



## **DEATH IN A GARRISON TOWN: A TRAGIC HISTORY OF SOLDIER SUICIDE IN HALIFAX**

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### **CURRENT RESEARCH ON MILITARY-RELATED SUICIDE**

Military suicides have become part of daily discourse in contemporary Canada, yet one struggles to identify some pattern in the behaviour of those soldiers and veterans who chose to kill themselves. Family members have expressed grief, criticizing governments, demanding some form of action to prevent further deaths. Media have scrambled in search of experts who can provide explanations for their audiences. Politicians, eager to exhibit concern, have raised questions, and in Nova Scotia, have struck a public inquiry. Department of National Defence researchers and independent scholars have examined exhaustively the issue, reaching conclusions that will probably satisfy no one. This excerpt from an extensive analysis of military suicide places the historical record of self-inflicted death among serving soldiers and veterans in Halifax within the context of these current research findings.<sup>1</sup>

Self-inflicted death among soldiers and veterans is not a new phenomenon. In the years between 1830 and the commencement of the Great War, thirty-six military-related suicides, twenty percent of all male self-inflicted deaths in the municipality, have been identified.<sup>2</sup> This is a conservative number. Conscious or mistaken classification of suicides as accidental deaths certainly impacted the total. Additionally, many nineteenth century soldiers took discharge in Halifax, but Coroner records of the period seldom gave information on occupations, previous or current. Thus, with one exception, recorded suicides in these early years were of serving soldiers.

In his 2013 study Antoon Leenaars rejected convenient explanations of military suicides, stating there is no single cause. They result, he asserted, from the interplay of cultural, interpersonal and specific issues, what he terms the ecology of suicide.<sup>3</sup> Despite rejecting any single factor as key to suicide, Dr. Leenaars does acknowledge the importance of military culture and the walls which this culture erects, forcing 'warrior' values on all, even those who may be vulnerable to suicide. Within those walls suicide is viewed as weakness and, thus, antithetical to the warrior culture.<sup>4</sup>

A Canadian Department of National Defence (DND) research study, published in 2016, investigated 239 suicides that have occurred among serving members of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) between 1995 and 2015. In these years researchers discovered a high level of mood disorders, spousal/intimate

partner breakdown and career-related proceedings. They posited that these may have been indicators of heightened suicide risk among Regular Force males.<sup>5</sup>

The authors also suggested that during those years there were no statistically significant increases in the overall suicide rate among members of the military; and that the military rate reflected rates found among Canadian males. They noted, however, among the military “a trend for those with a history of deployment to be at an increased risk of suicide compared to those who have never been deployed.”<sup>6</sup>

In 2017 the principal researcher in that study reported a modification to this finding, downplaying the significance of deployment, suggesting in her words “that the pattern seen during and following the Afghanistan conflict may be shifting.” Continuing, Dr. Rolland-Harris stated: “This is in discordance with the 10-year (2005–2014) pattern that found that those with a history of deployment were possibly at higher risk than those with no history of deployment.”<sup>7</sup> She seemed to be implying that suicide risk declines the further one moved from the deployment period.

Like Antoon Leenaars, these researchers in both their 2016 and 2017 reports cautioned against identifying any single cause of suicide. Their data indicated that military-related suicides resulted from a “multifactorial causal pathway (this includes biological, psychological, interpersonal and socio-economic factors) to suicide rather than a direct link between single risk factors (e.g. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or deployment) and suicide.”<sup>8</sup>

Another recent Canadian research study examined self-inflicted deaths among veterans. After studying suicides from 1976 to 2012, researchers at Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) posited a significant suicide rate among its clients: “Suicide risk and rates are significantly higher in Veteran males compared to the male CGP [Canadian General Population].”<sup>9</sup> This study further indicated that “Veteran males in the youngest age groups are at highest risk of suicide.” Researchers also noted that the risk of suicide had been “relatively unchanged over the past four decades.”<sup>10</sup> Unable to identify specific causes for these self-inflicted deaths, VAC researchers related their belief in the multifactorial causal pathway identified by others.

In 2014 Smith, Masuhara and Frueh, researchers at the University of Hawaii, issued a caution about relating suicide to combat experiences.<sup>11</sup> Reviewing suicides committed by members of Britain’s Army of the East deployed in Crimea, the major British military engagement of the mid-nineteenth century, they found a very low rate, yet one roughly equivalent to U.S. suicide data during the American Civil War. This led them not only to downplay the impact of combat on subsequent suicide, but to suggest that “the increased rate of suicide among military personnel is a more modern trend perhaps not inexorably connected to combat exposure.”<sup>12</sup>

Current research offers pathways to investigate pre-Great War garrison suicides in Halifax. The 2014 findings of Smith, Masuhara and Frueh have particular significance: they can be tested in the actions of troops who had been deployed to Crimea and subsequently stationed in Halifax. From Antoon Leenaars’ work and DND and VAC studies, one senses that suicidal ideation among serving members and military veterans arises from complex issues. As will become apparent, historical data and recent research conclusions are consistent: both confirm there was no single factor, however traumatic it might have been, that triggered these acts of suicide.

## **SUICIDE IN THE HALIFAX GARRISON: SEARCHING FOR CAUSALITY**

### **1. IMPACT OF COMBAT**

Some twenty-first century research suggests deployment to combat zones was a marker among those of the CAF who took their own lives. Although an important qualifier has been added by others, suggesting this may, in fact, be a modern phenomenon, it is, nonetheless, important to test both assertions by examining self-inflicted deaths in the Halifax garrison.

