

Battle Strategies: The 1885 Resistance

General Middleton's Strategies

Sir Frederick Middleton was a career officer of the British Army. Prior to the 1885 Resistance, he had extensive training and battle experience. As a result of his experience in putting down mutinies and uprisings in Britain's far-flung empire, he possessed a negative view of colonial officers and troops. This viewpoint extended to both the Métis resistance fighters and to the inexperienced Canadian troops whom he commanded during the 1885 Resistance. For instance, he gave non-combat related assignments to his Canadian officers, while giving missions to British-led troops. He also kept the North-West Mounted Police away from action. General Middleton was usually a cautious strategist, however, in 1885, he employed both textbook and unconventional strategies.

At the Battle of Fish Creek (April 24, 1885), General Middleton chose an unorthodox battle strategy against the Métis. Prior to the battle, General Middleton underestimated both the Métis' effectiveness as marksmen and as practitioners of guerrilla warfare. Over protests from his officers, Middleton divided his force into two equal halves along the South Saskatchewan River at Clarke's Crossing, a few days march from Batoche. To divide an army when there is little or no intelligence about an enemy's strength and positions or knowledge of the battle terrain is not standard military procedure.

Middleton had hoped that by dividing his force in half, he would have a better chance to quickly engage the Métis. This proved a faulty strategy

during the Battle of Fish Creek. During the battle, Middleton could only rely on four hundred soldiers to fight the Métis. The inexperienced Canadians were also reluctant to engage the Métis. Therefore, Middleton exposed himself in order to give his inexperienced troops confidence. The battle ended in a standstill: the Métis killed ten soldiers before exiting the battlefield, while Middleton's forces killed four Métis. Middleton, while publicly calling the battle a victory, privately concluded that it was a defeat. Henceforth, he ordered more men and supplies, planned his strategy more cautiously, and kept his forces intact.

During the Battle of Batoche (May 9-12, 1885), General Middleton neutralized the effectiveness of the Métis sharpshooters. Middleton knew that the Métis were expert marksmen who inflicted a great number of casualties upon his troops during the earlier skirmishes at Duck Lake (March 26, 1885) and Fish Creek. For the final assault on Batoche, Middleton ordered the construction of a zareba¹ – a fortified camp or enclosure that protects soldiers, horses, supplies and battle equipment. Middleton's zareba, which was constructed on May 9, was, according to Sergeant Walter Stewart, 152 metres long by 91.5 metres wide and could protect approximately 250 wagons, 900 horses, and 1,250 men. The zareba was so well covered that the soldiers inside of it could light a match without fear of the Métis firing upon them. The protection that the zareba offered also allowed General Middleton to regroup his men at night. More importantly, since the Métis had a limited amount of manpower and ammunition, the highly protected zareba allowed the Canadian Army to wear down the Métis forces. Once the Métis

became battle exhausted and ran out of ammunition, the Canadians breached Batoche's weakened defences.

Métis Strategies

During the 1885 Resistance, the Métis were divided regarding the best means to conduct their military campaign. Louis Riel advocated limited warfare, while Gabriel Dumont advocated an offensive war that would have used guerrilla tactics. Louis Riel urged restraint and argued for the Métis to use defensive tactics that would inflict as few fatalities as possible. For instance, he stopped the Métis from pursuing the retreating North-West Mounted Police and Prince Albert Volunteers following the conclusion of the Battle of Duck Lake, as well as harassing General Middleton's forces after the Battle of Fish Creek. Originally, he wanted to take hostages, as the Métis had done in the Red River Resistance in 1869-70, and use them to bargain with the federal government. By contrast, Gabriel Dumont promoted a more vigorous and offensive strategy to deal with the Canadian Army. He suggested attacking Fort Carlton, Prince Albert, and Battleford to capture supplies and ammunition. After being armed, the Métis could ambush whole columns of soldiers or policemen before they could retreat back onto the prairie. Dumont felt that these sorts of offensive actions would persuade the English-speaking Métis to join their French-speaking cousins. In the end, Riel's more cautious, defensive tactics were chosen over Dumont's offensive ones. With this more defensive strategy, it was only a matter of time before the larger, better equipped Canadian Army would overwhelm the Métis.

During the 1885 Resistance, the Métis used First Nations battle tactics. The Métis employed ambush methods, used the local terrain to their advantage and dug rifle pits that were up to five (1.525 metres) or six feet (1.83 metres) deep, (they could also hold up to ten men). During the Battle of Batoche, Métis sharpshooters, who were strategically placed in rifle pits, held off the North-West Field Force for three days. At Batoche, the Métis used clever tactics to get the soldiers in their protected zereba to reveal their positions. For instance, while lying down in their rifle pits, the Métis put their hats on sticks as a decoy for the soldiers to fire at. This allowed Métis sharpshooters to locate the position of enemy troops and fire upon them. The Métis were only defeated on the fourth day, after being outnumbered, overpowered, and running out of supplies.

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.

Wiebe, Rudy, and Beal, Bob. *War in the West: Voices of the 1885 Rebellion*. Toronto: Jackpine House Ltd and Bob Beal, 1985.

¹ Zarebas and similar defensive structures had been used throughout the world during the nineteenth century: In the Sudan, various tribes used them to protect themselves from their enemies; American Pioneers used a similar structure made from covered wagons to fend off Native-American attacks and finally, the Métis used a defensive work consisting of Red River carts during the Battle of Grand Coteau (June 13, 1851) against the Dakota in what is now North Dakota.