13. The Battle of Batoche (1985)

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A minor event in military history, the battle of Batoche was a traumatic turning-point for the Métis. To understand what went on during those few days between a cautious Canadian army and about 300 Métis led by a good tactician (Gabriel Dumont) and an incompetent commander (Louis Riel), it is necessary to map the troops' movements in all their details, and to heed contemporary military handbooks as well as the Métis perspective.

The Battle of Batoche has been the subject of numerous scholarly and popular studies. This interest, however, has been focussed on the significance of the battle, its consequences, and its importance as a watershed in Canadian history and as a symbolic victory of Anglo-Canadian forces over those resisting the new economic order. The earliest publications, Major Boulton’s Reminiscences of the North-West Rebellion, and C.P. Mulvaney’s The History of the North-West Rebellion of 1885, were based on first-hand accounts of North West Field Force participants anxious to explain their victory. Immediately after the appearance of the official account of the rebellion, published in the Canada Sessional Papers in 1886, little analytical work was attempted. Early accounts made almost no reference to sources that might have provided perspective to the Métis actions. This to some extent has been corrected by George Stanley and, more recently, Desmond Morton, but the overall result of past histories of the Battle of Batoche has left the military actions of the Métis and the Indians vague. The impression that the outcome of the battle was inevitable still remains.

Traditionally, the last day of the battle, when the North West Field Force suddenly and surprisingly broke through weakened Métis lines at the southeastern end of the battlefield, has been emphasized. Yet a detailed
narrative shows that the first day had by far the most military action, which included the *Northcote* incident and at least two nearly successful attempts by the Métis and the Indians to outflank the North West Field Force. On this first day the Métis and the Indians put such pressure on Middleton’s men that some accounts suggest that only the highly mobile and rapid-fire Gatling gun prevented a serious setback. In fact, according to Reverend G. Cloutier’s diary, the Métis considered the first day a victory. They believed that their actions caused Middleton to withdraw into the zareba on the evening of May 9.

One other noticeable imbalance exists in the historic record. The tactics adopted by Middleton bore the brunt of considerable criticism, especially by the Canadian officers, many of whom felt slighted because Middleton preferred British officers. Similar criticism from military historians has been made without reference to contemporary military handbooks such as Garnet Wolseley’s *A Soldier’s Pocketbook*. Furthermore, none of the well-known accounts of the military actions cite the military manuals of the day, such as Captain Callwell’s *Small Wars: Their Principle and Practice*. This last book makes frequent reference to Middleton’s actions during the 1885 campaign. Indeed, they are held to be exemplary, given the conditions he encountered. The ten maps which illustrate my article are based on the documents and maps of the period and on many trips to the site to examine the terrain over which this battle was fought. (In this endeavour I am indebted to Jack Summers, who tramped the site with me on numerous occasions over the past two years. Without his insights, much of what is detailed here could not have been accomplished.)

In 1885 there were approximately 48,000 Native westerners in the Assiniboia, Saskatchewan and Alberta territories. Politically, many grievances of these people had been ignored, and fears of an Indian uprising were widespread. The dangers of an uprising by Native westerners were denied by P.G. Laurie of Battleford, editor of the *Saskatchewan Herald*, whose columns frequently contained diatribes against reports from eastern newspapers, whose editors claimed the Western frontier was a lawless and dangerous territory. Laurie thought that such reports might slow the settlement he so desperately wanted. Also known to many was the recent catastrophe at the Little Bighorn. Such factors lent credence to the preconceived but basically irrational notion of a hostile, wild frontier. It was largely for this reason that the North West Field Force organized a careful well-ordered strategy to move into this unknown territory.

Major General Charles F.D. Middleton, CB, Commander of the Canadian Militia and leader of the North West Field Force, was uncertain about the
exact number of “savages” his men would be fighting. The experience of British contingents in small wars throughout the Empire showed that caution would have to be exercised. When fighting native forces, there was always the fear that a small group could easily gain momentum with a few early successes against a regular European-type army. 13

Not all Canadian leaders were confident of a clear early victory. The obstacles of geography, transportation and supply were enormous. Middleton, though armed with a brash confidence, initially showed disregard for the fighting prowess of the Métis and forged ahead to confront them as soon as he could. Only after Fish Creek, the first encounter and a setback for the North West Field Force, did Middleton grudgingly acknowledge that he had underestimated the Métis. 14

To move against Prince Albert and, later, Batoche, identified as the Métis stronghold, Middleton and his officers agreed to a three-pronged movement into the Northwest. Columns were to march towards what were considered to be potential trouble spots. Middleton would proceed north from Qu’Appelle (Troy) along the South Saskatchewan; Otter from Swift Current towards Battleford; and Strange from Calgary towards Edmonton. Of these columns only two were to be engaged in any serious fighting, and only Middleton’s column was involved in more than one battle with the Métis in which any lives were lost.

