

A year in the life of the Queensland Scottish Volunteer Corps

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The Queensland Scottish Volunteer Corps was formed during the burst of patriotism associated with the Russian war scare of 1885. Being a volunteer body, only arms, ammunition and some instruction were provided by the Government, the Corps having to supply all uniforms and equipment. The economic strain this placed on the Queensland Scottish was exasperated by the continual loss of members after the war scare had passed. Nevertheless it struggled on so that by 1887 it had three companies in Brisbane, and one each in Ipswich, Toowoomba and Rockhampton. With the creation of a Permanent Force and a strong militia after the Defence Act of 1884, volunteer corps were frowned upon by the colony's military hierarchy. 1887 was a year in which the tension and animosity between the Defence Force Staff and the Volunteers Officers resulted in a very public confrontation. Although some of the Officers gained notoriety, the aftermath of the confrontation left the Queensland Scottish in a generally more efficient state.

The annual encampment of the Defence Force companies in the southern and central districts of Queensland was usually held at Lytton Fort over the Easter holidays. In 1887, due to the inclemency of the weather, the Easter Encampment was cancelled, and arrangements were subsequently made for it to be held in late June of that year. As the date of the encampment drew near it became publicly known that the Queensland Scottish were unlikely to attend. Even the *Brisbane Courier* reported on this 'open secret'. According to that newspaper there were various reasons why the Corps wouldn't be present. One reason, presented with some semblance of official sanction, was that many of the Volunteers were unable to obtain leave from their work beyond the gazetted two public holidays. It was suggested however, that Major Stevenson the QSVC Commanding Officer, was not prepared to ask his men to come to camp because of confusion over instructions issued to Government Departments to grant leave to men of the QDF to attend the camp. Some Ministers in charge of the Departments were prepared to follow the instructions while others were alleged to be set against it. As many of Stevenson's men were reported employed by the dissenting departments of the Civil Service, the Major allegedly did not feel inclined to ask them to place their livelihood in jeopardy. It was apparent many civil servants believed that their salaries would be deducted for the time they spent absent at the Encampment. It was further suggested that as the two public holidays would only allow one night in Camp, the Major had determined not to put his men to the trouble.

Although the *Brisbane Courier* generally accepted the 'official' reason, it did make note that there were *grounds for believing that some friction between the headquarters and the officers of the Queensland Scottish Volunteers lies near the root of the trouble*. What was the cause of the friction which resulted in none of the Brisbane companies of the QSVC attending the Encampment? Why did it not seem to affect the distant country companies of the Queensland Scottish, F Company in Toowoomba and C Company Rockhampton, yet impacted on E Company at Ipswich? F Company actually attended the Lytton encampment, the only Scottish company to do so. E Company, like the Brisbane metropolitan companies did not go to Lytton. The answer is not simple, nor will it now ever be fully known, but the *Brisbane Courier* was close to the mark. Over the next few months the depth of feeling

between Headquarters Staff and the Volunteer officers became quite evident and public.

On the evening of 5 July, the Brisbane and Ipswich companies of the Queensland Scottish, the Brisbane Volunteer Rifles and the Queensland Irish mustered at the Adelaide Street drill shed for inspection by the Commandant, Colonel French and other senior Staff Officers. Major Stevenson was absent, and the Scottish were under the command of Captain Wilson of A Company. After company and battalion drill, Colonel French addressed the Queensland Scottish, initially praising their fine appearance and the diligence of some of the Corps' non-commissioned officers who had qualified for their rank. Of the Officers of the Corps, French was less kind, noting that none of them had yet qualified for their positions. Although regulations gave prospective Officers twelve months to qualify for their rank, French noted he had given some of them two years, but they had not appeared inclined to qualify. The Colonel considered it unfair that the men were led by unqualified Officers, as he felt they were a very fine Corps *and should be commanded in a proper manner*. He also raised the issue of the Corps' non-attendance at Lytton, suggesting that the men should not think of themselves first, but consider the good of the force when making such a decision.

