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Upper Canada's Black Defenders? Re-evaluating the War of 1812 Coloured Corps

Gareth Newfield

With the approach of the bicentennial of the War of 1812, renewed attention is being devoted to Canadian units that served in the conflict. Amongst these may certainly be counted the Coloured Corps. The lone all-Black unit engaged in Upper Canada (today Ontario), the primary theatre of war, its service has become symbolic of the experiences of African-Canadians during the conflict. Yet despite this fact its participation remains poorly understood. To some, its story is typical of a litany of Black units in Canada's military history – relegated to seemingly unglamorous support roles, its contributions are subsequently marginalized. Accordingly, even

Abstract: As the lone all-Black unit to serve in Upper Canada during the War of 1812, the history of the Coloured Corps has become symbolic of the experiences of African-Canadians during the conflict. Nevertheless, its service in the defence of Canada remains poorly understood. Past focus upon its seemingly unglamorous role as labourers has marginalized its strategic contributions, whereas recent scholarship has confused or exaggerated its prior accomplishments in combat. This article seeks to present a more balanced view of the Coloured Corps by exploring its history and mythology. It will demonstrate that the Corps' respective achievements were neither so menial nor so decisive as is perceived, but rather its soldiers ultimately filled both roles creditably – despite considerable adversity – in a manner typical of thousands of Upper Canadian troops.

updated editions of certain seminal histories tend to touch briefly – if at all – upon its service as a labour corps later in the war.¹ More recently, historians seeking to correct “a shamefully overlooked chapter” have inadvertently misinterpreted sources while attempting to emphasize its accomplishments as a combat unit.²

This article seeks to present a more balanced history of the Coloured Corps during the War of 1812. Utilizing primary sources and the small range of secondary literature available, it will consider the under-valued nature of its role as a labour corps, and explore the mythology of its service as a combat unit. It will demonstrate that despite facing racial adversity, the Coloured Corps – like many provincial units – played a varied and creditable role in making the American campaigns to conquer Upper Canada more than just “a mere matter of marching.”

Blacks in Early Upper Canada

The first substantial settlement of Blacks in Upper Canada occurred during the years immediately following the conclusion of the American War of Independence. The majority, brought to Canada either as slaves during the late war or as the property of Loyalist refugees, amounted to some 700 individuals by 1792.³ Added to this small population was a minority of free Blacks who

like Richard Pierpoint (a former slave from Africa and veteran of Butler's Rangers) had fought for or sought the protection of the British Crown, thereby gaining their freedom. Dissatisfied by the emergence of slavery in Upper Canada, Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe sought to abolish the institution in 1793. This attempt met with opposition from a Legislature concerned about the economic impact of abolition amid shortages of labour in the developing colony.⁴ Only a weakened version

Résumé : L'histoire du Corps de couleur (Colored Corps), la seule unité entièrement constituée de soldats noirs à servir dans le Haut-Canada pendant la guerre de 1812, est devenue le symbole de l'expérience vécue par les Afro-Canadiens dans ce conflit. On n'en sait cependant que très peu sur son implication dans la défense du Canada. Dans le passé, l'accent mis sur son utilisation comme groupe de travail chargée de tâches peu glorieuses a contribué à marginaliser son rôle. Par contre, en tentant de mettre en valeur son action comme compagnie d'infanterie, des chercheurs se sont mépris sur ses réalisations comme unité de combat, ou encore les ont exagérées. L'article analyse ces interprétations et présente une nouvelle histoire du Corps. On y fait la démonstration que ses hommes, en dépit d'obstacles considérables, n'étaient ni des manoeuvres exerçant des métiers inférieurs, ni des soldats d'élite, mais qu'ils avaient honorablement accompli leurs tâches, tout comme les milliers d'autres militaires du Haut-Canada durant cette guerre.

of Simcoe's "Act Against Slavery" passed, forbidding the further importation of slaves but granting freedom (upon reaching adulthood) only to those born in the province.

African-Canadians occupied an uneasy place within early Upper Canadian society as a result of this ambiguous legislation. In 1794 Pierpoint and fellow "Free Negroes" petitioned the government to allow them to settle in small communities so as "to be enabled to give assistance... to those amongst them," but were refused, possibly due to concerns about the creation of Black enclaves.⁵ Meanwhile the legal protection of slavery produced an exodus of escaped slaves towards the United States, particularly after Michigan's abolition of the institution in 1805. Indeed, the military implications of this phenomenon (sparked by news of their incorporation into a segregated American militia corps at Detroit) caused considerable political unrest in Upper Canada during 1807.⁶ Nevertheless Blacks generally enjoyed greater freedoms under British law; even slaves were allowed to own commercial businesses, while free Blacks exercised the rights of full (albeit socially second-class) citizens.⁷ The prospect of invasion by the United States (with its greater tolerance of slavery) thus represented a major threat to these liberties in the minds of Upper Canada's free Black population, prompting many to take up arms.

