

### **The Battle of Duck Lake (March 26, 1885)**

The Battle of Duck Lake (March 26, 1885) was the opening battle of the 1885 Resistance. The battle itself happened by accident. On March 25, 1885, Gabriel Dumont asked Louis Riel to let him take thirty men to gather supplies from the stores of those merchants who opposed the Métis' resistance against the federal government. They rode to Hillyard Mitchell's store and appropriated its contents. Riel then told Mitchell to keep track of everything that the Métis took.

North-West Mounted Police Superintendent Leif Crozier was warned that the Métis were likely going to occupy Duck Lake. However, he was unaware that this had already occurred. He sent fifteen mounted police and seven Prince Albert volunteers under the leadership of Sergeant Stewart and Thomas McKay with a number of sleighs to get provisions from Mitchell's store.

Gabriel Dumont, along with thirty Métis (and some First Nations warriors) intercepted the police. Dumont knocked a policeman over with the barrel of his gun, and had a shouting match with Thomas McKay. Sergeant Stewart decided to retreat to Fort Carlton because they were outnumbered.

The Métis returned to Duck Lake, but barely had time to feed the horses when the police returned. Crozier decided to attack the Métis with fifty-six Mounted Police and forty-three Prince Albert volunteers, who possessed no battle experience, rather than wait for reinforcements. Crozier also had a 7-pound (3.175 kilogram) cannon at his disposal.

News of the first encounter between the Métis and the police and the Prince Albert Volunteers reached Batoche and St. Laurent. At this point, the Métis received reinforcements. The Métis had approximately three hundred men, which included some Cree from two nearby reserves. Many of the Métis present possessed no battle experience.

On the early morning of March 26, Gabriel Dumont took twenty-five men to set up an ambush. He chose a spot 3.5 kilometres from Duck Lake where there was a low elevation overlooking the road, plenty of low bushes, a gully, and a log house, which was immediately occupied by a few men. Some of Crozier's scouts were English Métis who were familiar with prairie warfare and detected Dumont's plan. Crozier ordered his men to halt, prepared a mounted barricade and armed his cannon. The Métis formed a semi-circle to attack the police on both flanks. At this time, Louis Riel led a force of Métis reinforcements.

Isidore Dumont and Assiwiwin, an elderly half-blind First Nations headman, moved towards Crozier's men waving a white blanket. Joseph McKay, an English Métis interpreter, moved to meet them, with Crozier following behind. Assiwiwin, who was unarmed, began to speak Cree to McKay. Assiwiwin reached for one of McKay's guns and McKay fired, killing the old man. Crozier ordered his men to fire and Isidore Dumont was also killed. Only Crozier's account indicates that the Métis fired the battle's first shots.

McKay and Crozier barely made it back to the rest of their men before the Métis started firing from all sides. Crozier's cannon was disabled early in

the fighting because the gunner put the shot in before the powder when he loaded it. This part of the battle lasted only a half hour.

The police retreated into a clearing where the Métis ambushed them. At this point, Gabriel Dumont was grazed in the head by a bullet and fell from his horse and was unable to get up. However, he continued to motivate his men. He gave his rifle and his cartridges to Baptiste Vandal, while Joseph Delorme stayed by his side. During the height of battle, Louis Riel rode a horse and held out a crucifix. Auguste Laframboise died beside him. The police began to flee. Gabriel Dumont's brother Eduoard wanted to pursue them, Louis Riel ordered the bloodshed to stop.

The Métis lost five men including Isidore Dumont and Assiwiyin. The other men who died were Jean-Baptiste Montour, Joseph Montour, and Auguste Laframboise. The Métis also had three men wounded, including Gabriel Dumont.

The police and volunteers lost ten men and had thirteen wounded, two of which were fatal. The North-West Mounted Police who died were Constables G.P. Arnold, G.K. Garrett, and T.J. Gibson. The Prince Albert Volunteers who died were Captain John Morton, Corporal William Napier, and Privates Joseph Anderson, James Bakie, Alexander Fisher, Robert Middleton, S.C. Elliott, Daniel Mckenzie, and Daniel McPhail.

### **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.

"The First Shot Rang Out".

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