

TIME TRAVELLER'S DIARY: Life in the Brigade Camp

By Jeremy Hood

By chance, the time machine dropped me right into the middle of Holland Landing, on the first day of Brigade Camp for the 2nd Military Division, the 29th of September, 1874 - the first year all the battalions in the division had been brought together to one location.

It was rainy and cold that week, but rations were plentiful and the men were cheerful.

I found myself among the York Rangers, the 12th Battalion of Infantry, alongside the 31st, 34th, 35th and 36th Battalions, as well as several Cavalry and Artillery units.

I learned from the Quartermaster that Holland Landing had been selected in particular because of its location, which had been cleared of trees for the Brigade and authorized for use by the Township, featured over 50 acres available for drills, and accommodation for nine rifle ranges.

Of particular importance to the infantry battalions was target practice at these ranges, still referred to as 'musketry,' despite the rifles only superficially resembling muskets.

The Snider-Enfield rifle had been introduced in 1866 as a breech-loading conversion of the existing 1853 Enfield muzzle-loading rifle, and permitted more than triple the firing rate of the older system.

The ammunition used for the Snider-Enfield rifle was a ridged soft lead slug, .577" (14.5mm) in diameter, hollow on the backside and with a wooden plug in the tip; both features allowed it to expand into the rifle's barrel for more efficient performance. Slugs that hit their targets would be greatly deformed, those that did not would remain relatively intact.

(You can see an example of these slugs pictured in our Weekly Spot on page 5.)

The number of rounds given to an infantryman for target practice had varied year to year, with 40 being the standard in 1873, although the recommendation was made in 1875 to further reduce the number. Captain Joseph White, the Musketry Instructor, mentioned that he believed more relevant instruction could be imparted and real benefit derived from ten rounds being fired, rather than twenty, as under the present system the men are often rushed to complete their target practice. Some of the men have shared this enthusiasm, but for a different reason?

A legend about the musketry drills was created that year, and I can attest to the other infantrymen's attitude toward our target practice. The cherished ration of beer

would only be provided once shooting drills had been completed.

To this end, men would rapidly fire their rounds to finish the drill, and so move on to the refreshment. This attitude was also noted by Capt. White, who told me that men take so little interest in rifle shooting because it lacked, at the time, any prize or trophy, and that they feel relieved when they can get rid of their ammunition.

For my brief time with the York Rangers before the time machine pulled me back, I was among those who rushed, and gladly joined my comrades in the mess tent!