

CANADA'S BLACK WATCH

*An Illustrated History of the
Regular Force Battalions, 1951-1970*

by SIMON FALCONER



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Chapter 1 **THE GENESIS: Germany, 1951-1953**

From a military perspective, the idea was unusual and was probably without precedent anywhere in the Commonwealth: a highland battalion drawing on five reserve units.

Formed in May 1951, it was simply called the First Canadian Highland Battalion (1CHB) and it was an amalgam. “A” Company would come from the Black Watch in Montreal, “B” Company from the 48th Highlanders in Toronto, “C” Company from the Seaforth Highlanders in Vancouver, “D” Company from the Canadian Scottish in Victoria, and Support Company from the North Nova Scotia Highlanders. Headquarters Company and Battalion Headquarters had no specific regimental affiliation — they were drawn from the five regiments that made up the rifle companies, or they came from other Canadian highland regiments.

The commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel R.L. (“Dickie”) Rutherford, was a Queen’s Own Cameron Highlander. The second-in-command, Major Mac Reid, was

from the Calgary Highlanders. WO1 Bob Watson, the RSM, was also a Cameron and he was later to be replaced by the legendary Ron Finnie. The pipes and drums also wore the Cameron kilt.

Virtually all of the captains and majors had operational experience but the majority of the subalterns, many of whom later became senior officers in the Black Watch, had come from the reserve forces or directly from Officer Candidate School (OCS) in Camp Borden. Like many others in the battalion, they had joined the Army in anticipation of serving in the Korean War but found themselves in 1CHB instead.

Many of the soldiers joining the battalion had been in the Second World War and there were few surprises for them: weapons were the same as those they had left behind in 1945, changes in uniforms were minor, and the battalion was structured and run in the same fashion as any Second World War battalion. But not all the soldiers were veterans; some, including corporals and a few

1. The thistle shoulder flash of 1CHB.
2. Lieutenant-Colonel Rutherford, OBE, conducts a traditional “drumhead” service.
3. Corporal Harry Wright and a universal carrier (Bren gun), both bearing the thistle emblem of 1CHB.

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1 sergeants, were barely out of their teens. One sergeant who was later to become a regimental sergeant major was nineteen years old. Many of those younger men were destined to become distinguished NCOs and warrant officers and, in the process, leave an indelible mark on the Black Watch that followed the First Canadian Highland Battalion.

ICHB mustered and trained in Valcartier in the summer of 1951 along with the remainder of 27 Brigade, destined for Germany as part of the NATO forces lining up against the Soviet Bloc. The battalion grew in strength to 38 officers and 932 other ranks and, in December 1951, ICHB departed for Germany to be part of 1 British Corps in the British Army of the Rhine.

Everyone signed on for three years, although a great many continued to serve long after their term with the Highland Battalion was finished, and more than a few were still members of the Black Watch in 1970 when the regular battalions were disbanded. Since wives were not permitted to accompany their



husbands to Germany, married men could request a discharge after one year's overseas service, and many did. Single men could leave after two years, and some did. Others, a little uncertain about what was in store, hastened the process of getting married before they left Canada, assuming an option would be useful if things did not go quite as planned.

Germany was something of a shock, even for the veterans who had served there six years earlier, but especially for the new soldiers. Hannover, where the battalion was to be located, still bore the scars of war — streets were filled with rubble and people were living in cellars and bombed-out

1. A “housewife”: standard issue for all recruits.
2. Members of the Black Watch training with the Browning automatic rifle in Valcartier, 1951.
3. The standard-issue steel pocket mirror.

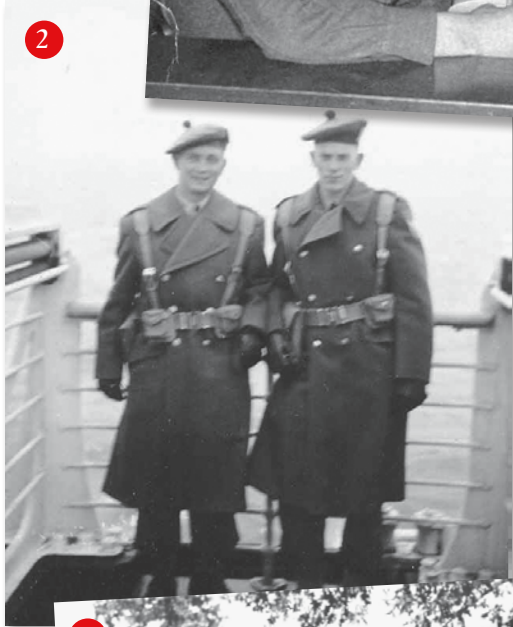


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1. Medals of Captain Don Fisher.
2. Regimental Sergeant Major Finnie.
3. Warrant officers and sergeants from the 1 Canadian Highland Battalion, 1952.



to move, operating for forty-eight hours without support, endless route marches, and intensive field training. New training areas — Putlos, Munsterlager, Sennelager, Soltau — entered the soldiers' vocabulary, names that would become familiar to all ranks of both battalions of the Black Watch who served in Germany in the 1960s. The German training areas had been in use by the Wehrmacht for decades (in some cases since early in the century) and had been much improved during the 1930s; as a result, they were easily the best anywhere in the world. Seeing the facilities for the first time, veterans of the Second World War serving in ICHB were astounded at their high quality, and some were heard to comment that their standards and layout, especially for field firing, accounted in some measure for the German army's high level of training during the war. Like the German barracks, the training areas served as a model for the future Camp Gagetown.



buildings. There was another complication: since the battalion was virtually identical to a British unit, there was a degree of resentment on the part of the Germans, who initially saw the Canadians as occupiers not unlike the British Army.

The barracks, a former German officer training facility, was a joy. Renamed Chatham Barracks, it was far better than anything in Canada at the time: three-storied, centrally heated barrack blocks, a gymnasium, a swimming pool, a theatre, tennis courts, soccer fields, and a massive parade square. A few years later, when Camp Gagetown was opened, soldiers who served in ICHB marvelled at how much the state-of-the-art Canadian facilities reminded them of the Chatham Barracks that had been built by the Germans in the 1930s.

It was serious soldiering: two hours' notice

But it was not all training. Half the battalion at a time was allowed evening passes, and Hannover offered many diversions even though those on pass had to wear their uniform. The attraction of German beer and German friendship — the locals had now begun to differentiate the Canadians from the British — led to casual liaisons and, in



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1. Relaxing at Chatham Barracks, 1953.
2. Officers of ICHB, wearing greatcoats and 37-pattern web equipment, en route to Germany.
3. ICHB obstacle course at Sennelager, 1953.
4. Medals and decorations awarded to Lieutenant-Colonel H.J. (Harry) Harkes MC, CD.
5. ICHB officers in Germany, 1953.