



The term Fenian is derived from the ancient Irish Gaelic word Fiana meaning "War band" or "militia". In the mid nineteenth century the term was used loosely to describe members of two Irish Catholic revolutionary organizations formed in 1858: **The Fenian Brotherhood** (in America) and the **Irish Republican Brotherhood** (in Ireland). The goal of these organizations was to free Ireland from British rule, and continue the bloody struggle for independence which started hundreds of years before.

Historically, British rule began in Ireland with the Anglo-Norman invasion in 1171 and was further consolidated after the Irish Catholic armies of James II were defeated by Protestant English forces under William of Orange in 1691. Between 1692 and the 1720's "Penal Laws" against Catholics resulted in a religious apartheid which allowed the transplanted English and Scottish settlers to dominate Irish internal affairs. A series of bloody uprisings in 1798 led to amalgamation with England in 1800. A large British army was sent to garrison the colony and the free Irish parliament in Dublin was eradicated. Irish Members of Parliament now sat in an English parliament with a Protestant majority which ensured unrest within the Catholic population in Ireland.

By the mid-nineteenth century, hundreds of thousands of Irish had emigrated to British North America (Canada) and the United States because of famine and oppressive landlords. The Catholic emigrants took with them republican ideals, a hatred of the English system, and the dream of independence for Ireland. Irish Americans would provide money, equipment, and manpower to build an Irish Republican invasion force.

In America, by 1865, Fenians had formed an Irish republic (without territory), appointed a President, a Secretary of the Treasury, a Secretary of War, and a Senate. Several "shooting clubs" sprang up which existed merely as an excuse for armed men to gather and openly drill and train for war against Britain. The United States Government did not openly sanction or criticize the Fenian movement for its preparations against Britain for fear of losing popular support at election time; however, the British Government was concerned that the American Government would side with the Fenian cause, even with official assurances that the United States would remain neutral.

The Brotherhood in America became divided on how best to support an insurrection in Ireland. One contingent believed that attacking Ireland directly was the best idea; however, it would have been next to impossible to transport an army past the British Navy, and defeat a professional British army in Ireland. The alternative was to capture a small territory in British North America. Upon successful completion of the invasion it was hoped that the U.S. Government would support, or annex the newly captured Fenian territory. In either case the main goal was to gain the military help of the United States Government in open war against Britain.

Several sharp engagements occurred along the border between the Fenians and the Canadian volunteers; however, the only real battle of any size was the Battle of Ridgeway (on the Niagara Peninsula: see map). On the morning of June 2, 1866 Lieutenant Colonel Alfred Booker arrived at Ridgeway station to take command of a brigade made up of the 13th. Battalion of Volunteer Militia Infantry (Hamilton), the Queen's Own Rifles (Toronto), and two rural rifle companies. Booker knew that the Fenians had crossed the Niagara river near Fort Erie. He received information that the Fenians were "...encamped and drinking heavily...". Instead of waiting to rendezvous with the British regulars. Booker decided to attack the Fenians even though he had no experience in commanding a brigade under fire. In addition, his troops were on average very young and only some had actually fired live ammunition before. Meanwhile, Colonel John O'Neill, the Fenian commander, had received scouting reports that the Canadians were near. He sent a screen of skirmishers (many of whom were Civil War veterans) to form a line running across the Lime Ridge road and waited.

Number Five company of the Queen's Own made first contact with the Fenians. As the skirmishing Riflemen ran low on ammunition they were relieved in line by the 13th Battalion, and the Fenians were made to retire after a brief exchange of fire. The Canadians continued to advance until they clashed with the Fenian main body. At that point the Fenians rallied and charged forward in a loosely disciplined but very concentrated column against the skirmishers of the 13th. They were forced to withdraw in the face of the Fenian force, at which time an unfortunate incident took place. Mounted Fenian officers were mistakenly identified as cavalry.

There was a sense of confusion as the Militia skirmishers saw no cavalry, and therefore the bugle call to: "...retire and form square..." seemed to make no sense. The Canadians became disorganized and fell prey to concentrated fire from the invaders. Part of Booker's force broke and ran back through the town of Ridgeway towards Port Colborne; while, a rearguard made up of riflemen and men of the 13th. continued to fight: retiring and firing as they went. The Fenians had routed the inexperienced Canadians but the expected concentration of regulars and militia enroute to the battle convinced O'Neill to retire back across the Niagara river to Buffalo where many of the invaders were interned by American authorities.

To British North Americans the actual raids were quite minor in comparison to the fear and fervour they aroused in colonial life. To the British Government the raids meant delicate negotiations with the U.S. Government as well as the great expense of providing troops from Britain to support the militia. It was time that Canada West (Ontario), Canada East (Quebec), and the other colonies (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island) should take full responsibility for military preparations against invasions. In part it was the need to provide for a unified defence of the colonies that led to Confederation (in 1867) a short time after the first of the Fenian raids.