



War-hardened Fenians had recently survived the U.S. Civil War, so they knew the benefits of moving to the cover of farmers' fences. They took advantage of every opportunity at the Battle of Ridgeway and old Fort Erie.

# Reliving History: Fenian Raids at Old Fort Erie and Ridgeway

Words & photos by Chris Mills



Women and children at war: women fought in 19<sup>th</sup>-century battles, sometimes disguised as males. This woman is a fife player in the regimental band, behind a boy flag bearer. In 1866 young sons of soldiers could join the forces as flag bearers or drummers.



Fenian re-enactors march from their camp to the battlefield. The flag of green with a gold harp shows artistic licence; it was designed from a painting of the Battle of Ridgeway.

They arrive in buses, vans and cars, from the U.S.A. and from across Canada. Men and women

range from pre-teen drummer boys and flag bearers, up to very retired seniors. They all share a passion for history, an appreciation for the camaraderie and a love of living under canvas. They're teachers, civic workers, law enforcers, and myriad other real life professionals. But put a black powder rifle in their hands, and this is how they spend the weekend.

Private Dave Fulton, 54, is a Toronto civic worker, but when he dons his British uniform

and picks up his flintlock, he's a member of the 1812 British 49<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot Grenadiers.

Everyone in combat signs a waiver for personal liability, and each of their weapons is inspected for cleanliness, function and the trigger safety.

As he waits his turn, Fulton says few re-enactors carry original flintlocks or percussion cap muskets. Pretty good replicas made in India sell for \$500 or \$600, but Fulton and his crew all carry genuine Italian Pedersoli replicas worth about \$1,200. "I'm a history fanatic," says Fulton. "I love



Fenian raiders at old Fort Erie with a U.S. flag of the 155th New York Infantry, an Irish infantry from south Buffalo.

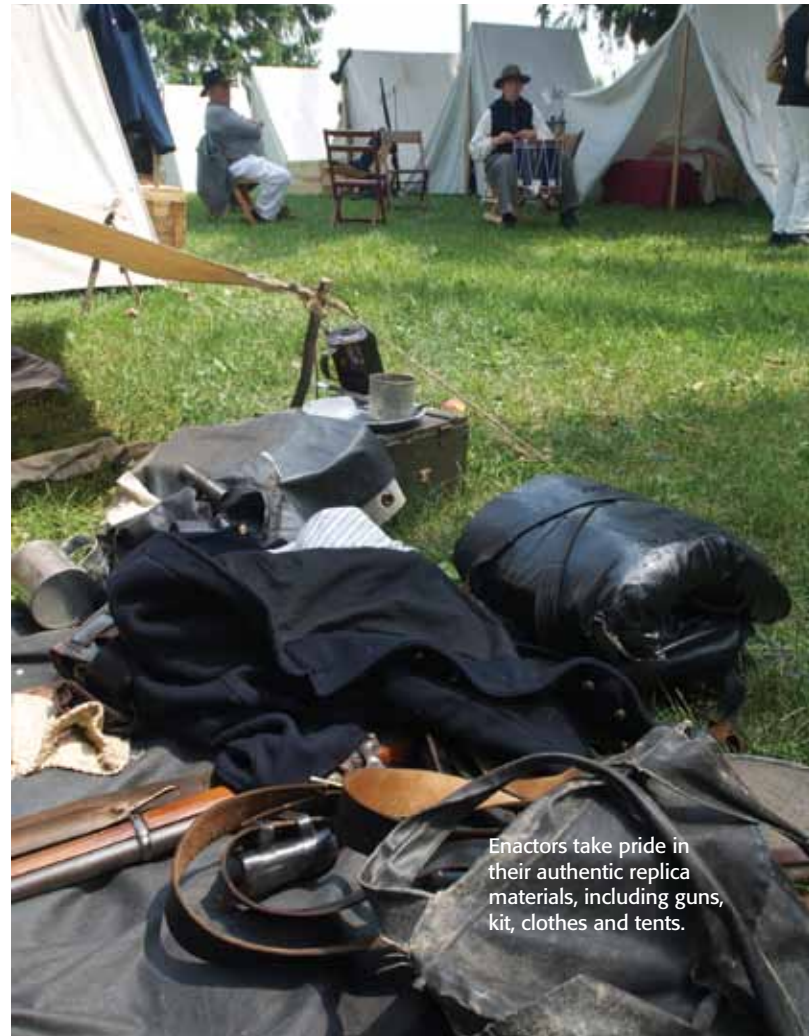


A blacksmith in real life, Helmut portrays one from the 19th century while his partner Sian portrays a lady selling homemade tinworks, wooden toys and dry goods.

A flagbearer carries the flag of the 155th New York Volunteer Infantry of Irish from south Buffalo, still used in re-enactments of Civil War and Fort Erie battles.



British (Canadian) redcoats during the Battle of Ridgeway, before being overtaken by Fenians on the field at old Fort Erie.



Enactors take pride in their authentic replica materials, including guns, kit, clothes and tents.

