles, the earth of the cemetery began to stir. Bony hands scraped away the soil. Regiment, in most armies, a body of troops headed by a colonel and organized for tactical control into companies, battalions, or squadrons. The word is derived from the Latin ‘regimen,’ a rule or system of order, and describes the regiment’s functions of raising, equipping, and training troops. The Regiment Raise Up feat Sadat X & El Da Sensei [NEW 2014]. (play). (download) 3:14. The Regiment Raise Up ft. Sadat X & El Da Sensei (prod. DJ Duct). (play). (download) 4:10. The Raising of the Regiment My Home / Within a Mile O'edinburgh Town / Fanfare-Argylls Regiment. Other listen. araw araw ben and ben. Hello everyone, I've been searching for some books or articles that discuss how the idea of "the regiment" has been used in different armies across time. My particular area of interest is World War I and the interwar period. I know from vague references here and there in my previous reading that the regiment had lost much of its tactical significance as a discrete unit on the battlefield prior to World War I. Battalions seem to have become the "basic" unit of infantry force and divisions/corps the primary operational units.