

# Barracks Life in the Nineteenth Century; or How and Why Tommy's Lot Improved

Carol M. Whitfield

## *Abstract/Résumé*

*Cet article traite des conditions de vie des soldats britanniques en poste en Amérique du Nord et décrit les changements qui eurent lieu entre 1800 et 1900. L'auteur insiste particulièrement sur les changements physiques dans les domaines de l'architecture et de la culture matérielle.*

*This paper examines how and why the living conditions of British army privates serving in North America changed between 1800 and 1900. The author concentrates especially on the physical manifestations of those changes — the architectural and material culture changes that occurred.*

At the end of the nineteenth century Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem about the lot of Tommy Atkins — the British Tommy who is the equivalent of the American GI Joe. In the poem Tommy complains about how he gets pushed from pillar to post except during a war and then he is called "Mister Atkins."

Tommy was a fictional character but not one created by Kipling. Actually Tommy Atkins was the John Doe created by someone in the War Office at least as early as 1825 to show British army officers and clerks how to fill in forms. Kipling's Tommy had some real complaints but they were nothing in comparison to Tommy's great-grandfather's problems when he served as a private in the British army in North America about 1800.

In large part this paper is a report on research in progress, in progress for the last decade. It is a result of work I and my colleagues in Ottawa and at the Halifax Defence Complex have been doing to understand and help restore and furnish the forts that are managed by Parks Canada, and in particular the Halifax Citadel. The information is drawn from a variety of sources. First I have used documentary material, which tends to look at Tommy's living conditions from a largely bureaucratic viewpoint: what the regulations were, requests for changes in the prescribed quantities, and orders for goods. Secondly, I have consulted pictorial material. Unfortunately many of these are English photographs, although some North American material has been uncovered. But, since the British army was a bureaucratic organization, a photograph of an English barracks is probably not very different from a photograph of a Canadian barracks for the same period. Thirdly, cartographic sources — maps and plans — reveal

many facts about space allocation and, occasionally, include sketches of furnishings. Fourthly, I have used physical sources, architectural and material culture artifacts, including archaeological finds, which make clear what Tommy's living conditions were like.

In 1800 when Tommy enlisted in the British army he promised to serve George III for the rest of his life in return for food and bed. The barrack room that was to become his new home was crowded; wooden double bunk-beds with a minimum of space between them lined the walls and tables and benches (referred to as forms) ran down the middle. Each bed had a straw-filled palliasse, a bolster, a pair of sheets, two blankets, and a rug (in this case a bed coverlet). The rest of the room furnishings consisted of one round towel for every twelve men, a rack for the muskets, shelves and pegs (three feet two inches long per man) to hang knapsacks and uniforms on, fire irons, a coal- or wood-box, a wooden urinal tub (also used until 1840 for personal washing), a candlestick, and a broom and mop. It should be noted that there was no box or cupboard in which to put personal possessions because Tommy was not expected to have any personal belongings.<sup>1</sup>

In 1800, the Duke of Kent felt it was necessary to instruct the men in the Nova Scotia command how the barracks were to appear during the day. He laid down that

the Bottom Boards of Berths from the Center to the feet, must be taken out, and the Beds folded up, according to the following mode Vizt.

The Bolster laid at the Bottom of the Paillasses, which is to be doubled over it twice, so as to make ly in three folds — with the Bolster in the Center; The

Sheets, Blankets, and Rug to be doubled over from the length, and then turned together, in three folds, also the Sheets, to be laid on the Paillasses, the Blankets on the Sheets, and the Green Rugg on the Blankets.

....

The Hatts or Caps of the Non Committed [*sic*] Officers and Soldiers properly hung upon pegs, that must be fixed, to the side of the hanging Shelves for that purpose. The Accoutrements on the Racks, with the Bayonets, Belts, over the Pouch Belts, the arms neatly and uniformly laid in the Racks,... the name of each man, and the number of his Arms, being plainly written on a small Card or small Pice [*sic*] of Paper, of the Shape of a small card, and placed on the top of arm Rack, exactly over the owners fire lock.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, Tommy Atkins' length of service had changed. It was now reduced to twelve years of which six were served in the reserves. But most of the barrack furnishings had not altered much. The most dramatic change was the number of men in each barrack room. Until 1845 there were no regulations, simply physical limitations. In 1845, as part of a slow awakening of concern for Tommy (largely because the Royal Commission on Military Punishments had revealed that there were some positive steps the army bureaucracy could take to reduce the number of courts martial), barrack accommodation was set at 450 cubic feet per man. This was the ideal, the goal, but one which was not realized in Halifax until new barracks were opened in 1860. Ironically, in 1858, this time because of the reports of the Committee on Barrack Accommodation and the Army Sanitary Commission which resulted from the furor of the Crimean War débâcle, the space per man was raised to 600 cubic feet. In Halifax it was necessary to build even more barracks, the Glacis Barracks, and to cut the garrison housed in the Citadel in half to meet these new regulations.<sup>3</sup>