### The Battle that Created Canada

Historians consider the Battle of Ridgeway, which was one of the Fenian Raids against British North America in 1866, the battle that created Canada because it galvanized support across the country to create a Canadian Confederation against foreign intervention.

Following the end of the American Civil War, Irish-American "Fenians" bristled at the occupation of Ireland by British soldiers and believed that they could drive them out if they marched into and secured British Canada for ransom.

These were Civil War veterans, Confederates and Union, hardened in battle and skilled in warfare. Their mix of Confederate grey, Union blue and civilian outfits made a fine mash underneath the flags of the gold and green Irish Republican Army.

About 1,000 of them crossed the Niagara River at Buffalo, NY, and secured the railways, the telegraph office and the old Fort Erie that had been destroyed in 1814. They failed to recruit Irish Canadians in the region, so moved cross country to the town of Ridgeway where they handily beat Canadian militia of volunteers comprising several regiments from Hamilton, Toronto and locally.

They then returned to the old fort where they faced more British Canadian volunteers bringing up their rear, and routed them, too. The Fenians heard that thousands of British regulars were on their way and so abandoned the fort to return to New York to check on expected supplies and reinforcements.

On the water, Marine Guards of the USS Michigan arrested them and confiscated all their weapons.

There's debate over whether the White House approved the raids as reprisal for British support of the Confederacy during the war. Andrew Johnson, the president, however, afterwards signed a declaration against the uprising and sent General Ulysses S. Grant himself to ensure the Fenians were stopped.

reenactments. It's a lifestyle. And I can attend other re-enactments across the country by simply altering my uniform. Last year in Georgina, I'm a U.S. soldier sacking a town and shouting liberty or death!" Today, he'll play a Fenian to pump up the numbers.

Private Erin Bottrel, 45, is a British drummer in the 12th York Regiment for York County. He's been a re-enactor for 20 years. When he's not in uniform he's in anti-money laundering in Toronto. His wife, Karen Seeley, 47, is a writer.

"The battle re-creation is for the audience, but we're here for the campfire talk, the period authenticity, the tent life," says Bottrel. "We put away the cell phones and channel changers. It's our chance to run away from it, however briefly. However, all of us, me included, are rather too old for what we're portraying, since those soldiers in 1866 would all have been 17 to 25 or

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Fenian re-enactors line up to receive a new flag, the true green and gold colours that they would have carried on their 1866 raids of British territory.



Guy Larocque of Quebec, in white shirt, keeps an eye on the Fenian rifles, most of which are replica percussion-cap black powder muskets.

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so. It's a typical situation in the re-enacting hobby since younger people are either not interested or can't afford it."

Greg Fekner, a Confederate with the 10<sup>th</sup> Louisiana Company C, is actually a 29-year-old museum curator from Woodstock, Ont., in his third year of re-enactments.

Today he and members of the American Civil War Historical

Re-enactment Society are Fenians. Their weapon of choice is a percussion cap musket, so everyone has a PAL (possession and acquisition licence).

"Some people may think we're a bunch of crazy gun-loving yahoos," says Fekner, "but we're educators and we're entertainers. We also know that one single accident would end it. That's why training and safety are primary. It's a great way to teach history for young and old, and it's my chance

to do the living history part of it. It gives you a better perspective of history, away from the textbooks."

Les (Leslie) Peplinski, a 37-year-old English and history teacher from Brantford, joined the Civil War re-enactors 20 years ago when as a 17-year old she became a drummer boy.

"No one knows, but there's belief that 400 to 500 Civil War soldiers were women," she says. "Once you start, you don't want to leave. We're like a family. These guys practically raised me. My mom thought I was insane but now my three boys are into it,

too. My husband's not into it but he knows that this is my form of escape."

Meanwhile, camp followers with their familiar canvas pavilions include people like Sian, 43, and Helmut, 56, sutlers from Hamilton. Sutlers are merchants who followed the soldiers to provide services and merchandise for them to buy. Helmut is a genuine blacksmith, but goes mobile on weekends.

"All my life I've been following re-enactments, except for a few years in university, blacksmithing at Black Creek Village and doing work for the Royal Ontario Mu-

seum," says Helmut as he pumps the bellows on his fire. His wife is usually with him, although she's cut back on some of the longer distances from home.

Active in re-enactments for 27 years, Sian is a sociology professor for an Ottawa university. She makes wood and tin toys, and finished leather goods. She fell in love with the activity as a teenager when she met friends who were associated with Fort York in Toronto.

When the battle begins, real blasts fill the air; orders shout, wounded die, and columns disappear in the smoke while Jim

Hill, Niagara Parks Commission's superintendent of heritage, provides enlightening historical commentary.

Overnight, the rains come and pound red coats and blue coats alike. In the morning, only a handful has decamped, but everyone else rises with remarkable cheer to fight another round. But this time the other side wins.

Revisionism. Just for sport. **EV**

*Chris Mills photographs and writes about activities and subjects through the Niagara region. He hasn't shot a blackpowder gun in anger or strife in recent history.*