

**THE BIG TREK**  
**NIAGARA TO TORONTO**  
**OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 1915**

**By**

**Lieutenant Colonel William A. Smy, OMM, CD, UE**

Although troops had assembled in Niagara Camp from the earliest days of the First World War, the camp never developed to a point where it could accommodate large numbers of men over the winter period until the summer of 1918. So each year, after the summer season of training, winter billets had to be found for the units which had undergone training at Niagara during the spring, summer and fall. The first challenge was the winter of 1915/1916.

On 16 October 1915, the military staff of Military District No 2 announced that on 25 October the whole of the assembled troops at Niagara (some 10,000 men) would begin a long “big trek” to winter quarters. It was described as “the most extensive military movement that ever has taken place in the Niagara District” and would be the “largest trek since the 189 mile trek from Swift Current to Battleford in 1885.”<sup>1</sup>

A scenario was developed wherein a state of war existed between “Northland” and “Southland”. Land forces of Northland had swept deep into Southland and had taken control of all the area between Niagara and Toronto except fortified garrisons which Southland had managed to establish at Niagara, St. Catharines, Hamilton and Toronto. Southland reinforcements at Niagara were needed to strengthen the line at Newmarket and the plan was to move the troops from Niagara through these garrisons. During the move they would need to establish outposts at their nightly encampments at Grimsby, Bronte Creek, and Port Credit. Enemy forces would operate against them along the route.

According to the scenario, it was impossible to move the troops to Toronto by ship as Lake Ontario was “infested” with enemy submarines. In fact, the scenario stated, submarines were lurking in the vicinity of Niagara-on-the-Lake, and it was “rumoured that a number of these underwater craft have been netted while attempting to enter the Niagara River.” Commanding Officers were warned that a “venturesome” submarine might shell troops marching near the lake.<sup>2</sup>

An exercise headquarters was established at the Hamilton Armoury. Administrative detachments were positioned at the “fortified posts” and “Outposts”. Newspapers

---

<sup>1</sup> St Catharines Standard, 16 October 1915.

<sup>2</sup> St Catharines Standard, 25 October 1915.

reported that Ball ammunition had been issued to Battalions at Niagara “in case any trouble may transpire on the march that will necessitate its use.”<sup>3</sup>

To provide an emergency method of moving individuals or groups of men, the route paralleled the electric rail line between Beamsville, Hamilton and Oakville. The Dominion Power and Transmission Company instructed its employees to provide assistance when called upon and pick up any soldiers who required transportation and Conductors were ordered to “give all assistance in case incapacitated soldiers” needed help boarding cars.<sup>4</sup>

In St Catharines, the battalions in turn moved into a tented encampment on the grounds of the armoury on Lake Street. There were already some tents there being used by the Welland Canal Force, but about 160 additional “regulation bell tents” were put up, most of which were erected just west of the armoury proper, with others on the front lawn. “Space [was] reserved for the field kitchens and transport wagons west of the armoury where have been erected sheds with sanitary equipment the equal of which will not be available at all other temporary camps en route.”<sup>5</sup>

The armoury was used as a kitchen and large dining hall, and a civilian catering staff was hired to provide meals for both the resident staff and the transient battalions. A signal corps officer set up equipment in the armoury to provide the St Catharines link in the line of communications to report the progress of the move.<sup>6</sup>

The citizens of St Catharines took up the challenge of having a military force of about 1,000 men in their community on a daily basis. The YMCA arranged a nightly concert, and for 5¢ provided laundry services. The St Catharines Standard set up a co-ordination desk to process offers by residents to host soldiers to dinner and a bath in their residences.

Enthusiasm aside, however, there were problems. Lake Street Armoury could not support the hygiene requirements of such large numbers, so by the time the last battalion passed through St Catharines, the men were bathing in Lake Ontario at the end of Lake Street. Signalling was “lamentably weak”; it took 6 hours to transmit a message over 12 miles, with the conclusion that “heliographs are futile”. It took 16 trucks to move the blankets for a battalion, but there was only one truck available in St Catharines. That meant 16 round trips to the railway station, with the result that men did not get to bed on time.<sup>7</sup>

One shining success was that of the medical services, both on the march and at the various overnight camps.

At Grimsby, the camp was established on the beach.

---

<sup>3</sup> St Catharines Standard, 16 October 1915; 30 October 1915. The Globe, 25 October 1915.

<sup>4</sup> St Catharines Standard, 25 October 1915.

<sup>5</sup> St Catharines Standard, 16 October 1915.

<sup>6</sup> St Catharines Standard, 25 October 1915; Stevens Photo Album.

<sup>7</sup> St Catharines Standard, 28 October 1915.

