

NOTE

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Canada's First Military Attache

1. One of the first and very hesitant short steps taken by Canada into the arena of international affairs was the dispatch of an official military observer to the scene of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905.
2. The outbreak of this war in the far east had been anticipated by the Great Powers of the western world. Ever since Russia had forced China to lease her Port Arthur in 1898, and a branch line connected the Trans-Siberian Railway with this ice-free port on the Yellow Sea, providing easy access to the Northern Pacific Ocean, tiny Japan had been biding her time until she should be strong enough militarily to defeat the Russian giant in a limited war for control of Manchuria. The moment came on 8 February 1904, three days after protracted Russo-Japanese diplomatic negotiations were broken off. Warships of the Imperial Japanese Navy made a surprise attack on the Russian naval squadron at Port Arthur and achieved a modicum of success. Transports then began landing the First Imperial Japanese Army in friendly Korea. Its role was to march north into Manchuria. Here three Japanese field armies would act as a covering force, while a fourth army reduced Port Arthur. War was belatedly declared on 10 February 1904.¹
3. Then began a race by war correspondents to see who could get to the battle zone first and begin sending back authentic reports to newspapers in the western world. The accredited military observers, or attachés, of the Great Powers proceeded more sedately towards their approved

destinations with either the Japanese or Russian armies in the field. The British groups scheduled to serve with the 1st and 2nd Imperial Japanese Armies were headed by Lieutenant-Generals Sir Ian Hamilton and Sir William G. Nicholson respectively.

4. No one doubted that there would be much to observe that was new and only partially understood. Since the American Civil War, 1861-1865, and the Franco-Prussian War, 1870-1871, there had been a steady development in armaments. The small bore magazine rifle and smokeless powder, first employed extensively during the South African War, 1899-1902, made it possible for concealed defenders to decimate the ranks of any enemy advancing in close order across open ground. Even more devastating as a killer of advancing soldiers was the Maxim machine-gun used by both sides in South Africa. The question of artillery deployment required serious consideration. With the development of quick-firing field guns that could be fired by indirect gun-laying from a concealed position, there no longer might be any need to mass an army's artillery in open view of the enemy in order to support an attack.² Advanced military thinkers were convinced that the days of artillery driving up and unlimbering in the open were as dead as would be the battery which attempted to do so during a battle.³

5. Equally anxious to observe this conflict between white and yellow races was Colonel William D. Otter in far away Toronto, Canada. This very keen officer in Canada's tiny Permanent Active Militia had attracted considerable attention to himself during both the North-West Rebellion and the South African War. Now District Officer Commanding, Military District No. 2, with headquarters in Toronto,

he had let it become known to local newspapermen that he was interested in becoming a military attaché.⁴ Otter even spoke to the Minister of Militia and Defence, Sir Frederick Borden, and to Major-General The Lord Dundonald, the British officer then serving as General Officer Commanding the Canadian Militia. Lord Dundonald, however, told Otter that he was interested in sending only artillery officers and did not want to send a senior officer.⁵

6. Other interested permanent force officers, according to a news story which appeared in The Mail and Empire of Toronto on 12 February 1904, were Colonel C.W. Drury who was Director of Artillery at Militia Headquarters in Ottawa and Colonel T.D.B. Evans of the Royal Canadian Mounted Rifles. Equally interested officers of the Non-Permanent Active Militia were Colonel Sam Hughes, M.P. and Captain E.W.B. Morrison of the Ottawa Citizen.

7. This intelligence caused Otter to write a personal letter to Lord Minto, who was Governor General and Commander-in-Chief of whatever armed forces Canada might have at any one time. Minto replied that neither Drury nor Evans was being considered: only one junior officer, if any, would be sent from Canada as a military observer.⁶

8. Actually Lord Minto had already telegraphed the Colonial Secretary, Mr. Arthur Lyttleton, that the Canadian Government was anxious to send an artillery officer, not above the rank of major, to serve as a military attaché with the Japanese Army in the field. Minto strongly supported the request, which would appear to have originated with Lord Dundonald,⁷ and suggested that the Canadian officer should accompany the British attachés. Lyttleton immediately minuted the telegram, which reached the Colonial Office on 12 February, to both the Foreign Office and the War Office where it was favourably received. 8

9. Lord Dundonald selected Captain H.C. Thacker, R.C.A., a promising young artillery officer who had completed the British Army's gunnery staff course at Shoeburyness, Kent, England as recently as 23 December 1903. Herbert Cyril Thacker was a son of Major-General T. Thacker of the Indian Army. Although born in Poona in 1870, young Thacker had attended Upper Canada College in Toronto and the Royal Military College at Kingston. Commissioned into the Royal Canadian Artillery as a lieutenant on 10 October 1893, and immediately given a brevet captaincy, he had served creditably with the Yukon Field Force during the Gold Rush, 1898-1899 and in the South African War, 1899-1900. Effective 1 March 1901, he had obtained the substantive rank of captain. At the moment, Thacker was enjoying some leave in Toronto.

10. If Sir Frederick Borden showed little interest in the dispatch of Captain Thacker to Japan there were very good reasons why. The Minister of Militia and Defence had made some politically rash commitments when he had attended a meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence on 13 December 1903, during the course of an official visit to London, and he was now doing his best to have them omitted from the official minutes. There were also many changes to be made in the proposed new militia bill, if it were to conform to the reforms proposed for the British Army by the Esher Committee and state clearly that control of the militia was vested in the Canadian Government.⁹ In consequence, Lord Dundonald wrote directly to the Prime Minister, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, on 18 February as follows:

With regard to sending an officer to Japan. I think it would be very desirable to attach a young artillery officer to the British Staff out

there; I have selected Major [sic] Thacker who has just done very well in England in Artillery subjects, and whilst studying artillery he could study transport and other matters, he would of course act under Sir William Nicholson officially it would be stated I conclude "that Canada had sent an officer Major Thacker to be attached to Sir William Nicholson's Staff in Japan." I do think it would be wise to send this young officer and done in this way, I think the possible objections of certain people as to Militarism might be avoided. I spoke to His Excellency some time ago about the desirability of sending a young officer. The Imperial authorities are willing I hear. 10

11. No publicity was given to Captain Thacker's departure for Japan. On 2 March the Ottawa Citizen mentioned that two British officers en route to the far east as military observers had stopped off in Ottawa briefly to visit Lord Dundonald. On 4 March the Adjutant General advised the heads of the several directorates and services at Militia Headquarters of Thacker's mission and suggested that they submit a list of the topics about which they would like to be informed.¹¹

The Russo-Japanese War continued to occupy most of the front page of the Mail and Empire and other Canadian daily newspapers, but the wildest rumours were being printed because there was strict censorship of the press in Japan and foreign correspondents were not permitted to go where the fighting was until the last week in March.¹² By that time the First Imperial Japanese Army was functioning smoothly and unlikely to commit any blunder that would cause the Japs to "lose face" in western eyes.

12. On the other hand, British naval officers had witnessed the first Japanese landings in Korea and Lieutenant-General Sir Ian Hamilton's group of British military observers was following the First Army north to the Yalu River, where it decisively defeated the Russians on 30 April- 1 May 1904. Such preferential treatment could be justified by the fact of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 30 January 1902, and the