The *Telegraph* produced an editorial on the following day which said everything about the Queensland Scottish officers which French may have thought but would never have said. Unfortunately, the editorial read as though it was quoting the Colonel, and with descriptive words like 'inefficiency and dolt-like stupidity' it raised a considerable storm. *It appears*, the *Telegraph* reported, *that the country is being put to no small expense to gild certain thick-headed Scotchmen, who by their neglect of duty are a disgrace to their nation which has given to the Imperial service some of its greatest men*. Some of the officers of the Queensland Scottish took the words as personal insults and harboured considerable animosity towards Colonel French. This did not appear to lessen even after French wrote to the newspaper refuting the language indirectly attributed to him. French was forced to defend the very officers he had perhaps unwisely criticised in public. The *Telegraph* at least quoted him in this instance. *I am sorry that you should have cast this slur on a body of gentlemen*, he wrote, *who compare favourably with the officers of any other corps in the colony, and against whom I have nothing except that there has been unnecessary delay on the part of some in passing the examination required by regulations*. The *Telegraph* was unrepentant, attributing the absence of the Queensland Scottish from the Encampment as a public offence, and questioned whether such behaviour from all the other Corps would be acceptable. French's remarks, and the *Telegraph's* editorial had caused the rift between Headquarters and Volunteers to deepen.

The complex issues of dispute were never far beneath the service as the months passed, and they again came to the fore in September 1887 at the second annual general meeting of the QSVC. The refusal by Colonel French to accept the services of a strong company of Scotsmen in Maryborough earlier in the year, on the grounds of economy, was one such concern. It had been greeted with much regret particularly when it was seen large sums of money were being spent on other defence items. To make matters worse, the services of a large metropolitan volunteer corps, the Queensland Irish, had been subsequently accepted. In the view of the Corps' officers anything asked of the Government had been refused after consultation with the Brigade Office. Even Sir Thomas McIllwraith was inclined to speak his mind on the treatment given to the Corps. At the annual general meeting of the corps

McIlwraith, the honorary Lt-Colonel of the Corps publicly stated his belief that the Scots *had been met with a constant system of quiet obstruction at the hands of the Brigade Office.*, The lack of adequate government support by way of funding was a particular bugbear, Sir Thomas having been called on to give a personal guarantee to the Brigade Office for the repayment of the cost of the dress uniforms. The Government had also refused to form the Scottish into an administrative battalion, or to provide or appoint a paid secretary to perform the large amount of clerical work which was undertaken by the officers.

The issue of the examination of Volunteer officers for their rank, was one which raised considerable discussion, as most of the officers believed the items they had to study were too difficult and impractical given their volunteer status. Most new officers were given provisional appointments without being required to undertake any test of their ability to command. The provisional appointment of officers to a rank was very common in the Queensland Defence Force. As French had noted, it was expected that these officers would in fact qualify for their rank by examination within twelve months. The QSVC had thirteen provisional officers in March 1887, and only one who had qualified, a track record which was not inspiring. In defence of the Corps however, it should be noted that five of these officers had been appointed to their provisional ranks only one or two months. Of the remaining eight provisional officers, three had been on the provisional list for more than eighteen months, one for more than twelve months, and the remainder under twelve months.

Although Colonel French probably had more important things to do with his time, if he had consulted the March 1887 List of Officers he might have been shocked to find the status of provisional officers of the militia was worse than that of the Volunteers. Of the forty-five provisional militia officers, one had been appointed in 1884, seventeen during 1885, twenty during 1886, and only seven during the early months of 1887! Although the QSVC had the worst record as a Corps, the individual circumstance of the officers was little different to any other militia or volunteer officer. From French's point of view however, if the Officers were unqualified and seemingly tardy in their efforts to become qualified, it did not bode well for the success of the Corps. From that point of view it can perhaps be understood why he did not approve the offer of service from Maryborough, as he would not have wished to incur further expenses through training and capitation allowances on a poorly officered Corps.