The other change immediately noticeable was the bed. In the late 1820s, the single iron bedstead, which folded up during the day to allow the men to move about more freely, was introduced.<sup>4</sup> The new bed was still in use at the end of the century as a photograph of Wellington Barracks, Halifax, in the 1890s shows. There were even regulations for folding these beds:

The iron bedsteads are not to be placed at a less distance than six inches from any part of the wall, if the size of the room will admit of such space. The bedsteads are to be turned up at an early hours, but before this is done the bedding is to be left exposed to the air for an hour every morning. The beds and bedding are to be removed from the barrack rooms as often as practicable during fine weather, for the purpose of being aired.

....

The paillasse is to be rolled up in a circular form, the blankets and sheets neatly folded up and laid on the

top, and the whole to be bound round the centre by a strap. When thus rolled up, the bedding is to be placed about two inches from the head of the bedstead, the foot of which is to be doubled back. The rug is to be placed about two inches from the head of the bedstead, the foot of which is to be doubled back. The rug is to be placed on the unoccupied end of the bedstead, so as to admit of soldiers sitting thereon during the daytime. The rug is to be folded round the blankets of such bedding as may not be in use.<sup>5</sup>

Other changes had also occurred to make Tommy's life more comfortable. In 1800 it was extremely rare to have any heat source other than a fireplace but by 1900 every barrack room had a stove. In fact, stoves became part of the regulated barrack furnishings in the Canadas in 1811, but there are indications that in St. John's in 1860 fireplaces were still the main source of heat, with stoves in the halls and passages. At the same time in Halifax, half the barracks had stoves in the rooms. By the end of the century hot water heating was being introduced but into the military hospitals first. In one fortification I recently toured this was accomplished by a pipe running from a boiler around the top of the walls.<sup>6</sup>

It was not until the 1860s that the system of lighting barracks was improved. As mentioned above the regulated allowance at the start of the century was one candlestick for every twelve men. By 1868 most of the Halifax barracks had been converted to Albertine oil-lamps, and the senior medical officer for the Nova Scotia command was recommending that they be introduced in New Brunswick and Newfoundland. By 1888 many of the barracks in Halifax had been converted to kerosene lamps (which did not draw praise from the medical staff) and the introduction of gas lighting had begun. At the very end of the century electric lighting was being installed.<sup>7</sup>

For Tommy himself, one major change had occurred; he was allowed to own a box to hold his personal possessions. In 1800 the authorities of the British army did not want or encourage Tommy to own anything other than that supplied by the British army (all of which was marked with a broad arrow and often with the regimental number and the soldier's number). The Horse Guards and War Office even discouraged Tommy from saving money. Their theory was that a man with possessions and money had a stake, a means of surviving initially should he desert. This attitude only disappeared slowly. In 1841 savings banks were introduced following a recommendation of the Royal Commission on Military Punishments, and over the century barrack boxes were introduced on a regimental basis. For example, the Royal Sappers and Miners were permitted a box as early as 1831. It measured 2 feet by 1 foot 3 inches by 1 foot 2 inches and was painted grey, with white lettering. By the middle of the century almost all regiments permitted their non-commissioned officers to own a box of varying dimensions but it was not until the 1890s that there was a

standard wooden box for privates measuring 26½ by 16 by 12 inches.<sup>8</sup>

Before leaving the subject of barracks, it might be useful to look at the kind of documentation which is available to study a specific piece of furniture. The best source is, of course, an original example, but frequently we are forced back upon written descriptions. These increase as the century progressed and as the army became more and more bureaucratic. For example, by the middle of the century printed standard contract forms were being used by the Royal Engineers at some locations. The 1852 carpenters' contract for Quebec describes a soldiers' table top as:

Pine, 6 feet x 2 feet 6 inches, 1½ inches thick wrought both sides, tongued and grooved, clamped with Pine 4 inches wide, corners rounded, the edges bound round with 1¼ inch Hoop Iron, put on with Screws, and notched to receive the Trussels.<sup>9</sup>

The other major standard sources are the *Priced Vocabularies* (of 1870 and 1898) and *Schedules of Barrack Furnishings*. The 1870 *Priced Vocabulary* describes a soldier's table as either six or four feet in length, which are the same measurements given in the 1872 *Revised Schedule of Barrack Furniture*, and the 1898 *Priced Vocabulary* also indicates that tables were either six or four feet long and of wood "with iron dowels, clamps and bolts."<sup>10</sup> Obviously the 1852 description is the most useful, but this combined with pictorial information suggests that there was really no change in the last half of the nineteenth century.