At Hamilton, an exercise “Fortified Post” was established at James Street Armoury where the men were fed and slept.

Merton Camp was established near the G.T.R. station at Bronte under the command of Captain W. A. Stevens of the 19th Regiment, St. Catharines. It was cut by Bronte Creek and was large enough to accommodate 15,000 men and horses. Photographs reveal it also had a rifle range on site.<sup>8</sup>



Colin Stevens Collection

### **Merton Camp**



**Rifle range firing point at Merton Camp**



Colin Stevens Collection

**Artillery at Merton Camp**

---

<sup>8</sup> St Catharines Standard, 25 October 1915.

Camp Port Credit was described as being “perhaps the best ungarrisoned camp of the whole route.” The village of Port Credit provided water and electric light and filtered water for drinking was supplied by a near-by starch works. Cement walkways skirted the camp on all sides and washing water was provided on the field.

The departures were usually based on a battalion, or battalion size unit, departing every day:

- 25 October: 37th Battalion
- 26 October: 58th and 74th Battalions
- 27 October: 75th Battalion
- 28 October: 83rd Battalion
- 29 October: 30th, 31st and 40th Field Batteries, CFA
- 30 October: 92nd Battalion
- 1 November: 81st Battalion
- 2 November: 84th Battalion
- 3 November: 76th Battalion
- 4 November: 86th Battalion
- 5 November: Camp Details

At Niagara Camp, there were bonfires and banquets the night before the 37th Battalion departed and the men were in great spirits. The camp staff and officers came under criticism, however, as much of the wood for the fires was construction lumber newly purchased for the camp. Newspapers reported that the next day the men were “in perfect condition” and that the whole camp turned out for the departure, “while the streets of Niagara were thronged with citizens.”<sup>9</sup>

At 1215 hrs, a screen of sixteen scouts preceded the Advanced Guard of one company. The Main Body of the Battalion then followed at 1345 hrs, led by the Battalion Band, and trailed by a “transport train” which included five “steaming kitchens”. Stretcher bearers picked up stragglers. The whole was brought up by the Rear Guard.<sup>10</sup>

The 81st Battalion left Niagara Camp mid-day on 2 November. The Evening Review reported:

“Tramping along behind the 81st Battalion on its march from Niagara to St Catharines was John House, Port Dalhousie, 86, whose grandson of the same name is a Lieutenant in the battalion, and rode a horse in the march. Mr House scorned the offer of conveyance by his grandson, when the latter saw that his grandfather was determined to make the trip. House was a sergeant in the 19th Lincolns during the Fenian Raid in 1866 and he previously served in the 73rd Imperial Regiment.”<sup>11</sup>

---

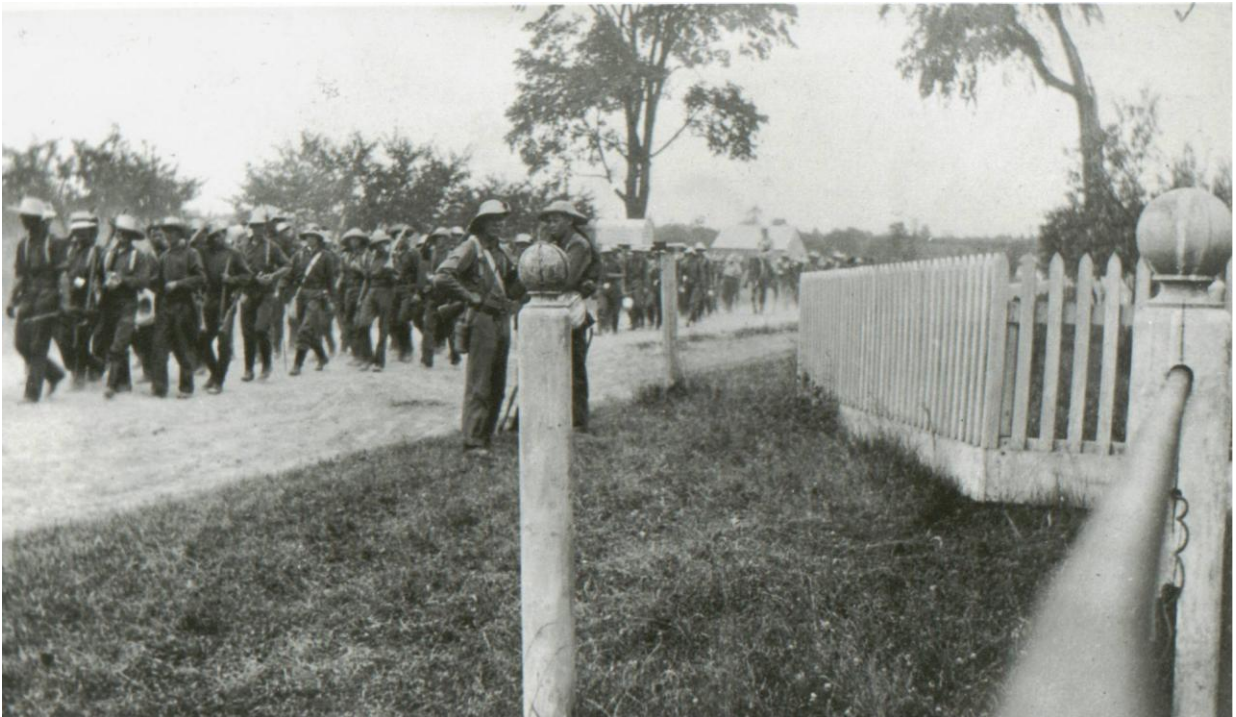
<sup>9</sup> St Catharines Standard, 25 October 1915; 27 October 1915.

