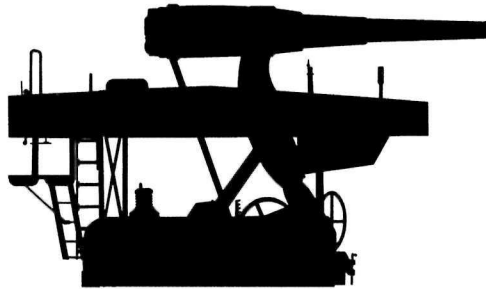




FORT RODD HILL

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE OF CANADA

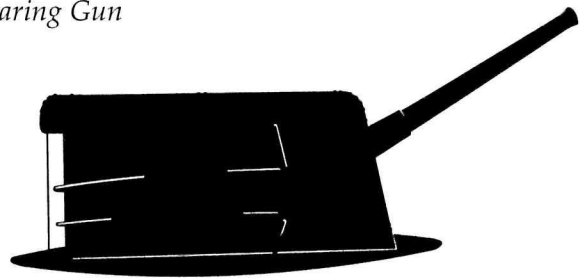
EVOLUTION OF THE VICTORIA-ESQUIMALT COAST DEFENCES



6-Inch Disappearing Gun



*64-Pounder Rifled
Muzzle Loader*



6-Inch Mk. 24 Gun

INTRODUCTION

Although the batteries which formed the coast defences of Victoria - Esquimalt were never called upon to repel an enemy, the threat of an attack was very real on more than one occasion. At such times, the value of these batteries was never in doubt. Their existence helped to ensure the security of the city of Victoria. By protecting the naval base at Esquimalt, the coast defences provided the warships of the Royal Navy, and later the Royal

Canadian Navy, with a secure anchorage from which they could sail to provide protection to the entire coast of British Columbia.

There were many changes in the coast defences during the nearly 80 years of their existence, from 1878 to 1956. This period saw great political and technological changes, which had an impact on the way in which these gun batteries evolved.



1843 – 1878

During the early colonial period of Vancouver Island's history, Victoria, with a population of a few hundred, was both the centre of commerce and the seat of government for the colony. Founded in 1843 as a Hudson's Bay Company post, Victoria was to experience slow but steady growth during the first decade and half of its existence.

The infant colony was almost entirely reliant on the warships of the Royal Navy's Pacific Squadron for its defence. From 1848 on, warships visiting the colony used the harbour at Esquimalt as an anchorage. The harbour was large and sheltered and close to Victoria.

During the Crimean War (1854-56), three hospital huts were built on the shore. These were constructed after an unsuccessful assault on the Russian port of Petropavlovsk on the Kamchatka Peninsula had brought damaged ships, with many wounded on board, to Esquimalt. This was the beginning of the navy's shore establishment.

The Fraser River gold rush, which began in 1858, caused a massive increase in Victoria's population. Thousands of prospectors, mostly Americans, passed through the colony en route to the gold fields. This created fears of American assimilation, particularly when U.S. troops landed on the disputed border territory of San Juan Island in 1859. Tension increased in Victoria and fears of an invasion of the colony arose.

To assert British sovereignty, the Colony of British Columbia was proclaimed on the mainland in November, 1858. Ships of the Royal Navy were made available to support the authority of the colonial Government. The navy helped to maintain law and order with a guardship at the mouth of the Fraser River, on the miners' route, to collect licence fees from miners heading inland to the gold fields.

A detachment of Royal Marine Light Infantry was landed on San Juan Island by agreement with the U.S.A. on a joint military garrisoning of the island while the issue of sovereignty was considered.

With a greater number of warships cruising in local waters, increasing use was made of Esquimalt harbour and it was soon being suggested that coast artillery bat-

teries should be provided for its defence. In 1859, Rear-admiral Baynes, the commander-in-chief of the Pacific Squadron, had recommended the transfer of his headquarters to Esquimalt and the placing of shore batteries to defend the harbour. Although Esquimalt was to become the major station of the Pacific Squadron over the next few years, the shore batteries were not emplaced.