A conjectural depiction of Richard Pierpoint as a member of Butler's Rangers during the American War of Independence.

Formation and Early Service

As war approached during the spring of 1812, Richard Pierpoint unsuccessfully petitioned the provincial government of Major-General Isaac Brock "to raise a Corps of Men of Colour on the Niagara Frontier" for the defence of the colony.⁸ No record of why Pierpoint's proposal was rejected survives, although there are several probable explanations. Segregation within the prewar militia was impractical due to the small and dispersed nature of the Free Black population, and thus Black citizens served alongside their White counterparts since the

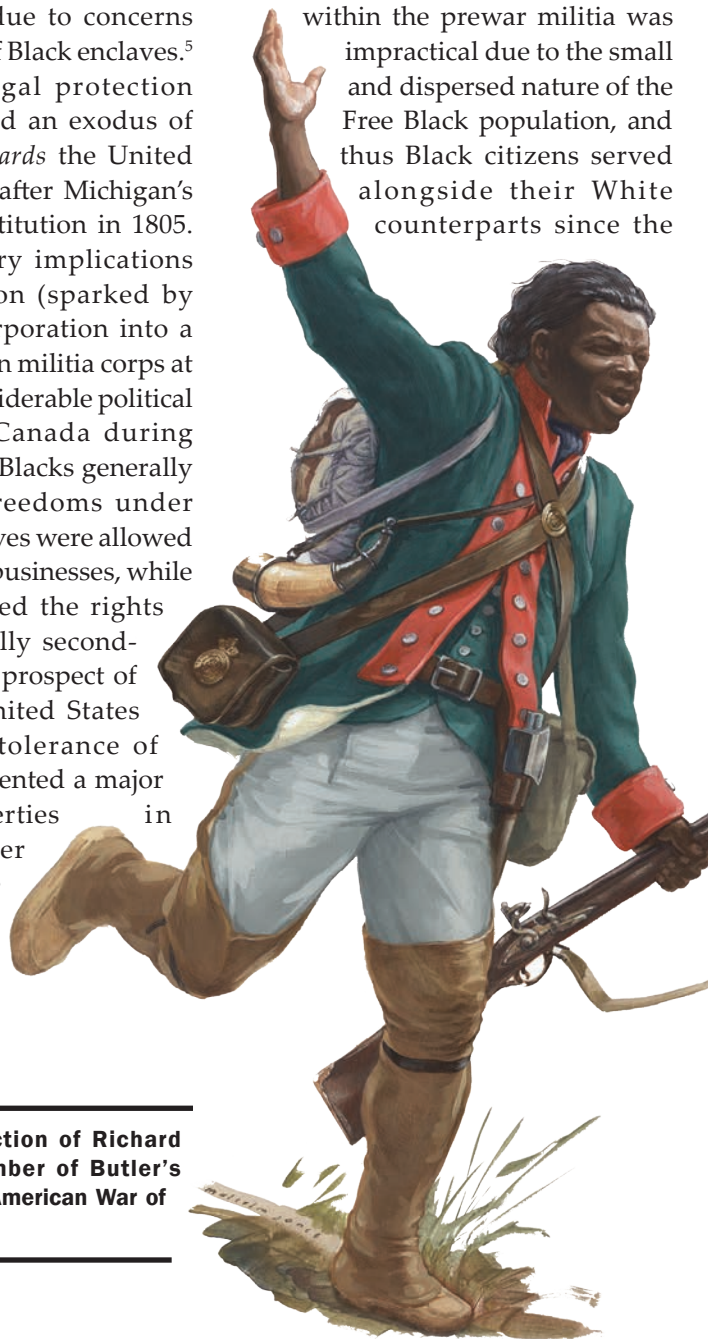


Illustration of Richard Pierpoint by Malcolm Jones © Canadian War Museum

1790s.⁹ Conversely, the influence of institutional racism cannot be ignored. Blacks were universally barred from holding commissions in Britain's military forces during the period, even within the segregated Caribbean "West India" Regiments.¹⁰ Lastly, Pierpoint's status as a manual labourer (despite being a community leader) may have disqualified him for a position ostensibly reserved for gentlemen.

The militia's uneven response following the American invasion of the province in July 1812 may have prompted authorities to reconsider Pierpoint's proposal. By late August the nucleus of an all-Black company had formed in Niagara under the 1st Lincoln Militia. Command was not, however, given to Pierpoint (who enlisted as a private in September), but instead to Captain Robert Runchey, a white officer and local tavern keeper. Characterized as a "worthless, troublesome malcontent" and a "black sheep," his appointment reflected the low status usually afforded to Black units.¹¹ Certainly his command of the "Company of Coloured Men" was discreditable. On 15 September, for example, he

court-martialled a white soldier for fraternising with "his nigros [*sic*]," and was apparently not above hiring his men out as domestics – one militia surgeon lodged a formal complaint that Runchey failed to fulfil a promise to supply a "black man" to act as his servant.¹² Moreover, the "company" consisted of little more than a cadre until reinforced by the wholesale transfer (whether voluntarily or otherwise) of 14 men from the 3rd York Militia in early

October.¹³ The unit drilled at Fort George throughout the early autumn, gradually reaching a strength of 38 men.

