



# Sabretache

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THE CALGARY MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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May 2018

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF AN ICONIC CANADIAN

### Sir Samuel Benfield Steele (January 5, 1849–January 30, 1919)

Born in 1849 in Purbrook, Upper Canada, the son of a British naval hero, (SEE PAGE 4), Sir Sam Steele was a legendary figure who was at some of the most important moments of Canada's early history.

**Fenian troubles:** Between 1866 and 1871, the American-based Fenian Brotherhood initiated raids on British Army forts and customs posts in Canada to encourage the British to quit Ireland. In June 1866, more than a 1,000 Fenians crossed into Ontario's Niagara region and waged war with professional and volunteer troops. That year, at age 16, Steele joined the 5th (Simcoe) Battalion of Infantry and later established and trained his own militia to safeguard the nation.

**Red River Rebellion:** Steele volunteered for the Red River Expedition of 1870 raised to quell the "treasonous" provisional government established by Louis Riel in 1869. It was Canada's first real crisis following Confederation in 1867, and the arrival of Pte. Steele and others in the force marked the end of the mutiny.

**North-West Mounted Police and the Great March:** Sam Steele was one of the first men to join the force, formed in 1873. He accepted a commission as a sergeant-major and was given regimental number 2—tasked with halting the whisky trade and bringing law to Canada's West. In 1877, Steele was present at Fort Walsh, Sask., when U.S. Gen. Alfred H. Terry met Hunkpapa Lakota Sioux Chief Sitting Bull with his president's promise of a "lasting peace." Sitting Bull had sought refuge in Canada after the Battle at Little Bighorn.

**Last Spike:** Steele was in charge of policing the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, Canada's first transcontinental rail line between 1881 and 1885. He

acted as magistrate, settled labour disputes, acted as a judge and reined in gamblers and bootleggers in the course of his work. He was present on Nov. 7, 1885, when the "Last Spike" was driven at Craigellachie, B.C., to signal the completion of the CPR.

#### CMHS Meeting

The next CMHS meeting will be held on

**Tuesday,  
May 15th.  
2018  
7:00 pm**

At the  
Petty Officers'  
Mess  
HCMS Tecumseh



Cree Chief Big Bear

**Northwest Rebel-**  
**lion:** A second, more serious crisis occurred in 1884 when Riel and his followers established the provisional government of Saskatchewan. Steele interrupted his work on the CPR and gathered a force of 25 policemen and some 110 ranchers and cowboys to assist with quashing the insurrection. That April, he and his men subdued an insurgency by the band of Cree Chief Big Bear.



**Notice of Next Meeting**

The next CMHS meeting will be held on

**Tuesday, May 15th., 2018****19:00 (7:00 pm)**

At the Petty Officers' Mess, HMCS Tecumseh.

Members are reminded that an offering of foodstuffs for the Legion Food Bank is considered your unofficial entrance fee to our regular scheduled meetings.

The unofficial agenda of this meeting will be:

Introduction of guests, Minutes of last meeting Correspondence, Membership report Treasurer's report, Old business / New business Break, Show &amp; Tell

The President, **Allan Ross** would like to invite everyone to remain after the meeting for an informal time of fellowship.

**Klondike Gold Rush:** With miners flooding into the Yukon, the North-West Mounted Police needed a good man to administer frontier justice. In 1898, Steele helped set up effective border posts to curtail the activities of Alaskan outlaw Soapy Smith, and with a force of only 13 cleaned up chaotic Dawson City—a boomtown of 14,000. In 1899, political cronyism saw Steele replaced.

**Boer War:** Steele was tasked with setting up the Alberta cavalry regiment, Lord Strathcona's Horse, in 1900, to fight in the Boer War. His unit performed well once it arrived in South Africa in May of that year—often doing forward scouting for regiments trying to eliminate Boer commandos. The Boer War marked Canada's first official dispatch of troops to an overseas war. Steele would spend five years afterward as a commander organizing a civil police force in the South African Constabulary.

On March 17th, 1900 Sam Steele, along with his Strathcona Horse contingent of 540 men and 599 horses, sailed for South Africa aboard the S.S. Monterey of the Elder Dempster Line. While Sam writes almost nothing of this in his published memoirs, his diary entries describe the many hardships the crossing entailed, particularly for the horses. His March 29th personal diary entry reads: *Weather hot. Stifling [where] the horses die. Everything possible done to make it tolerable for the poor beasts. Temp. 93 on the horse decks. ... 5 horses dead within last twenty four hours of pneumonia. ... (Next day) 10 horses died of pneumonia today. Too bad, but it cannot be helped. Great attention has been paid to them all the time...*...Horse carcasses were dumped overboard, and a total of 176 horses died on this cross-Atlantic journey. The crossing was tough for the men on board as well with sea-sickness affecting many, and for those healthy enough to stay upright for the sailing, enduring continuous physical training and drills organized by their Commanding Officer, Sam Steele. They needed to be tough to participate in the Boer War!