In 1866, the colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia were united under the latter name, with Victoria as the capital. The colony joined the Canadian confederation in 1871. The new province's volunteer companies, formed during the 1860s, were reorganized as part of the Canadian Militia organization. However, the Royal Navy remained the province's first line of defence.

The increasing importance of Esquimalt as a naval base was further underlined in 1877, when the Admiralty nominated a world-wide network of coaling stations for the use of the Royal Navy's steam-driven warships. It was vital that these fuel supplies be protected if the navy were to continue its role of defence of the British Empire. Esquimalt was ranked eighth in importance and, again, it was recommended that permanent defences be erected to protect the naval yard and harbour.



Members of the Victoria Battery of Garrison Artillery Finlayson Point.

1878 – 1893

It was not until 1878, however, when a crisis in Anglo-Russian affairs in the Balkans made war appear imminent, that the first coast artillery batteries were emplaced. The guns installed in these four batteries were all rifled muzzle loaders, mounted behind earthen ramparts, to protect both Victoria and Esquimalt harbours.

To man these guns, the Victoria Battery of Garrison Artillery was formed and was officially gazetted as a unit of the Canadian Militia on July 20, 1878. Six days later, the militia gunners fired their first practice round from a 7-inch gun at Macaulay Point. The batteries could only be considered as temporary. Better guns, more carefully sited in strong emplacements and manned by a regular garrison supplemented by well trained local militia artillerymen, were required for permanent defence.

In 1883, The Victoria Battery of Garrison Artillery was reorganized to form two of the four batteries in a new unit, the British Columbia Provisional Regiment of Garrison Artillery. The decision was also made by the Dominion Government in 1883 to form a third permanent force battery as part of the Regiment of Canadian Artillery and to station it at Victoria. C Battery was not formed until 1887, owing to difficulties in recruiting. After arriving, the battery spent much of its time clearing the site of its barracks at Work Point and helping with its construction.

C Battery's primary task was to train the local militia. This was a spasmodic affair, as on two occasions the battery was away for a number of weeks assisting the civil power to maintain law and order on the Skeena River and at Nanaimo and the battery was short of personnel. Low pay, lack of pensions and better paying local job opportunities all had their effect and few of the men re-enlisted following completion of their first three years of service. Identical factors made it difficult to recruit replacements in Victoria. C Battery failed to provide the regular garrison needed at Esquimalt.

Throughout the later part of the 1880s, planning for the provision of more extensive and permanent defences continued. Additions to the naval base at Esquimalt, most notably the completion of the graving dock in 1887, further increased its importance to the Royal Navy. Esquimalt's significance in the world-wide system of Imperial defence was also enhanced by the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway line to the west coast. By mid-1888, the British government had formulated a plan for the installation of new, modern coast defence batteries and the provision of a detachment of the Royal Marine Artillery to man them. Although a deadlock in negotiations with the Canadian government ensued over the cost-sharing formula, an agreement was finally signed in 1893.

The advance party of the Royal Marine Artillery detachment, consisting of 19 men of all ranks, arrived at Victoria on August 18, 1893 and C Battery departed for Quebec the following evening. The remaining 55 members of the detachment arrived March 29, 1894 just in time for the commencement, on April 1, of the five-year agreement between Canada and Britain.



6-inch disappearing gun in the Menzies Street drill hall, 1897.

