



A Very Canadian Story- New Brunswick's 104th Regiment of Foot

In June 1812, the United States declared war on Great Britain, beginning a 30 month conflict waged at sea and on the long land frontier in North America. In New Brunswick, there was fear and watchfulness and preparation, but the land war did not come here; instead, New Brunswick went to the war.

The winter of 1813 was one of extreme cold and heavy snows. Between February and April, New Brunswick's 104th Regiment of Foot marched more than 1100 kilometres from Fredericton, New Brunswick to Kingston, Upper Canada (Ontario) to reinforce British troops and thwart an expected invasion by the Americans. This effort by a regiment of poorly clothed, frostbitten and hungry soldiers stands as an incredible feat in military history. That they battled the elements before they battled the enemy makes this story very Canadian.



Parks Canada: Derek Fitzjames

The Americans sought to seize British North America with a series of invasions in the summer and fall of 1812, however each assault was repulsed by the British. With the onset of winter in 1812 came word that the Americans were planning a major attack in the spring of 1813. The British army needed more troops, but the usual access route, the St. Lawrence River, was already frozen and closed to shipping. Senior officers in Upper Canada (Ontario) remembered New Brunswick's 104th Regiment of Foot and concluded that they were the answer to the problem. In early 1813 New Brunswick's 104th Regiment of Foot was ordered to "make ready to march".

Close to 600 soldiers and officers left Fredericton on February 16th, 1813. These soldiers had been recruited from places like New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, Ontario and Scotland and came from all situations in life, from rich officers to the very poor who could only earn enough to eat through soldiering.

Marching single file, pulling toboggans laden down with food and muskets while bugles played the traditional leaving song “The Girl I Left Behind Me”, the men set off from their garrison in Fredericton in companies of 100 on six successive days.

The march took place during the coldest, snowiest winter in 20 years. Each group had to break new trail, as the previous company’s tracks had been snowed under during the night. During the first seven days they found nightly shelter in houses and barns along the way. By the eighth day the men encountered the wilderness of the upper St. John River, and each night the men dug 5 feet into the snow with their snowshoes and chopped poles for a roof to their hut, as temperatures dropped below -27C.

Their only barrier against the cold was a fire and a threadbare woolen blanket.



104th Hurting: Drew Kennickell Illustrations

The regiment arrived in Kingston, Upper Canada (Ontario) on April 12th, 1813 after marching 1176 km (730 miles) in 55 days, covering an average of 27 km per day. Many men suffered from frostbite and other ailments from the effects of snowshoeing such a long journey, yet only one soldier, almost certainly ill before leaving Fredericton, died during the march, at Woodstock.

New Brunswick’s 104th Regiment participated in most of the well known battles of the War of 1812 including the Battle of Lundy’s Lane, the attack on Fort Erie and the Battle of Beaver Dams made famous by Laura Secord.

After the war, around 100 veterans returned to New Brunswick. 50 received land grants in the military settlement formed between Grand Falls and Presqu’île on the St. John River. Another 15 received land grants between Fredericton and St. Andrews.

With the help of New Brunswick’s 104th Regiment of Foot, the provinces of British North America stood together to fend off attacks from the United States of America. The bonds of nationhood began to form, setting a path leading to Confederation 55 years later on July 1st, 1867.