Rates of suicide in the garrison were highest during the 1830s. Was this elevated level of soldier-suicide related to Britain's wars with France from the 1790s to 1815? This seems unlikely. Given the sharp contraction in the size of the British army following the end of those hostilities and the progressive reductions in the length of service required of Britain's soldiers, it is doubtful any troops in the Halifax garrison during the 1830s had previously served in later stages of the Napoleonic Wars. In fact, a review of individual soldier-suicides in the garrison throughout the nineteenth century indicates that only one long-serving soldier, William Prentice, took his own life. A thirty-year man, Private Prentice killed himself in 1851; thus, he was not a combatant in those European wars.

Although it seems clear the Napoleonic Wars were not a factor in the experience of garrison troops of the 1830s, one can assert with certainty that the Crimean adventure of the 1850s was an element of military memory affecting many troops posted to Halifax in the aftermath of that conflict. A war in which 20,813 British soldiers died, twenty-one percent of Imperial troops engaged in that theatre, surely ranks in ferocity and destructiveness with any recent military engagement.<sup>13</sup> Memories of war, therefore, must have remained vivid among troops who had survived the dreadful conditions on that Black Sea peninsula, but did suicides result from those experiences?

As part of an international force, British troops fought in Crimea from mid-1854 to the spring of 1856 and subsequently veterans of that conflict were posted to Halifax. Garrison documents record the arrival in the town of the 62<sup>nd</sup> and 63<sup>rd</sup> Regiments on 2 June 1856, direct from Crimea.<sup>14</sup> During the years 1856 to 1876 these same records document the presence in the garrison of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment of Foot Guards and the 4<sup>th</sup>, known as the King's Own Regiment, the 30<sup>th</sup>, 38<sup>th</sup>, 78<sup>th</sup> and 97<sup>th</sup> Regiments of Foot, units that had served in Crimea. These troops provide an opportunity to consider both the 2016 findings of DND researchers and the 2014 University of Hawaii study.

No member of the 62<sup>nd</sup> or 63<sup>rd</sup>, regiments posted to Halifax directly from deployment in Crimea, committed suicide during the six years those units were stationed in this garrison. Although none committed suicide, three members suffered sudden deaths during their time in Halifax: Archibald Gray of the 63<sup>rd</sup> in March of 1858; George Johnston, also of the 63<sup>rd</sup> in January of 1859; and Patrick Lucas of the 62<sup>nd</sup>, who died in December of 1861. Each man's death was judged by military surgeons and Halifax Coroner juries to have been caused by excessive consumption of alcohol.<sup>15</sup> Whilst their substance abuse might have resulted from memories of the carnage in which they had participated in Crimea, their deaths did not appear to witnesses to be suicidal, nor were they judged as such by civilian Coroners or military authorities.

During the decade following that war only one man in the garrison, who may have served in Crimea, chose to end his own life. That soldier, Sergeant Paymaster Paul Hallam of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, King's Own Regiment who was facing demotion to the ranks, committed suicide. Melancholy before his death and having previously attempted to take his own life, he succeeded on 15 October 1866.<sup>16</sup>

With no suicides in regiments that arrived in Halifax directly from Crimea and only a suspicion of one that might have been related to that conflict, it seems deployment played little part in the military-related suicides of the period. Soldiers who took their own lives in Halifax during these years had been posted to Malta, Gibraltar, the West Indies and garrisons in Quebec and Ontario, all combat-free zones.

Although causation of suicide is complex, garrison suicides during these early years appear to have been driven by a variety of factors, a number of which would be familiar to current researchers: substance abuse; failing personal relationships; career issues; and absence from family and family death.

## 2. HARSH CODE OF MILITARY DISCIPLINE

Standing apart from any indicators identified by twenty-first century researchers was the punitive code of army discipline that prevailed during much of the nineteenth century. Though suspicious of any single cause, four decades of evidence does suggest that significant factors in a number of garrison suicides was the harsh code of discipline and the fear and mental turmoil it caused. Central to that discipline was corporal punishment. In an attempt to counter campaigns opposed to army flogging, Horse Guards, military headquarters in London, issued a report in August of 1836 focused on corporal punishment. During the previous three years, Command asserted, only 588 men of the entire British army had been flogged: 270 for mutiny and insubordination; 139 for sale of arms; 80 for drunkenness on duty; 52 for stealing from comrades; and 47 for disgraceful conduct.<sup>17</sup> The military's attempt to manipulate public and parliamentary opinion failed and agitation against flogging continued.

Soldiers of the garrison and citizens familiar with the military code in Halifax knew that Horse Guards had missed the essential inhumanity of this punishment; it was not just the act itself that offended sensitivities, but the amount of punishment administered. Flogging during this era consisted of sessions of 100 or more strokes.<sup>18</sup> Men of the 76<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot paraded on the Citadel's square on 2 February 1842, a bitterly cold morning, to witness Private John McGuire, convicted of theft from a comrade, receive 100 lashes. Although milder temperatures prevailed on April 4, the punishment administered that day was more severe. The 76<sup>th</sup> stood in formation and watched Private Andrew Brown receive 150 strokes, laid on by Regimental drummers.<sup>19</sup> On August 12 the same drill was followed. Privates Patrick Bonar and William Cumberland, sentenced to 150 lashes each, were flogged before their comrades. On this occasion the defaulters received only 100 strokes, fifty having been remitted by Major General Sir John Harvey.<sup>20</sup>

Private John Burns, who had been required to watch his regimental comrades McGuire and Brown stripped to the waist and lashed in April, certainly knew and feared punishments awarded by courts-martial. Three weeks after their sentences had been administered Burns shot himself after coming off guard duty at the Citadel, choosing suicide rather than face a court-martial. According to a friend, John Burns was deficient of some items of kit and knew this would be discovered at inspection "and that he was afraid of being punished."<sup>21</sup> Private Burns was one of seven soldiers of the Queen who committed suicide in Halifax during the 1840s.

