

THE 1919 UNITED STATES ARMY'S
CANADIAN INVASION PLAN REVISITED

by

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In 1975 I presented a paper at the 10th Annual Northern Great Plains History Conference in Grand Forks, North Dakota, titled, "The United States Army's 1919 Contingency Plan to Defend North Dakota Against an Unspecified Invader from Canada." It was based almost entirely on records of the Kansas City District Engineer Office in the custody of the National Archives and Record Service's regional branch in Kansas City.¹ The Corps of Engineers had transferred the records to the National Archives in Washington many years ago. Shipped to the Kansas City branch in 1970, they were ultimately processed and declassified. I became aware of the records while looking for possible topics for graduate students seminar papers in urban history. At first glance, the records appeared to be simply some more unimportant bureaucratic documents created by the corps.

I accepted an invitation to present the invasion paper without enthusiasm. Early drafts of the invasion paper were flowery in tone, had an official ring, and took the activities of the military men at face value. In short, I failed to apply the same kind of historical analysis that I would have in considering the significance of position papers from a Kansas gubernatorial campaign. Fortunately a colleague, Richard Elrod, a former intelligence officer, set me straight. He cited 1960s contingency plans detailing possible helicopter drop zones in a then hostile country that failed to take into consideration any military response if the United States attacked. For me that put things back into perspective. I started to consider the military pioneers as bureaucrats in uniform and I went on from that standpoint.

Here in short form is the story.

In 1919 members of the United States Army Corps of Engineers planned the defense of North Dakota and Montana against an invasion from Canada. They produced secret reports that represented a ludicrous exercise in contingency planning and inept bungling by narrow-minded and security-conscious military bureaucrats. The Chief of the Construction Corps, Colonel Clarence O. Sherrill,² a much decorated West Pointer who was an expert on military maps and photographs, appeared primarily concerned with extending the role of his organization. He never explained the importance of protecting a traditionally undefended stretch of border, nor did he identify a possible enemy or give any indication of the potential size of a defense force.³ In the name of secrecy he left important territory outside the plan. He appeared ignorant of geography and politics.

The men in Sherrill's command proceeded as best they could. They followed orders and never raised doubts about the

need to guard the frontier. Had intelligence uncovered an invasion plot? Were thousands of Mounties preparing to gallop south toward Bismarck? Were Indian chiefs about to mount a second Battle of the Little Big Horn? Was the "Yellow Peril" about to engulf Canada? Did Bolshevik hordes propose to attack via the North Pole? Was aggression contemplated in Ottawa? Were "agrarian radicals" on the march? Did the British Empire intend to renew the War of 1812? Was "Pancho" Villa planning operations from Canada? If these and other questions arose, they never appeared in writing. Serious men, taking their responsibilities to heart, collected information on everything from the location of wells to the stability of roadbed ballasts on trunk railroads. They could just as easily have been mounting an attack on Berlin or a defense of the Philippines. The compilation of inconsequential information assumed major importance to those involved.

Sherrill and his engineers believed that giant railroad guns were the key to defending the nation. These 12- to 16-inch cannons, mounted on flat cars, fired two ton shells over distances of more than 20 miles. Supposedly, they had many advantages. They could be kept in marshaling yards deep inside the country, rather than in exposed border positions, where their menacing presence might cause international complications. When needed, they could be pulled out and rolled swiftly through the night, arriving at prearranged positions in time to surprise and destroy an unsuspecting invader. To the engineers, the artillery pieces represented powerful deterrents and solved the problem of quick deployment along frontiers undefended under formal treaties, signed agreements, or traditional understandings. The big weapons formed the backbone of defense strategy.⁴ It made little difference that few existed or that the Germans had found railroad guns useful mainly for terror effect on the Western Front.

