

SURVEYORS AT WAR

BY PETER MANSFIELD

THE HISTORY of surveying and mapping is tied intrinsically to the history of war and war technology. Grossly inaccurate maps were blamed by the French generals for defeats in the Franco-Prussian war. Pledging that history would not repeat itself, the French army, aided by hikers, tourists and those seekers of absolute truth (to one part in 100,000), the geodesists, embarked on a period of frenzied map-making. Soon, all they needed was a war to test their product. They didn't have to wait too long.

In "Tourism, Patriotism and Topography", Rene Siestrunk writes:

"In 1914, the skills thus developed by all these individuals were put to use in that form of applied topography known as trench warfare."

The 1920s and 1930s saw the rapid development and expansion of the aerial photography industry. It was Hitler who put the new technology to the test with that form of applied photogrammetry known as the blitzkrieg.

These developments have been followed in turn by that form of applied geodesy known as intercontinental ballistic missile warfare, and more recently by that agent of digital mapping - the cruise missile.

And the work continues. In Ontario, the basic mapping program has come under fire for being uneconomic. Nonsense! It has saved the Russians billions. While we have to spend ourselves into bankruptcy building satellites that can produce up-to-date maps of their country, they can obtain all the maps they want of us by simply walking into the Queen's Park map-room and buying them.

Ultimately, however, it may not be the topographers but the topologists that decide our fate. Topologists are those egg-headed cousins of ours who can tell, in strict mathematical terms, the difference between a donut and a washing machine (one doesn't lose one's socks). This special expertise may serve a grisly purpose one day. Scientists tell us that after an all-out nuclear exchange, when

the entire North American land mass resembles Sudbury, it may be the topologists who poke through the rubble and determine which pile of cinders is Washington and which Moose Jaw.

But that is the future! What of the past?

May 12, 1985 marks the 100th Anniversary of the battle at Batoche - a decisive battle in the Red River Rebellion of 1885 and one in which surveyors played a key role. Their involvement in the on-going troubles in the northwest represents a colourful chapter in the history of surveying in Canada and one that has been outlined extensively in "Men and Meridians".

The usual platitudes about loyalty and courage were mumbled by politicians and generals alike and these were recorded for posterity. But a closer examination of diaries and reports of the time suggest not all was sweetness and light. In fact, the surveyors involved were ignored by politicians, scorned and mistrusted by the generals and shafted by historians.

In his "History of the Northwest", Alexander Begg writes:

"The Land Surveys were in a large measure responsible for both rebellions in the northwest."

Begg asserts that the underlying problem was the desire of surveyors to impose the principal meridian and the rectangular township upon the existing river-lot system as occupied by the Metis. Surveyors, he contends, were unsympathetic to the claims of those people - the Metis and the Indians - already resident in the northwest. Nothing could be further from the truth. In his report of 1885, a Deputy Minister wrote:

"... in no case where settlers have been found on a river front in advance of survey and desired that their holdings should be laid out with river frontages, has the privilege been refused."

In a shameless attempt to discredit the surveying profession, Begg half-quotes William Pearce, D.L.S.:

"At page 15 (Annual Report of the Department of the Interior, for 1884) Mr. Pearce says: 'The claims at St. Laurent on the South Branch of the Saskatchewan, were not personally investigated by me, as the greater portion of the claimants spoke only French and I would have required an interpreter.' Mistaken economy in the light of subsequent events."

It is unfortunate that Begg did not see fit to print the other half of Pearce's remark:

"With the approval of the Minister, Mr. Duck, Dominion Land Agent, who speaks the French language, was instructed to obtain the evidence of these claimants. This was revised by me and recommendations made in each case by the Land Board."

The problems actually began following the purchase of Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company. It was an over-zealous Canadian government that ordered the survey work of this vast territory to commence before the official transfer of sovereignty of the West had been made. Surveyors were in the unenviable position of being the earliest manifestation of the new Federal authority and as such were regarded as intruders and trouble-makers.