Essentially there were five significant battles or confrontations during the suppression of the insurrection in the West. The North West Field Force was involved in four of them: Fish Creek, Cut Knife Hill, Batoche and Frenchman’s Butte. At Duck Lake the skirmish was between the Métis and the North West Mounted Police, under Superintendent Crozier. One other major event occurred during the campaign: the Frog Lake Massacre, where whites and Métis in the community were killed and the remainder taken hostage by Big Bear’s Cree insurgents. Only the Battle of Batoche gave the government forces a decisive victory. The sole clear victory for the Métis came at Duck Lake. The other three conflicts—Fish Creek, Cut Knife Hill and Frenchman’s Butte—were all stand-offs in one form or another. At Fish Creek, the Métis retreated after an indecisive battle; at Cut Knife Hill, Otter withdrew pursuant to the resistance of Poundmaker’s Cree; and at Frenchman’s Butte, Big Bear’s Cree retreated from the barrage of fire into their defensive alignment, although the militia were unable to pursue them through the muskeg.

Perhaps more significant than the battles which were fought, were those which were not. Although the newspapers of the time indicate that many whites feared reprisals from Indians during the rebellion, very few took
place. At Battleford, some 500 men, women and children were allegedly besieged in the North West Mounted Police fort by Poundmaker’s Cree, but the fort was not directly attacked, although the stores of the town, momentarily abandoned by a frightened population, were looted. In Prince Albert, residents protected by the North West Mounted Police were not threatened by Indians or mixed bloods. Trouble was anticipated from the large number of Indians comprising the Blackfoot Confederacy. Crowfoot, their war chief, had received an invitation from Riel to join the resistance, but did not respond. The presence of the North West Mounted Police and the trust the Indians had was certainly partially responsible for their reluctance to participate alongside Riel. A general attack was feared by many whites in the West, however.

The Governor-General and Adolphe Caron, the Minister of the Militia, differed with Middleton over the course of action that would most quickly end the campaign. The target for the first attack remained uncertain. Governor-General Lansdowne clearly believed that after Fish Creek, Prince Albert would be the objective for the North West Field Force. He had written to Lord Derby in London stating that he hoped Middleton would join forces with Otter at Prince Albert and would then advance on Batoche: “Middleton will probably have to fight again on his way to Prince Albert. He would, I gather, prefer not to fight if he could avoid doing so, until after he had reached Prince Albert and perhaps effected a junction with Otter.”

Lansdowne, who was in touch with Caron on an almost daily basis, appeared to be under the impression that a greater number of troops would finally advance on Batoche.

The correspondence between Lansdowne, Derby and Melgund (later Earl of Minto and Governor-General of Canada) leaves the impression that there were reservations over Middleton’s ability to conduct the campaign from the field. Lansdowne intimated these concerns to Melgund. On one occasion he wrote, “The Fish Creek affair has troubled me very much—Even without your private telegrams I could read something very like the word disaster between every line of the General’s other accounts. I have thought all along that he and the experts quite underrated the difficulty of the task before him.” Other observers saw Middleton as a general too old and reluctant to engage in combat and to advance on Batoche:

During this tedious delay General Middleton gave all sorts of excuses for his reaction. One day it was want of supplies then he had not sufficient medical staff to take with him after having a suitable force to look after the wounded. Then the excuse was that the wounded could neither be left
where they were nor removed up the river to Saskatoon.
The truth was that he was afraid to advance on the rebels’
position at Batoche until he was materially reinforced.20