At first, the Office of the District Engineer in Kansas City, Missouri, charged with preparing a plan of battle, decided to leave the eastern half of North Dakota undefended. This was a deliberate oversight. The Corps of Engineer's District Office in St. Paul, which exercised authority over the Red River of the North, still had a wartime appointed civilian administrator without the proper clearance.⁵ Colonel R.T. Ward, who became head of the Kansas City office on July 1, 1919, in a normal change of command, considered it impractical and stupid to leave part of the border undefended, so he interpreted military jargon in a way that broadened his charge, officially limited to the Missouri River and its tributaries. Ward noted that because the "action" remained unstated that he had no choice except to defend a larger area.⁶ Ward requested \$1,500 to support the project, designated C. of E. 660F Fortifications, but "on account of limited funds," was told by his superiors that expenses should not exceed \$500.⁷

The War Department sent large maps of Montana and North Dakota to Kansas City. Corps of Engineer officers working in secret marked the major rivers and railroads with red and blue crayons,⁸ discovering the obvious--a combination of geography and communication lines would force invaders to advance in a

southeasterly direction across North Dakota. Unfortunately, the Corps lacked maps of western Canada, greatly complicating the planning of strategy. Officials solved this deficiency in a direct manner. A major general in the War Department wrote to the Canadian government, requesting and receiving the needed maps.⁹ The Kansas City office also proposed overflights by military planes of the border to take aerial photographs. This fell through because of a bitter dispute over cameras between the Corps of Engineers and the Army Air Force. The branches also squabbled over who would pay for the personnel and the gasoline. Moreover, there were no landing fields.¹⁰

The Engineers in Kansas City secured very detailed information on railroad lines from the United States Railway Administration.¹¹ However, Colonel Ward knew little except what the maps indicated about the remote border. His solution was to send a junior engineer to compile an intelligence report. Captain A.H. Riney, Jr., an authority on road building and quarrying, made a two-week inspection trip. After traveling through the area on the Great Northern and Soo Line railroads, observing the terrain from train windows, he submitted a myopic report on August 16, 1919.¹² Most of his observations bordered on the nonsensical. He found that the roads followed lines of least resistance, that muddy fields dried quickly under a hot sun, that it was cold in the winter and hot in the summer, that the climate fluctuated between dry and wet seasons depending on the amount of rainfall, and that some wells were deep and others shallow. He concluded with the startling perception that the railroad locomotives burned coal and that tunnels were unnecessary on the prairie. Ward forwarded the finding to Washington with the laconic comment, "The result of the reconnaissance and additional study has not changed the general scheme as outlined in the preliminary study."¹³

Ward's "preliminary study" of July 24, 1919¹⁴ which displayed only a common sense knowledge of North American geography, became the basis for operational planning. After surveying "general maps," he determined that Winnipeg, about 60 miles north of the border in eastern Manitoba, was a key east-west railroad center. He developed a series of plans based on his conclusion that "no great natural defense line" existed along the 49th parallel, the wind-swept and remote international boundary. The unfortunately designated "Plan A" called for an immediate retreat to a line somewhere south of the Missouri River. The same results would have followed from "Plan B," which envisioned a Missouri-Milk River line. The Milk, which started in Glacier National Park, flowed north into Alberta, where it followed the border for 100 miles before dropping back into the United States halfway across Montana. The additional territory in this defense perimeter was virtually uninhabited.

Other options called for a railroad strategy. The main line of the Great Northern Railroad ran an average of 45 miles south of the border for a distance of several hundred miles, with numerous branches. Plans "C" through "F" used the railroads for either defensive or offensive operations. Mobile troops would move back and forth along the Great

Northern, meeting threats as they occurred. The final alternative, "Plan G," suggested "a defensive line wholly on Canadian territory"--in short, an invasion of Canada. Assault troops, supported by an area bombardment of the Canadian prairies by railroad guns, would move by train through two desolate border points 500 miles apart, Northgate in western North Dakota and Sweetgrass in west-central Montana, advancing northward toward unstated objectives. While Ward admitted that this double envelopment to nowhere meant "a general advance on a very wide front," he actually believed it feasible. He submitted his report in September of 1919, which his superiors "considered satisfactory,"¹⁵ and placed on file.