But it was surveyors, in fact, who were most aware of the potential dangers and their cause, and as such tried to warn the politicians. Col. J. S. Dennis, Surveyor-General, wrote in 1869:

"I have again to remark the uneasy feeling which exists in the Half-breed and Indian element with regard to what they conceive to be premature action taken by the Government in proceeding to effect a survey of the lands without having first extinguished the Indian title."

Unfortunately his warnings were ignored by the Federal officials and since surveyors are the agents of government policy not the makers, Dennis found himself caught between a rock and a hard place. Aided by two Ontario surveyors - Milner Hart, P.L.S. and A.C. Webb, P.L.S., Dennis began the survey work in

the summer of 1869. It was the absurd hope of William McDougall, Lieutenant Governor of the Northwest that they could lay out the township lot pattern without the 1200 Metis families resident there noticing. Perhaps he thought that the survey crews could traverse the prairies disguised as wheat.

The survey work continued under these trying conditions until October 11, 1869, when Webb and his party were discovered trying to run a line across a long, narrow river-lot belonging to André Nault. A group of Metis men headed by Louis Riel stopped the progress of the survey by standing on the survey chain. Webb left quietly. It is possible that prudent and conciliatory gestures at this point could have prevented the subsequent uprising. Unfortunately, on that very day, McDougall arrived from Ottawa, eager to view for himself the progress being made by the surveyors. Befitting his conciliatory nature, McDougall brought along 350 rifles and 30,000 rounds of ammunition and soon the first uprising began in earnest. Incredibly, the surveyors were ordered to continue with their work even though the situation was extremely volatile. It is no wonder that the first blood spilled was that of Thomas Scott, an assistant on a survey crew.

Angry words were exchanged and soon push came to shove, the final result being the banishment of Riel to more southern climes. This unfortunate episode is known politely as the Red River troubles and it laid the groundwork for the Red River Rebellion of 1885.

By 1884 Riel had returned to Batoche, near present day Prince Albert in Saskatchewan, at the request of Metis leaders. The seeds of revolution had been sown by poor crops, mounting debts and inadequate credit facilities for farmers.

The uprising began in earnest on March 26, 1885 when an unplanned skirmish at Duck Lake between Metis and the Mounted Police left 14 men dead. Word of the rebellion reached the Dominion Land Surveyors as they gathered in Ottawa for the annual meeting. They quickly realized that the survey work upon which they depended would halt if the violence in the west was allowed to continue throughout the summer.

On April Fool's Day 1885, the sur-

veyors met at Russell House, an Ottawa hotel, to organize a special surveyor's militia unit which would participate directly in the western conflict. It was agreed that 10 Dominion Land Surveyors would form the nucleus of the corps and each would be responsible for recruiting 4 assistants (Geo-Joes?) familiar with conditions in the northwest, thus making the corps 50 men strong.

On the recommendations of Sir David MacPherson, Minister of the Interior, the surveyors met with Adolphe Caron, Minister of Militia, who gave them his stamp of approval. They were to be known as the Dominion Land Surveyor's Intelligence Corps!

Soon they were on their way to join Major-General Middleton and the fighting in Saskatchewan. They arrived in Winnipeg on April 11. After picking up saddles and other gear, they moved on to Qu'Appelle, and finally Swift Current where they were given wild horses and ordered to run them through a mounted drill. The resulting chaos provided fine entertainment for the attendant dignitaries and though it proved somewhat embarrassing for the surveyors, was taken in good-natured stride. Arthur Wheeler writes:

"This was interesting: A number of the horses had never been saddled before and at the word 'Mount' promptly pitched the would-be rider out of the saddle. Wild confusion reigned, men shouting and swearing, horses bucking and bolting and for some time it was a circus well worth seeing."

The D.L.S. Intelligence Corps next set up pickets at a spot half-way between Swift Current and the front where they also acted as a despatch-carrying unit.

They quickly made a name for themselves among the officers, especially one Joe Burrows, D.L.S.

"Joe Burrows was quartermaster of the corps and proved his qualifications for that position to such an extent that on one occasion the Commanding officer was paraded before the Commanding General to listen to a complaint made by the commissariat officers, who stated that Burrows and his quartermaster fatigue of the Surveyors Corps would steal the filling out of the teeth of the commissariat staff unless they slept with their mouths shut."