Whether Middleton actually had a clear plan of attack in mind for
Batoche after Fish Creek is not known. According to Boulton, Middleton sel-
dom communicated his intentions even to those in his immediate staff.
What is known is that up to April 29, Middleton was heading towards
Prince Albert and that he was reluctant to engage his men too hastily after
Fish Creek: “Find it would be better to push on to Prince Albert by Hudson’s
Bay Crossing. Troops behaved well but are raw, officers same. Would not be
safe to risk defeat so shall relieve Prince Albert and join with Otter in attacking
rebels. Shall send courier to Humboldt or Clark’s Crossing ... am
engaged in bringing column to this side. Will march tomorrow.”21 It was a
rather optimistic prediction the day after Fish Creek and it was in fact to be
over two weeks before he would march again. Three days later, on April 28,
Middleton again reasserted his conviction to move to Prince Albert first.
Middleton had mixed reactions to the battle; in his communications to
Caron there was only a cautious optimism. “I think we have taught the
rebels a lesson and am pretty sure that I would march to Batoche, but their
men would harass me all the way, and I lose a great many men and I am
very averse to that and do not think it would be politic.”22

The arrival of the Northcote on May 5, with its supplies and two compa-
nies of the Midland Battalion on board, coincided with Middleton’s change
of plans. Middleton’s confidence seemed renewed with the appearance of the
Northcote, and Batoche now became his objective. Reasons for changing
targets from Prince Albert to Batoche are unclear, and no evidence exists to
suggest that he discussed his change in plans with any of those around him
or with Caron in Ottawa. Even those at the front believed he would first
move on to Prince Albert. Major Boulton, Commander of Boulton’s Scouts,
wrote:

On the 5th of May General Middleton completed his
arrangement for a further advance on Batoche. At the time
he was, I believe, urged to advance directly on Prince
Albert, in order to effect a junction with Colonel Irvine and
his corps of Mounted Police, leaving Batoche for future
attack; but no doubt feeling that this would be a sign of
weakness, the General determined to march on to Batoche,
and to attack Riel in his stronghold without further delay,
sending a message to Colonel Irvine to cooperate with him
from the North.”23
A new determination now pervaded Middleton’s communications and he no longer expressed concern over his shortage of manpower—he certainly dropped the idea of joining forces with Otter for an attack on Batoche. This might have been due, at least partially, to Otter’s fall from favour after his battle with Poundmaker’s Cree at Cut Knife Hill on May 2. Otter had embarked on his mission to Cut Knife Hill against Middleton’s orders but with the approval of Lieutenant-Governor Dewdney. These two events—the arrival of the Northcote and Otter’s encounter at Cut Knife Hill—coincided with Middleton’s determination to move against Batoche. A two-pronged attack was still planned, but Otter would no longer be part of it.

The arrival of the Northcote significantly strengthened Middleton’s marching capacity. On board the boat were 80 men of the Midland Battalion, together with Colonel Van Straubenzie and Captain Howard of the United States Army. Howard, a representative of the American gun manufacturer, had with him the Gatling gun which was to provide the important fire power on the first day of fighting at Batoche. The cargo also contained the desperately needed food supplies and some ammunition. The steamer itself was also to be used in the attack.  

Alterations to the Northcote were made by Major Smith of “C” School of Infantry who was placed in command of the steamer. Middleton ordered the upper deck to be made “bullet proof” and placed the following somewhat motley crew on board:

Thirty-one rank and rifle, two officers C Company School Corps, Captain Bedson, my aide-en-camp, Captain Wise, who, though better, was to my great loss, incapacitated from walking or riding, three sick officers, Mr. Magre and Mr. Pringle, medical staff, several men of supply and transport services, Mr. Gottam, a newspaper correspondent, and some settlers returning to their homes, amounting with some of the crew to about fifty combatants.

Then Major Smith was ordered “to anchor the first night abreast of our camp, remain there the next day, and on the morning of the ninth drop down and meet the column at about 8, just above Batoche.”

These tactics were not without critics:

the commander had conceived the rather ludicrous idea of converting the Northcote into a gunboat. She was furnished with clumsy barricades, which were to serve as bulwarks, and as she had no cannon to counter against, the task of rendering these barricades bullet proof was a difficult one. The
utter folly of equipping and arming her in the manner described was seen when she passed down the river and began the fight on May 9.27

Obviously, loading down a steamer that had already experienced serious navigational difficulties with sandbars downstream was considered impractical. However, no other sources were critical of this phase of Middleton’s strategy for Batoche.