No threat of an invasion from Canada materialized. Yet, in the natural course of everyday business, the American military had developed a secret Canadian invasion plan. Neither treaties nor a history of generally good relations stopped the war planners from carrying out what they believed their patriotic duties. Presumably, more updating would follow in the future, again in secret and without the knowledge of either the people or the civilian governments on either side of the international boundary.

The initial reaction to the paper was beyond my expectations.¹⁶ The audience enjoyed. Larry Remele, the managing editor of North Dakota History, who had previously received a copy, accepted the paper on the spot for publication. My objectives had been accomplished, but there was more to come. A reporter from the Grand Forks Herald interviewed me. His story appeared on the front page the following day under the caption, "Did the Army think Mounties were coming in 1919?"¹⁷ The account appeared in at least five other North Dakota newspapers. The Duluth News-Tribune carried it with the headline, "At last it can be told! Peril of the Plains."¹⁸ That might have ended matters except for one of those unpredictable things. Bill Richards, a military affairs correspondent for the Washington Post, was in Grand Forks researching an article on the closing of a missile base. He saw the Herald story and called me in Bemidji. We talked at length. He told me that a story he planned on the contingency plan would run shortly, and predicted that after that I would receive more telephone calls. He was right.

On October 28, 1975, Richard's story appeared on page one of the Washington Post.¹⁹ "Fifty-six years after it was drawn up, a bizarre U.S. Army plan to invade Canada has been unearthed by a Midwest historian," he began. "The plan--which was kept classified by the Army until last month--calls for defending the barren Saskatchewan Province either by tank or on horseback backed by military support from huge cannon mounted on railway cars." He quoted me as saying, "I'm no military strategist, but to me it looks ludicrous." After that, the impact of appearing in the Washington Post soon became apparent. I was contacted by journalists representing the Toronto Globe and Mail, the Associated Press, the Kansas City Times, the Independence (Mo.) Examiner, the National Enquirer, and Time magazine. The college radio station at the University of Missouri-Kansas City interviewed me; a national PBS program carried an excerpt. Via telephone I was on Iowa State University's radio station, on the Canadian Broadcasting

Corporation's nightly network show, "As It Happens," on public affairs programs in Calgary and Vancouver, and on a talk show in Regina. By this time the original paper had assumed its own life. Indeed, many people thought in terms of invasion rather than defensive plans. Nothing I said changed matters. In spite of being intimately involved, I became a spectator as a national and even international story unfolded.

Headline writers played it in a variety of ways. The Chicago Sun-Times declared on page one, "Find 1919 Plan by US to Invade Canada." According to the Boston Globe, "The US Army was ready . . . ready to invade Canada." The St. Louis Globe-Democrat proclaimed, "1919 plan for U.S. invasion of Canada found." In Florida, the Orlando Sentinel Star claimed "U.S. Plan for Invading Canada told--50 years Later." The Saratoga Herald-Tribune contended, "Professor Finds Bizarre Army Plan to Invade Canada." More vaguely, the St. Paul Pioneer Press informed readers, "Horsemen to Aid Attack: Canadian Invasion Plan Unearthed." In a similar vein, a New York Times caption stated, "1919 Plan to Stop 'Invasion' Found." The Bemidji Pioneer proclaimed, "North Dakota Now Defenseless: Army's 1919 plans declassified," while the Kansas City Times speculated, "1919--a Northern Invasion?" The Fargo Forum asserted, "Documents tell 1919 Plan to Defend Midwestern Area." Overseas, the European edition of Stars and Strips averred, "Records from 1919 discovered: Army had plan to halt Invasion from Canada," and the Manchester Guardian Weekly simply said, "Canadian Contingency." The Independence Examiner reported, "Humorous Article Puts UMKC Professor in News." Time called the affair, "The Battle That Wasn't." The Army Times noted, "What about Mexico?" and proceeded to attack contingency plans in general.²⁰ Military Affairs called the newspaper reaction "absurd," claiming, "such studies have to be seen within the general context of military training and the improbabilities of both peace and war."²¹

