



VIMM Newsletter

Spring 2025

Vancouver Island Military Museum

VIMM President Awarded King Charles Coronation Medal

VIMM President, Roger Bird, has been awarded the King Charles III Coronation medal. This distinction is awarded to Canadians who have made a significant contribution to Canada or to a particular province, territory, region of, or community in, Canada, or attained an outstanding achievement abroad that brings credit to Canada. Roger has been a volunteer at the museum for twenty-nine years, and president for the past eighteen. He has served in every capacity - tour guide, treasurer, secretary, greeter, and display designer. Roger was, of course, one of those primarily responsible for moving the museum to its current location in 2012 and in designing and building the extensive displays. He has also been instrumental in designing a succession plan for the museum and in arranging a joint management agreement with the City of Nanaimo which assures the future independent existence of the museum. This included making presentations to city committees and to the council. Roger served in the RCAF for thirty-four years, retiring as a captain. Never satisfied with the status quo, Roger has always moved the museum forward and taken a keen interest in veterans and their families. He has gained recognition for his efforts from the Veterans Affairs Commission. Roger has been active in Nanaimo with Crime Stoppers and the British Columbia Crime Stoppers Board. In 2013, he was made a Phil Harris Fellow of Rotary International, and, in 2017, he was presented with a BC Community Achievement Award. Roger is stepping down as president, but will continue, with his wife Heather Neil, to work in our medal shop, mounting and preserving military medals. He will also continue greeting visitors, explaining our displays, and entertaining all with his knowledge, warmth and sense of humour.

Well done Roger Bird.



Lisa Barron, Member of Parliament for Nanaimo-Lady Smith, presented the King Charles III Coronation Medal to VIMM President Roger Bird.

Women's War Work – The Home Front

By Heather Neil

The Second World War changed life for women in Canada forever. Before the war, it was the custom for a woman to quit her job once she married, and turn all her attention to the role of a full-time housewife.

All that changed with the advent of the war. The shortage of men at home opened up jobs for women. In effect, they picked up where the men left off, filling in job vacancies in factories, farms, and offices to keep the country running. Out of a total Canadian population of 11 million people, only about 600,000 women held permanent jobs prior to the war. The wartime female labour force grew to 1,200,000 souls (including 261,000 in weapons related work, and 50,000 in uniform).

Canada had its own “Rosie the Riveter”, the symbolic working woman who laboured in factories for the war effort. Women worked shoulder to shoulder in factories, on airfields, and on farms. They built parts for ships and aircraft, and manufactured ammunition. They drove buses, taxis, and streetcars. This level of female participation in the



workplace was a first for Canada.

Women also worked tirelessly in the home. They knitted socks, scarves, and mitts and prepared parcels for Canadians overseas; gathered materials for scrap collection drives, and helped people displaced by the war by providing clothes and setting

up refugee centres. To deal with war time shortages, women became experts at doing more with less. They planted Victory Gardens to supply much-needed fruits and vegetables to their families and communities.

With their sons overseas, many farm wives took on extra work. They drove the tractor, plowed the fields, put up hay, and hauled grain to elevators, along with tending the kitchen garden, raising chickens, pigs, and turkeys.

The Women's Institutes (WIs) and other women's groups did their part. Helping neighbours

was part of the members' daily lives and during war time this expanded to include those in the military. Making quilts, bandages, and clothing for the men overseas were just a few of their war time projects. These groups sent books, newspapers, and special treats to military hospitals overseas. They also held “send-off” and “welcome home” parties for servicemen from their area and, after the war, were in the forefront of efforts to create local war memorials.



“Ronnie the Bren Gun Girl” was Veronica Foster, assembling Bren machine guns at the Inglis factory in Toronto. The Americans copied the idea, creating “Rosie the Riveter.” Ronnie was first.

