

# Story of Colonel John By

## BUILDER OF THE RIDEAU CANAL

### Scene 1

**NARRATOR JOHN BY** I was born in Lambeth on the banks of the River Thames in England. My dad's name was George, my mom's name was Mary and I had nine brothers and sisters! Now my dad was a senior officer in the London Custom House and a member of the respected guild, the Waterman's and Lighterman's Company. I was a pretty observant kid and good with my hands. When I was a kid, I used to sit on the banks of the Thames River watching all the traffic on the river and wondering what I would do when I grew up. From my bedroom window, I could see Lambeth Palace where the Archbishop lived but best of all I could watch the boats on the river. When I was about 9, I saw Rumsey's first steam powered boat going up the Thames River! I didn't know it at the time, but that was an historic event of the Industrial Revolution! You can listen in on a conversation with my dad and mom and my older brother George and my sister Mary Ann!

**JOHN** Dad, do you like building boats for a living?

**DAD** Well lad, it's a great business and we're part of the future right here in London. This is a great business!

**GEORGE** That's what I want to do when I grow up!

**JOHN** Dad, I think I want to build new things when I grow up! Maybe even design and invent new machines!

**DAD** Design things! Why would you want to do that son? You could work in our business!

**JOHN** I don't know exactly why, but I think I want to be an engineer!

**GEORGE** Don't worry about engineering little brother! I'll give you a job!

**JOHN** I don't just want a job. I want to invent, design and build things.

**MOM** I've always noticed that you were handy at fixing things, John.

**MARY ANN** I have seen the way you watch the boats going up and down the river.

**DAD** Are you sure about this son?

**JOHN** Yes dad, I've been watching the boats and... and I'd like to know how they work. I want to do something new!

**GEORGE** You always were a strange one, little brother!

**MARY ANN** That's for sure!

**MOM** John, if this is really what you want, John, we're here to help you!

**DAD** Now John, if you're serious about this, you'll have to talk with my friend, John Rennie about

engineering. Maybe we could get you into the Royal Military Academy.

## Scene 2

**NARRATOR JOHN BY** Well, I finished grammar school having done well in Arithmetic, Writing, English, French and Latin. At age 11, I became an apprentice as a waterman who transported people and goods along the Thames River. I was just 13 years old when I went to the Royal Military Academy at Woolwich. I'll never forget my first day there when I met all my pals and took my entrance examinations! That was so stressful but I made it!

**JOHN** *(Standing in front of a bulletin board)* Entrance examinations start today right!

**PETER** For sure! They could be quite tough to pass!

**JOHN** Yes, that will be stressful!

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**(Tableau)** John and all the new recruits file into an exam room, pantomime sitting on benches, writing exams. Then they freeze pencils in mid air.

**NARRATOR'S VOICE** *(Whispering)* Stress, stress, stress! Will I pass? Will I fail? That's the moral of this tale! Stress, stress, stress!

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**JOHN** *(Rushing up to a bulletin board at front stage right to see the entrance exam results)*  
Yeah! I passed! *(Throwing his cap into the air).*

**PETER** Hey, me too! Yeah! (*Throwing his cap into the air.*)

*They are surrounded by four other recruits, throwing caps into the air in celebration. They all file into a hall with benches for their first class.*

**PROFESSOR LANDMANN** Good morning gentlemen! Welcome to Royal Military Academy! I will be teaching you fortification theory, geometrical drawing and artillery. Professor Catty will teach you French and Professor Cruickshanks will teach you chemistry and Mr. Sandby will teach you map drawing. You will have to work hard at your studies and your practical sessions.

**PETER** Sir, what do we learn in fortification theory?

**PROFESSOR LANDMANN** That will be practical geometry and mathematics, mechanics of cranes and hoists, surveying, leveling, practical hydraulic lifts and drainage. It also includes designing of barracks, storehouses and guard rooms.

**JOHN** Sir, will we be building models?

**PROFESSOR** Absolutely yes! Many. And mathematics will include geography as well!

**MARK** What time do we have to get up in the mornings?

**PROFESSOR** First bell is at 5:30 to get up and washed. 6:00 field drills and physical exercises until breakfast at 7:30. Classes begin at 8:00 on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. On Thursday, Friday and Saturday you will have practical hands-on laboratories.

Right gentlemen, If you have no further questions, dismissed for today.

*The new recruits file out of class... and race across the grass for lunch.*

### **Scene 3**

**NARRATOR JOHN BY** Well, I graduated at age 16 in 1799 and became a Second Lieutenant in the Royal Artillery first stationed at Plymouth Harbour and then I was transferred to Quebec City where I worked among other things on an 18' by 18' model of Quebec City area for defense purposes. That really was a fun job! In 1810 I returned home to Britain with the model.