1893 – 1906

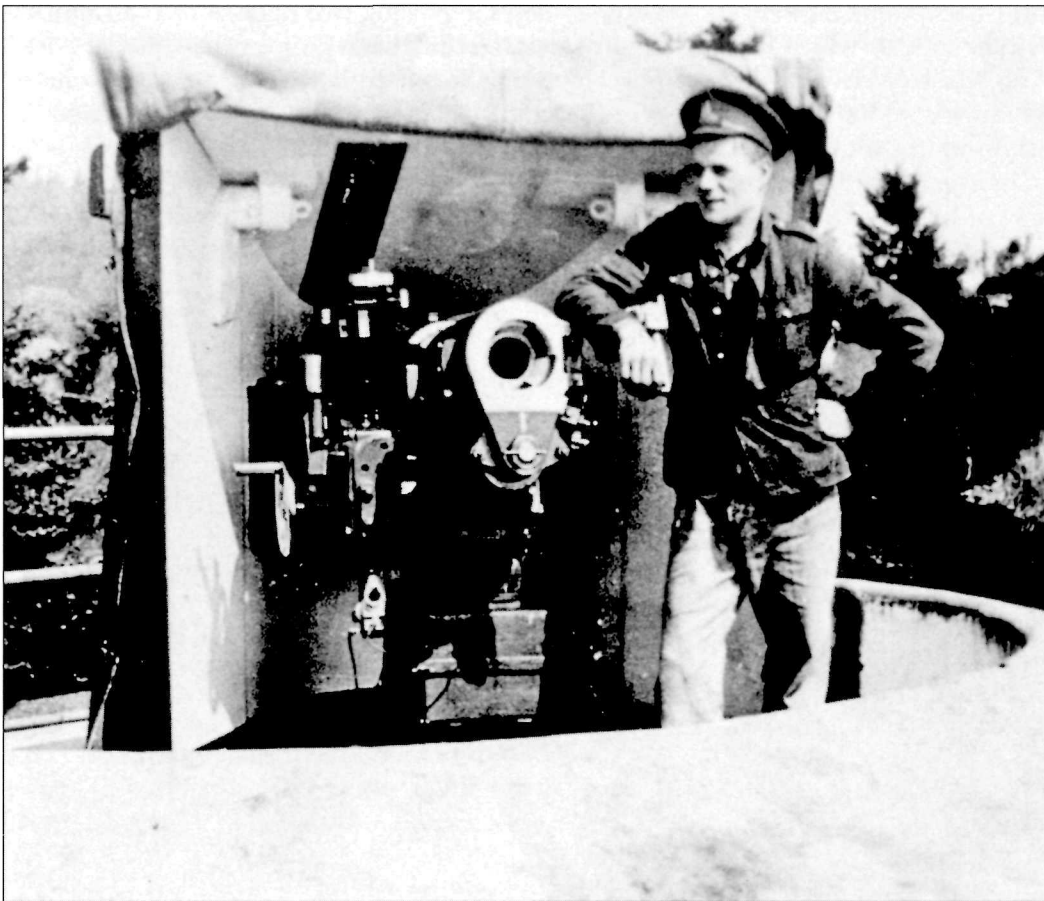
Work began on the first of the new batteries at the end of February 1894, under the supervision of the Royal Engineers. The site was at Macaulay Point, where three breech-loading 6-inch guns on hydro-pneumatic disappearing carriages were emplaced. Construction of Fort Rodd Hill did not begin until September 1895. There, three more 6-inch disappearing guns were installed, two in Lower Battery and one in the Upper Battery. The guns at both Macaulay Point and Rodd Hill were proof-fired by the Royal Marine Artillery in late October 1897.

With the completion of the 6-inch gun batteries, work began in 1898 on three batteries of smaller, quick-firing guns designed to protect Esquimalt harbour from attacks by torpedo boats, and on the minefield planned for the mouth of the harbour.

The battery at Belmont was completed in 1900 and the one at Black Rock in 1902. Each had two 12-pounder

quick-firing guns. The original Duntze Head battery of two 6-pounder Hotchkiss guns was completed in 1900. A new Duntze Head battery of two 12-pounder quick-firing guns was completed in 1904, adjacent to the old battery site and replacing the old battery. Four defence electric lights were also provided, to illuminate the harbour mouth at night, and these were in place by 1903. The final battery in the defences, Signal Hill, although built before the British garrison left, was not to have its two 9.2-inch guns mounted until 1912.