Every Women's Institute also had a “Central War Charities Fund”. These funds raised millions of dollars during the Second World War. The WIs also used their agricultural connections to cooperate with the government to establish farm labour bureaus to encourage city women to volunteer to help harvest crops. They held ‘canning clubs’ to keep up with the high demand for preserved fruits and vegetables. Their members' experiences in adapting recipes to war time shortages led them to publish special cookbooks. The average homemaker, struggling to prepare meals within the restrictions of food rationing, found these books invaluable.

In short, women on the home front served. And served well. They supported our country's war effort not only in traditional roles, but also in unprecedented new ways.

After the war, most women returned home, let go of their jobs. Their jobs again belonged to men. However, there would be positive and lasting effects from the efforts and sacrifices of the home front women of World War Two. They had proved that they could meet the challenge, both in and out of the home.

President's Message

To say that 2025 will be a year of major change and challenges for the museum is a bit of an understatement. The good news is that we have been anticipating and preparing for this change for several years. Our AGM was held on March 14 th when the following changes to our board of directors were announced. President, Roger Bird is stepping down from his position as president but, thankfully, will remain as Past President, and also take on the duties of Secretary-Treasurer. Roger has guided the museum through some trying times, not the least of which was the move in 2011 from The North Town Centre Mall to our current location in the Centennial Building located in the downtown core. The Mall, which had served us well, had been our home since the museum society was created in 1986. Roger joined the society as a volunteer in 1995 and became president in 2003. We owe him a tremendous debt of gratitude for his commitment and dedication in establishing the museum as an important member of the City of Nanaimo's Cultural and Heritage partnership. With respect to our board of directors, I will be taking over as President and Greg Devenish will become Vice President. Jim Dickinson, who has been a volunteer since 2001, has been elected as a director and brings a wealth of business experience to the group. He is a most-welcome addition to the management team. The next important issue addressed at the AGM was the Co-Management agreement with the City of



The Vancouver Island Military Museum overlooking Nanaimo Harbour.

Nanaimo and the hiring of a General Manager. I am glad to report that the necessary steps to complete both are well in hand and we expect to have them in place by May 1 st . The Co-Management agreement and the addition of a General Manager to the management team will be essential in charting the direction of the Vancouver Island Military Museum for the foreseeable future.

Brian McFadden.

Medal Mounting

The VIMM will gladly mount your medals in court mounting or in a frame. Contact us for further information and prices.



Canadian Rocket Artillery

By Angus Scully

Rocket artillery plays a daily part in the war in Ukraine and is used extensively by both sides. The Ukrainian Army has made very good use of the American High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), considered by some to be one of the most important weapons keeping the Russians at bay. HIMARS is also used by the UK, Australia, Poland Jordan, Romania, and Singapore. Canada does not have any rocket artillery, but, at the end of the Second World War Canada had been instrumental in developing rocket artillery and made good use of it in battle.

In 1943, LCol Michael Wardell began designing an area rocket artillery system for the British Army but received little support. However, LCol Eric Harris of the Royal Canadian Artillery was impressed with Wardell's work and convinced Canadian Military Head Quarters to support the project. Two batteries were tested in May 1944, impressing Brigadier H. O. N. Brownfield, senior gunner of First Canadian Army, who recommended further Canadian Army support. Under Canadian leadership, development proceeded, testing was carried out, and troops from Canadian light anti-aircraft units were retrained to form two rocket batteries. The rockets were developed from Royal Navy warheads, RAF rocket motors, and army fuses. Each war head had the equivalent explosive power of a 5.5-inch artillery shell.