Fear of punishment was not just a local phenomenon; it was a factor throughout Britain's armed forces. Henry Marshall, writing in 1846 of suicide in the British army, stated: "Fear of punishment is supposed to be sometimes the cause of suicide in the Prussian army, and I have reason to believe that the same cause operated in the British army." Marshall reported that among Dragoon Guards and Dragoon regiments stationed in the United Kingdom during a seven year period, one in every seven deaths in those units was self-inflicted.<sup>22</sup> Marshall knew of what he spoke. Having served as a military surgeon in various Imperial outposts and later as Inspector General of Britain's military hospitals, he had collected and analysed data on diseases and causes of mortality among soldiers. His comments, therefore, demand our attention.

It was not the just the lash that drove British soldiers to suicide. In 1841 alone, fourteen men of the Nova Scotia Command had been sentenced to transportation to Van Diemen's Land.<sup>23</sup> The frequency of desertions provoked Command to respond, strengthening desertion posts surrounding Halifax and

issuing a string of directives denouncing the crime. Neither action had much effect. During the years 1840 to 1844, 682 men of the Nova Scotia Command deserted the colours.<sup>24</sup> In June of 1845 Command in Halifax reacted, making clear the seriousness of the crime and the punishment it warranted. Read before all troops at three successive parades, Command ensured no soldier could claim ignorance.

The numerous instances of desertion which have lately occurred in this Command call for the unremitting vigilance and attention of Officers Commanding as well as all other officers and non-commissioned officers to prevent this disgraceful crime and bring to condign punishment all who may be guilty of it.

The number of culprits sentenced within these few months to transportation has been very great – they will expiate their crime in long and rigorous confinement in chains and hard labour, deprived of all comfort in banishment at Botany Bay.

This ought to be sufficient warning to any disloyal subject who may contemplate deserting their colours and imitating so base an example; and the good and deserving soldier whenever he may be aware of the intention, is expected to do everything in his power to prevent the accomplishment of such an ignominious purpose.<sup>25</sup>

In the following decade Patrick Tray, a Private in the 97<sup>th</sup>, left the Halifax Citadel on the morning of March 21, 1852 with no intention of ever returning. Making his way northward, he eluded piquets stationed at Fort Sackville near Bedford, men detailed to intercept deserters. Tray knew that if recaptured he would be marked with the letter D, as prescribed by the Mutiny Act, and transported to England, then onward to a penal colony. By March 23 his pursuers had picked up his trail and the soldier realised he could not dodge them much longer. Near 17 Mile House, an inn on a major road running north from Halifax, Tray shot himself rather than be taken back to the Citadel. The decision of the Coroner's jury missed the true cause of Private Tray's suicide, concluding that "under the excitement of the moment and in a temporary state of insanity [he] shot himself."<sup>26</sup>

### 3. CAREER PROBLEMS

There were suicides in the garrison for which some greater clarity exists. Like Sergeant Hallam of the 97<sup>th</sup>, who committed suicide facing reduction to the ranks, Sergeant John Kent of the Royal Artillery also faced demotion. Unable to bear this stain, he hanged himself at the South Barracks on the morning of 26 May 1877. A Coroner's jury determined Kent "came to his death by his own hand, having hanged himself from a beam in a water closet in the South Barracks Square."<sup>27</sup>

Company Clerk, twenty-eight year-old Private Richard Long of the Royal Irish Fusiliers shot himself in a side room in the Citadel on a September evening in 1874. His death was the culmination of a series of events, for which he took personal responsibility. Arrested for drunkenness on the previous Saturday, this young man, who according to Sergeant John Mitchell "always bore an exemplary character", was reacting to what he deemed dereliction of duty on his part. Sergeant Mitchell gave details to the inquest: "the deceased told me that a private soldier, Collingwood, who had deserted the night before had broken into Long's cash box and taken from it twenty-five dollars, money belonging to the Fusiliers. On account of this Long went out and drank to excess."<sup>28</sup> On return to barracks, under arrest and besieged by guilt, he took his own life.

A postscript to this account of military suicide during the years of British occupation was the death of Private Albert Lovell. The only soldier of the garrison to take his own life in the years between the departure of British forces from Halifax and the return of veterans to the city following the Great War, this young man had come to Canada from Britain in April of 1906. The purpose of his trip, he told the purser on the steamship *Canada*, was "to join the army."<sup>29</sup> Why this twenty-five year-old came to Halifax to do what he could have done at home in England is not clear. Whatever his reasons, he was successful, becoming a member of the Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR).