**World War 1...**Steele requested active military duty with the outbreak of the First World War. He was initially rejected for command on the grounds of age. However, a compromise was reached which allowed him to act as commander of the 2nd Canadian Division until the unit was sent to France, where he would be replaced. After accompanying the Division to England, Steele was offered an administrative post as commanding officer of the South-East District. Matters were complicated, however, when Canadian Minister of Defence Samuel Hughes insisted that Steele also be made commander of all Canadian troops in Europe -- a slight problem, as there were two brigadier-generals who each believed the Canadian command was theirs. The issue was not resolved until 1916, when the new Minister of Overseas Military Forces of Canada, Sir G. H. Perley, removed Steele from his Canadian command after Steele refused to return to

Canada as a recruiter. He kept his British command until his retirement on July 15, 1918. While in Britain, Steele was knighted, on January 1, 1918. Unfortunately, he died of influenza just after his 70th birthday in London, England A full military funeral was held at St. John's Church in Putney, England on February 6th, 1919, and included representatives from Canadian military battalions, the Royal North-West Mounted Police, Lord Strathcona's Horse, Canadian Machine Gun Detachments, and several branches of the Canadian Army Corps. and Service. Massed bands played, a Gun Carriage procession took place, and honorary pall bearers included a host of Major-Generals and Brig.-Generals. In the summer of 1919, Sam's body was brought back to Canada, where a second large and grand military funeral service was held. Sam Steele's funeral procession wound through the streets of Winnipeg. Sam was buried in Winnipeg's St. John's cemetery



## Minutes of last meeting / Calgary Military Historical Society

**Meeting held on April 17, 2018 at the Petty Officer's Mess, HMCS Tecumseh**

**1. Meeting called to order** By President Allan R. at 7:05 PM. 20 members in attendance. One guest Kay Hyde.

**2. Minutes of Previous Meeting.**

Discussed no correction. Member Barry E. moves that the Previous Meeting Minutes be accepted. Seconded by David S.

**3. Newsletter.** No issues or concerns.

**4. Treasures Report.** Report by Floyd S. Lists of monies collected from book auctions, donations etc. Listing of expenditures. Floyd reports, with last month expenses, a slight decrease over March balance. Member Brian H. moves that the Treasures report be accepted as reported.  
Seconded by David S. Approved.

**5. Membership Report.**

Report by Floyd S. Total 48 members (2 Life, 2 Hon, 44 Regular). Member David S. moves that the Membership report be accepted as reported. Seconded by Barry E. Approved.

**6. Correspondence:**

- Alison Cobra, U of Calgary Press. Informs Society of publications available for reference, as per page 4, the 2018 April Newsletter.

**7. Announcements:**

- MCC of C - Southern Alberta Chapter hosting a AACCA Easter Show Member Meet & Mingle Friday Mar. 30, 2018. Buffet service 16:00 - 17:00. All members and guests welcome.

**8. Old Business.**

- AACCA Easter Show review, attendance down overall, firearms sales up on Friday. Society  
Booth well attended, membership success and evaluation to come.
- Website reset, Thanks Dave, site visitation up, need articles/items to post to keep site active, a static site results in decreasing number of revists.

**9. New Business:** - Discuss Facebook link to website, suggestion to consult Kevin R.

**BREAK**

**10. Ticket book auction & Book Raffle:** - Conducted by David G.

**11. Show and Tell:**

Darryl K. - 1st Depot Battalion AB & BC cap badges, US Pilot & Aircrew Randall M15 knife with sheath.

Kay H. - Selection of items of her mothers WW2 CAWC AG Staff service including 1944 Ottawa yard photo, ration book, ID cards etc.

James B. - Discusses his San Francisco trip.

Stuart E. - Aircrew Europe Star, original VS forgery including one of each for hands-on comparison

Brad M. - Selection of father's RCHA buttons & shoulder flashes for Mess Dress and Blues.

Jack D. - discusses Globe & Mail article with regards to his RCMP publication and public correspondence.

David L. - WW2 German Language Primer for British Prisoners of War; hand made miniature of a Jousting medieval Knight.

Bob M. - Book History of Chivalry & Armour; selection of medals including French "Legion of Honour" established in 1802 by Napoléon Bonaparte, French Military "Order of St. Louis", a Russian & Japanese Russo-Japanese War 1904/05 campaign medals, Crimea medal with Sevastopol bar, Ottoman Empire Turkish "Order Of Medjidie" and Morocco "Medal of the Interior".

Indra R. - Selection of Commonwealth War Graves Commission publications, Cemetery & Memorial sites

David G. - Pre WW1 LSH metal insignia and a cloth shoulder title. LS Horse WW1 post card.

**12. Adjournment:**

President Allan R calls for motion to adjourn. Member Barry E. moves to adjourn. Seconded by David S. Approved.