It was, however, the public remarks of the loyal Major John Stevenson about Colonel French's July inspection of the Corps, which sparked the most dramatic action. Stevenson suggested that Colonel French should have shown more discretion in criticising the officers in front of the men. He intimated that had he been present he might have replied to the Colonel in a manner which that officer may not have liked. Stevenson's moment of glory and bravado at the Corps' 1887 annual general meeting proved to have been unwise. Perhaps forgetting he was a provisionally appointed volunteer officer in uniform speaking in a public place, Stevenson's directness was probably more in line with his calling as a politician. He had over-stepped the mark. Colonel French, an Imperial officer, knew how to respond to flagrant challenges to his authority, promptly communicating with the Force's Commander-in-Chief, Governor Sir Anthony Musgrave. Major Stevenson was summoned before the Governor to explain his conduct. His explanation was unsatisfactory, and Sir Anthony Musgrave subsequently released General Order No 10 in the *Queensland Government*

Gazette of 19 November 1887. This order publicly noted that the Governor having had under his consideration the conduct of Acting-Major J Stevenson, Queensland Scottish Volunteer Corps, in that, at a meeting of the Corps on 1st September last, he and the officers and men being in uniform, he publicly discussed and censured the conduct of the Commandant, his commanding officer, and having called upon Acting-Major Stevenson for an explanation of his conduct, and having considered that officer's answer to the charge, has been pleased to direct that Acting-Major Stevenson be reprimanded and cautioned.

One might expect that this could have cemented relationships between the Corps and the Headquarters Staff into one of open conflict. This does not seem to have been the case however. The vice-regal authority of the Governor was never questioned, and even the newspapers remained silent on this issue. The Governor's censure appeared to quieten John Stevenson too, and he made no use of his position as a member of the Legislative Assembly to raise the matter in Parliament. Not surprisingly, Stevenson appears to have taken a reduced role in the activities of the Corps from this time. This void led to the movement of a few energetic officers into positions of command in the Corps, and a new command culture appears to have evolved.

Acting-Major John Stevenson resigned his commission in March 1888, and there was little public lament over the matter. The rank of Major Commanding was not filled, and Captain Alexander Grant, as the next senior officer, appears to have taken nominal command of the Corps. With the support of the zealous Lieutenant Strong, Grant seems to have had a positive impact on the Corps, and morale was obviously boosted by the enthusiasm of its new Officers.

Cohesion of any type was important to a Corps which believed itself to be suffering from the obstruction of the Staff at the Brigade Office. There was certainly a homogeneity in the religious beliefs of the Corps, and joint church parades with the Ipswich Company were not uncommon. An exceptionally high percentage of the men attended the services at St Pauls Presbyterian Church in Spring Hill. The Reverend James F McSwain, the Corps' chaplain, conducted the service at the March church parade, providing a suitably stirring sermon. There is little doubt that the Presbyterian religion provided an additional cohesiveness to the Corps, something rarely found in colonial forces, and which may have only been equalled in the Catholicism of the Queensland Irish Volunteer Corps.

Perhaps because of the adverse attention they had received for not attending the 1887 encampment, the QSVC attended the 1888 Easter Encampment. For many this was the second camp of the year, having earlier attended the unofficial camp in Toowoomba in January. The Scots mustered ninety-six men in camp and were accompanied by their pipers. They were under the command of Lieutenant Strong and acquitted themselves well at the training camp.

The appearance of the QSVC in the dramatic play 'Human Nature', staged at Her Majesty's Opera House in Brisbane in April 1888, is probably indicative of a new-found popularity for the Volunteers. The play ran for more than a week. Part of the scene was set in a desert city in Egypt where a battle takes place between the British and Arabs. A large body of the QS were trained to play the part of the British. The extremely popular play included a final

tableau where the Commanding Officer advanced down the stage on horseback! So popular was the play with public and participants alike, that members of E Company Ipswich travelled to Brisbane on a week night to ensure their appearance in the play and a share in the glory. The performances included a special complimentary benefit for the Corps which was packed with Defence Force personnel and notable public figures such as Sir Thomas McIlwraith. The Scots were joined in a 'march past' on the final night by the Headquarters Band and their own pipers. The benefit resulted in a £26 donation to the Corps.