I do not want to suggest that all problems can be resolved this easily. Earlier I quoted from an 1800 document which describes the rug or bed coverlet as green. This and an 1812 document which states that "250 green knotted rugs" were shipped to St. Johns is all I have been able to learn about this item during ten years of keeping looking.<sup>11</sup> The *Priced Vocabularies* and *Schedules* do not even give measurements for the rug. Recently this problem became even more complex. A colleague checked an original coloured copy of the *Standing Orders for the Royal Artillery* for 1876 and informs me that a diamond-pattern blanket shown in one of the illustrations is orange and blue.<sup>12</sup> So now my problem had doubled, I want to know what a green knotted rug and an orange and blue diamond-pattern rug looked like, consisted of, and measured.

Fortunately it was not rugs but grey army blankets which Tommy used in 1800 to create an illusion of privacy for his wife and children. By 1800 the British army had established that 6 per cent of the rank and file would be permitted to marry, with the commanding officer's leave, and that their wives and children could live in barracks and draw rations. It was not until 1811, however, that the women could draw bedding and their children were not issued bed and bedding until 1856. (Until this date the parents had to provide the bedding or the children slept in the beds of soldiers on guard duty.)

As the nineteenth century began these women and children were housed in the same rooms as the bachelor soldiers, usually taking over the corners of the rooms and hoping that no one would enforce the 1795 Barrack Regulations which forbade the use of "any of the Bedding ... to any other purpose than they were originally intended for." By the 1840s the commanding officers of most garrisons were attempting to isolate the families and single soldiers by putting several families in one room. In 1860, for example, at Fort Townshend in St. John's, two rooms were set aside with three families in each room while at Wellington Barracks, Halifax, thirteen rooms housed twenty-six families.

During the 1860s the first married quarters for privates (PMQs) were built in Halifax with an allotment standard of one room, sixteen by sixteen feet, for each family. This was done to overcome the destitute state of the more than one hundred families who were renting quarters in Halifax using an allowance of four pence per day begun in 1848 for married soldiers to find accommodation out of barracks. According to Hastings Doyle, these families had to live where "no civilian of respectability would inhabit and none do, except those whose poverty is the result of vice and intemperance...." The new PMQs, ironically called Pavilion Married Quarters, opened in 1868. Eventually they housed eighty families.<sup>13</sup>

The other factor which undoubtedly had a great impact on Tommy's personal comfort was food. British daily army rations throughout the period were one pound of bread and one pound of meat per man.<sup>14</sup> This did not constitute the whole of a soldier's diet, but simply what the army issued. In addition each group of men that were housed together messed together, that is, they each contributed a set amount towards the purchase of "groceries" — coffee, sugar, milk, potatoes, and other vegetables which the cook used to vary their diet.<sup>15</sup> At some North American garrisons the men had a vegetable garden.

As late as 1861 there was virtually only one method of cooking available — boiling. The boilers were "usually placed in a range along the side or at the ends of the cookhouse." In a few instances "they [were] built round a central shaft passing through the roof". Boilers came in two sizes to hold approximately twelve or twenty-five gallons. They were made of "cast iron, about three eighths of an inch thick." "Each boiler [was] provided with a thin moveable sheet iron lid, covering two thirds of the top; the remaining portion being fixed, and from the centre of the fixed part the steam pipe ... [was] carried into the chimney flue."<sup>16</sup> These boilers were used to boil the meat and vegetables and to boil coffee and tea — hardly an interesting diet! This was the situation in 1860 at most of the barracks in Atlantic Canada although some of the new ones in Halifax also had ovens. Over the next decade, however, experiments with three different cooking appliances were pursued, and either Deane's, Galton's, or Warren's appara-

tus was introduced into most barracks. For example, Warren's apparatus was substituted in Saint John in 1868.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately this is an area in which our research is just beginning, so I am not certain whether it was Deane's boiler, which could steam food, or his range that the army was buying.

We do know from archaeological and photographic evidence that there was little change in at least some of the dishes Tommy ate from. A dish and mug were found during underwater archaeology near Fort Malden, Amherstburg, Ontario, on which a soldier had scratched his name and regiment; it can be dated to the War of 1812. The same style dish shows up in a drawing for 1860 and in a photograph taken in Halifax.