Other viewpoints surfaced. An editorial in the Washington Star suggested that the Corps may have gone awry only in being half a century ahead of the time:

Thus, what reveals itself to modern minds as a fatuous piece of army busy-work might have had unsuspected substance. The wheat-rich plains of Saskatchewan, the bubbling oil of today's Alberta and who knows what other resources are up there are mightily alluring now from this side of the border.²²

Michael Kilian, in a column on the editorial page of the Chicago Tribune, after asserting that "in pure economic terms, we'd do much better to attack New York," gave a modern recipe for extending Manifest Destiny to the north. "Whatever grievance we were paying to settle, we could get the Canadians to sue for peace in an instant by threatening to cut off all our television programs," he said. "After a day of nothing but CBC documentaries on Eskimo life, white flags would be popping up all over Toronto."²³

Most Canadians took the story with their traditional good humor. A CBC program, "Inside From the Outside," did a

satire.²⁴ Several persons who called the Regina talk show that I appeared on wondered why the United States needed plans to attack what in 1919 was a virtually uninhabited prairie. One man telephoned from the Alberta-Montana border to report that there was hardly anyone there in 1975, let alone fifty years earlier. Another person indicated that given the role of the United States in defending the western world, he hoped that current American war plans made more sense. Still another Canadian caller added that he could understand why the U.S. Army had trouble learning about western Canada in 1919, because the federal government in Ottawa did not know much about it in 1975.²⁵

There were also the inevitable official responses. A representative of the Canadian Department of External Affairs determined that an "undetailed search" indicated it "unlikely" that the plan was a treaty violation. He indicated that in a modern context the Canadian government "would obviously be concerned if anyone in the United States felt there was any need for such a plan." At the provincial level, Premier Allan Blakeney of Saskatchewan warned the U.S. Army that if it attacked following the 1919 strategy it would fail, because the few remaining railroad tracks left in this province--the abandonment of branch lines was a burning local issue--were in such poor shape that they could hardly carry a full boxcar of wheat, let alone heavy railroad guns. In Ottawa a spokesman for the Canadian Department of National Defense contended that Canada "never had any plans to invade the U.S." and that he was "pretty sure we've never prepared for an attack on your side."²⁶ Actually, under "Scheme No. One" of 1921, a plan existed that called for the 4,000 man Canadian Army, supported by 50,000 trained reserves, to attack in the west on a 1,500 mile front. The forces would converge on Fargo and continue from there in the general direction of Minneapolis-St. Paul, supported by diversionary terror raids on New York by the 114 plane Canadian Royal Air Force.²⁷ The Pentagon, claiming no plans to invade Canada were "extant," did admit that, "If an attack were ever to take place across the Canadian border the Army is prepared to defend the country." The response remained "classified."²⁸

In retrospect, I found the whole experience interesting and rewarding. I received over fifty letters and doubtless would have gotten more if it had not been for a prolonged Canadian postal strike. Many came from kind strangers or casual acquaintances, who took the trouble to clip and send newspaper accounts. Several experts on military policy sent interesting comments. The State Department asked for a copy.²⁹

NOTES

1. Miscellaneous File 478, Subject Files of District Engineer, 1906-29. Records of the District Engineer Office, Kansas City, Missouri, Records of the Office of Chief of Engineers, Record Group 77, Kansas City Federal Archives and Records Center. Declassified E.O. 11652, Sec 3(E) and 5(D) or (E), OSD Letter, May 3, 1972, by RRW. NARS, Date, 10 September 1975. Unless otherwise cited all archival material is from the above source.

2. Gen. Cullun's Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the United States Military Academy, VI A, Supplement, 1910-1920 (192), 935. Sherrill graduated second in his class from West Point in 1901. He worked on engineering projects in the Philippines, the Canal Zone, and the United States, prior to serving with distinction in France in World War One.