This might not have been the wisest career choice for Albert Lovell. Fifteen months after his arrival in Halifax and his enlistment in the RCR, he was an inmate at the garrison prison on Melville Island. On July 11, 1907 Lovell committed suicide in his cell. Sergeant Cox, who found him, testified the prisoner had consumed a bottle of lineament prescribed for a sprained ankle but had also wound a cord “three times around his neck tightly, appeared as if he wanted to strangle himself.”<sup>30</sup> Cox also found a note from Lovell explaining his action, inscribed on a slate.

I could not help along this. My poor head is so bad. I was taken with two epileptic fits in the night. I fell out of bed both times. I hope you people will excuse my slackness since I have been here but I have been very bad. Remember me to dear Mother. I hope I shall see her one of these days. Give poor old Jack my dog to somebody who will look after it. Goodbye to all.<sup>31</sup>

Touching as it may be, his concern for his dog’s welfare does not lead us towards any real understanding of his action. Like previous suicides in the garrison and in those that followed, one sees in Lovell’s death a combination of factors at work, what current researchers have termed a multifactorial causal pathway.

#### 4. FAILING PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND FAMILY DEATH

On a summer morning in 1889 Joseph Hill, a private in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the West Riding Regiment, shot himself with his Martini Henry rifle. A cook in the Officers' Mess at Fort McNab, he had been depressed since receiving a letter from his partner in England. "She wanted money," the Regimental Surgeon told the Coroner. Surgeon George Weston, who knew Hill and was trusted by him, concluded his testimony, saying "She had a little girl by him. He wished to be at home with her."<sup>32</sup>

"He was of a sullen morose disposition," Colour Sergeant John Smith testified at the inquest into William Stephens' death. Stephens, a private of the 30<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot had shot himself while sitting at his bed in the Citadel on the last day of the year 1869. Sergeant Robert Blake told the inquiry that Stephens had previously attempted suicide, eighteen months earlier. Blake provided additional detail, telling the Coroner's jury that although married, Stephens had enlisted twenty-seven months earlier as a single man. Consequently, the army did not recognize his wife, causing him, according to Blake, to be morose. Disregarding any impact this had on Stephens' behaviour, Sergeant Blake was in no doubt about the cause of the soldier's suicide. "I believe he was insane when he shot himself yesterday. I always considered him a man not capable of judging his own actions."<sup>33</sup>

Stationed at Fort Charlotte, one of the installations guarding the entrance to Halifax Harbour, Corporal William Moore of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment of Foot, known colloquially as the Royals, was also depressed by a family matter. "He had a child buried yesterday," Private Henry Roper testified, adding: "He appeared a little cut up at the loss of the child. I saw him crying." William McBratney, a fellow NCO in the Royals, concluded that the child's death was the cause of his friend's suicide. "Except for the loss of the child I do not know anything that could affect the mind of the man but about that he appeared much cast down."<sup>34</sup>

Gunner David Smith was twenty-six when he shot himself in July of 1901. Born in the Vale of Glamorgan, Wales, Smith had been raised in the area's bilingual culture. Before enlisting in the Royal Garrison Artillery in January of 1896, he worked in the district's coal mines. Like others in his regiment, he had been posted to various locations across the empire. In July of 1901, after five years of service, Gunner Smith was stationed in Halifax. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of that month, the Welshman reacted sharply to receipt of a letter from his mother, according to testimony of comrades in the barracks. Before concluding that Smith had committed suicide by gunshot, Dr. William Finn, Medical Examiner for Halifax, summarized those comments:

The deceased man came into his room, tore up a letter he had and threw it in the grate; he shook hands with another man present, went from room through a short corridor. The men heard a report of a gun, rushed out of doors and saw the deceased lying in the corridor with blood coming from his head. Whole left side of head and face blown to pieces.<sup>35</sup>

The letter from his mother that appeared to have provoked Smith's actions could not be introduced into evidence. Even in July, the dampness of barrack rooms in the Citadel required fires and the distraught soldier had thrown the torn pieces of the letter into the flames. No one could explain David Smith's actions that summer evening and for the good of the service the military moved quickly in the wake of his suicide. Two days after his death Gunner Smith was buried at Fort Massey cemetery in Halifax. It took longer, however, for final details of his military career to be sorted. On the 9<sup>th</sup> day of December, 1901 this was completed: his assets, £12.13.3, were divided among his relatives, according to his will.<sup>36</sup>

#### 5. OFFICERS ALSO COMMITTED SUICIDE

Suicides during British occupation of Halifax were not restricted to Other Ranks, with a former officer and one serving officer of the garrison killing themselves during these years.<sup>37</sup> They were, as one would

expect, members of England's privileged class: a Cambridge graduate and former lieutenant in 81<sup>st</sup> Regiment of Foot, whose father had served as Sheriff of Nottingham;<sup>38</sup> and an Oxford graduate, son of a Church of England cleric in Cheltenham, an elegant Regency spa town in the Cotswolds of southwest England. Each exhibited characteristics identified by twenty-first century researchers as common among military and veteran suicide victims. The first, who shot himself, suffered from delusions he was being fed harmful medicines; the second, whose moods were described as swinging between despondency and high spirits, swallowed prussic acid.

In January of 1836, Hugh Marvel Blaydes took his own life. Blaydes, unmarried and heir to estates in Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire, had graduated from Trinity College, Cambridge and had been formerly an officer with the Second Battalion of the 81<sup>st</sup> Regiment of Foot. As a young man he had served briefly with that unit in Halifax and later in the West Indies.<sup>39</sup> Although he died in Halifax, he had not long been a resident there. In May of 1834, when Blaydes made his will, he was a civilian living on his family estates in High Paull, Yorkshire. He added a codicil to that will, signed on March 7, 1835 at Valletta, Malta.<sup>40</sup> In January of 1836 in Halifax, thirty year-old Hugh Blaydes shot himself.

