

The Buffalo 7th Regiment, Irish Army of Liberation Flag

Presented by the Fenian Sisterhood of Buffalo, May 6th, 1866

by **James M. Madden**

A very plain-looking green silk flag with a gold border and a simple sunburst in the canton became the rallying point for Irish Americans in 1866. With a storied history, the flag of the Fenian Brotherhood's Buffalo 7th Regiment, Irish Army of Liberation (also known as the Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.)), was carried across the Canadian Border into a long forgotten battle a year after the Civil War ended.

The Fenians were an Irish revolutionary organization created in America in 1858 by exiled Irish rebels who fled Ireland. They became the United States' version of the already established Irish Republican Brotherhood (I.R.B.) in Ireland. The group's objectives were to force the Britain Empire out of Ireland. In order to fulfill this, many Irish joined state militia units and with the American Civil War came better opportunities for Fenian men to obtain the needed military training to use these skills later against the British Empire in the name of Irish Freedom.

With the Civil War over by the middle of 1865, Fenians around the country, many seasoned veterans from both the North and South, came together to continue their quest to free Ireland. The Fenian Brotherhood broke into two factions by early 1866, with the Senate faction devising a plan to invade British North American, hold it for ransom by trading it for Ireland's liberty. It was thought this was easier and less costly than to risk an ocean crossing. Their designs were to attack Canada East and West on two fronts simultaneous, one strike from Northern Vermont to capture Montreal and the other from Buffalo, NY for Toronto.

This Buffalo 7th Regiment IRA color was unfurled during the skirmish at Fort Erie, Ontario and the Battle of Ridgeway, June 1-3, 1866.

The original flag was usually large, especially for military use in the field, measuring 9' x 6' and had gold fringe along the edges. In the canton was a half Fenian Sunburst, the emblem of the Fenian Brotherhood. Only one black and white photo is known to exist, taken when it was donated to the Buffalo Historical Society in 1902. It was tastefully decorated with lettering of the regiment, who made the flag, the presentation date and the two battle honors. The sunburst had unfortunately disintegrated with age and reports stated it was from possible battle damage. While there were several green Fenian flags known to be carried into Canada, "all with sunbursts, no harps" as one veteran recalled, this is the only one known to survive and be photographed. It's unique in overall design for a Fenian Flag.

It is believe no lettering existed on the flag at the time of the 1866 battle but was placed there much later. Obviously, the battle honors didn't exist but the presentation date of May 6th itself painted onto the flag is in question. The May 6th ceremony never happened. No flag accounts appear in local newspapers around that date and a notice in the Buffalo Courier (May 15, 1866) announces the flag presentation by the Buffalo Fenian Sisterhood was now set for May 16th at Townsend Hall. Also since there was a balance remaining on the cost of the flag, an admission of twenty five cents would be charged. Another notice of postponement appeared on the date of

16th. No other presentations or postponements occurred in the newspapers after that time and soon the flag was carried into battle by the Fenian Buffalo company.

The Fenian Sisterhood, who made this flag, were the wives, daughters and sweethearts of the military members and helped support their cause. The “Sisters” raised money for the organization through fancy balls and picnics and often presented their local Fenian circles with silk flags, either sewn by hand or commissioned.

The Fenians found little resistance in Canada, routing the ill prepared militia, killing nine and wounding several others but accomplished little more and took casualties as well. The United States stepped in to enforce their neutrality treaty with Great Britain by denying Fenian reinforcements from crossing over the river from Buffalo. Soon, the Fenians in Canada realized they were trapped and needed to return back to U.S. shores. While crossing, the steamer USS Michigan picked up several hundred Fenians, detaining most on barges until orders were given by the US Government to have them released. While on the USS Michigan, the flag bearer, John Smith, tried to hide this flag under his clothing to protect it from being seized, however nine feet of material is hard to disguise and Smith was ordered to undress on deck thus giving up the flag to the Michigan’s captain, who also seized all their weapons and held them on board his ship.

Months later, on November 4th 1866, the Buffalo Fenians were able to reclaim their military hardware. On the inventory manifest turned over, appearing along with the list of specific arms was “1 Fenian Flag”. The agreement reached was the Fenians would get their weapons returned with the understanding they had to sell all of it at auction immediately. The Fenians turned this day into a parade marching in mass to the dock where the USS Michigan was moored; loading several wagons full of rifles and this flag was proudly carried by Sgt Smith at the head of the columns through the streets in military procession. The Brotherhood headed toward their headquarters and the wagons went off to the local auction house, which so happened to also be owned by the Buffalo Fenian Circle leader, Patrick O’Day.

Throughout, the Fenians were always treated kindly by politicians because of their growing Irish voting bloc within the United States. The Fenian Raid also facilitated the union of the then divided East and West Canada, to join in a Confederation a year later in July 1867, to become the Domination of Canada.

Unfortunately, the 7th Regiment Irish Army of Liberation flag, seen in the black and white photo, no longer can be viewed. In an Oct 19th 2015, correspondence with author Peter Vronsky (Ridgeway: The American Fenian Invasion And The 1866 Battle That Made Canada), he indicated the Buffalo Historical Museum could no longer unfold the flag to be “viewed as the silk had been “salted” by the silk dealer (to fraudulently increase the weight and price of the silk) and now the salt has eaten away the flag. It’s a mass of saltine sludge I am told”.

Today, we reproduced the Buffalo 7th Regiment, Irish Army of Liberation flag, as it likely appeared before the Fenian Raid into Canada, without the lettering for the 150th Anniversary of that event. The other flag (right) is a generic Fenian Sunburst flag, taken from research of the period and will be used by Fenian reenactors also.