Finally, on May 7, Middleton was prepared to move on from the site of his first battle with the Métis and the Indians. The General had estimated the strength of his force to be 700 but, according to Melgund, 886 men made up his ranks.28

Middleton chose to advance with an infantry force which included Boulton’s Scouts and French’s Scouts (the Dominion Land Surveyors were to arrive on May 11). There was no trained cavalry at the front even though it was available. Middleton’s decision not to include Denison’s cavalry was one part of his plan for which he later received much criticism.29

Four guns or cannon were in the Field Forces’ arsenal, two with the Winnipeg Field Battery and two with “A” Battery. All four were RML nine-pounders and were put to extensive use by Middleton, especially at Batoche. Their effectiveness against the elusive Métis and their well-hidden rifle pits has been questioned by some. But it has also been argued that they were effective in psychologically demoralizing the enemy over the four days of fighting.30

The more publicized piece of artillery during the campaign was the Gatling gun carried to the front by the Northcote. Operated by Captain Howard throughout the campaign, the Gatling gun’s effectiveness at Batoche has been the source of some controversy, judging from the reports following the fighting. For many, it was the first time they had ever seen a rapid-fire gun in action and, as a novelty, it attracted considerable attention and commentary both during and after the campaign. Major Boulton, in his reminisces, was cautious in assessing the contribution the Gatling made to the success of the North West Field Force. While admitting that it was a significant weapon, particularly on the first day of the fighting, he was less effusive than most. Boulton felt that the success attributed to the Gatling detracted from what he considered the brave and solid role played by the infantry and artillery companies.31

The Gatling gun’s primary advantage was its rapid-fire capacity—it was advertised as being able to fire 1,000 shots per minute. It was also relatively light to transport and easily adjustable for both elevation and direction. Of the gun’s ten barrels, five were fired in succession while the other five were
being loaded. When the crank which fired the gun was turned, firing, loading and extraction all took place synchronically without interruption.

The entire combat contingent which was to move against Batoche was thus assembled. On the afternoon of May 7, the troops marched from Fish Creek to Gabriel’s Crossing, which they reached by 6:00 p.m. Here they met the Northcote, which had landed that afternoon. A scouting mission was undertaken to decide on the safest approach to Batoche. Middleton wrote:

As I had learned there were some nasty places to pass on the river trail, I rode out with some scouts to the east, accompanied by Mr. Reid, the Paymaster of the Midlanders, etc., in this very neighbourhood. With his assistance I marked out a route for next day’s march which would bring us on the Humboldt trail to about five or six miles from Batoche.

On the morning of Saturday, May 9, reveille was sounded at 4:00, breakfast was taken at 4:15 and the men were ready to march at 5:00, each with 100 rounds of ammunition. As the column advanced on Batoche, it encountered sporadic rifle fire from two houses along the road. The two houses, not far from the church and rectory and belonging to Ludger Gareau and Jean Caron Sr., were barricaded. One report has the building about 400 yards from the church and rectory. The first house was fired on by the Gatling gun, which caused the men in and around the two buildings to scatter. Boulton’s Scouts then fell back and a gun from “A” Battery shelled the second house: “Some rebels immediately ran out of a ravine behind the house into the bush. The two houses took fire and were soon in ashes.”

The coordinated attack on Batoche was to take place at 8:00 a.m. with the Northcote moving downriver from the south and Middleton coming across land from the east. It is clear that 8:00 a.m. had been agreed upon as the time for the two-pronged advance to begin (see map 1).

The steamer was to remain just downstream from Batoche until bombardment from Middleton’s guns was heard. But the Northcote was engaged by the Métis before Middleton’s troops reached the village defense. As Middleton wrote: “As we got near the river, much to my annoyance we heard a rattling fire and the steamer’s whistle, showing the latter was already engaged.”

According to Major Smith, the Northcote was progressing as planned until shortly before 8:00 that morning. At 6:00 a.m., the Northcote had moved to a point just south of Batoche, where she anchored because she was slightly ahead of schedule. The sources describing the progress of the Northcote agree that she was fired on immediately after her advance upriver resumed.
There is disagreement, however, over when this advance commenced. One source had it at 8:10, while Major Smith reports it as being 7:40—a difference of some 30 minutes, and enough to spoil the plan.

As the Northcote struck out towards midstream she immediately came under heavy fire from both banks. In his reports, Smith indicated that the men on board did not return the fire at first, but as the hail of bullets became heavier his men began “independent and volley firing.” The Métis appeared to be lying in wait:

as we rounded the bend a moment or so later we were raked fore and aft by a fierce storm of bullets coming from both banks. From almost every bush rose puffs of smoke, and from every house and trees on the top of the banks came bullets buzzing. The fire was steadily returned by the troops on board, consisting of C Company School of Infantry; and notwithstanding that the rebels were protected by the brush and timber which covers the banks, apparently some injury was inflicted upon them. Volley after volley was fired and several of the lurking enemy were seen to drop headlong down the sloping bank.