Mary Mayette, his domestic servant, told a Coroner's jury on 6 January 1836 that Blaydes had been unwell and was being treated by a physician. Dr. Hume outlined the nature of his patient's complaint. The deceased believed "someone had been giving him medicine, whether in his milk or his food. After some conversation with him I was perfectly satisfied that an insane idea had got possession of his mind. I endeavoured to reason him out of the notion of people giving him medicine."<sup>41</sup>

According to *The Times* of Halifax, Hugh Blaydes went to his bedroom following the physician's departure "and with a pistol in each hand, both of which he attempted to discharge, only one, however, having gone off, had given himself a ghastly wound in the head which must have instantly terminated his existence."<sup>42</sup> The jury's verdict was as expected: "being of unsound mind and memory but delirious and distracted in manner and by means aforesaid did shoot and kill himself."<sup>43</sup>

If it seems odd that Blaydes had committed suicide after only a few months in Halifax, the case of Ensign Charles William Egginton of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot was truly remarkable. This young officer killed himself after only three days in the town. Like Blaydes, Charles Egginton was a university graduate, awarded a degree from Oxford in 1861. Commissioned one year later in the King's Own, he was posted to Malta, where he remained for three and a half years. Twenty-seven year-old Egginton was aboard the troopship *Tamar* on 20 April 1866 when it docked at Halifax. Disembarking that afternoon, the men of the 4<sup>th</sup> marched to the hilltop Citadel. Assigned duties, they stowed equipment and began to settle into their quarters. Sometime between the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup> and the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> of April, Egginton visited a local chemist shop with fellow Ensign M.C. Graham. There the young officer purchased cyanide of potash, presumably to clean a stain on his uniform.<sup>44</sup>

Benjamin Lane, the battalion's Assistant Surgeon, who pronounced Egginton dead and had conducted the post mortem examination, told the Coroner's jury that the young officer seemed to have undertaken that task. "The deceased had been using the solution of potassium to clean his vest as I saw it spotted as if rubbed over." According to Dr. Lane Egginton then consumed the remainder of the toxin. "The stomach," he testified, "gave a strong odour of prussic acid and was very much inflamed. Prussic acid was the cause of his death."<sup>45</sup>

Ensign Graham, who had been with Egginton on his visit to the chemist, told the Coroner's jury his friend "has been despondent and low spirited, other times high spirited." Captain Robert Robeck confirmed Graham's assessment of the man's emotional balance. "I was well acquainted with the deceased," he



told jurors; “he was at times low spirited without apparent cause.”<sup>46</sup> The men of the jury were unanimous in their verdict, ruling Ensign Egginton’s death “a deliberate act on his part during a fit of despondency.” The young officer’s affairs were wound up in October of 1867, with his eldest brother John, an officer in 3<sup>rd</sup> Dragoon Guards, receiving a sizable legacy.

## **6. ‘GOOD’ SOLDIERS AND SUICIDE**

Not all soldiers of the Halifax garrison committed suicide to evade the Army’s strict discipline, suffered substance abuse issues or experienced failing personal relationships. They were ‘good’ soldiers, unpunished, who for reasons now lost to us, took their own lives. Private James Wells of the 83<sup>rd</sup> Regiment was described as “not been in any way a defaulter in the regiment.”<sup>47</sup> Private Wells shot himself while on duty at Government House early on the morning of 8 August 1835. John McTeer of the Royal Irish Regiment was regarded as a “good soldier but eccentric in his habits.”<sup>48</sup> Private McTeer shot himself while on guard duty at the Magazine on Campbell Road in Halifax’s north end on 14 April 1885.

Private William Prentice of the 38<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot had been described as a reliable and steady soldier. As noted earlier, Prentice was an old ‘sweat’, having served an estimated thirty years during which time he had attained seven Good Conduct Badges.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, William Prentice killed himself on the morning of 14 June 1851 while a patient in the Army Hospital. Prentice was judged by a civilian jury to be “delirious and out of his mind [who] did with a musket inflict upon himself a grievous wound of his head, of which grievous wound he then and there did die.”<sup>50</sup> No testimony accompanied this decision, indicating clearly that Coroner William Gregor believed the facts of the case were self-evident: Prentice was, he believed, insane at the time of his death.

The case of Robert Williams was examined by a Coroner’s Jury in October of 1880. Williams, a young Private in the 97<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot, drowned himself off McNab’s Island, an artillery battery at the mouth of Halifax Harbour. His friend, Private John Elston testified that Williams was known to be good swimmer, but that his moods recently had been strange. “He acted queerly two nights before he committed this,” Elston reported. Lieutenant Edward C. Haggate of the 97<sup>th</sup> agreed, telling the jury, “The deceased had a melancholy appearance. He was a sober man.”

Haggate then produced the Regimental Defaulters’ Book, indicating the only blot on young Williams’ army record: a previous attempt to commit suicide. A Regimental Court-Martial had found Williams guilty, sentencing him to fifty-six days’ imprisonment at hard labour, commencing May 29, 1878.<sup>51</sup> Too young to have served with the 97<sup>th</sup> in Crimea, memories of deployment to that combat zone did not blight Williams’ final years in Halifax. His behaviour, depression and previous suicidal ideation, did, however, illustrate characteristics identified by Antoon Leenaars and DND researchers more than a century later.

