



James Douglas Taking the Oath as First Governor of BC, AD 1858.1925. Oil on canvas.

The Colonial Militia of Vancouver Island and British Columbia 1853–1871

by Adam Goulet

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Introduction

With more than 27,000 kilometres of coastline to protect, the defence of the province of British Columbia has always relied heavily upon naval assets, be they of the British Royal Navy (until 1910) or of the Royal Canadian Navy, and upon locally- raised militias. In terms of land forces, British Columbia today is home to a Canadian Brigade Group consisting of 12 reserve regiments of various types, as well as a host of Ranger patrols. All volunteers, the men and women who comprise these units carry on traditions that started back when this province was two separate colonies, those of Vancouver Island and of mainland British Columbia. Some traditions are kept to honour a regiment's members who

have since passed, while others are kept in order to maintain a connection to historical units, a connection officially denied to modern regiments. The reasons behind this lack of continuity in traditions are directly related to the support these units have received. Too often in our history we have had need of highly trained, professional soldiers, only to find those skilled individuals underpaid and ill-equipped, but they are nevertheless ready to serve when required. This topic has not been given sufficient attention by the academic community in recent memory, and, given the increased activity of today's Canadian Armed Forces Reserves in British Columbia, a closer look is warranted.

It is well-documented that, throughout British North America, volunteer militia units were widely used in the defence of colonies across the continent. In Britain, the Volunteer Rifle Corps movement was very popular with the masses.¹ Therefore, it is not surprising that, when emigrants from these places arrived in the colonies of mainland British Columbia and Vancouver Island, they should bring with them those traditions. From 1853 to 1871, seven different militia units were periodically formed and disbanded between these two colonies, and each one was raised, either for a specific purpose, or in response to a specific threat, real or perceived.

Roll Call

The Victoria Voltigeurs came first. Initially raised by soon-to-be Governor James Douglas in 1851, they were a small force of Métis – the children of French-Canadians and Iroquois – voyageurs formerly in the employ of the Hudson’s Bay Company. They were each offered a 20-acre plot of land where the Colquitz River empties into Portage Inlet in exchange for signing up, and they were paid and fed for their periods of service.² They were also issued trade guns and a company uniform. The uniform was not of a traditional European design, but consisted instead of a red woolen sash tied around a blue Canadian capote. (A long cloak with a hood ~ Ed.)³ The intent was that the militia be used as an armed force to help the governor enforce the laws of the colony. The Voltigeurs’ best known example of this was in response to the murder of a Peter Brown on 5 November 1852. This shepherd, who tended the Hudson’s Bay Company’s flock on Christmas Hill, was killed by a Cowichan warrior and the son of a Nanaimo chief. It took approximately two months for the investigation to identify the murderers and for Governor Douglas to organize the expedition that would see justice done. With a mixed company of sailors and marines from HMS *Thetis*, along with a number of Voltigeurs, Douglas sailed to Cowichan Bay and Nanaimo where they apprehended the culprits, held the historic trial on board the steamer *Beaver*, and hanged the two young men at the entrance to Nanaimo Harbour, a place now known as Gallows Point.⁴ Governor Douglas was most pleased with the performance of his militia, noting in a letter to John Tod, the senior member of the Legislative Council of Vancouver Island: “...not only by their [the sailors and marines of HMS *Thetis*]

steadiness and discipline, but also by their promptitude and alacrity in the field, and I am happy to say that our little corps of colonial voltigeurs [sic] imitated their noble example.”⁵

Approximately three years later, the Voltigeurs would be used for another similar expedition to mete out colonial justice. As the non-native population of the colony grew, the need for protection from the local aboriginals became less prevalent, and in March 1858, the Victoria Voltigeurs were disbanded, only to have another militia unit ‘stand up’ a mere two years later.