Father Fourmond, who was housed in the rectory throughout the fighting, also remembered the activities surrounding the arrival of the Northcote:

Vers 8 hs. a.m. nous étions sortis... Tout à coup, un ... sifflement affreux se fit entendre à nos oreilles, venant du côté haut de la rivière... C’est le bateau à vapeur... C’est le bateau arrivant et sifflant la guerre... L’attaque commença par un parti de Sioux campés proche de la mission... Aussitôt prennent fusils et se précipitent vers le bateau à travers les buissons... La bataille était engagé.

Philippe Garnot recalled Dumont telling him that almost all of the Métis had left their rifle pits along the Jolie Prairie to fire on the Northcote as it moved by the village. Garnot himself remembered sending about 20 men to join the assault.

One of the more spectacular events was the decapitation of the steamer’s smoke stacks when the ferry cable crossing the river was lowered—sending them crashing to the deck. Major Smith’s report suggested that he was unaware of the loss of the stacks and whistle until after the Northcote had anchored again downstream, even though he wrote: “As we passed Batoche the fire was especially heavy, and I heard a crash as if a portion of the upper deck had been carried away.” This decapitation was engineered by the
THE BATTLE OF BATOCHÉ 1885
DAY 1, MAY 9, 1885.  8:00 AM  Map 1 of 10.

Sequential Military Maneuvers
- Metis and Indians
- North West Field Force
- Rifle Pit (Occupied by Métis)
- Rifle Pit (Unoccupied by NWFF)
- Canon (9 Pounders)/Fire
- Gatling Gun/Fire
- Northcote

- Northcote

NWFF:
A  Boulton’s Mounted Infantry
B  16th Grenadiers
C  90th Battalion
D  Midlanders
E  ‘A’ Battery
F  Winnipeg Field Battery
G  French’s Scouts
H  Surveyors

N 0 200 400 800 1600 Feet
0 60 120 240 480 Metres
ferryman, Alex P. Fisher, who was assisted by Pascal Montour. The consequence of this tactic might have been greater had the Métis been able to corral the steamer at this crossing.

On board the Northcote only three minor injuries were reported, including the shot to the heel suffered by Macdonald, the carpenter. Major Smith concluded his report to Middleton by praising the zeal and coolness of his soldiers, while placing the blame for the disastrous fate of the Northcote on the near-mutinous crew. “Our weakness lay in the fact that the master, pilot and engineer were aliens, and that the crew were civil employees and not enlisted men.” The final assessment published in Mulvaney’s history of the North-West Rebellion was less circumspect: “General Middleton’s navy project did little more than imperil many valuable lives and withdrew from his forces a considerable number of men who were badly needed on Saturday, Sunday and Monday.” This last condemnation perhaps does not take into account the effect the Northcote had in distracting the Métis and the Indians away from the eastern front where Middleton’s advance took place. The Métis expended much energy and ammunition on the Northcote, even after it had been incapacitated. It is remarkable that on May 9, Middleton reached the church and rectory, which he was unable to do the following day—in fact he would not reach this point again until the final day.

The organization of the Métis facing the troops who were advancing towards Batoche is less well known that that of the North West Field Force, though some evidence was collected by W.B. Cameron from Patrice Fleury and Charles Laviolette later. Two scout detachments were formed, one under Fleury and the other under Ambroise Champagne. Fleury was on the west side of the river, while Champagne patrolled the east side. Both had chosen a few good riders to accompany them. Dumont, who was Commanding General, had nine or ten captains who were responsible to him—each of them, in turn, responsible for a troop of men. A Board of Strategy, headed by Louis Riel and Charles Nolin (who had left before the fighting had started), also was formed to advise Dumont. The first secretary of the board was William Jackson, who was later replaced by Philippe Garnot. Remaining members were Albert Monkman, Napoléon Nault (brother of André Nault), John Boucher, Philippe Gariépy, Pierre Gariépy, Old Man Parenteau (father-in-law of Xavier Batoche), Moise Ouellette, Maxime Lépine and Joseph Arcand.