Soon this training was put to its first test. On the morning of 13 October 1812 General Brock's forces received word of the invasion by Major-General Stephen Van Rensselaer's American army across the Niagara River at Queenston. Runchey's Company was first left at Fort George under Major-General Roger Sheaffe to guard against a feint, and did not arrive at Queenston until after Brock met his celebrated end. Runchey, however, was not with them. Command was given for an unknown reason to Lieutenant James Cooper of the 2nd Lincoln Militia.¹⁴ Upon reaching Queenston they joined John Norton's Amerindian

warriors skirmishing against the American position atop the Heights, before forming part of Sheaffe's battle line as the afternoon progressed. Alongside the British 41st Regiment Runchey's men "fired a single volley with considerable execution, and then charged with a tremendous tumult," bringing about the surrender of the American troops on the Canadian shore.¹⁵ Although it sustained no casualties, Lieutenant Cooper's mention among those officers who "led their men into action with great spirit" testifies to the company's creditable role in the battle.¹⁶

With the frontier secured Runchey's Company settled into winter quarters at Fort George. Never popular, Runchey appears to have resigned by 24 October, presumably due to his absence at Queenston Heights, although his nephew George Runchey remained as a lieutenant.¹⁷ Meanwhile, having proven its worth the company received a reward in the form of its back-pay, delivered after the belated appointment of a militia paymaster for the unit.¹⁸

Hard Times – The 1813 Campaigns

In early February 1813 the company lost its first soldier (Private John Jackson) to disease, while illness reduced it further to approximately 30 rank and file by spring.¹⁹ Its time in garrison was not wasted. Runchey's departure presented an

Major-General Isaac Brock, circa 1809. Brock's administration initially rejected the formation of a segregated militia company, but relented after the first American invasion of Upper Canada.

R. Nursey, *The Story of Isaac Brock* (Toronto, 1908), Canadian War Museum.



opportunity for reorganization. To ensure its proper administration, for example, it was attached to the Quartermaster-General's Department under supervision of Lieutenant George Fowler, and a British sergeant from the 8th (King's) Regiment was seconded to improve its discipline and drill. Now considered an embodied (rather than sedentary) militia corps fit for general service, it was re-designated the "Coloured" or "Black" Corps, continuing to be identified as such for the remainder of the war.²⁰

Having captured the provincial capital at York in April 1813, a combined force under Major-General Henry Dearborn and Commodore Isaac Chauncey launched an amphibious assault against Fort George on 28 May 1813. That morning the Coloured Corps (part of Brigadier-General John Vincent's 1,300 troops) was attached to Colonel Christopher Myers' brigade and rushed to oppose the landing, where "for fifteen minutes... at a distance of six to ten yards" they "exchanged a destructive

and rapid fire" with the Americans before being forced back by naval gunfire.²¹ In the short engagement the Coloured Corps lost one sergeant wounded, Lieutenant Runchey and two privates captured, and two privates missing and thought to have deserted to the enemy.²² The latter may in fact have been killed, as an American officer recalled he observed at least "one negro...dead on the field."²³ The fact that this fatality wore a green uniform (supposedly that of the Glengarry Light Infantry) has been construed as indication of the company's role as elite skirmishers.²⁴ Such evidence is tenuous at best, however, in light of the widespread issue of green uniforms (due to shortages of regulation red cloth) to the militia in 1813, and the Glengarry Regiment's own recruitment of African-Canadians.²⁵

Vincent abandoned Fort George under threat of envelopment and withdrew towards Burlington

Heights (today Hamilton, ON). During the retreat Vincent dismissed the militia on 29 May, retaining only the Coloured Corps (which then mustered one lieutenant (Fowler), two sergeants and 27 privates) and other embodied units.²⁶ Conditions for Vincent's troops upon arrival at Burlington were poor; "I want everything," he reported, noting many men were barefoot and ragged, while his force lacked tents and field equipment.²⁷ Moreover the position was condemned for being surrounded by swamps filled with malaria-bearing mosquitoes, notwithstanding its defensive merits. Not surprisingly, the Coloured Corps suffered terribly from exposure, one of their White

comrades recording that "we were sent there as a place of clemency and safety; and on the contrary found the floor ... to consist only of the cold ground and its roof to consist only of the canopy of heaven."²⁸

On 6 June Lieutenant-Colonel John Harvey (the Deputy Quartermaster-General) convinced Vincent to attack the camp of the pursuing American division located eight miles from Burlington at Stoney Creek. The Coloured Corps is commonly believed to have fought in the vicious night attack that ensued, despite lack of any firm evidence.