The Pig War that began in 1859 on San Juan Island reminded the colonists of Vancouver Island that, without their own military, the Royal

Navy could only do so much to defend them, assuming the fleet was even in port. After having been denied admittance to the local fire brigades due to racism, Victoria’s black community decided to form a volunteer militia unit to help protect the colony. Governor Douglas was keen to accept a volunteer force that supported itself through the sponsorship of the wealthy black merchant, Mifflin Gibbs. Recruiting began in the spring of 1860, and with 40–50 black men enlisted, the Victoria Pioneer Rifle Corps was born. In July 1861, having risen swiftly in popularity, the Corps was officially sworn in. The men of the ‘African Rifles,’ as they became known, built their own drill hall on Yates Street, and even chipped in to pay for a drill sergeant from the Royal Navy to train them. Ordered directly from England, their uniforms consisted of green jackets with orange facings in the style of the British rifleman. However, arming the African Rifles was an ongoing problem. They were only able to acquire the use of second-hand flintlocks from the Hudson’s Bay Company, and, despite repeated requests to the governor, were not issued rifles until 1864.

With the changing of Governors from Douglas to Arthur Kennedy, the Victoria Pioneer Rifle Corps was granted the loan of a number of rifles in order that they might practice with, and use them, in the parade welcoming the new governor. Unfortunately, due to racism demonstrated by the parade committee, the African Rifles was denied the right to march in the parade. A week later, when the Corps presented itself to the new governor, they were met with a very politic answer, meant to acknowledge their place in the community without committing to support them in the future, for fear of losing favour with the racist factions of the colony. Nearly two years after the parade, the government asked for their rifles back, and the Corps returned them, along with a notice. “...the VPRC had not disbanded, but had not met for drill because of government discouragement and the depletion of its ranks by Blacks returning to the United States.”⁶

During the period the African Rifles were getting started, there was another, short-lived volunteer unit on Vancouver Island. Due



DND. Reconstruction by Ron Volstad

A Victoria Voltigeur, 1851–1858.



Governor Arthur Edward Kennedy. Photo by G.R. Fardon, circa 1864–1866.

Image A-01401 courtesy of Royal BC Museum, BC Archives.



Original uniform of the Victoria Volunteer Rifle Corps, 1862.

possibly to the fact that the African Rifles only accepted black volunteers, a white militia unit formed in the summer of 1861 called the Vancouver Island Volunteer Rifle Corps. This second corps collapsed after only a few short months of existence, allegedly due to internal fighting.⁷

In May 1864, Governor Kennedy created the Victoria Volunteer Rifle Corps. Paid for by the government, this latest iteration of militia organization on Vancouver Island would last until British Columbia joined Confederation in 1871. In this era, the colours of military uniforms were essential to warfare. They allowed for easy identification of, not only nationality, but also of individual regiments or formations within a given nation's military. Initially adopting a uniform similar to the Austrian infantry (white and blue), the Corps' choice was widely criticized by the public until they changed it to the more familiar green and black of the British rifle regiments.⁸

Meanwhile, in the mainland colony of British Columbia, the New Westminster Volunteer Rifles, comprised partially of former Royal Engineers, was created in November 1863. As a unit, the Royal Engineers were repatriating back to England, and even though 130 of the 165 officers and men elected to stay behind,⁹ the citizens of British Columbia were concerned with respect to the security situation. With the pressure of Americans pushing northwards in search of gold, and the constant problems with local First Nations people, the colonists put forward a petition to the governor for the formation of a militia unit. The New Westminster Volunteer Rifle Corps (NWVRC) first saw action in the late-spring of 1865. Objecting to the construction of a highway from Bute Inlet to BC's interior by way of the Chilcotin plateau, members of the Chilcotin First Nations began raiding and harassing the project, and they murdered 13 of the project's personnel. A joint operation, led by Captain Chartres Brew of the NWVRC and Governor Frederick



The second uniform adopted by the Victorias.

Seymour, comprised of both land and sea elements (including the NWVRC, the Hyack Fire Brigade, and HMS *Sutlej*), set forth and spent several months putting down the Chilcotin uprising. In the end, five First Nations people were identified as the ringleaders. They were subsequently tried and put to death by hanging in Quesnel.



Rifle match at New Westminster, 1865.

During the summer of 1866, and in response to increased fears of Fenian invasions on the west coast, the Seymour Artillery Company was stood up in New Westminster. The Fenians were a fraternity of Irish nationals in North America. After the American Civil War, the Fenians made several attempts to invade British North America, always with the ultimate goal of winning independence for Ireland. Also, numbering a few former Royal Engineers in their ranks, and named in honour of Governor Seymour, the artillery company was intended to serve in support of the NWVRC. However, they would not receive their main armament until more than a year later with the arrival of the HMS *Sparrowhawk*. In October 1867, the artillery company received two brass, muzzle loading, 24-pound field guns, and the gunners began drilling with their new equipment weekly.¹⁰ As New Westminster was the capital of the colony, the local artillery company was also responsible for firing all official and ceremonial salutes, the Queen's birthday being a prime example, thus demonstrating just one manner in which the colonial militia was an important part of the social scene.

