

GREATER VANCOUVER'S MILITIA GUNNERS

The history of Vancouver's militia gunners goes back beyond the formation of the 15th Field Regiment's direct ancestor, the 15th Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery, in 1920. In June 1866 the Seymour Artillery Company [later Battery], a volunteer corps, was organized at New Westminster to deal with the perceived threat of Irish-American Fenians who had invaded the eastern provinces of British North America. The battery was armed with two smooth-bore, brass howitzers. These guns were used to fire royal salutes on Queen Victoria's birthday. The wooden gun carriages were allowed to decay and, by 1889, the guns were no longer safe to fire.¹ Their duty in firing royal salutes was assumed in 1892 by the Hyack Fire Fighting Company, which exploded gunpowder charges between two superimposed anvils. Since then the Hyack Anvil Battery has fired the 21-gun salute on Victoria Day in New Westminster. The gunless gunners of New Westminster carried on as a battery of the British Columbia Brigade of Garrison Artillery until their conversion in 1899 to an infantry company. That solved the problem of replacing their disabled cannons.

The B.C. Brigade of Garrison Artillery, in which New Westminster's gunners had served, was also the parent regiment of two artillery companies raised in the new port city of Vancouver. These companies were formed in 1894 and 1895 and, like the Seymour Battery, they received two old muzzle-loaders fit only for practicing gun drill. Live fire training occurred at Victoria-Esquamalt, whose naval base was given modern defences. The militia gunners also fought in sham battles – a sort of public entertainment – and they participated in parades and celebrations which expressed the British allegiance of this North American city. Like New Westminster's gunners, the Vancouver companies were converted to infantry in 1899. One member lamented the switch from the gunners' blue and scarlet uniforms to a rifleman's black and green in a poem:

*“From the radiant brilliance of brass and blue,
To the dull dead black of shoddy and glue,
The cheapest cloth of the uniform-makers,
For the Sixth Battalion of Undertakers.”*

Governor-General, the Duke of Connaught, lent his name to the new infantry battalion and, in time, the Duke of Connaught's Own Rifles would acquire fame as the B.C. Regiment, Royal Canadian Armoured Corps.

When Canada entered the First World War in 1914, the only militia gunners in the province were located at Victoria, where they were employed in coast defence at installations, such as Fort Rodd Hill. In the Lower Mainland men were recruited for artillery regiments of the Canadian Expeditionary Force and they served in France, Belgium, and Russia. The 68th Overseas Battery, which was deployed to Archangel, Russia, in September 1918, is perpetuated by one of the 15th Field Regiment's batteries. Veterans of the Great War (1914-18) lobbied the federal government to have an artillery regiment in Vancouver. Their wish was granted in July 1920 when the 15th Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery, was authorized. It would have three batteries of field guns [the 31st, 68th and 85th] and an attached battery [the 5th] of heavy, siege guns.² The quick-firing 18-pounder was the field gunners' chief weapon. Summer gun camps were held on the prairies. There were two major changes for Vancouver's gunners in the interwar years. They had been quartered in the Horse Show Building on the edge of Stanley Park and, in 1933, they moved into the newly-built Bessborough Armoury. This building was designed by the commanding officer, LCol. Richard T. Perry, who was a professional architect. The B.C. Hussars shared the armoury. The geometric 1930s style was a departure from the baronial castle model of most Canadian armouries. A modernistic building deserved a modern regiment. The horses that drew the artillery regiment's guns and ammunition limbers were replaced by trucks and the guns' wagon wheels were converted to rubber tires.

In the First World War the guns that protected Vancouver from seaborne attack were manned by naval reservists and by militiamen from Cobourg, Ontario. Land around English Bay had been reserved for coastal defence gun batteries but there were no permanent emplacements and no coast artillery units to man them. The prospect of

¹ Gunner J. Hall's devotion to the battery was evident in 1885 when he walked the twelve miles from his home on Burrard Inlet to New Westminster to attend training sessions and parades.

² An Ammunition Column, based in Vancouver, was added to the brigade in July 1921.

war with the expansionist Japanese Empire led to a decision to establish both a local coast artillery regiment and to erect permanent gun batteries for the port's protection. Vancouver's field gunners became the 15th (Vancouver) Coast Brigade in April 1938. The construction of concrete and steel positions for coastal defence guns began in Stanley Park and then on Point Grey. During the Second World War (1939-45) the regiment [as it was after 1941] went on to full-time service and manned a network of coastal forts from Steveston to Point Atkinson, with a detachment on Yorke Island, which guarded the north end of the Inside Passage between the mainland and Vancouver Island.

In 1939 the B.C. Hussars, who shared the Bessborough Armoury and had never been given armoured vehicles, were converted to a searchlight regiment that supported the coastal batteries with night time illumination of the surrounding waters. One battery of the 15th and the attached 5th Medium [artillery] Battery became anti-aircraft gun batteries to enhance Vancouver's air defences. Two infantry divisions were stationed in the province while the air force and navy expanded rapidly. These provisions show that the Japanese threat to British Columbia was taken seriously. Submarines sinking merchant vessels, the Japanese invasion of the Aleutian Islands, and fire bombs delivered by high-altitude balloons kept the province's defenders on the alert. The shelling of Vancouver Island's Estevan Point and of the Oregon coast were the only surface attacks made by the Japanese navy.

The rapid expansion of the armed forces in British Columbia during the Second World War was matched by a quick reduction in strength after the war. The reserve units that were formed to supplement the regiments on wartime service, such as the 11th (Reserve) Anti-Aircraft Regiment, were the first to go. In 1948 most of the coast artillery gunners reverted to field artillery, leaving only the Vancouver/102nd Coast Regiment. The local coast artillery defences had been phased out near the war's end and, by 1954, the national government decided that coastal defences were an obsolete form of protection in an age of long-range bombers and guided missiles. The remaining coastal gunners were given a choice of joining the 15th Field Regiment, RCA, or the 43rd Medium Anti-Aircraft Regiment. The anti-aircraft regiment was absorbed by the 15th in 1959. That was not the end of the reductions.

In 1960 the 15th Field Regiment had six batteries as well as a headquarters staff. Since 1970 the regiment has had two batteries [31 and 68] and it shares the Bessborough Armoury with its own army cadet corps as well as an air cadet unit. The 15th Field Artillery Regiment Band is a frequent participant in public events and gives concerts throughout Canada and abroad. The gunners parade on national holidays and fire salutes. Their current weapon is the 105-mm. C3 howitzer. In 1977 Vancouver's mayor and council granted the regiment the Freedom of the City – a right to march with small arms and guns within Vancouver.

As trained, volunteer soldiers, the Vancouver gunners provide personnel for Canada's peacekeeping and peace-making operations under the authority of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the United Nations Organization. Soldiers of the regiment are now in Afghanistan. The gunners are also ready to be called out in domestic emergencies, such as they were during 1948 Fraser Valley flood. Their latest contribution was to provide security during the 2010 Olympic Games. This year is the 90th anniversary of the regiment's foundation. The regiment's colours are its historic 25-pounder gun and it is this that we salute, when in uniform, upon entering the armoury.

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