This perhaps arises from Lieutenant Fowler's personal account, which implies the company accompanied Harvey's force from the British encampment. General Vincent's

counterparts) was ordered formed at Fort George on 3 March.³² However this unit was separate from the Coloured Corps. The Provincial Artificers (composed of White personnel) failed to recruit beyond cadre strength and spent much of the war garrisoned in York, while the Coloured Corps remained an infantry company.³³ After the war a clerical error (perhaps arising from confusion over the subsequent role of the Coloured Corps as labour troops) erroneously intertwined the identities of the two units as "Corps of Artificers (Alias Coloured)," which has since been cited repeatedly by historians.³⁴

This aside, it is difficult to piece together the Coloured Corps' activities in the months immediately following Stoney Creek. On 13 June it was posted at Burlington, after which nothing is heard until 22 August, when the company reappears in the village of St. Davids. This period constituted one of the darkest points of the war in Upper Canada for the British forces. Having blockaded the Americans in their fortified camp surrounding Fort George, the British Centre Division endured exposure, poor diets, sickness and consequent desertion, leading Major-General Francis De Rottenburg (who had assumed military command in the province) to despair that "the country will be lost for want of hands to defend it."³⁵ Under these conditions the Coloured Corps was not immune, losing four deserters on 10 and 16 June.³⁶ One author argues these dates suggest its involvement in several skirmishes against an infamous band of American marauders during the blockade.³⁷ Yet accounts of these actions fail to mention the company, while the distance of 50 miles it would have had to march back and forth from Burlington during a very short period does not appear to have been considered.

correspondence, however, indicates that Fowler and his command remained in the rear to preserve communications with Burlington.²⁹

Similarly, Harvey's dispatch omits mention of the company among those engaged, nor does the company's pay list for the period indicate any casualties.³⁰ Its involvement in the battle itself is therefore unlikely.

A second and more fundamental misconception is that prior to the loss of Fort George the corps was converted into a labour company called the "Provincial Artificers" to assist the shorthanded Royal Engineers with the erection of barracks and fortifications.³¹ Certainly such a unit (to consist of 50 men clothed and equipped as their regular British



A Black militiaman of Runchey's Company of Coloured Men, circa 1812.

Militiaman, 1812 by G. Dittrick © Parks Canada



The Battle of Queenston Heights, 13 October 1812. Runchey's Company was engaged principally in attacking the American position on the Heights, shown at the upper right.

Following the British assault on Black Rock, New York on 11 July the Coloured Corps received a new commanding officer - Lieutenant James Robertson - as Fowler was assigned to other duties. Although the leadership of an officer with a distinguished combat record was of benefit to the company, Robertson may have received the post as a sinecure, having been left destitute by the destruction of his property near Fort Erie.³⁸ Still, he appears to have led the company competently, if not enthusiastically, from this point. Once in St. Davids, the Coloured Corps may have participated in the sortie against the American outposts ordered by Governor-General Sir George Prevost on 24 August, although there is only circumstantial evidence.³⁹ Soon the beleaguered British forces shifted their lines to healthier positions near the mouth of 4 Mile Creek, where the Coloured Corps was next reported

on 15 September.⁴⁰ There it passed the remainder of the autumn likely conducting patrols and performing fatigue duties, until the Americans withdrew from Fort George in mid-December.

A New Role: Labourers

Following the American withdrawal the re-styled Right Division reoccupied Fort George and captured nearby Fort Niagara in a night assault on 18 December. Unfortunately for the British both fortifications were soon found to be in poor repair, while barracks and storehouses for the winter were still urgently needed at the depot at Burlington. British forces in Upper Canada faced a long-standing and severe shortage of skilled labour and trained engineers. With the failure of the Provincial Artificers to

recruit, British commanders had been forced to rely upon drafts of reluctant militiamen, who in turn "always deserted in such large numbers that they could not supply the ordinary duties" of the Engineer Department.⁴¹ Indeed, by January 1814 the shortage of labour had become so acute that Lieutenant-Colonel Ralph Bruyères (commanding Royal Engineer in the Canadas) reported from York that the "total want of Artificers and labourers" had entirely "retarded the progress of the public works" in the Niagara Peninsula.⁴² As an interim solution authorities considered raising another Provincial Artificer company in Upper Canada, one staff officer assuring Lieutenant-General Sir Gordon Drummond (now commanding in the province) on 8 March that "a Corps...could be raised in a very short time."⁴³ Bruyères, however, was unwilling to wait for this undertaking or for



Fort George, circa 1813.

reinforcements of the British Army's Royal Sappers and Miners from England, and proceeded to the Niagara Frontier determined to procure assistance by any means necessary.