In early May they finally joined up with Major-General Middleton's main force near Batoche. By this time they had become the butt of numerous jokes. Owing to the high proportion of commission-holders (22) in the corps, they were known affectionately as the "49 officers and one scout". It is noteworthy also that Middleton could not bring himself to use their official title but instead referred to them as the Land Surveyor Scouts.

Perhaps the surveyors made Middleton nervous for they were as well-educated and mature as he and certainly not the usual bright-eyed 19 year olds that he was given as cannon-fodder.

The surveyors were there to gather information, but according to Captain Dennis, the intelligence they offered Middleton "was not looked upon with special favour".

Middleton's skepticism of the calibre of his troops was highlighted at Batoche where Riel and his men had dug in for one last stand. The Metis were renowned for their shooting prowess, but at Batoche they found themselves outnumbered and surrounded.

At this point one final push would have ended the hostilities. But Middleton was cautious - cautious to the point of being a liability. Instead he ordered his chief-of-staff, Lord Melgund back to Ottawa for more men and contented himself with small, daily advances that did nothing but get his men shot by Metis sharpshooters. One unlucky soul was Alexander Kippen, a surveyor from Perth, Ontario, who on May 11 had his head blown away as he sat on a bluff near Batoche.

Perhaps it was at this point that the troops, D.L.S. Intelligence Corps included, decided that enough was enough.

On that fateful day of May 12, 1885, the General ordered yet another partial advance and then retired to lunch. This, it turns out, was the most crucial lunch of the campaign for while he was masticating, his men decided to turn the partial advance into a full-fledged charge of the Light Brigade (if, as one surveyor noted, "the rush of a lot of undisciplined ragamuffins can be called a charge"). Arthur Wheeler, P.L.S. wrote:

"I was in the zereba with my arm in a sling when suddenly we heard con-

tinuous cheering and volleys of rifle fire. The General came along and wanted to know what it was all about. An artillery officer standing beside him replied, 'I think they are charging the village, Sir.' 'Who the devil gave them orders to charge?'"

Poor Middleton! Fortunately his men won the day. The Metis were routed and while many fled into the wilderness, it was only a few days before most of them, including Riel, had been captured. All that was left was the chase of the Indian Big Bear and his followers. The D.L.S. Intelligence Corps moved on to Prince Albert, Battleford and finally Fort Pitt where they engaged in the wilderness chase. Here, at long last, the surveyors were in their true element - swamp, bog and muskeg - and their experience proved most useful.

Soon they returned to Battleford to set up pickets along the South Saskatchewan River. Many Indians were

intercepted there and some were convicted and hung for their part in an earlier massacre at Frog Lake.

The D.L.S. Intelligence Corps had now out-lived its usefulness. The rebellion was over. Riel would soon be tried and hung. Wheeler writes:

"We returned to Fort Pitt, arriving on June 12th. We were in camp there with the rest of the troops until June 28th doing nothing ... on June 28th, we were told, to our joy, that the corps would not be required for service any longer and that we might return home. We lost no time getting started and arrived at Moose Jaw on July 11th, where we were disbanded on the 12th."

So ended the "geodysey" of the Dominion Land Surveyors' Intelligence Corps.

In later years, some surveyors came to the conclusion that the whole affair could have been avoided if it weren't for the insensitivity of the political leaders and the incompetence of the military leaders. Wheeler concludes:

"Looked back upon through the vista of years the whole episode seems inglorious ... It has always seemed to me that the Northwest Mounted Police and organizations of local volunteers, such as Bouton's Mounted Infantry, French's Scouts, the D.L.S. Corps and men accustomed to the country and to dealing with the half-breeds and Indians could have handled the situation more practically, more effectively and at a minimum of cost."

The Canadian Surveyor
Vol. II Nos. 4 and 6
April, 1926/October 1926

Tourisme, Patriotisme et Topographie
Cartes et Figures de la Terre
(from the Canadian Surveyor - March 1982)