A new 10-year agreement between Canada and Britain came into effect in 1899. By the terms of this agreement, the comparatively small Royal Marine Artillery detachment was replaced by a much larger British garrison made up of 322 men of all ranks of the Royal Garrison Artillery and the Royal Engineers. This agreement reflected a much greater British commitment to the defence of Esquimalt; but this new commitment was to be short-lived.



One of the two 12-pounder quick firing guns was installed at Belmont Battery in 1900. This photograph was taken in 1924.

In 1905, as part of a world-wide reorganization of the Royal Navy designed to concentrate more warships in British home waters, the Pacific Squadron was abolished. In the following year, 1906, the garrison of British troops at Esquimalt was also withdrawn and the defence of the naval base was transferred into the hands of the Canadian government. Four years later, the Royal Canadian Navy was formed and took over control of the dockyard.

1906 – 1936

When the British artillery and engineer companies departed, they were replaced by much smaller Canadian permanent force units. Three officers and about 47 other ranks of the Royal Garrison Artillery transferred into the Canadian service to form the nucleus of 5 Company, Royal Canadian Garrison Artillery. Similarly, 31 members of the Royal Engineers volunteered for transfer and from them 3 (Fortress) Company, Royal Canadian Engineers was formed.

The Imperial garrison had also contributed greatly to the efficiency of the local non-permanent militia. It had established a series of schools of instruction, which created a substantial core of well trained militiamen. The militia gunners carried out annual practice firings and had acquired an enviable degree of accuracy with the guns of the defences. By 1906, this local militia unit, now designated the 5th B.C. Regiment Canadian Artillery, was among the largest and best trained regiments in Canada, and it remained so for years.

With the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, the garrison quickly assumed the role for which it had been trained. 5 Company R.C.G.A. moved from Work Point barracks to Signal Hill Battery. At the same time, the militia gunners were mobilized to man the guns at Fort Rodd Hill, Belmont, Duntze Head, Black Rock and Macaulay Point.

On the first day of the war, it appeared an attack was about to take place when two submarines were seen approaching Esquimalt on the surface. The guns were ready to fire on them, and would have probably sunk them, but at the last moment they were recognized as friendly. The submarines had just been purchased by the British Columbia government for the Royal Canadian Navy, but nobody had thought to inform the coast gunners that they were arriving on that date.

The danger of attack at Esquimalt was greatest during the first few months of the war. The Germany Pacific Squadron, under Admiral Von Spee, was at large in the South Pacific at this time and one German cruiser, the *Leipzig*, operated as far north as San Francisco. However, after destroying a British cruiser squadron at the Battle of Coronel, Von Spee's squadron was itself destroyed at the Battle of the Falkland Islands in December 1914. Although the coast defences of Victoria and Esquimalt remained fully manned through out the war, the danger of attack became much more remote

after this date, and the focus for the troops in the defences shifted to training men for overseas service.

When the First World War ended, the return to peacetime routine was swift. The militiamen were demobilized and 5 Company returned to its barracks at Work Point. Small out-fort detachments were detailed to maintain the guns and equipment in the batteries. The non-commissioned officer in charge of the detachment at Fort Rodd Hill lived with his family in the Warrant Officer's Quarters. It was only when the permanent force and the militia ran their summer training camps and firing practices that the forts were fully manned.

Through the 1920s and early 1930s, few changes were made to the coast defences, despite their increasing obsolescence. The anti-military sentiment following the First World War and the Great Depression both led to continuing cuts in Canada's defence budget. In 1923, two 6-inch quick-firing guns, removed from scrapped Royal Canadian Navy cruisers, were installed at Macaulay Point, replacing two of the 6-inch disappearing guns there. A third such gun was installed at Fort Rodd Hill, but it was used only for training and was never fired. A fire command post was also installed in the Upper Battery at Fort Rodd Hill in 1924.

More extensive improvements had to wait until the late 1930s, when the deteriorating international situation at last spawned a belated rearmament program.

