

The British Columbia Regiment

(Duke of Connaught's Own)



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British Columbia owes its existence to the early explorers of The Northwest Fur Trading Company who first established trading posts west of the Rocky Mountains.

In 1821, they were taken over by the Hudson's Bay Company, whose territories extended on the west coast from the Arctic circle down to the northern border of California. As the Americans expanded northwards and their settlers moved into the Oregon Territory, the Governors of the Hudson's Bay Company decided to build a fort at Camosun, on Vancouver Island, in 1843. Three years later the name of the fort was changed to Victoria, and the Oregon Territory dispute was

ended in 1846 with the treaty which fixed the 49th parallel as the border to the Pacific. The border was adjusted south through the strait of Georgia and out through the Strait of Juan De Fuca, ensuring that the whole of Vancouver Island remained British.

In 1849, Vancouver Island became a Crown colony and with the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1854, Governor James Douglas spent funds to build Hospital Huts to look after the expected wounded from a British attack on the Russians at Petrepavlovsk. In 1855 the attacking Fleet found the Russian fort abandoned. Now that they had these unused hospital facilities on their hands, the Admiralty decided to move their Pacific Squadron from Valparaiso, Chile, to Esquimalt. The Colony also spent £81:8:9 to raise a temporary defence force of a Rifle Company consisting of an Officer, one Sergeant, one Corporal and eight Privates.

With the joining of the Colony of Victoria with the mainland to form the Colony of British Columbia in 1858, a detachment of Royal Engineers numbering about 165, under the command of Colonel Richard Moody, arrived later that year. They were to assist in the establishment of a Seaport town and a Seat of Government, to survey lands, and to open roads. Many of the roads they built in the Lower Mainland still survive, such as North Road, Douglas Road and Coast Meridian. The Capitol city they chose came to be named New Westminster. Their most significant achievement was the construction of the Cariboo Wagon Road up through the Fraser Canyon. The Engineer detachment was disbanded in 1863 and only 15 men accompanied Colonel Moody back to England, the remainder settling in the new colony. These men formed the nucleus of the volunteer soldiers which led to the formation of our Regiment twenty years later.

In 1859, the San Juan Island dispute nearly provoked a war with the United States over whether the Islands were American or British possessions. Each side had maps supporting the

others claim and until the dispute was settled through Arbitration in 1872, both sides maintained agreed forces of 100 men on the Island. Although Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany decided in favour of the American claim, the event sparked local interest in raising a volunteer militia force to "maintain order".

Strangely, the first unit, which existed from April 1860 to March 1864, was composed of recent black immigrants from California, who, being denied service in the local fire brigade due to their colour, decided to form a militia company of their own. All members, including the officer, were black. The governor approved and under the title of The Victoria Pioneers Rifle Corps, or "African Rifles," they paraded with a strength of about 60 serving members. Their uniforms were blue with orange facings, they had a small band of nine instruments, and were drilled by a Sergeant Instructor from HMS Swiftsure.

In a good natured spirit of admiration and rivalry, the Vancouver Island Rifle Volunteers were formed in July 1861 from the white population of Victoria. They initially had a strength of 160 serving members, but enthusiasm waned and they were disbanded a year later. Similarly, an Artillery company was formed in Victoria but it also had a short existence. Lack of uniforms and the inability to obtain arms was a great problem to be overcome.

In 1864, the old Volunteer Rifle Corps was reformed, consisting of two companies, which continued to flourish and in 1886, went into camp at Beacon Hill. This was the first occasion of such training being carried out in British Columbia. They eventually became number 4 Battery when our Regiment was formed in 1883.

At the same time the militia was developing on the island, a small militia force came into being in the New Westminster area. In November 1863, The New Westminster Volunteer Rifles

were formed with a strength of about 73 serving members.

Enthusiasm in local defence was revived in 1866 with the Fenian scares. The Fenians were groups of Irish Americans who, after the American Civil War, decided to invade and conquer Canada and use it to trade to free Ireland from Britain. Several actual invasions took place in the Niagara peninsula and battles were fought between the Fenians and the British Regulars and Canadian Militia. Locally, a force of Fenians arrived in San Francisco and were trying to hire a boat to sail North. They were unsuccessful.

The most important of the early units was the Seymour Artillery Company formed at New Westminster on June 6th, 1866. Many members were former Royal Engineers. The War Office provided guns, rifles, ammunition and accoutrements complete for this unit, and a Drill shed for them was built for them at New Westminster at the cost of \$1400. The Seymour Battery became Number 1 Battery on October 12th, 1883 when our Regiment officially was entered on the roll of Battle.

The British Columbia Regiment of Garrison Artillery
October 12th, 1883

The Russo-Turkish War in 1878 had not been without some effect in the Pacific. The British Fleet had sailed through the Dardanelles into the Black Sea and threatened war. The Russians had retaliated by sending a formidable Squadron to the Pacific coast and threatened to attack the Coastal towns of British Columbia. The Russians used San Francisco as their base, and one memorable incident occurred when a Russian cruiser appeared off Esquimalt on a "friendly" visit. With only one small British gunboat present, the Russians could have easily destroyed the British vessel, burned the dockyard and shelled Victoria.

In these circumstances, the Admiralty provided spare guns, and several defensive batteries were constructed.

This led eventually to the construction of Fort Rodd Hill, which protected Esquimalt until the 1950s. Although, the crisis passed without war, the need of a permanent unit to care for and man the guns was recognized. The Admiral in command of the Pacific Station asked for 100 men of the Royal Marine Artillery, but it was decided that the responsibility would fall to the Dominion of Canada. The result was the creation of our Regiment out of the existing volunteer units into three batteries in Victoria and one in New Westminster.

The Laurie Bugle, 1884. Donated by MGen Laurie and shot for annually between Victoria and New Westminster.

The authorised strength of the new Regiment was about 200 serving members, and its first band was authorised on November 9th, 1883. By April 1884, it was ready for its annual inspection, and later that year, members attended at the Victoria School of Artillery. 64 pounders were provided by the Royal Navy for Training.

A Rising was reported amongst the Skeena Indians in the Summer of 1886, and the Premier and two of the members of the Cabinet in their capacities of Justices of the Peace called out the Militia for active service. "C" Battery from Victoria was embarked on a warship which sailed 800 miles North and four days later arrived at the mouth of the Skeena River. Two days later, when they reached the offending village, all was quiet. The men remained encamped for another month having an interesting holiday shooting bear and exploring the area.

Captain Thomas Owen Townley (seated, centre, left) with the officers and NCOs of the New Westminster battery of the B.C. Brigade of Garrison Artillery circa 1892.

In 1886, the City of Vancouver was incorporated just before it was burnt to the ground due to a brush fire which raged out of control. The city was rebuilt and promptly went into such a period of growth, that by 1892 it was a city of some importance. A Drill Hall had been acquired at the Imperial

Opera House on Pender Street at the North end of Beatty (now the site of the Shelly Building and commemorated by a plaque just Inside the main entrance). A rifle range had also been cleared at Central Park, all at the expense of the city. When authority was given in 1894 for the raising of Number 5 Company in Vancouver, Major T.O. Townley, who was also the Mayor of Vancouver, was placed in command. Artillery training was carried out mainly by gun squads drilling in the 32 and 64 pounders. "The main event of the year was the gun practice. One gun detachment from each company went down after one day's drill, manned and fired the 6 inch guns at a moving, target, making 60% of direct hits and a ricochet."

Rifle shooting was important and Martini-Henry rifles were used until their replacement by Lee-Enfields.