<sup>10</sup> St Catharines Standard, 25 October 1915.

<sup>11</sup> Evening Tribune, 3 November 1915. The grandson was John Albert House, the Battalion Machine-Gun Officer. The elder John House died November 1919.

A letter to the editor of the St Catharines Standard that day suggested that the 81st receive a special welcome. In the event, in the late afternoon, when the Battalion reached the railway bridge on Queenston Street, factory whistles sounded and a special fire bell rang to announce its arrival. Dinner invitations exceeded the number of men wishing to visit a home in the city.<sup>12</sup>

The Battalion left St Catharines the next morning, and in a sham battle west of Jordan later that day it drove off the “enemy”. St Catharines residents were justly proud of the performance of the Battalion as it was the first unit to win that “victory”. Previously, on one occasion, officers of a battalion being tested had been surrounded and captured.<sup>13</sup>



Jon Jouprien Collection

**81<sup>st</sup> Battalion on Pelham Road near St Catharines while on the march to Toronto**

At Grimsby, the men were fed from the unit’s mobile kitchens and slept on the beach. Heavy rain held up the march for a day. The Battalion then marched 19 miles on 4 November and spent the night at the Hamilton Armoury, and the next day completed a 14 mile march, bivouacking at Merton. A 16 mile march on the 6th brought it to a bivouac site at the Long Branch rifle ranges. The 81st marched the last 12 miles from the ranges to Toronto on 9 November “without any appearance of fatigue”.

---

<sup>12</sup> St Catharines Standard, 30 October 1915; 2 November 1915.

<sup>13</sup> St Catharines Standard, 4 November 1915.

The senior staff of Military District Number Two decided to make the arrival of so many men in uniform a stimulus to recruiting. They organized an enormous 12-mile parade of the 58th, 37th, 74th, 75th, 81th, 83th, 92nd and 95th Battalions through the streets of Toronto accompanied by 16 military bands, field kitchens, ambulances, transport vehicles and guns. Motor vehicles in the parade carried signs, "Your King and Country Need You -- Step on Board."

"The whole route was decorated with flags hanging from homes, offices and businesses. Automobiles, too, were outfitted with Union Jacks, and men, women and children carried miniature flags. People arrived in crowded street cars, hanging off side rails, cheering. Every time the parade stopped, the populace cheered, and showered the soldiers with gifts of 'sweet meats', cigarettes and tobaccos...Practically the whole city saw the parade, citizens crowding six or seven deep over the entire route, while others sought better vantage points from rooftops, trees and the tops of automobiles. With the sheer number of flags, ".the avenues of humanity made a veritable Union Jack through which the soldier boys passed."»<sup>14</sup>

The parade was then followed by an inspection by Sir Sam Hughes:

"although the men must have badly needed a rest, they were the jolliest of all. When the parade halted they held an impromptu concert between Bay and Yonge streets, singing the favorite camp ditties. The following went to the tune of 'My Bonnie'

'They say we get milk in our coffee;  
They say we get cream in our tea.  
They say we get milk in our cocoa;  
But it looks more like whitewash to me'

The crowd gave them a great cheer...»<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, this ditty was almost the same as two sung at Niagara Camp which voiced discontent with conditions under which the men soldiered.<sup>16</sup>

The march ended and the troops dispersed to their winter quarters at the Exhibition Grounds.

---

<sup>14</sup> Ian Hugh Maclean Miller. "Our Glory and Our Grief: Toronto and the Great War". PhD Thesis, Wilfred Laurier University, 1999. p 205-207.

<sup>15</sup> St Catharines Standard, 10 November 1915.

<sup>16</sup> St Catharines Standard, 15 September 1915.