1936 – 1956

In 1936, a British coast artillery expert, Major B. D. C. Treatt R. A., was brought to Canada to recommend improvements to the defences on the east and west coasts. Treatt's report formed the basis for a plan for updating the Victoria-Esquimalt defences, but it would require several years to acquire the necessary guns and fire control equipment from Britain. Consequently, late in 1937, an interim plan was adopted, which called for the installation of older guns already in Canada in the new positions chosen by Treatt.

Work had yet to be completed on these interim plan batteries when the Second World War began in 1939. Considering this, and the poor state of training and equipment of the permanent force and militia gunners on mobilization, it was fortunate that there was little danger of attack on the west coast of Canada during the first two years of the war.

By the time of Japan's entry into the war in December 1941, the condition of the Victoria-Esquimalt coast artillery defences had greatly improved. The interim plan batteries had all been completed and the militia gunners mobilized to man the defences were well practiced with the new equipment. One of the new batteries, Mary Hill, replaced the Upper and Lower Batteries at Fort Rodd Hill, where the obsolete 6-inch disappearing gun were dismantled for scrap. A new 9.2-inch gun battery was constructed at Albert Head, and Macaulay Point received two modern 6-inch guns. In addition, two new anti-torpedo boat batteries were constructed to protect Victoria harbour, and seventeen 60-inch General Electric searchlights were installed to provide illumination of the approaches to the two harbours at night.

In order to provide at least one battery with sufficient range to reach across the Strait of Juan de Fuca, two 8-inch railway guns were accepted on loan from the U. S. government and installed on stationary mountings at Christopher Point in 1941. They would remain there until returned to the U.S. in 1945. This loan was indicative of the close cooperation between the American and Canadian coast defences that had developed even before the United States joined the war.

The threat to British Columbia's coastline was at its greatest during 1942. In June of that year, Japanese forces occupied the islands of Kiska and Attu in the Aleutian Islands and in the same month a Japanese submarine shelled the lighthouse at Estevan Point on Vancouver Island. Victorians were practising air raid drills and black outs and, to people on the west coast, the war seemed very close.

The attack on Pearl Harbour had pointed out the need for anti-aircraft defences. Fortunately, the decision had been made the previous year to manufacture light and heavy anti-aircraft guns in Canada and the first three 40mm Bofors light anti-aircraft guns produced in this country were rushed to Esquimalt directly from the factory, within ten days of the outbreak of war with Japan. By the end of 1942, there were sixteen heavy and twenty-four light anti-aircraft guns in place.

Beginning in 1943, the first modern coast artillery guns began to arrive from Britain. With the installation of modern, long-range, counter-bombardment guns at Mary Hill and Albert Head, the fortress system of the range finding was put into use. The latest design of fire control was installed at the batteries, in a series of observation posts at other locations, and in the fortress plotting room at Fort Rodd Hill. All these locations were connected by cable, so that cross observations of targets from the observation posts could be transmitted instantly, computed quickly and passed immediately as accurate data to display dials on the guns. The system was fully operational by December 1943.

The anti-torpedo boat defences of Victoria and Esquimalt were also updated beginning in 1943. Modern twin 6-pounder guns were installed at Belmont Battery, Duntze Head and Ogden Pier and these guns had more than twice the rate of fire of the 12-pounder guns they replaced.

When hostilities finally ceased, in 1945, the coast defences once again returned to the quiet of peacetime routine. The batteries were placed under the care of maintenance detachments and the guns were only fired during the occasional training exercise. Although new equipment and techniques, such as fire control by radar, were brought into use, the era of coast artillery was drawing to a close. Revolutionary weapons, devised during the war and developed in the years that followed, had stolen the thunder of the great guns. In 1956, coast artillery was declared obsolete in Canada and the guns were removed from the batteries of the Victoria-Esquimalt Fortress.

Shortly afterwards, a concerned group of local citizens, made up largely of serving and former coast artillerymen, began to lobby to save the now surplus Fort Rodd Hill property. Their campaign was successful and Fort Rodd Hill was acquired by Parks Canada as a national historic park in 1962. Its new role would be to preserve and interpret the long and colourful history of the Victoria-Esquimalt coast defences.