The Commandant's annual inspection of the Corps took place late in June in Victoria Park. Captain Grant commanded the Corps which was comprised of A, B and D Companies. The men were closely inspected by Colonel French and put through company drill. In addressing the Corps, Colonel French complimented the men on their appearance and drill. He referred to the infamous comments he had made at the 1887 inspection and noted he was pleased with the result, as all the Officers had passed their two examinations in twelve months.

Perhaps as part of the new confidence within the Corps, a Battalion Order appeared in the *Telegraph* in July 1888, notifying the formation of a new company of the Corps. Recruits *of good character, and not under 5 feet 6 inches* were invited to join. The new company was not formed, for reasons which as yet remain unknown.

John Stevenson's involvement with the Corps continued despite his resignation as an Officer. In July 1888 he presented to both the Corps and the Queensland Scottish Rifle Club a silver cup to be competed for in rifle shooting. A rifle team to compete on behalf of the Corps at the Queensland Rifle Association's Battalion Cup Challenge was also selected around this time.

The Corps second annual ball was held at Centennial Hall in Brisbane on 1 August 1888. About seventy couples attended the mid-week ball, including representatives of other defence Force regiments. Music was supplied by the Corps' pipers and a string band. Dancing was kept up until the early hours of the morning.

In October 1888 the newly promoted Captain Strong led a church parade to Ipswich, and eighty men with band and pipes departed on the train. There they joined E Company for a service at the Presbyterian Church, where that Company's chaplain, the Reverend P Robertson, conducted a service. After the church parade many of the Brisbane men remained in Ipswich to socialise and caught an evening train back to the capital.

The Brisbane Town Hall was the venue of the Annual General Meeting of the QSVC in mid-December 1888, but only a limited number of members attended. The reports delivered by the secretary and treasurer showed that the total number of members in the 6 companies had fallen to 335. Of these only 250 had qualified efficient during the year, which meant the capitation allowance provided by the Government had also decreased. It was suggested that one of the reasons for the falling off was the bad employment situation which necessitated many efficient men moving away to seek work. Colonel French, in his annual report of the status of the Queensland Defence Force, had revealed earlier in the year that the men of most corps moved about so much in search of work that in many cases that he estimated 30 to 40 per cent of the men in a company changed in a year.

The QSVC committee formed the opinion that there were too many enforced drill sessions, and others suggested that drilling for eleven months of the year was ridiculous when a simple eleven drills during the year were considered sufficient *in the old country*. However, the enthusiasm and sense of duty of the new officers to comply with the current drill requirements was made evident in statistics which showed each officer averaged thirty-nine parades a year out of the forty-two they were required to attend. There were no similar figures provided for other ranks. Enthusiasm was not always enough, as the financial statement for the Corps for the year showed expenditure exceeding income by a staggering £500! Captain Grant suggested that matters were in an unsatisfactory condition and needed reorganising, while Lieutenant McKenzie was of the opinion that the Corps did not occupy the position it should and had been going backwards during the year.

With hindsight, the Corps had in fact progressed during the year. It was better served with conscientious officers, and had developed a better relationship and profile with the community generally. The loss of men from the ranks appears to have been universal in the Defence Force, and endemic of the colony's unemployment situation and movement towards an economic depression, rather than a surging lack of interest in the Corps.

The dissatisfaction generated from attending a required number of drill sessions was generally a personal matter which reflected the level of commitment individuals were prepared to give to the Corps and volunteer soldiering generally. All volunteer corps were required to do the same number of drill sessions, and the militia companies of the QDF did an even larger number. The required drill sessions were only reduced a few years later when the economic downturn necessitated a cutback in all defence spending.

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