3. "CONFIDENTIAL," Chief of Engineers to Division Engineer, Western Division, 21 May 1919.

4. "Data Sheets for Railway Artillery Armament," United plans showing the "load at rail" and other technical details for nine different kinds of 'railroad ounts," 1st Indorsement, Chief of Engineers to Officers Charged with Land Defense Projects, 30 June 1919.

5. George W. Freeman headed the St. Paul office from 20 November 1917 to 17 November 1919. Telephone conversation with Raymond H. Merritt, 18 September 1975.

6. "CONFIDENTIAL," District Engineer, Kansas City, to Chief of Engineers, 24 July 1919. District Engineer, Kansas City, to Chief of Engineers, through Division Engineer, Western Division, 9 July 1919.

7. 3rd Indorsement, Chief of Engineers to District Engineer, Kansas City, through Division Engineer, Western Division, 21 July 1919.

8. Department of Interior, General Land Office, State of Montana (Washington, 1917); Department of Interior, General Land Office, State of North Dakota (Washington, 1918); District Engineer, Kansas City, to Chief of Engineers, 9 July 1919, 2nd Indorsement Chief of Engineers, Kansas City, 15 July 1919; District Engineer, Kansas City, to Chief of Engineers, 21 July 1919.

9. "COPY," J. E. Chalifout to Maj. Gen. W. M. Black, 6 August 1919.

10. Col. E. H. Marks to Col. R. T. Ward, 2 September 1919; Col. A. H. Acher to District Engineer, Kansas City, 23 September 1919.

11. Detailed tables for "Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad," n.d.; "Great Northern Railway," n.d.; J. W. Woermann to Col. Willard Young, District Engineer, Kansas City, 7 June 1919.

12. A. H. Riney, Junior Engineer, to District Engineer, Kansas City, 16 August 1919.

13. "CONFIDENTIAL," District Engineer, Kansas City, to Chief of Engineers, 2 September 1919.

14. "CONFIDENTIAL," District Engineer, Kansas City, to Chief of Engineers, 24 July 1919.
15. Col. A. H. Acher to District Engineer, Kansas City, 23 September 1919.
16. What follows is a condensation of Lawrence H. Larsen, "The Reaction to a Scholarly Paper," North Dakota Quarterly, 44 (Autumn 1976), 67-71.
17. Grand Forks Herald, 17 October 1975.
18. Duluth News-Tribune, 18 October 1975.
19. Washington Post, 28 October 1975.
20. Chicago Sun-Times, 27 October 1975; Boston Globe, 28 October 1975; St. Louis Globe-Democrat, 17 October 1975; Orlando Sentinel Star, 26 October 1975; St. Paul Pioneer-Press, 26 October 1975; New York Times, 7 December 1975; Fargo Forum, 18 October 1975; Stars and Stripes, 29 October 1975; Manchester Guardian Weekly, 16 November 1975; Time, 10 November 1975; Army Times, 3 November 1975. These are examples from the thousands of media publications that carried the story.
21. "Academic Intelligence," Military Affairs, 30:40 (February 1976).
22. Washington Star, 30 October 1975.
23. Chicago Tribune, 11 November 1975.
24. CBC, "Inside from the Outside," 21 November 1975.
25. Regina Talk Show, 30 October 1975.
26. Washington Post, 28 October 1975.
27. Richard A. Preston, "Buster Brown Was Not Alone: American Plans for the Invasion of Canada, 1919-1939," Canadian Defense Quarterly, 3 (Spring 1974), 47-58; Robert A. Preston, "Buster Brown Was Not Alone - A Postscript," Canadian Defense Quarterly, 4 (Winter 1974-75), 11-12; E. Eayrs, In Defense of Canada: From the Great War to the Depression (Toronto, 1964).
28. Quoted in Time, 10 November 1975.
29. Edward N. Lundstrom, United States Department of State, to Lawrence H. Larsen, 30 October 1975, in author's possession.