The Coloured Corps appears to have been seized upon as the solution to Bruyères' predicament. Already stationed at Fort George, its strength had fallen to barely two dozen rank and file by early February, limiting its effectiveness in the field as a combat unit.⁴⁴ Whether any considerations of race also influenced Bruyères' choice is less clear. White personnel had certainly proven unreliable as labourers, whereas the British Army had a longstanding policy of utilizing Black soldiers in such instances, maintaining (for example) a 1,000-strong Black labour corps in Jamaica throughout the Napoleonic period.⁴⁵ Unfortunately historians may only speculate as to Bruyères' motivation for employing the Coloured Corps. His death in

May 1814 meant that all such details were quickly forgotten, as reported by Lieutenant-Colonel Gustavus Nicolls (his successor) in early 1815:

When I visited the Niagara Frontier... I found that a corps of Free Men of Colour had, during the war, been raised for the Quarter Mr. General's Department, but had been turned over to that of the Engineers, any necessity for this I never could learn, but it seems to have been the fashion in Canada to heap all kinds of duties upon the latter.⁴⁶

Regardless, by the time officials at York and Quebec had begun to debate the formation of a second artificer unit Bruyères had long since attached the Coloured Corps to the Engineer Department on his own initiative, utilising them to repair the forts at the mouth of the Niagara River. Indeed, in early March one Private Peter Lee was discharged after injuring himself during the reconstruction of Fort

Niagara's landward defences, which had decayed since its occupation by the Americans in 1796.⁴⁷ The corps' duties, however, would soon focus on an altogether new project.

Construction of Fort Mississauga

British engineers judged Fort Niagara and Fort George (the perimeter of which had been drastically reduced by the Americans) to be incapable of resisting a determined siege. To replace them, Bruyères designed a new fortification situated closer to the lake, soon dubbed Fort Mississauga. It was intended to consist of a large, central masonry tower surrounded by a star earthwork. Much of the material was gleaned from the rubble of the nearby town of Niagara which had been burned by the Americans prior to their withdrawal in December 1813. By mid-March 1814 the Coloured

Corps was heavily engaged in the preliminary stages of its construction, although bad weather soon proved a major obstacle. In April General Drummond reported that it had been "totally impracticable to proceed in any of the works...at Mississauga Point."⁴⁸ It was not until late April that the first guns were mounted on the fort's earthen walls, although work on the interior structures had yet to begin.

Work on the fort continued into the early summer, while returning casualties and recruits raised the Coloured Corps' strength once more to approximately 30 rank and file by 22 June.⁴⁹ At this time it was considered an engineer unit exclusively, and thus was not called into the field to repel the invasion of Major-General Jacob Brown's

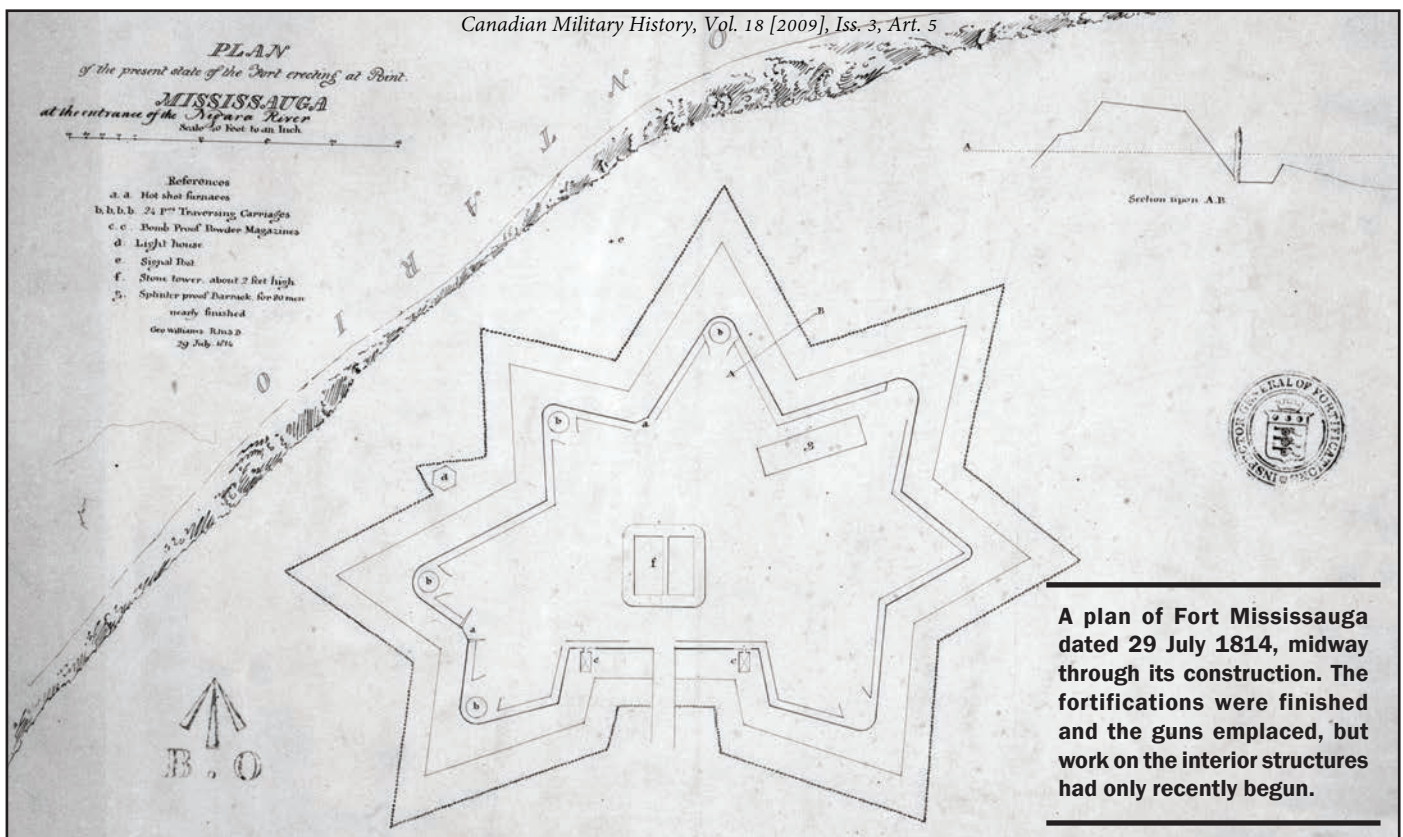
American Army across the Niagara River on 2 July. Following Brown's victory at the Battle of Chippawa on 5 July, Major-General Phineas Riall (commander of the Right Division) retreated towards Burlington to await reinforcements, leaving the Coloured Corps, engineers and a small garrison to defend the forts at the mouth of the Niagara River. The Americans launched a demonstration-in-force against Fort Mississauga on 15 July, but the garrison's British regulars easily repulsed this attack.⁵⁰ After this alarm the corps continued its work on Fort Mississauga's central tower (which was beginning to take shape), Riall reporting on 17 July that the "Coloured Corps Military Artificers" still formed part of the garrison.⁵¹