At first, the system was called the Land Mattress, after the effect of the rockets hitting an area. A battery had about 12 projectors (launchers). Each projector fired 32 rockets per salvo and reloading took seven to ten minutes. With a battery firing a full salvo, 384 rockets could land on a target area in 7 seconds. The first combat operations were carried out in November 1944, in support of the assault on Walcheren Island, Netherlands, when

764 rockets were fired in two

salvoes. Further operations in January 1945 supported the British Army. In February 1945, the now named First Canadian Rocket Battery fired in support of Operation Veritable, the Canadian Army campaign in the Rhineland of Germany. In March 1945, supporting the crossing of the Rhine River, the Battery fired 13 300 rockets on thirty-three targets. By April 1945, in Germany, the two batteries operating, were the equivalent of an artillery regiment. In the last days of the war, the rocket batteries were supporting 4 Canadian Division (Armoured). No men from the rocket batteries were killed by enemy action, but Gunner Wallace Knezovich of Vancouver and Gunner Frederick James Craig from London were killed when a truck load of rockets exploded. Without the support of First Canadian Army and the pioneering work of Canadian artillery personnel in support of LCol Wardell, there would not have been any rocket artillery in the campaign in North West Europe.

For More Information

D. C. Knight., RCA, 1944-1945
<https://archive.org/details/1-cdn-rocket-battery-1944-1945>

On Display at VIMM

Canadian Artillery 1939-1946.



or scan **HERE**
to read the article.



Launcher at Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.



Canadian rocket gunners loading a launcher, 1944.

First Canadian Parachute Battalion: From Normandy to the Russians

By Greg Devenish



80th Anniversary of the End of the Second World War

the road to surrender...surely must be the end of the German Army." Chasing the Germans was the Russian Army advancing towards Denmark. The First Canadian Parachute Battalion was the only Canadian unit to meet the Russians.

The Battalion was created in 1942 with initial training in the USA and the UK. Morale was very high, and a special esprit-de-corps soon developed in the unit. In March 1943, all training was moved to Shilo, Manitoba.

First Canadian Parachute Battalion was added to the 6th British Airborne Division. British Brigadier James Hill wrote, *The arrival of the Canadians was both a matter of delight and great responsibility...they were the only Canadian troops, entirely cut off from their army.* The 6th British Parachute Division dropped into Normandy in the early hours of D Day operations in 1944, fortifying the eastern flanks of the invasion beaches, securing the bridges over the River Orne, and taking out the coastal battery at Merville. On 6 June, the Canadians met all their objectives. For the remainder of the Normandy campaign the battalion acted as an infantry unit and returned in early September to England for reorganization.

In the last weeks of April 1945, the First Canadian Parachute battalion rode British tanks from the Elbe River to Wismar, Germany. Sgt Anderson wrote, *"We are advancing at a great rate, passing German units armed to the teeth... on the outskirts of a built-up area we are fired on... the guns level the buildingsand away we go... We forge into the town... soon fully armed German troops are flooding down*



Inspection of 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion at Bulford by George VI on May 15, 1944. The King is shaking hands with Major D.J. Wilkins.

I was standing by the door and almost as soon as we crossed, we started the jump. The aircraft was going in faster than usual because of the flak, which spread out the troops a bit. C.S.M Kemp wrote about the fierce fighting around a fortified farm, While we were organizing for the attack our Bren Guns were setting up on the flanks to give covering fire ...I had a Sten gun. We were about 200 yards from the houses – [Capt. Sam]

McGowan said let's go... We kept low...the Bren gun coverage making them keep their heads down, we were able to get close enough to lob grenades. We ran in right after the explosions and shot up everyone still there. For his leadership and courage C.S.M. Kemp was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.



C.S.M. Kemp receiving DCM from General Montgomery in April 1945.

In March 1945, the Allies crossed the Rhine River and "Operation Varsity" was the last airborne operation of the war. The battalion was given the task to knock out German gun-pits, fortified houses, and the village of Bergerfurth. Company Sergeant Major (CSM) John Kemp, from Nanaimo, stated,

As we crossed the Rhine we were already standing in the aircraft.

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Following the Battle for the Rhine, the Canadians were back in the thick of the fighting. The push was on to move north to the Baltic to stop the Russian advance. It was a brilliant dash, securing bridges over the Dortmund-Ems canal, moving cross country to the Weser River, crossing the Elbe River, and on to Wismar. Time and speed were of the essence.

Sgt. Anderson described those early days in April, and dealing with German prisoners and civilians became a problem.

