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Instruments of War: A Canadian Musician in a Rhode Island Regiment

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Instruments of War: A Canadian Musician in a Rhode Island Regiment

Abstract

Canada! America's hat! Our friendly little brother to the north. The home of hockey and Tim Horton's and your home, too, when that other political party elects their crazy candidate. All jokes aside, the United States has long had a close relationship with our northern neighbor, and the Civil War proved no exception. An estimated 30,000 to 50,000 Canadians fought during the war, typically on the side of the Union due to their geographic proximity and cultural sympathies. Of that number, approximately 5,000 were killed. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Civil War Music, Civil War Musicians, Canadians in the Civil War, 4th Rhode Island

Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Instruments of War: A Canadian Musician in a Rhode Island Regiment

May 16, 2016

By Ryan Nadeau '16

Canada! America's hat! Our friendly little brother to the north. The home of hockey and Tim Horton's and your home, too, when that other political party elects their crazy candidate. All jokes aside, the United States has long had a close relationship with our northern neighbor, and the Civil War proved no exception. An estimated 30,000 to 50,000 Canadians fought during the war, typically on the side of the Union due to their geographic proximity and cultural sympathies. Of that number, approximately 5,000 were killed.

Of course, not all Canadians who partook in the war were there to fight. Among the number who volunteered in the Union army was a young musician by the name of Calixa Lavallée, who some two decades after the war became responsible for one of the most enduring symbols of Canada (at least as we perceive it here in the United States): the music of their national anthem, "O Canada." Born in Quebec to parents of French descent, he was only sixteen when he traveled to the United States for the first time to join a traveling minstrel show based out of Rhode Island. Already an extremely versatile musician, he journeyed across the politically-tense nation to cities like New Orleans, Vicksburg, Richmond, Washington, Philadelphia, and New York to perform on tour. On 19 January, 1861, Lavallée and his troupe were in Atlanta when Georgia seceded from the Union.



Calixa Lavallée in his later years, defying typical post-war facial hair trends. Photograph via Wikimedia Commons.

Rather than return to Canada Lavallée's troupe decided to capitalize on the war, as they believed that citizens both North and South could use musical performances as a pleasant distraction from the political turmoil. Patriotic fervor sweeping both sections of the country called for music promoting their cause, and Lavallée was happy to oblige, personally penning a number of pro-Union songs upon his return to the North in March. While not well known today, his titles included Col. Ellsworth Gallopade, The First Welcome, and The War Fever. As the war picked up, however, entertainers began to have a harder and harder time drawing crowds to their shows, and thus, by midyear, Lavallée's troupe had plans to tour Canada after a summer's rest in Rhode Island. Lavallée did not return to his homeland, however; rather, one day before his troupe's intended departure on 17 September 1861, he enlisted in the band of the 4th Rhode Island in Providence. While he did not leave a record of why he may have joined the war, it is likely that paygrade and prospects of adventure seemed more appealing to the nineteen year-old musician than the prospect of touring Canada.

During the Civil War, musicians were omnipresent. Each company maintained field musicians, who were responsible for directing their affairs through the performance of musical refrains. Calls to meals, activities, and battle directed company affairs and helped announce the commands of the company's officers on a louder scale than their individual voices through the use of drums, fifes, and bugles. Field musicians were distinct from military bands, however, which normally fulfilled less functional purposes, such as performing at parades and serving as entertainment for high-ranking military officials. Nearly every Union regiment maintained a band of one size or another, resulting in the recruitment of thousands of musicians for the war effort, with significantly fewer numbers on the Confederate side. Bands were frequently a source of pride for the regiment to which they were attached and were frequently instrumental in maintaining their morale.

The 4th Rhode Island was deployed in October of 1861, and so Lavallée and the band went with them. After completing their training the regiment was selected by General Burnside (a Rhode Islander himself) to join him on the North Carolina campaign. During most of the fighting, when a full performing band would have ordinarily just gotten in the way, Lavallée and other musicians assisted with medical personnel in setting up field hospitals and transporting wounded soldiers off the battlefield. Until the fall of 1862, however, the only true risk of being forced out of the war effort that Lavallée faced was made by budget cutters in the War Department who believed that regimental bands were too expensive.



The band of the 114th Pennsylvania Infantry. While not Lavallée's regiment, his band would have likely been composed similarly.

Photograph via Wikimedia Commons.

On 17 September, however, Lavallée was present at the Battle of Antietam, the single bloodiest day in Civil War history. There, Lavallée was allegedly wounded by fire, most likely while retrieving a soldier of his regiment from the battlefield. No official record exists that confirms the story, but it is known that some regimental bands were present at Antietam. The 4th Rhode Island also took heavy losses while fighting around the Dunker Church, a site of some of the day's most intense fighting. Whether or not Lavallée's wound was severe enough to merit discharge, or whether his regiment simply needed to save money and could not maintain a wounded musician, Lavallée was discharged from the army after Antietam, which occurred exactly a year after his enlistment.

According to the Canadian journalist Claire Hoy, Lavallée was wounded at Antietam not when he went to retrieve bodies in his secondary service as a member of the band, but because he had been transferred to combat duty as a result of budget cuts. Hoy also names the exact way in which Lavallée was wounded: by a shot to the leg. His conclusions are not shared by Lavallée expert Brian Christopher Thompson, however, who has published the most recent and comprehensive biography of Lavallée in English as of 2015.

Despite being discharged from the army band and making a mostly full-time return to Canada by 1863, the Civil War would not be Lavallée's final encounter with a Confederacy that he opposed. Late into the war, the Canadian public opinion of the North had soured due to tensions between Britain and the Union, exacerbated by episodes such as the Trent Affair. This led to fear of war between Britain and the United States, which would likely lead to an invasion of Canada. In response, Canadian politicians devised a plan to create the Canadian Confederation in order to restructure the government into a condition more favorable to the defense of Britain's North American colonies. Lavallée took a stand against Confederation, aligning himself with several young radicals who believed that a confederated government would reduce the power of the traditional colonial provinces, an ironic turn from a former Union man. Lavallée and his fellow French-Canadians likely saw Confederation as a tool by which British influence could be increased over the population of Quebec. Rather, Lavallée and his radical friends saw outright independence, or even annexation by the United States, as preferable outcomes. By 1867, however, Confederation became a reality. Thirteen years later, in 1880, at the behest of the Congress of Catholic French Canadians, he composed the music to the song that would become the combined Canada's national anthem as a patriotic tune.

After his experience in the Civil War, Lavallée was permanently tied to the United States. Even after returning to Canada, he traveled back to the states frequently to teach and perform. After composing "O, Canada" he returned to the United States for good, where he died in Boston in 1891. Lavallée's service in the band of the 4th Rhode Island was not particularly glorious nor even very unique. His brief adventure at the start of the war does, however, provide an example of how the war drew individuals from outside the United States, even those with significant patriotic ties to other nations. Lavallée is, after all, likely the only composer of a foreign national anthem to have participated in the war! That he would have preferred to see his home province of Quebec absorbed into the United States, and that he chose to close out the final decade of his life there, indicates the great affection he developed for the United States in the first years he spent living in, and bleeding for, them.

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