As the Northcote floated downstream beyond Batoche the infantry neared the church and rectory. Within 100 yards of the church two rounds were fired from the Gatling gun. Immediately following this burst of fire a white flag, or handkerchief, was noticed and the firing was halted by Middleton.
He had apparently given “strict injunctions to the force to spare non-combatants as far as possible.” From Middleton’s recollections the flag was seen being waved by a priest from the opened door of the church. He then approached the church: “I stopped the fire and rode up to the house which I found to be full of people; three or four Roman Catholic priests, some Sisters of Mercy, and a number of women and children, the latter being all half-breeds. They were naturally alarmed, and having reassured them we continued our advance.” According to Boulton, only the corner of the rectory had been struck by the bullets. Some of the bullet marks can still be seen in its woodwork.

Fourmond recorded this encounter in some detail:

En même temps, nous voyons les habits rouges se développer en ligne de bataille tout autour de la mission; profitant des divers accidents du terrain, pour cacher leur marche en avant…. Sortons, dit P. Fourmond, ils vont nous reconnaître, et ne pas tirer sur nous… PP. Fourmond et Vegreville sortent et s’adossent au pignon de la maison, faire face aux soldats pour titre reconnus… A peine là, qu’une détonation retentit et une balle frappe au-dessus de nos têtes… Rentrons, il y a danger. A peine entrés … on entend la mitrailleuse cibler le toit de la maison.

There a decision was made to try to raise a white flag:

P. Moulin saisit un morceau de coton donné par les Mères et entrouve la porte ouverte et l’agit en face des soldats avançant en ordre de bataille. Au même instant on entendit ce cri retentir de leur côté. “Don’t fear! Don’t fear!”

After the encounter at the church, Boulton’s Scouts advanced. Only a short distance past the church, Boulton’s infantry were fired upon from “a sort of low brush about 200 yards or 300 yards ahead.” Two companies of the 10th Grenadiers were then ordered to advance in skirmishing order, and these men reached the edge of the ravine on the left; another two companies moved forward on the right near the church. “A” Battery was now ordered forward to the crest of the hill overlooking Batoche with both its nine-pounders and the Gatling gun. The former began to shell the houses at Batoche while the latter was directed at the west bank, “from where a galling fire was being kept up by a totally invisible enemy.” This was the farthest the Field Force was able to advance, and it was not until May 12 that they would reach the crest of the hill overlooking Batoche again. Having reached this ridge by the mission, the Grenadiers and “A” Battery came under a
DETAILED BATTLE ZONE MAP
BATOCHE. DAY 1, MAY 9, 1885.
9:00 AM
Map 2 of 10.

- Treed Areas
- Floodplain
- Contour Line
- Slopes
- Cemetery
- Trails
- Church and Rectory

Sequential Military Manoeuvres

Metis and Indians

Northwest Field Force

Rifle Pit (Unoccupied)

Rifle Pit (Occupied by Metis)

Rifle Fire

Cannon (9 Pounders) / Fire

Gatling Gun / Fire

NWFF
A Boulton's Mounted Infantry
B 10th Grenadiers
C 90th Battalion
D Midlanders
E 'A' Battery
F Winnipeg Field Battery
G French's Scouts
H Surveyors

AREA WHERE ZAREBA WILL BE BUILT IN AFTERNOON

PLAIN

0 100 200 400 800 Feet
0 30 60 120 240 Metres
shower of bullets. Recalling this moment, Boulton wrote, “We had now received a decided check. Immediately in our front lay thick bush, beyond which we could not penetrate. We had been driven by a heavy fire of the enemy from the position which the guns occupied overlooking the village, which was within easy range of the rifle pits that were covered by the bush.”52 At this point Middleton ordered the Gatling gun ahead.

This initial clash has been estimated by some to have been just before 9:45 a.m. As the Grenadiers moved forward the heaviest fire was felt from the left, “and desperate efforts were made to turn our left flank by their men in the bush under the high river bank and on the slope, who fired with great vigour.”53

Having reached the crest of the hill overlooking Batoche, Middleton noted that “the gun detachments and horses were suffering,”54 and ordered them to pull back. At this point the heaviest of fire was felt from, as Middleton wrote, “a bluff just below.”55 By all accounts it was here that the Gatling gun made its most memorable contribution by holding off the enemy fire until the Grenadiers could make an orderly retreat. It looked as though the Métis were trying to pinch off the Grenadiers, leaving them cut off from an easterly retreat.

