

The Battle of Fish Creek (April 23, 1885)

The Battle at Fish Creek was General Middleton's first encounter with the Métis. On April 23, 1885, he moved his newly divided forces from Clarke's Crossing, which was only a few days march away from Batoche. That night Gabriel Dumont's scouts told him that the Canadian troops were camped at the McIntosh Farm, which was about ten kilometres south of Fish Creek. After hearing this, Dumont sent couriers to Pitikwahanapiwiyin (Poundmaker) and Mistahimaskwa (Big Bear) to ask for military assistance. The two chiefs rebuffed Dumont's overture because they felt that the Crees' best interests were to remain neutral.

To counter the marching Canadian troops, Dumont at first proposed a night attack in which Middleton's sentries would be quietly stabbed and a prairie fire started. Dumont then suggested that two hundred Métis horsemen would then sweep into the camp to attack the inexperienced Canadian soldiers. However, Dumont's scouts saw some of Major Boulton's men securing forage for their horses. Thinking that the scouts were on patrol, Dumont called off the attack. The Métis then decided to ambush Middleton's forces during the day at Tourond's Coulée, which was a ravine that twisted from Tourond's farm towards the South Saskatchewan River, and down to where Fish Creek ran into the river. It was the perfect place for an ambush because marksmen could be placed in the creek bed and on its slopes. The Métis could also monitor the road down to the ravine. They were also well camouflaged: the low thick woods at the start of the bridge would have prevented the soldiers from seeing the Métis.

Late on the evening of April 23, Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont set out for Fish Creek. Gabriel's brother Eduoard Dumont was left to guard Batoche. Late that evening, Noël Champagne and Moïse Carrière warned Riel and Dumont that the North-West Mounted Police were about to attack Batoche by surprise via the Qu'Appelle Road. Upon hearing this intelligence, Louis Riel decided to leave with fifty men to reinforce Batoche. The remaining Métis force at Fish Creek would be less than a fifth of the size of the Canadian Army.

On April 24, Gabriel Dumont rode south with his men at 4:00 a.m. He ordered them not to use the road through Tourond's Coulée. He then borrowed Ignace Poitras' fast horse and, with Napoléon Nault, rode to reconnoiter (gain intelligence about) Middleton's camp. At 7:00 a.m., Gilbert Bréland warned that eight hundred soldiers were advancing. Dumont then placed a hundred and thirty men in a hollow on the left bank of Fish Creek, hid horses in the woods, and then went with twenty men farther down the creek's pathway. He ordered his men not to attack until all of Middleton's troops were in the coulee; then the trapped soldiers could be shot at like bison.

At Fish Creek, the Métis had many superb marksmen such as Philippe Gariépy, James Short, and Gilbert Bréland, but they also had many inexperienced youth. Some Dakota fought with the Métis as well. Middleton's English-Métis scouts said that the Métis were well armed with repeating rifles, but many only had shot guns or muskets. The Métis only had three or four Winchesters.

On the morning of April 24, 1885, the Métis' positions were discovered. This occurred when Middleton's English Métis scouts saw tracks on the trail, made by a young Métis who had disobeyed Gabriel Dumont's order of stay off the road. Major Boulton sent scouts to explore the ravine. One rode near Gabriel Dumont. Dumont then rose up and ran after him. Someone fired at the scout, while some of Dumont's men shouted that the Métis had just encountered Middleton's advance guard of forty men. Dumont then shot the scout and jumped back into the coulée to rejoin his men.

The fighting started at 9:00 a.m. Some of Gabriel Dumont's men fled the battle. However, Dumont decided to set an example by shooting at all available targets. When the soldiers started firing directly at him, he galloped back, with Napoléon Nault, to a position higher up the ravine, where the rest of the Métis forces were located. At this point, Dumont stopped fifteen of his men from deserting. However, only forty-seven of the a hundred and thirty men with whom he started with remained. He also had fifteen horsemen, which meant that he was left with approximately sixty men to fight four hundred soldiers. Dumont, who was still in pain from his wound at Duck Lake, inspired the remaining Métis to fight on.

The Métis kept the Canadian Army from advancing all day. As the battle raged, the Métis sang Pierre Falcon's songs to keep up their courage. When they were down to only seven cartridges of bullets, Dumont set fire to the prairie grass, sending thick clouds of smoke towards Middleton's troops. When the wind shifted he then returned to his fifteen horsemen after trying

to get back to the rest of his main force in the rifle pits. He returned to find that the Dakota had retired from the fighting.

At this point, only seven men remained with Gabriel Dumont, but then reinforcements came. Edouard Dumont, along with Yellow Mud Blanket, Ambroise Champagne, and eighty horsemen reinforced the Métis' beleaguered position. Marguerite Caron, wife and mother of some of the participants, compelled Louis Riel to send in the re-enforcements. Edouard Dumont led a cavalry charge that forced the Canadians back. This action led to General Middleton's decision to withdraw, which would ensure that the battle would end as a draw.

On the Canadian side, ten men were killed and forty-five were wounded, while the Métis suffered the loss of four men, one being Gabriel Dumont's nephew, Pierre Parenteau. Three Métis were wounded, one mortally. They also lost fifty-five horses in the battle. The Métis picked up thirty-two Canadian carbines, and at first light, rode back to Batoche to prepare for another battle.

Reference:

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.