**Meeting Adjourned. 21:00**



## The Father of Samuel Benfield Steele

**STEELE, ELMES YELVERTON**, naval officer, farmer, politician, and public servant; b. 6 Feb. 1781 at Colford, Gloucestershire, England, one of ten children. Married first, in 1809, to Elizabeth Seeley Coucher, by whom he had six children, and secondly, in 1847, Anne MacIan Macdonald, by whom he had six children;

Military careers were common in the Steele family. Five of Elmes' six brothers entered the army or navy and his uncle, Samuel, had served in Canada with Jeffery Amherst in 1760. Not unnaturally, Elmes chose a career in the Royal Navy, entering as an officer cadet in 1798. He served with distinction on several ships during the Napoleonic wars and rose to the rank of captain. He was mentioned in dispatches for his part in a raid on the Spanish coast, escorted a convoy to Quebec in 1805 as lieutenant of the *Mercury*, and served as gunnery officer on

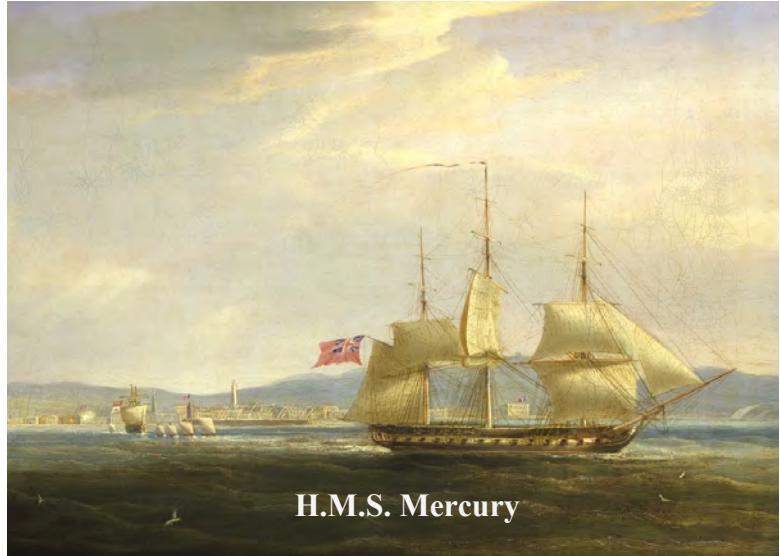
board the *Leopard* when she fired on the United States ship *Chesapeake* in June 1807.

After Waterloo Steele went on half pay and settled with his family in France. In 1830, while he was in England exercising his right (granted in 1812) to vote as a freeman of the city of Gloucester, revolution erupted in Paris and his family joined him in England. In 1832 Steele came to Canada with his son John to claim land which had been offered to British officers. He selected a 1,000 acre site in Medonte Township north of Lake Simcoe and was joined by the rest of his family in 1833.

In 1837 Steele mustered volunteers in Medonte to help suppress the rebellion led by **William Lyon MACKENZIE**. All those who could bear arms marched to Barrie, where guns were issued, and then to Newmarket, where news of the rebels' defeat reached them. Steele and a friend continued to Toronto on business, passing the smouldering ruins of **John Montgomery's tavern** on the way. Steele retired from the navy with the rank of commander in 1838 and, although he was a lieutenant-colonel of the Simcoe County militia for two decades, he concentrated on civilian matters.

Appointed magistrate in 1833, he was also particularly active in promoting public works. In an 1839 petition Steele and others argued that a water route connecting Lake Huron and the Bay of Quinte by way of the Severn River, Lake Simcoe, and the Trent River would open up lands for settlement and increase the value of grain production and export. It would also provide a shorter, cheaper route for trade between Lower Canada, Upper Canada, and the rapidly developing western states of the United States, provide construction jobs for immigrant labourers, and create a secure communications route between the Canadian Great Lakes in the event of war with the United States.

On 15 Oct. 1839 Steele was elected chairman of a meeting at Finch's Tavern on Yonge St at which Reformers approved the recommendation for responsible government made by **Lord Durham Lambton**. A Tory mob led by the sheriff of the Home District, William Botsford Jarvis, broke up the meeting. The death of at least one unarmed Reformer caused a scandal in the province and Steele gained a reputation as a staunch Reformer, although he had taken no part in provincial politics until that time. As a result, Reformers strongly supported Steele's candidacy in Simcoe in the election of 1841. He promised to further local interests such as roads and pensions, of particular interest to settlers many of whom were like himself former military men. His Tory opponent, **William Benjamin Baldwin**, he had also denounced in 1839 as an intimate of the Family Compact whose "misdeeds" he listed: "prodigality terminating in the bankruptcy of the province . . . arbitrary proceedings . . . insufferable pride and presumption . . ." Steele defended the yeomanry who had been branded "with the stigma of rebel," and supported the union of the Canadas because it would "reduce to their proper level in the social circle every member of the dominant faction." In the assembly Steele worked successfully for a good road from Toronto to Orillia, and campaigned for the restoration of pensions which army and navy veterans had commuted to get a start in Canada. He did not run in the election of 1844, having been branded by local interests as a follower of Lord Sydenham Thomson, rather than of **Robert Baldwin** who he supported. Instead he restricted his efforts to his work as Justice of the Peace, to the promotion of non-political local projects, and support of the Anglican church he had endowed in Medonte. In his later years he lived for a time on what was to be the site of Orillia.



H.M.S. Mercury