Footprints in the Community

The presence of a militia unit in a given city or town was much more evident in the colonies than it is today. That was due, in part, to the size of population centres of the era. However, it is more relevant because of the footprints the militia units implanted upon the local social scene. Colonial militia units frequently served as the social hub for a given community, be it geographical or demographical, frequently *cutting across* as much as *reinforcing* socio-economic classes through a given militia unit's members willingness to serve.

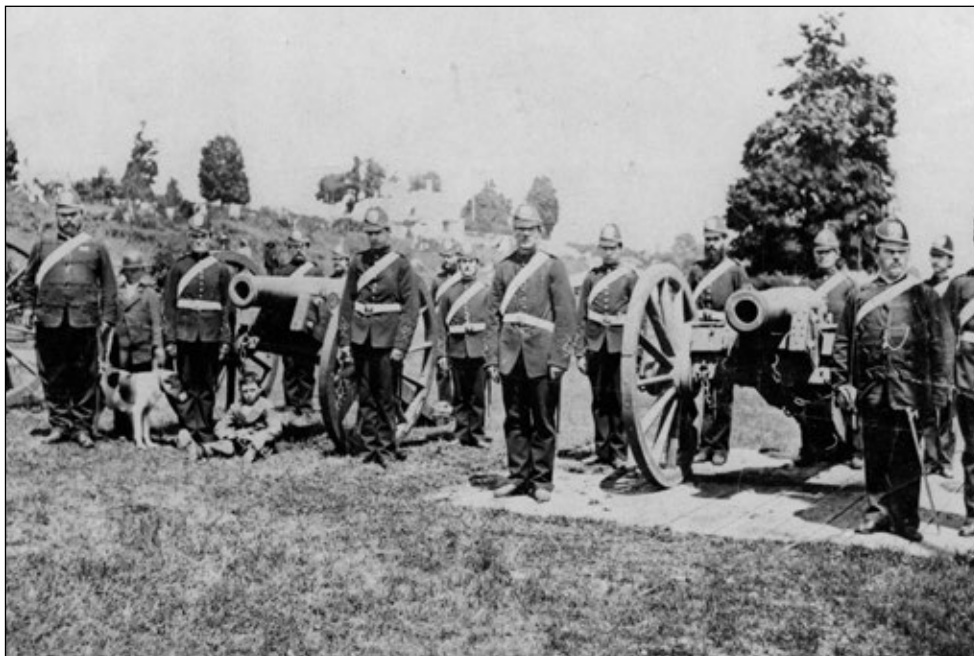
With few sources of public entertainment, the colonial citizens of the late-1800s understandably attended whatever social functions presented themselves. Public holidays frequently meant a public display of soldiering, including drill and gunfire, as well as providing the potential for a mock battle between opposing sides. It was not uncommon to have the local Vancouver Island militia unit defend a position on Beacon Hill, while a contingent of Royal Marines would launch an amphibious assault. To the soldiers it was important training, but to the action-starved public,

it was amazing entertainment. As illustrated in this article from the *British Colonist*, dated 26 May 1866, the author describes the events surrounding the Queen's birthday celebrations:

"...while a number of persons wended their way to Beacon Hill to witness THE VOLUNTEER REVIEW. At 11 o'clock the Victoria Volunteer Rifle Corps, under the command of Capt. Young of No. 2 Company, marched to Beacon Hill headed by the band for inspection by the Governor. Shortly afterwards His Excellency rode up and was saluted by the Corps during the inspection. The Volunteers then broke into column of four companies and marched past in quick time which was done with great precision. The corps next performed sundry evolutions advancing in line, volley firing by companies and in line, etc. After this His Excellency addressed the corps complimenting them on their marked improvement since the last inspection which was due to their attention to drill and the exertions of their Adjutant. He gave the especial credit for their marching and volley firing. Three cheers were proposed by His Excellency for the Queen, he giving the time, and the Volunteers responding heartily. The corps then formed and marched to town. His Excellency's family and a large number of spectators were on the ground."