In February 1811, I was sent to serve in the Peninsular War in Spain and Portugal but was sent home in July because I became ill.

It was on April 21, 1826 that I was ordered to Canada to build the Rideau Canal as part of the military defense for fear of attack by the United States You are welcome to listen in as our planning group gets to work. Our group included Captain Daniel Bolton, Lieutenant William Denison, Lieutenant Edward Frome, Lieutenant Henry Pooley and John MacTaggart, Clerk of Works.

**LIEUTENANT COLONEL JOHN BY**

Gentlemen, thank you for your continued excellent work in planning and overseeing this important project, construction of the Rideau Canal. As you well know, we have decided to divide this project into sections and proceed

with all sections at the same time in order to complete the canal in five short years! We face a number of big obstacles. This meeting is to review progress and to identify and try to resolve obstacles.

**CAPTAIN BOLTON** One big problem is the health of the workers and their terrible living conditions.

**JOHN BY** You are correct. The onset of winter requires that we provide warm bedding to our workers as at present conditions are unhealthy. I will arrange for blankets and supplies as soon as possible.

**LIEUTENANT DENISON** Your decision to set up base camp here across from Wrightville has been a good one. Transportation of materials from Montreal has been made much easier here than it would have been in Kingston. We are now building temporary living places-nicknamed Barrack Hill! And we have started surveying the surrounding land for building houses and a proper settlement town.

**JOHN BY** Barrack Hill is well named. More workers are arriving daily and it provides a place for them to sleep and eat.

**LIEUTENANT FROME** I have of course been involved in the early surveys of our route and now am in charge of the Kingston Division of the canal. We have begun construction of the dam and locks at Kingston Mills!

**JOHN BY** Good work Frome!

**LIEUTENANT POOLEY** Well, I can report that the first bridge across the Ottawa River from Richmond Landing to Wrightville is finished. We are working on the second. My team is also hard at work on the Smith Fall's section of the canal. We are concerned about the proposed changes in the width of the canal.

**JOHN BY** That is a big issue. The Kempt Commission had told us to make the canal 33 feet wide, which is a big change. It will cost more money. Let's meet tomorrow to talk about how to do this.

**JOHN MACTAGGART** As Clerk of Works, I can see that we are very much over budget. We are having to spend extra funds because of heavier bedrock than expected and because we have to make the canal wider. I just hope that the committee will understand the difficulty of building this canal in five years!

**JOHN BY** Yes, I sure hope so too! I am expecting that military budgets will cover defense related costs.

**JOHN MACTAGGART** I have to say that I have been very ill with malaria and I am not at all well.

I would like you to meet Hugh Nicol Baird who has been replacing me so effectively.

**JOHN BY** Thank you Hugh for your help. I have not been feeling well lately either.

I certainly hope that I am not going to have a bout of malaria!

**JOHN MACTAGGART** I hope not too. It is a vicious illness. The fever, vomiting, pains in the back, weakness and loss of

appetite and trembling are awful. Chills and then the big crisis of vomiting, a few hours of a big sweat... and then healing begins. It's a horrible experience!

**JOHN BY**

I know. I've been there!

## **Scene 4**

**NARRATOR**

The Rideau Canal was actually finished in the fall of 1831 but the opening took place in the spring of 1832! I had no idea that black clouds of trouble were looming as the grand opening took place. The committee was about to recall him to Britain to explain his overspending! How unfair that was because military costs were never paid for from defense budgets!

However for now, it is a big celebration. My family and I were joined by my fellow engineers, contractors and workers sailing from Kingston to Bytown! We stopped at each lock to meet the teams of workers and to congratulate them for a job well done! Finally we arrived at Richmond Landing by then renamed Bytown.

**COLONEL BY**

It gives me real pleasure to welcome you all to this opening ceremony of the Rideau Canal that we have all worked so hard to complete in five short, hard years! Many lives have been lost and I would like to pay tribute to those men who have died of illness mostly and some accidents. This canal is an important part of the defense system of Canada but it also is of great importance to transportation of goods to Canadians along the way.

**WORKER**

This great canal has been built by us all!

**COLONEL BY**

Three cheers for the Rideau Canal and everyone who worked so hard to plan and to build it! May it be used for many years to protect Canada and to help Canadians!

**ALL**

Hip, hip, hurray! Hip, hip, hurray! HIP, HIP, HURRAY!

*Sound effects of loud and long applause!*

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PRINCIPAL RESOURCE:

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