Throughout this paper I have chosen to be fairly specific about barracks, food, and women and children. But I would like to touch on a few other things that changed for Tommy during the nineteenth century. At the start of the century the British army began educating Tommy's children and offering Tommy (sometimes insistently) the chance to learn to read, write, and do simple arithmetic. In the 1840s libraries for soldiers were introduced, and in the 1860s the army actually built a gymnasium for the bigger garrisons, like Halifax. All this concern for Tommy's leisure time was part of an effort to attract him away from the taverns and alcohol which had been his only recreation.

During the nineteenth century, the British army decided that the best way to reduce the number of courts martial (most of which were to try soldiers for incidents related to alcohol or for desertion) was to provide him with acceptable alternatives for his time. Hence libraries were formed after the Report of the Royal Commission on Military Punishments was accepted in 1840. On the other hand, recreation rooms, soldiers clubs, and a revised canteen system were instituted in the 1860s after Florence Nightingale, Sydney Herbert, and others used public sympathy for Tommy during the Crimean War to study and report upon his living conditions. Those two incidents, a study of flogging and the Crimean War, actually had a great impact on Tommy's peace-time life.

In some ways, in comparison to others here for this colloquium, I am fortunate. Because the British army was a bureaucratic organization there are contracts and priced

vocabularies such as the ones already quoted. By the end of the nineteenth century there was even a printed record of every design change made in the *List of Changes* and standard plans for some pieces of furniture. On the other hand it is easy to become stuck in the morass of documentation, trying to find the last piece of the puzzle, convinced that somewhere there must be a description for a green knotted rug, and it is easy to forget that Tommy was probably just a "single [man] in barricks [*sic*] most remarkable like you."

## NOTES

1. *General Regulations for the Army* (London), 1799, 84—85; Public Record Office (PRO), WO44/590, 246-51, Lt. Col. Oldfield to respective officers, Montreal, 23 June 1841; Public Archives of Canada (PAC), RG 8, C, 1, 548, p.2, York, 18 Jan. 1807.
2. PAC, RG8, C, 1, 1167½ C, pp. 43-46, Garrison Orders, HQ Halifax, 9 March 1800.
3. Cameron Pulsifer, *British Regiments in Halifax* (manuscript, 1980), 18-23; PAC, MG 24, F38, Circular no. 330, War Office, 1 October 1858.
4. PAC, RG 8, C, 1, 1187, p. 27, General Orders, Horse Guards, 4 May 1827.
5. *Queen's Regulations and Orders for the Army* (London), 1868, 313.
6. PRO, WO 28/303, 17, G.O. Quebec, 26 Nov. 1811; *Army Sanitary Report* (London), 1860, 336; 1892, 50.
7. *Army Sanitary Report*, 1868, 67; 1888, 76; 1889, 79; 1987, 97.
8. John William Fortescue, *A Short Account of Canteens in the British Army* (Cambridge, 1925), 21; *Orders and Regulations for the Corps of Royal Engineers and Royal Sappers and Miners at Home and Abroad* (London), 1831, 154; *Priced Vocabulary of Stores Used in Her Majesty's Service* (London), 1898, 941.
9. PRO, WO 55/886, ff. 299-475. This has standard contracts for 1844, 1848, and 1852; the latter is amended to indicate it was being used after 1855.
10. *Priced Vocabulary of All Stores Used in Her Majesty's Service and Provided by Control Department* (Woolwich), 1870, 583; *Revised Schedules of Barrack Furniture etc., and Royal Warrant of 1872* (London), 1889, 23; *Priced Vocabulary*, 1898, 987.
11. PRO, WO 57/4, 334, Harrison to commissary in chief, 18 February 1812.
12. *Standing Orders of the Royal Regiment of Artillery* (London), 1876.
13. *Army Sanitary Report*, 1860, 338; Pulsifer, *British Regiments in Halifax*, 25-26; Carol Whitfield, "Tommy Atkins' Family," *APT*, V, no. 4, (1973): 65-72.
14. PAC, RG 8, C, 1, 300, 27-28, 22 July 1830; *Royal Warrant and Regulations Regarding Army Services, and Explanatory Directions for the Information and Guidance of Paymasters and Others* (London), 1848, 55.
15. PAC, MG 29, F46, 15-16.
16. *General Report of the Commission Appointed for Improving the Sanitary Condition of Barracks and Hospitals* (London, 1861), 48.
17. *Army Sanitary Report*, 1868, 67.