Beyond displays of war, the militia units also provided a source of more refined distraction. The drill halls of militia units frequently served as both ballrooms and community centres. They provided a large, open, indoor area that could be used in inclement weather when such spaces were not in ready supply. They were often used for everything, from balls and fancy dress dinners, to wedding receptions and fundraisers.

The Victoria Pioneer Rifle Corps was quite well known and popular for its social events. The ladies of the black community of Vancouver Island were constantly holding fundraisers for the upkeep of the unit (as the unit was not regularly funded by the government). The community was also known for holding an annual celebration on the 1st of August in honour of the emancipation of slaves in the



Dominion Day in New Westminster at the Seymour Battery of Garrison Artillery, 1882.

British West Indies.¹¹ The officers of the African Rifles were even known to make social calls on high-profile visitors to the colony, and these were well received, for the most part.¹²

Despite maintaining a high public profile, most militia units were constantly running into financial problems. Many prominent citizens were known to buy uniforms and/or equipment out of their own pockets, just to get things started, or to keep things going. The members of a unit were known to pool their resources, sometimes contributing as much as fifty cents or more just to pay for a drill instructor to teach them their craft.¹³ Therefore, militia units were not *always* hard up for cash.

Surviving Peace

Every few years, new threats emerged: unlawful First Nations, war with the Americans (Pig War, Civil War, and so on), the influx of American gold miners, the threat of a Fenian invasion... all perfectly valid reasons for the colonists of the west coast to fear for their safety and sovereignty. During those periods of danger, the ranks of the volunteer militias would swell with overwhelming support by virtue of volunteers from the communities they called home. At the same time, their colonial governments would suddenly become quite forthcoming with financial support in keeping with the mentality of their citizens. The problem, however, was that one cannot simply will a trained fighting force into existence overnight by ‘throwing money’ at volunteers.

Too often, the critics commenting upon colonial defence would come to the same conclusion that the militia units were not up to the task of defending their respective colonies, despite all their best intentions. The following is an excerpt from an article in the *British Colonist*, dated 4 January 1872 and entitled “Fenians! War Ships!! Police!!!”, in which the author is commenting on the need to rely upon the Royal Navy to defend the colony from the threat of a Fenian invasion, a threat that had been brought to the attention of the governor six days earlier:

“It is true that there is a company of Rifle Volunteers, under the efficient command of Captain Rosco; and it is equally indisputable that the company includes several good shots. But it is problematical to what extent it would be safe to rely upon this force as a means of repelling a Fenian invasion. If we are correctly informed that it has lapsed into a torpid state, it would, perhaps, be wisest not to count upon it at all as a means of defence.”¹⁴

During the lulls between threats, the views of the colonists tended to return toward apathy, and the government’s view mirrored this attitude. Funding would disappear, and militia training and the maintenance of their equipment would deteriorate right

along with it. Surprisingly, while the number of volunteers did drop, there were always those few willing to serve, even at their own expense at times. Why would they do such a thing? Whether racially, economically, or politically motivated, the peacetime neglect of these militia units by their governments was blatant and short-sighted, but that did not stop some individuals from still serving by whatever means necessary. One can only presume that it may have been out of a patriotic need to serve, or perhaps the desire to cling to the dazzle of fancy uniforms and parades, or perhaps a combination thereof. The one thing that is certain is that when the call came to serve, they answered, in spite of critics who decried them as unable to contribute substantially to colonial defence. Not until the colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia amalgamated and joined Confederation did the militia units of the west coast gain a measure of permanency.

Confederation and the Cusp of Canadian Military Eras

On 16 October 1871, almost three months after British Columbia joined confederation, Militia District No. 11 was established by the federal government when it assumed responsibility for defence. The existing militia units were disbanded and reorganized, and new units were permanently established with funding from Ottawa.^{15,16} While few present-day reserve regiments claim to be able to trace their lineage back to the colonial era, these claims have been difficult to verify as a direct result of the fact that the units referred to were officially disbanded. Further study into both individual unit lineage claims and national trends therein, as well as the possible need to re-define Canadian Armed Forces guidelines on this subject is warranted, given this country’s unique military history. Regardless of the ‘official’ continuity between colonial and post-confederation units, there are still many parallels one can draw from past to present.