From this distance it is impossible to comprehend fully the deaths of these ‘good’ soldiers. Certainly the default decision of Coroner’s Juries of the period, temporary insanity, was nothing more than a tissue intended to cover an unimaginable act. These men seemed to share only one element: they all were soldiers of the Empire.

## **7. MILITARY CULTURE AND ‘GREEN WALLS’**

Easy to categorize methods employed in carrying out the act, reasons for suicide are far more difficult to classify. Some of these troops, perhaps a few, had seen combat; others, the majority, had whiled away their service in garrisons around the globe.

What then of Antoon Leenaars’ military culture and its ‘green walls’? Evidence certainly suggests both existed during the nineteenth century. Military culture expresses itself in a number of ways, most

obviously in men's pride in their unit and its battle honours. Equally, that culture might be seen in the troops' stolid acceptance of flogging and other aspects of the army's stern code of discipline. Negatively, however, military culture created a garrison mentality, men set apart from the mainstream, believing themselves superior to the local population. This culture of separateness led to excessive drinking and hell-raising. One need only consult army courts-martial and records of Halifax Magistrate, County and Supreme Courts of the period to confirm this negative behaviour among troops of the garrison.

A more challenging task is determining whether that culture and its 'green walls' contributed to the deaths of these thirty-six men? From this distance and in view of the limited evidence surviving from those years, it is difficult to conclude what effect the British Army's military culture had on suicides within the Halifax garrison. That culture militated against weaknesses; thus, one presumes individuals, who experienced anxieties and doubts, would keep their own counsel. Yet evidence gathered from testimony at Coroner's inquests in Halifax indicates that some men of the garrison, who subsequently committed suicide, had confided their fears to friends and comrades, in effect acknowledging themselves as aberrant within that military culture. Others had previously attempted suicide, making their 'weakness' public. By their actions, these men had openly rejected the military culture and its warrior tradition, choosing release from both.

It seems, therefore, this cultural construct might not have been an overriding factor in precipitating thirty-six military-related suicides in Halifax's garrison. Fear of punishment for violating military culture certainly played a role in some of these deaths, but there were other dynamics at play: depression, excessive drinking; reduction in rank; failed relationships; death in the family or separation from it. All these factors were undoubtedly part of the complex fabric that surrounded military suicides in Halifax.

#### **REFLECTIONS ON SUICIDES IN THE HALIFAX GARRISON**

Testimony delivered at inquests throughout the years indicated men of the Halifax garrison took their own lives for a wide range of reasons. Comments by superior officers and comrades alike provide some insights into the minds of these men. Portraits derived from such remarks are, of course, incomplete. Testimony may have been biased, or even misleading, serving the witnesses' ends. It might also have been an accurate account of soldiers, who revealed anxieties to men they deemed comrades. Regrettably, this is all one can now salvage from incomplete documentation. Certainly not the psychological autopsy crafted by Antoon Leenaars, comments before nineteenth century jurors do allow twenty-first century readers to perceive some fleeting images of the complex strains that led to nineteenth century soldier suicides.

There seems but one factor that differentiates early soldier-suicides from later: the harsh code that ruled their lives. Commentary by soldiers of the Halifax garrison is supported by research of an important nineteenth century expert: flogging and transportation to penal colonies appear to have influenced decisions to commit suicide. Although those stern conditions were modified during the final quarter of the nineteenth century, the military culture with its warrior values remained in force. Less easy to assess its impact on troops, it may have had some role in forming suicidal ideation.

Little apparent connection seems to exist between these pre-Great War military suicides and deployment, reflecting the 2017 conclusion of DND's Elizabeth Rolland Harris. A number of other issues have surfaced during this assessment of nineteenth century self-inflicted military deaths that suggest further congruence with twenty-first century analysis: substance abuse among those who took their own lives; depression; failed/failing relationships; death and distance from families; career problems; and previous attempts at suicide.

This research suggests that nineteenth century and early twentieth century soldiers and veterans confronted issues faced by soldiers and veterans of our own time. It substantiates conclusions of current experts that “suicide is a multifactorial event that is explained by more than deployment alone. Focusing only on deployment, PTSD or any of the other risk factors discussed in this report is an ineffective approach to suicide prevention.”<sup>52</sup>

Difficult though it may be for some to accept, current research and the history of self-inflicted death among soldiers and veterans in Halifax confirm that suicide does not result from any single cause, traumatic though it might have been.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an excerpt from the author’s ‘DEATH IN A GARRISON TOWN: SUICIDE AMONG SERVING SOLDIERS AND VETERANS IN HALIFAX, 1830-1939.’

<sup>2</sup> Although Halifax had been garrisoned since 1749, the commencement date of this study reflects the advent of reliable records of sudden death investigations in Halifax.

<sup>3</sup> Antoon A. Leenaars, *Suicide Among the Armed Forces: Understanding the Cost of Service* (Amityville, New York: Bywood Publishing Company, 2013), 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Rolland-Harris, Elizabeth Cyr and Mark A. Zamorski, “Report on Suicide Mortality in the Canadian Armed Forces (1995 to 2015)”, Surgeon General Health Research Program, SGR-2016-005, Department of National Defence, November 2016, 38.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, i.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Rolland-Harris, “2017 Report on Suicide Mortality in the Canadian Armed Forces (1995 to 2016)”, [http://www.forces.gc.ca/assets/FORCES\\_Internet/docs/en/about-reports-pubs-health/report-suicide-mortality-caf-2017.pdf](http://www.forces.gc.ca/assets/FORCES_Internet/docs/en/about-reports-pubs-health/report-suicide-mortality-caf-2017.pdf) accessed 2 August 2018, i.