With Commodore Chauncey's powerful American naval squadron

in command of Lake Ontario and threatening the rear of Drummond's forces, control of the mouth of the Niagara River became vital to the security of the Right Division's operations. This fact was apparent to even the most junior British officers, including Lieutenant John Le Couteur of the 104th (New Brunswick) Regiment, who in his diary noted, "Mississauga...is a pretty little Fort and would prevent vessels coming up the [Niagara] river."⁵² The Coloured Corps' labours to complete the fort were thus of key strategic importance for the British, and accordingly occupied the company for the remainder of the Niagara Campaign. Indeed, the presence of more than a dozen women and children with the small unit – when Drummond had previously ordered the Right

The interior of Fort Mississauga in 1840, showing the tower and barracks erected by the Coloured Corps during 1814.





A plan of Fort Mississauga dated 29 July 1814, midway through its construction. The fortifications were finished and the guns emplaced, but work on the interior structures had only recently begun.

LAC NMC 23031

Division's dependants to the rear to ease the burden on his logistics – suggests the company was entirely settled in its work upon the fort.⁵³

Nevertheless, at least two sources claim it fought in the climactic Battle of Lundy's Lane on 25 July 1814; one even suggests it was responsible for erecting field fortifications – an improbable duty amid a battle of manoeuvre fought at night.⁵⁴ These accounts are based principally upon the recollections of Private Simon Groat, recorded in the 1870s. Groat, however, could not remember the name of his own commanding officer with certainty, nor his own age upon his enlistment, therefore can hardly be considered a reliable source.⁵⁵ In reality the Coloured Corps continued its work on Fort Mississauga, while other more combat-ready troops from the garrison were withdrawn to reinforce the Right Division.⁵⁶

Following Lundy's Lane the Right Division engaged the Americans at Fort Erie in a costly and protracted siege. Desperately short of trained engineer troops with which to conduct the operation,

Drummond repeatedly dispatched requests for reinforcements, yet such was the importance of their work at Fort Mississauga that the Coloured Corps – a day's march away – was not sent.⁵⁷ Unable to dislodge the Americans, the British abandoned the siege in September, and upon taking up winter quarters in November rumours of the impending peace began to circulate.

Disbandment and Aftermath

Fort Mississauga was completed by early winter, and the Engineer Department retained the Coloured Corps on the frontier to erect additional barracks and storehouses. In February 1815 Lieutenant-Colonel Nicolls embarked on an inspection tour of the Niagara District, and having observed the corps' work firsthand was duly impressed. "No people could be better calculated to build temporary barracks than these Free Men of Colour," Nicolls wrote, "as they are in general expert axemen" – one of the few recorded

commendations the unit received for months of backbreaking labour.⁵⁸ Not everyone was enamoured with these duties, however; rumours of peace had already prompted Lieutenant Robertson to petition for transfer "to some other [corps] of a more permanent prospect" in order to preserve his personal income should the company be disbanded.⁵⁹