The Fenian threat to the west did not materialize as it did in the east, depicted here with the desperate Fenian charge near Ridgeway Station in Upper Canada, 2 June 1866.

Within their community, militia regiments often served the colony by contributing more than just protection. Their training was occasionally a source of entertainment, and their drill halls routinely became integral parts of colonial social life, which included the fundraising necessary for their existence. Today, many reserve units make a concerted effort to continue to contribute to their communities beyond defence. On Vancouver Island, the island's reserve medical unit, 11 (Victoria) Field Ambulance, annually supports the British Columbia Boomer's Ride by providing medical coverage, logistical support, and many riders. The funds raised by the ride, and an annual gala dinner held for Boomer's Legacy, go toward those in need in Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Jamaica, thus contributing to the well-being of the global community.¹⁷

As new dangers arose, be they aboriginal, American, or Fenian, the colonists rallied behind their militias, swelling their ranks, bringing with them funding and the ardent fervor of patriotism – only to be withdrawn when the threat of the moment had passed.

NOTES

- For more information on the British volunteer rifle corps movement, see Hugh Cunningham, *The Volunteer Force: A Social and Political History, 1859–1908*, (London: Croom Helm, 1977).
- B.A. McKelvie and Willard E. Ireland, "The Victoria Voltigeurs," in *The British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XX (July–October 1956), pp. 221–239.
- Ibid.*
- Ibid.*
- Ibid.*, quoting Douglas to John Tod, 7 January 1853. James Douglas, Private Papers, Second Series, Transcript, pp. 36–38.
- Crawford Killian, *Go Do Some Great Thing: The Black Pioneers of British Columbia* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., 1978), p.135.
- Ibid.*
- Canadian Military History Gateway, at http://www.cmhg.gc.ca/cmh/page-536-eng.asp#endnote_126.
- Frances M. Woodward, "The Influence of the Royal Engineers on the Development of British Columbia," in *BC Studies: The British Columbian Quarterly*, No. 24 (Winter 1974–1975), pp. 19–21.
- Ibid.*
- Derek Pethick, *Victoria: The Fort* (Vancouver, BC: Mitchell Press Limited, 1968).
- Dorothy Blakey Smith (ed.), *Lady Franklin Visits the Pacific Northwest, February to April 1861, April to July 1870* (Victoria, BC: Provincial Archives of British Columbia Memoir No. XI, 1974).
- The Royal Westminster Regiment, at <http://www.army.gc.ca/iaol/143000440001719/index-Eng.html>.
- Although it is inferred in this article that Captain Rosco was the commanding officer of the Victoria Volunteer Rifle Corps, I was unable to find any corroborating evidence to this effect.
- Reginald H. Roy, "The Early Militia and Defence of British Columbia, 1871–1885," in *The British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XVIII (January–April, 1954), pp. 1–28.
- D.M. Schurman, "Esquimalt: Defence Problem, 1865–1887," in *The British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XIX (January–April, 1955), pp. 57–69.
- For more information on Boomer Rides and Boomer's Legacy, see <http://www.boomerslegacy.ca/about/history-and-goals/>.

The public's opinion of the militia still waxes and wanes, depending upon local and world events. When disaster strikes at home, their members are the country's beloved warriors and servants, vaunted above all others as selfless, heroic volunteers risking their lives to protect their fellow Canadians from fires, floods, and blizzards alike – until the fires are gone, the waters recede, and the storms abate, and reservists then go back to being students and employees. And yet still, as was the case in the colonial era, men (and now women), regardless of age, ethnicity, and religious affiliation, continue to enlist in the Canadian Forces Reserves.

Conclusion

It is true that today there are many more materialistic reasons for joining the Reserves, such as money for tuition, the allure of modern weapons, and the opportunity for free travel. However, those who make a career of the reserves must have some other reasons, and one can only surmise as to what those reasons might be. Is it the pomp and circumstance of traditional formal dinners, a rarity in today's society? Is it the desire to cling to memories of past operations and exercises? Is it a search for glory and recognition in one's spare time? Or is it as pure and simple as the patriotic desire to serve one's country in whatever capacity one can? Whatever the reason, be it selfish or altruistic, one thing is certain. We as a society ought to support the Reserves regardless of politics or economics. Give their members the consistent resources they need to protect us, and honour them by allowing them to trace their regimental lineages back to their colonial beginnings.