<sup>8</sup> Rolland Harris *et al.*, “Report on Suicide Mortality in the Canadian Armed Forces (1995 to 2015)”. The authors stress caution in adopting any such simple dichotomy: “Still, we must reiterate here that suicide is a multifactorial event that is explained by more than deployment alone; consequently, disproportionate focus on selected factors runs counter to the CAF’s public health approach to suicide prevention. Focusing only on deployment, PTSD or any of the other risk factors discussed in this report is an ineffective approach to suicide prevention.” In an update to this research, this conclusion was reinforced: the lead researcher wrote in her 2017 review of CAF suicides: “High prevalence of substance use disorder, mood disorders, spousal/intimate partner breakdown and/or of career-related proceedings may be indicators of heightened suicide risk in CAF Regular Force males.” Elizabeth Rolland-Harris, 2017 Report on Suicide Mortality in the Canadian Armed Forces (1995 to 2016), <file:///C:/Users/Gordon/AppData/Local/Microsoft/Windows/INetCache/IE/QGGN9BMT/report-suicide-mortality-caf-2017.pdf> accessed 2 August 2018, 11.

<sup>9</sup> Kristen Simkus, Linda VanTil, David Pedlar, 2017 Veteran Suicide Mortality Study, 1976 to 2012, Veterans Affairs Canada, November 2017, 5, <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/about-us/research-directorate/info-briefs/veteran-suicide-mortality-study>, accessed 2 August 2018.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Allen Smith, Kristi L. Masuhara and B. Christopher Frueh, “Documented Suicides Within the British Army During the Crimean War 1854-1856”, *Military Medicine*, Volume 179, No. 7, July 2014, <http://academic.oup.com/milmed/article-abstract/179/7/721/4259359>, accessed 23 July 2018.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 723.

<sup>13</sup> Orlando Figes, *Crimea: The Last Crusade* (Penguin: London, 2010), 467.

<sup>14</sup> General Order 2 June 1856, Arrival of the 62<sup>nd</sup> and 63<sup>rd</sup> Regiments aboard the transport *Himalaya* in Military Papers: Great Britain. Headquarters, Volume 47, General Orders Commencing 17 August 1854, ending September 1856, MG 12, NSA.

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- <sup>15</sup> See inquests of Privates Archibald Gray (14 March 1858; Volume 30, #12), George Johnston (25 January 1859, Volume 31, #9) and Patrick Lucas (23 December 1861, Volume 33, #22), Coroner Inquests and Medical Examiner reports, RG 41, Series C, 1830-1969, NSA.
- <sup>16</sup> Inquest held over the body of Paul Hallam, October 15, 1866, Coroner Inquests and Medical Examiner reports, RG 41, Series C, 1830-1969, Volume 39, #16, NSA.
- <sup>17</sup> *Acadian Recorder*, September 3, 1836.
- <sup>18</sup> Flogging of soldiers was a routine component of British army discipline. Wellington, writing to Sir Charles Colville on 25 September 1816, stated; "I dislike the punishment of flogging as much as others, but I dislike crime still more." [John Colville, *Portrait of a General: A Chronicle of the Napoleonic Wars*, Salisbury, England: Michael Russell, 1980, 216-217]. Limitations on the number of strokes were introduced progressively in the nineteenth century. In 1832 the limit was set at 200, in 1847 at 50 and in 1868 abolished for troops on Home Service. Flogging of men serving abroad continued until 1881, when it was ended as part of the Cardwell Army Reforms.
- <sup>19</sup> "The infliction of the punishment was put into the hands of the drummers, under the inspection of the Drum Major and Adjutant, the first to see the halberds are properly fixed, the cats in order, that each drummer does his duty, and is properly relieved after having given twenty-five lashes. The Surgeon is to take care that the prisoner does not receive more lashes than he is able to bear without endangering his life or injuring his constitution; and the Adjutant to cause the sentence of the Court Martial to be properly inflicted and to oblige the Drum Major to make his drummers do their duty." Henry Marshall, *Military Miscellany Comprehending A History of the Recruiting of the Army, Military Punishments* (London: John Murray, 1846), 150.
- <sup>20</sup> Garrison Court-Martial, 12 August 1842, General Orders, British Army, Nova Scotia Command, MG 12 HQ, Volume 35 January 1842 to October 1842, NSA.
- <sup>21</sup> Inquest held over the body of John Burns, 27 April 1842, RG 41, Series C, Volume 18, # 18, NSA.
- <sup>22</sup> Marshall, *Military Miscellany*, 106.
- <sup>23</sup> See Australian Joint Copying Project. Microfilm Roll 91, Class and Piece Number HO11/12, 1841, pages 305, 306, 332, 294, 395, <https://convictrecords.com.au/search/results>, accessed 10 March 2018. Although legislation transportation ended in 1857 with the new sentence of penal servitude, the last penal transport arrived in Australia in 1868.
- <sup>24</sup> Peter Burroughs, "Tackling Army Desertion in British North America", *Canadian Historical Review*, Volume LXI, No. 1, March 1980, 30-31. Nova Scotia Command included troops posted to New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island.
- <sup>25</sup> General Order Concerning Desertion in this Command, 21 June 1845, Military Papers: Great Britain, Headquarters, MG 12, Volume 39, NSA.
- <sup>26</sup> Inquest held over the body of Patrick Tray, April 14, 1885, Coroner Inquests and Medical Examiner reports, RG 41, Series C, 1830-1969, Volume 25, # 25, NSA. For punishments meted out by courts martial in the period see Military Headquarters, MG 12, #45, NSA.
- <sup>27</sup> Inquest over the body of John Kent, Royal Artillery, 26 May 1877, Coroner Inquests and Medical Examiner reports, RG 41, Series C, Volume 52, #6, NSA.
- <sup>28</sup> Inquest over the body of Richard Long, 27 September 1874, Coroner Inquests and Medical Examiner reports, RG 41, Series C, Volume 49, # 19, NSA.
- <sup>29</sup> *SS Canada out of Liverpool, England arriving 6 April 1906 Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canadian Passenger Lists, 1865-1935, RG 76-C; Roll: T-500 LAC*, Ancestry.com, accessed 10 June 2018.
- <sup>30</sup> Inquest into the death of Private Albert Lovell, 11 July 1907, Coroner Inquests and Medical Examiner's Reports, RG 41, Series C, Volume 72, # 73, NSA.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> Inquest held over the body of Joseph Hill, August 14, 1889, Coroner Inquests and Medical Examiner reports, RG 41, Series C, 1830-1969, Volume 65, #16, NSA.
- <sup>33</sup> Inquest held over the body of William Stephens, December 31, 1869, Coroner Inquests and Medical Examiner reports, RG 41, Series C, 1830-1969, Volume 45, #40, NSA.
- <sup>34</sup> Inquest held over the body of William Moore, August 8, 1844, Coroner Inquests and Medical Examiner reports, RG 41, Series C, 1830-1969, Volume 19, # 28, NSA.
- <sup>35</sup> Investigation into the death of Gunner David Smith, RGA, July 10 1901, Coroner Inquests and Medical Examiner's reports, RG 41, Volume 79, #498, NSA.