The following month confirmation of peace arrived in Upper Canada, and on 24 March 1815 the Coloured Corps was formally dismissed from service. At this point the men assumed they too were entitled to the gratuity of six months' pay granted by the Legislature to militia units in order to help their personnel transition to civilian life. In this they were sadly mistaken, as the relevant order pertained only to the incorporated militia units raised under the Militia Act and maintained at the expense of the provincial government.⁶⁰ In practice those provincial corps raised under the Articles of War and / or subsequently taken onto the establishment of the regular British military departments

(including the Coloured Corps and the Provincial Artillery Drivers) ceased to be paid by the colonial administration.⁶¹ By this technicality the Coloured Corps were at first denied the gratuities offered to other citizen-soldiers. Later, although the Corps did become eligible the Upper Canadian government's postwar shortage of funds caused further delays. Soldiers of the Coloured Corps faced an uphill struggle when seeking to claim this pay. Sergeant William Thompson appealed for assistance in September 1815 but was told by Lieutenant Robertson he "must go and look for his pay himself," as Robertson could be of no help in the matter.⁶²

Notwithstanding their honourable service, the men were eventually to encounter more overt bureaucratic insult in the acquisition of their land grants. In 1819 the new lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada, Lieutenant-General Sir Peregrine Maitland conceived a haven for escaped slaves and Black settlers between Lake Simcoe and Georgian Bay, within which two-thirds of the Coloured Corps were to receive their grants. Yet, in spite of Maitland's philanthropic ideas, the veterans of the Coloured Corps suffered the indignity of receiving only 100 acres, half that of their White counterparts. Moreover, they were not (as in 1794) allowed to settle close enough together to afford each other mutual assistance in clearing their land, and it was not until years later that many obtained full title to their property in consequence.⁶³ A further irony was that at least 11 men from the unit had died by the time the allotments were finally made in the early 1820s.⁶⁴ Short-changed by the government they had fought for over two years to defend, many of the veterans and their families struggled to eke out a meagre existence clearing their wilderness properties.

Richard Pierpoint's own experiences typify the adversity the men of the Coloured Corps faced in the post-war period. Having reached his early seventies in 1815, he was unenthusiastic about the prospect of beginning afresh. In July 1821 he therefore travelled to York to petition Maitland, claiming to be entirely unable "to obtain a livelihood by his labour," and was consequently "above all things desirous to return to his native country."⁶⁵ Notwithstanding testimonials to his "faithful and deserving" service in two wars from Adjutant-General Nathaniel Coffin and other senior militia officers, Pierpoint was instead granted his own plot of 100 acres of land alongside a tract of the Grand River within Garafraxa Township.⁶⁶ There he struggled to fulfill his settlement duties, and after years of a transient existence travelling between Niagara and Garafraxa, Pierpoint died sometime between 1837 and 1838, his dream to return to Africa unfulfilled.

Conclusion

The legacy of the Coloured Corps as a military unit is ultimately mixed. As a fighting unit its contributions to the British victory at Queenston Heights and the defence of Fort George are certainly documented. However, on the whole, the tactical importance of such a small company – especially given the presence of thousands of British regular troops (the backbone of the province's defence) and the company's subsequently sporadic engagement – is arguably negligible. Conversely, its achievements as a labour unit cannot be so easily dismissed. Although less glorious, the strategic importance of its construction of Fort Mississauga is an overlooked facet of British efforts during the 1814 Niagara Campaign,

and all the more notable given the praise the company received when compared to the reluctance of White troops to perform similar duties. Perhaps the key legacy of the Coloured Corps' is a symbolic one. Its service as both infantrymen and labourers was characteristic of the experience of Upper Canadian Militiamen as a whole, and in this respect (if no other) its personnel achieved some measure of equality. Moreover, it laid the foundations for the broader (albeit gradual) acceptance of the military service of African-Canadians, leading to the formation of several Black militia units – including provincial regulars – during the subsequent Rebellions of 1837-38.⁶⁷ For these reasons they should be remembered.

Notes

1. For example, see J.M. Hitsman (D. Graves ed.), *The Incredible War of 1812* (Toronto, 1999), p.327.
2. S. Pitt, "To Stand & Fight Together," *Rotunda* vol.29, no.3 (Spring 1997), 8-13, p.8.
3. M. Power & N. Butler, *Slavery and Freedom in Niagara* (Niagara-on-the-Lake, 1993), p.13.
4. G.M. Craig, *Upper Canada: The Formative Years 1784 – 1841* (Toronto, 1977), p.31.
5. R.L. Fraser, "Richard Pierpoint," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* VII (Toronto, 1988), p.697.
6. W.E. Kelly, "Race and Segregation in the Upper Canada Militia," *Journal of the Society of Army Historical Research* 78 (Winter, 2000), 264-77, p.275.
7. Power & Butler, *Slavery & Freedom*, p.12.
8. Fraser, "Richard Pierpoint," *ibid.*
9. Power & Butler, *Slavery and Freedom*, p.41; E. Green, "Upper Canada's Black Defenders," *Ontario Historical Society Papers and Records* 27 (1931), p.368.
10. For an excellent study on these units, see R.N. Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats: The British West India Regiments, 1795-1815* (New Haven, 1979).
11. Kelly, "Race and Segregation," p.273; Power & Butler, *Slavery and Freedom*, p.44.
12. Proceedings of the Court Martial of Private John Vanalstine, Niagara, 15 September 1812, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG 8 I, vol. 1700, p.180; Lafferty to Macdonald, Chippawa, 15 September 1812, LAC, vol. 688B, p.72.

