

Jarvis Family Experience and Fenian Raid at Ridgeway

As I remember the outbreak of hostilities came upon the country like a thief in the night. In the latter part of May – a party of Fenians crossed the border near Fort Erie and formed an entrenched camp. ... As soon as word came that they had actually got a footing on Canadian soil, troops were hurriedly rushed up from Toronto and London and Hamilton.

I will not attempt therefore to give a history of the Fort Erie campaign but confine myself rather to a few incidents, which came incidentally under our notice at Cornwall. We were deeply interested in what little news came through from the Western Theatre on account of my brother Salter being a sergeant in the Trinity College Company of the Queen's Own Rifles. The company was then under command of Capt. Levius P. Sherwood. Colonel Gilmour [sic] was in command of the Regiment. They were the first, or amongst the first, to get to the front. The 13th of Hamilton under Colonel Booker were brigaded with them. Possibly some will blame their unlucky number for the fiasco that resulted at the first brush. ... [T]he Queen's Own and the 13th Hamilton regiment came into touch with the enemy at the village of Ridgeway and a skirmish began at once. I believe Booker was senior to Gilmour, and took command. The men behaved very well. They were extended in skirmishing order and stood their baptism of fire without flinching. Our company (of course I did not belong to it then) was not in the thick of it, but were under fire. I have been told that Ogden Ford was full of his jokes and kept up the spirits of the men. ... Other men present in the engagement were Sergt. William Cary, afterwards Archdeacon of Div. of Ontario, private G.I. Taylor, now rector emeritus of St. Bartholomew's, Toronto, Ralph Hinds, another divinity student.

Ten or twelve were killed outright, and between 30 and 40 were wounded more or less seriously, and a few were taken prisoners. The University Company suffered most heavily, losing seven, in all. No. 8 Trinity College, managed to reform and was thrown out as a rear guard, and held the formation, till the column was finally halted and brought into some sort of order. The enemy, however, made no effort to follow up their advantage, and before the regulars came up they retired and soon broke up altogether and dispersed across the frontier.

We could never get Salter to talk much of this affair. I have been told since that he kept cool under the ordeal and in the midst of the melee was sent across the line of fire with orders and that he didn't duck his head when the bullets whistled past. The battalion returned to Toronto bringing their dead and such of the wounded as could be moved, and were welcomed as heroes.

All this took place on Saturday, June 2, 1866. We knew in Cornwall that events were moving on that frontier [and] that a crossing [of the Niagara River from Buffalo to Fort Erie] had been effected [by the Fenians]. Troops from Toronto, including the Q.O.R., had gone forward. Others besides Salter had gone from Cornwall, and were known to be in the expedition. Of course we were very anxious. Perhaps the coolest and least upset was my mother, who went about her work without intermitting any of the household duties. Generally she was the most anxious of the household if any of us were in the slightest danger, but often it is the ones whom we think should be the first to give way that show the greatest fortitude in a serious crisis. On Saturday towards evening telegrams kept coming in that there had been a serious engagement, but no details could be had. We did not know which side had been victorious.

On Sunday morning we all went to church. The gallery as usual was reserved for the military. Service went on as usual but of course we were all under a great strain with suppressed excitement.

The old Rector, Archdeacon Patton, went into the Pulpit to deliver a patriotic sermon fitting the occasion. In the middle of it a messenger in uniform arrived and handed a paper to the mayor who immediately rose from his place and put the telegram in the hands of the preacher, who had suspended his sermon. What was the message? It must be something serious to justify such an unheard of thing as the interruption of the prim and highly orthodox Archdeacon's discourse. Was it good or bad? Was it an order for the military to march out to meet an attack at our own doors? I do not think I was ever under such a strain before or since, and I fancy others of the congregation could say the same. The Archdeacon glanced over the paper and then read out quietly "Enemy have retired. Cornwall boys all safe." I believe the sigh of relief would have broken next moment into a good rousing British cheer, had not the Archdeacon raised his hand and announced, "We will thank God for his mercies by singing the doxology: Praise God from whom all blessings flow." It was given with a will, and then the grand old man proceeded with his thirdly, fourthly, and fifthly as if nothing particular had happened.

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