The Grenadiers had previously been ordered to fire from a lying position, but now as they stood up to retreat, drawing the Métis fire,

The Gatling, which was being worked for a second time and was just getting into action, with Captain Howard at the crank, turned its fire on the concealed foe, and for a moment silenced them.56

Although the fire from the Métis was intense, no one was killed during these clashes. At this time the Field Force occupied a position just back from the top of the ravine. The Métis held two positions: one lay immediately to the front and centre in rifle pits and to the left on the heavily wooded crest of the river bank. The right as yet was not defended, and it would not be until May 11 that it became necessary for the Métis to deploy greater numbers to the north.

The Gatling gun was now moved from the left flank towards the lines extending to the church (see map 3). This could be considered the second of three attempts to break through the enemy lines. As Middleton reported, “I brought the gatling round the church and Captain Howard made a dashing attempt to flank the bluff, but could not succeed, as the enemy was ensconced in well made rifle pits.”57 The time was now estimated by one source to have been approximately 9:45 a.m. The Winnipeg Rifles occupied the left flank along the river and graveyard; the 10th Grenadiers were next...
(going left to right) to the front and centre, while “A” Battery, along with Boulton’s and French’s mounted infantry, lined the right flank. “The Midlanders were in reserve near the church, near which the General and staff took a position, while the remaining companies of the 90th, aided by the Winnipeg Field Battery and dismounted detachments, were deployed on our right centre, right and right flank.”

The Métis made two attempts at encirclement during this early action. The first was made on the left flank. The second attempt came after the Gatling had to save the troops following the initial advance:

The Grenadiers advanced to the edge of the wood in rear of the school house, and a little to the right of the spot where we first felt the rebel fire... The rebels detected the movement, and desperate efforts were made to turn our left flank by their men in the bush under the high river bank and on the slope, who fired with great vigour; but they had nothing but shot guns, and their fire fell short. Some rebels with rifles on the other side of the river also took a hand in, but the Gatling silenced them.

A planned manoeuvre to capture the Gatling gun on the first day failed. It was described by Elie Dumont as they moved from right to left for their aborted attack:

Tout droit où mettaient le gatling [sic], on se trouvait dans les petits trembles... Alors, Philippe tire et Bap. Boucher tire aussi. Gens du gatling ont commencé à tourner la machine. Le gatling tire sur nous. Quand fini la décharge, je me sauve en descendant les côtés... Une partie de nos gens étaient là et voulaient aller au bord de la riviere ... on était comme une 30ne. On a suivi la Rivière à l’abri des écarts pour remonter le courant vis-à-vis le gatling... Voulait ramasser du monde assez pour aller prendre le gatling sur la côte en face de nous ... restait encore 100 vgs pour aller au gatling; on n’était pas assez de monde. ... On a resté 1/2 hs. là, et retourne par même chemin en courant vite au bord de la rivière pour éviter à nos gens de tirer sur nous... On a été auprès du cimetière. Soldats déjà reculés. On ne pouvait pas tirer les soldats étaient trop loin déjà.

After the first line of skirmishers ran into resistance and retreated a short distance, Middleton ordered the two nine-pounders of “A” Battery forward. No. 1 gun, under Captain Drury, fired a few shells a distance of fifteen
AREA WHERE ZAREBA WILL BE BUILT IN AFTERNOON
hundred yards across the river, and No. 2 gun, under Lt. Ogilvie, also fired at buildings across the river. The fire from the Métis was not particularly intense at this time, and an almost unencumbered shelling by the nine-pound guns was continuing. Dumont was on record as stating later that the initial resistance was less than it might have been since “Those in the pits near the river could not resist the excitement of following the ‘Northcote’ down stream, otherwise the General and the guns would not have advanced to the position from which they shelled Batoche on the 9th, before clearing out the rifle pits along the river bank, in the cemetery coulee, and on either side of the trail from where it descended the hill.” In the intervening time after the Northcote had floated downstream, the Métis were again manning the rifle pits along the entire front. During this lull Middleton ordered one of the guns further forward. Unfortunately for Middleton, the gun misfired and Middleton ordered a retreat,

when with a startling suddenness of a thunderbolt from a cloudless sky, a crashing fusillade, it could almost be called a volley, swept through the wooden slope at the right front ... the bushy slope, which hitherto appeared to be perfectly deserted, appeared suddenly to be infested by coyotting savages. The guttural ‘ki-yi-ki-yi,’ the sweeping fusillade, and above everything, the startling suddenness of the eruption, combined to make the new situation a trying one for the nerves of the bravest.