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<sup>36</sup> Gunner David Smith, 13621, 9 December 1901, *Registers of Soldiers' Effects, 1901-1929*, Ancestry.com, accessed 30 May 2018.

<sup>37</sup> In addition, an officer's death in 1894 was judged accidental by a Coroner's jury, even though evidence of the man's behaviour and health issues suggested otherwise. Given the jury's verdict, however, this death has been excluded from this investigation.

<sup>38</sup> Bernard Burke, ed. *A genealogical and heraldic history of the landed gentry; or, Commoners of Great Britain and Ireland enjoying territorial possessions or high official rank: but uninvested with heritable honours*. London, England: Colburn, 1837-1838), 668, Ancestry.com, accessed 10 July 2018.

<sup>39</sup> Admitted at eighteen years of age in 1824, Blaydes matriculated in the Lent Term, 1825. See Venn, J. A., comp., *Alumni Cantabrigienses* (London, England: Cambridge University Press, 1922-1954) in Ancestry.com Accessed 10 July 2018. The 81<sup>st</sup> served in Halifax from 1822 to 1826.

<sup>40</sup> His father, Hugh M. Blaydes, had died in 1829. Will and Testament of Hugh Marvel Blades, dated 13<sup>th</sup> day of May, 1834 at London and codicil to the above, dated 7<sup>th</sup> day of March, 1835 at Valletta, Malta, *Prerogative Court of Canterbury and Related Probate Jurisdictions: Will Registers*; Class: *PROB 11*; Piece: 1862, The National Archives; Kew, England, Ancestry.com, accessed 10 July 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Inquest held over the Body of Hugh Blaydes, Halifax January 6 1836, Coroner Inquests and Medical Examiner reports, RG 41, Series C, Volume 12, # 7, NSA

<sup>42</sup> *The Times* of Halifax, 26 January 1836.

<sup>43</sup> Blades Inquest.

<sup>44</sup> Inquest held over the body of Charles William Egginton, Ensign 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment, King's Own Regiment, 1866, Coroner Inquests and Medical Examiner reports, RG 41, Series C, 1830-1969, Volume 39, # 12, NSA.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Inquest held over the body of James Wells, August 8, 1835, Coroner Inquests and Medical Examiner reports, RG 41, Series C, 1830-1969, Volume 60, #25, NSA

<sup>48</sup> Inquest held over the body of John McTeer, August 8, 1835, Coroner Inquests and Medical Examiner reports, RG 41, Series C, 1830-1969, Volume 6012, #25, NSA

<sup>49</sup> *Acadian Recorder*, 14 June 18

<sup>50</sup> Inquest held over the body of William Prentice, June 14, 1851, Coroner Inquests and Medical Examiner reports, RG 41, Series C, 1830-1969, Volume 25, #7, NSA

<sup>51</sup> Inquest held over the body of Robert Williams, Army Private 97<sup>th</sup> Regiment, October 6 1880, Coroner Inquests and Medical Examiner reports, RG 41, Series C, 1830-1969, Volume 55, # 34, NSA.

<sup>52</sup> Rolland Harris *et al*, "Report on Suicide Mortality in the Canadian Armed Forces (1995 to 2015)" *Ibid.*, 37