

The Battle of Batoche (May 9-12, 1885)

The Battle of Batoche, which occurred from May 9 to May 12, 1885, was a cataclysmic event. After the previous battles of Duck Lake (March 26) and Fish Creek (April 25), the Métis decided to make their stand against General Middleton's forces at the village of Batoche. They dug a series of defensive rifle pits or trenches around Batoche's perimeter. Therefore, the battle itself was a siege. It was also a battle of attrition, which only ended after the Métis became exhausted from fighting and ran out of ammunition. General Middleton was determined to break the Métis resistance at Batoche and end the 1885 Resistance. He used a combination of defensive and offensive tactics to achieve this end.

On May 9, the actual battle itself began with the arrival of the steamer Northcote. General Middleton had planned for the North-West Field Force and the Northcote to arrive at the same time; however, the ship arrived ahead of schedule. The Métis were waiting for it and incapacitated it by lowering a ferry cable, which knocked down its smokestacks.

With the Northcote disabled, the Métis formed two scout detachments. Ambroise Champagne led one, patrolling the east side of the river, while Patrice Fleury led the other on the west side. The Métis scouts were organized as they would be during a bison hunt: there were nine or ten captains with ten men under them, with each reporting to Gabriel Dumont, the Métis military leader. On the first day of fighting, the Métis were outnumbered four to one.

General Middleton reached Batoche at about 9:00 a.m. The Métis started firing from the first two houses of the eastern branch of the Humboldt Trail, which was about 400 yards (357 metres) from the church and the rectory. The Gatling gun, which was on loan from the American Army, fired on the first house and a gun from "A" battery shelled the second house, causing the Métis to scatter. Both houses burned to the ground. The Gatling gun also fired on the rectory. One of the bullets went through the wall and hit Father Moulin in the leg.

After 9:45 a.m., the firefight continued between the Métis and Middleton's men. The North-West Field Force made it to Mission Ridge on the first day of battle, but they did not regain that ground until May 12. Middleton decided to pull back his best soldiers, the grenadiers, from the firefight. He used the Gatling gun to hold off the Métis fire, which emanated from their rifle pits. No one was killed during this first attack. The Field Force unsuccessfully tried to break through the Métis line.

On the Métis side, Elie Dumont and others tried to encircle the Field Force to capture the Gatling gun, but were unsuccessful. They tried a second time, only to ignite a prairie fire. The fire almost cut off Middleton's supply line, before burning out.

On May 9, the fighting ended at around 3:00 p.m. Middleton had a zareba built during the afternoon. A zareba is a defensive enclosure that is meant to protect supplies and combatants from enemy fire. Middleton used it to protect his men at night, while using it as a daily base of operations. The zareba was built on Jean Caron Senior's property, on the highest open

ground possible, which prevented any possible surprise attack from the Métis. At 6:30 p.m., the Métis advanced again, while the Field Force moved back to the zareba. The Métis and First Nations fired shots into the zareba every ten minutes for the entire night.

During the morning of May 10, the soldiers were ordered to dig rifle pits between the zareba and the cemetery. At 5:00 a.m. Middleton's troops hoped to demoralize the Métis by firing heavily at them from all positions. In the afternoon, Middleton ordered his men to dig their pits even deeper. His goal was to prevent the Métis from using the same tactics on the zareba as they did the night before. The troops withdrew at 6:00 p.m. under heavy fire, having been kept from the ground that they had previously gained a day earlier against the Métis.

On May 11, Middleton left at 10:00 a.m. and rode north of the zareba to "Jolie Prairie". The Métis fired on him and his men from their rifle pits. Middleton ordered the Gatling gun to be fired to stop the Métis from shooting. Before going back to the zareba, they burned down log houses that the Métis could have used for shelter.

Those Métis who were positioned by the cemetery moved north to meet Middleton at "Jolie Prairie". This allowed the Field Force to advance farther. The Métis did not fire at Middleton's camp that night. At this point, Middleton was informed that the Métis were running out of ammunition. He therefore decided to try to win the battle the following day.

To end the battle, Middleton used diversionary tactics. Middleton hoped to divert the Métis' attention northwards, and then have Colonel Van

Straubenzie's brigade proceed to the cemetery. Once Van Straubenzie could hear that Middleton's men were fighting, he was supposed to attack the village. Since the wind was too strong, Van Staubenzie never heard Middleton's attack. Therefore, his force did not proceed, which angered Middleton. At this time, only 50-60 Métis were still fighting from their original force of 250-300. They only had 40 rifles, with the rest using double-barrelled shotguns. Some Métis were using nails and spent bullets for ammunition.

Early that afternoon, the Field Force broke through the Métis' frontline rifle pits. The Métis valiantly fought against their advance, but succumbed to the onslaught. The Canadian soldiers bayoneted some Métis. About 25 soldiers that were being held captive by the Métis were then released. At this point, with the conclusion of the fighting, the Métis women, children and Elders emerged their hiding places. They had dug caves along the riverbank, using trees, brush and earth for covering. They hid in these caves – which varied from 10 (3.045 metres) to 20 (6.1 metres) feet in length, to 5 (1.524 metres) to 6 (1.8 metres) in width to 4 (1.22 metres) to 5 feet in depth – for the entire battle.

At dusk on May 12, Middleton had another zareba built. This one was positioned northeast of Xavier Letendre dit Batoche's house, as a precautionary measure against any additional fighting. However, no more fighting occurred at Batoche. The Métis aspect of the 1885 Resistance had concluded.

References:

Hildebrandt, Walter. *The Battle of Batoche: British Small Warfare and the Entrenched Métis*. Ottawa: National Historic Parks and Sites Branch, Environment Canada, Parks Canada, 1985.

<http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=zareba>