13. "Morning State of the Fourth Division under Command of Colonel William Clause [sic] Stationed at Niagara," 26 August 1812, LAC, RG 8 I, vol. 1203½A, p.35; Green, "Upper Canada's Black Defenders," *ibid*.
14. E.A. Cruikshank, *The Battle of Queenston Heights* (Welland, 1904), p.32.
15. B.J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812* (New York, 1868), p.403. This description is the earliest contemporary account of Runchey's Company in action during the War of 1812.
16. R. Malcomson, *A Very Brilliant Affair: The Battle of Queenston Heights, 1812* (Toronto, 2003), p.276; General Order, Montreal, 21 October 1812, LAC, RG 8 I, vol. 1168, p.325.
17. Nominal Roll of Captain Robert Runchey's Company, no location, c.1821, LAC, RG 8 I, vol. 1701, p.191. Runchey is commonly believed to have died in October 1812, but according to a genealogical list of the unit compiled for the Archives of Ontario in the late 1980s, his death did not in fact take place until 1819. See "Runchey's Coloured Company – Coloured Corps (Artificers)," Archives of Ontario, Finding Aid F 895 MU2036, Collection File #10.
18. District General Order, Fort George, 29 October 1812, LAC, RG 8 I, vol. 703, pp.48-9.
19. W. Gray, *Soldiers of the King: The Upper Canada Militia 1812-1815* (Erin, 1995), p.265.
20. "Coloured Corps Muster Roll and Pay List from the 25th of April to 24 July 1813 Inclusive," Fort George, 27 December 1813, LAC, RG 8 I, vol. 688E, pp.112-4.
21. M. Coleman, "The American Capture of Fort George," *Parks Canada History and Archaeology Series* 13 (Ottawa, 1977), p.29.
22. "Coloured Corps Muster Roll and Pay List," *ibid*. Lieutenant Runchey is listed as a prisoner on parole as of 30 May 1813.
23. Green, "Upper Canada's Black Defenders," p.369.
24. P. Meyler & M. Meyler, *A Stolen Life: Searching for Richard Pierpoint* (Toronto, 1999), p.86.
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43. Brenton to Foster, Delaware, 8 March 1814, LAC, RG 8 I, vol. 682, p.234.
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46. Nicolls to Mann, Quebec, 24 April 1815, LAC, MG 13, War Office 55/680, p.120.
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49. "General Weekly Distribution Return of the Troops forming the Right Division of the Army under the Command of Major-General Riall," Fort George, 22 June 1814, LAC, RG 8 I, vol. 1709, p.54.
50. Tucker to Riall, Fort Mississauga, 15 July 1814, LAC, RG 8 I, vol. 684, pp.129-133.
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52. D. Graves, *Merry Hearts Make Light Days: The War of 1812 Journal of Lieutenant John Le Couteur, 104th Foot* (Ottawa, 1993), p.207.
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54. French, *Men of Colour*, p.58, P. & M. Meyler, *A Stolen Life*, p.98.
55. P. & M. Meyler, *A Stolen Life*, p.87.
56. Harvey to Tucker, York, 23 July 1814, LAC, RG 8 I, vol. 684, pp.167-8; Harvey to Riall, York, 23 July 1814, LAC, RG 8 I, vol. 684, pp.169-72. These orders, pertaining to Tucker's mission to support Riall prior to the Battle of Lundy's Lane, make it clear only the most combat ready troops were to be drawn from the fort's garrison while construction continued.
57. For example, see Drummond to Prevost, Fort Erie, 21 August 1814, LAC, RG 8 I, vol. 685, p.126.
58. Nicolls to Mann, Quebec, 24 April 1815, *ibid*.
59. Robertson to Prevost, Chippawa, 18 January 1815, *ibid*.
60. Militia General Order, York, 10 March 1815, LAC, RG 9 IB1, vol. 4, 1815 miscellaneous fond.
61. Gray, *Soldiers of the King*, p.179.
62. D. Hill, *The Freedom Seekers* (Toronto, 1981), pp.117-8.
63. Power & Butler, *Slavery & Freedom*, p.45.
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65. Fraser, "Richard Pierpoint," p.698.
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67. See Kelly, "Race and Segregation," *ibid*; R. Chartrand, "Notes on the Canadian Incorporated Militia Infantry Uniforms, 1838 – 1843," *Military Collector & Historian* 60 (Winter 2008), 247-54.

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