At approximately 12:00 noon, after Captain Howard’s attempt to outflank the Métis on the right had failed, Middleton moved back to the left flank where he had left Melgund in command. When he arrived he found Captain Peters had attacked the Métis lines to the west attempting to reach the rifle pits: “I found Captain Peters had made a gallant and vigorous attempt, with a few of the garrison artillery, to drive the enemy out of the bluff below, but had failed and had retired, leaving a wounded man behind [Gunner Philips].”

Shortly after Philips was shot (one source had it at 2:00 p.m.), an attempt to rescue him was organized under the direction of Captain Peters (see map 4). It was believed at first that Philips had only been wounded, and perhaps that was the case. One participant recalled Philips crying out after he was hit: “Captain French, my leg is broken. For God’s sake, don’t leave me here.”

Shortly after Philips was rescued, a second encirclement of the Field Force was attempted, this time from the right flank of their line of defense (see map 5). Middleton makes almost no mention of these threats of being
cut off from supplies, but they are detailed at some length in numerous other accounts. Earlier, the Gatling had been effective in repelling an attack on the left flank, but the Métis now employed distracting tactics by taking advantage of the northwesterly wind blowing towards the church. A prairie fire was lit upwind, and it was expected that the Métis would try to attack under the cover of the smoke. The tactic managed to unsettle some of the senior officers; Melgund described the effects of this unanticipated tactic:

Enemy ... lighted bush fire on our right front, behind smoke of which we expected them to advance, things looked awkward we got wounded out of church into waggons, and had ordered them to fall back to camp. I found that the ammunition wagons were also retiring, and I stopped them, much to Disbrowe’s relief, who was in charge of them and had done well all day.65

The smoke and fire appears to have alarmed the men sufficiently that the wounded were moved out of the temporary hospital which had been set up in the church. According to another source, however, the troops were never in danger of panicking:

For a time we were surrounded by fires from the sloughs, the smoke of which rolled along the ground like fog. It was a tight place, but the troops never for a moment flinched. They simply looked to their officers who in turn patiently waited for orders from the chief.66

The fire, then, was the cause of some anxiety for the right flank but it appears that it was not followed by any sustained advance from the Métis.

After Philips’s rescue and the perceived encirclement had been withstood, the heavy firing on both sides subsided. It was now mid-afternoon: “Towards three o’clock the fire slackened somewhat, though a head shown by either party was a target for a score of bullets.”67 At 3:00 p.m., Middleton decided to send Lord Melgund, his chief of staff, to Humboldt, ostensibly to send a private message to Caron. The documentary sources remain ambiguous, so that the real purpose of the mission remains clouded with controversy. Later, some innuendo appeared in the eastern press to the effect that Middleton was panicking and was anticipating a desultory battle which he feared might be lost by the Field Force. The telegram was never found and, therefore, the issue cannot be definitely settled. In his own account, Middleton states that he sent Melgund simply as a precautionary measure. The order to send Melgund in fact was tied to Middleton’s larger problems. The first of these was that he was retreating and he was concerned over the
THE BATTLE OF BATOCHE

CARLTON TRAIL

AREA WHERE ZAREBA WILL BE BUILT IN AFTERNOON

GUNNER PHILIPS KILLED

PLAIN JOLIE PRAIRIE RAVINE

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DETAILED BATTLE ZONE MAP
BATOCHÉ. DAY 1, MAY 9, 1885.

2:00 PM Map 4 of 10.

- Treed Areas
- Floodplain
- Slopes
- Trails

- Ferry
- Contour Line
- Cemetery
- Church and Rectory

Sequential Military Manoeuvres
Metis and Indians
Northwest Field Force
Rifle Pit (Unoccupied)
Rifle Pit (Occupied by Métis)
Rifle Fire
Cannon (9 Pounders) / Fire
Gatling Gun / Fire

NWFF:
A Boulton’s Mounted Infantry
B 10th Grenadiers
C 90th Battalion
D Midlanders
E ‘A’ Battery
F Winnipeg Field Battery
G French’s Scouts
H Surveyors

AREA WHERE ZAREBA WILL BE BUILT IN AFTERNOON

N
0 100 200 400 800 Feet
0 30 60 120 240 Metres