The advance generally from the 10 th to the 17 th was a day-to-day struggle ...men are wounded and killed in isolated rear-guard action, but no major assault is called for...We are making 15 miles a day...Prisoners are becoming a headache. We have no facilities to handle them, and we can't spare men to guard them...In a quiet moment looking at perhaps 50 prisoners, it suddenly occurs to me that the age is perhaps 15 years, the kids have tears in their eyes...

The Canadians crossed the Elbe and into Wismar. On the afternoon of 2 May the Russians arrived. A stand-off occurred and it was decided to send a Canadian delegation to Russian headquarters for further talks. The Canadians were surprised to be part of a celebration, complete with a banquet and bottles of vodka.



First Canadian Parachute Battalion meets Russians in Wismar, Germany.

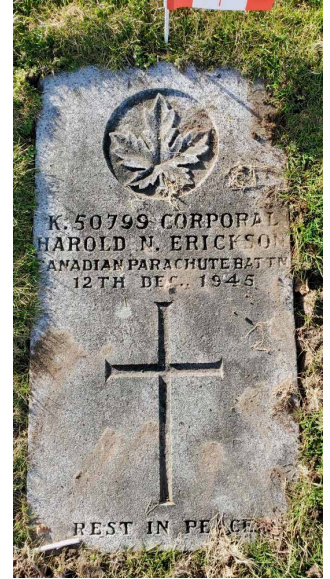
With the war winding down, relations between Canadians and the Russians had soured. Roadblocks to Wismar were manned. Russian visits were restricted and no Russian armor allowed. Sgt Anderson wrote,

The Russians are becoming more of a problem. They are allowed to pass freely through our lines and roadblock ...they are still entering our lines in a drunken

condition. This occurs both day and night. ...The Russians are drawn to the large city...our orders are to keep the lid on the situation... which often means turning the other cheek. A very difficult pose for our men.

On 8 May, the war in Europe was over. The solution for Wismar was decided at a higher level by Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin at Yalta. The British 6 th Division stood down and Wismar came under Russian control. British Brigadier James Hill of the 6 th Airborne said,

I remember thinking as my 1 st Canadian Parachute Battalion set sail for Halifax...what splendid ambassadors for their great country...they were called upon and paid the full price:128 men never returned to Canada; 294 had been carried off the field of battle wounded: 84 suffered in German camps. A casualty list of over 500 men...



Harold Erickson of Nanaimo served with the First Canadian Parachute Battalion in all of its operations but was tragically killed in a logging accident in December 1945, shortly after returning home. He is buried in Nanaimo.

ON DISPLAY AT VMM



Company Sergeant Major John Kemp of Nanaimo.

Canada Defended Alaska 1942

By Angus Scully



“Victory Over Kiska” by Rick Thistle. Ken Boomer of 111 Squadron RCAF shot down a Japanese float plane on 25 September 1942. A model of Boomer’s plane is on display at VIMM.

In the early months of 1942, the defence of the west coast of North America was in chaos. Neither Canada nor the United States had sufficient forces available, and co-operation was in the earliest stages. The port of Prince Rupert, in British Columbia, was vulnerable to Japanese attack but had no terrain suitable for an airbase. The United States offered Annette Island in Alaska as a base where the Royal Canadian Air Force could operate and help defend both Prince Rupert and southern Alaska.

RCAF 115 Squadron flying Bolingbroke bombers moved there in May, becoming the first Canadian force ever stationed on US territory. To get around US Customs tariffs on supplies and equipment, American Secretary of State Cordell Hull designated the RCAF force as “distinguished visitors,” thus granting free entry of goods.

RCAF 111 Squadron flying Kittyhawk fighters and 8 Squadron (Bolingbrokes) moved further north in Alaska to Yakutat in June, just when Japan attacked Dutch Harbour, Alaska, killing 43 Americans, and then invaded Attu and Kiska Islands in the Aleutians. RCAF 111 and 8 Squadrons then moved further north to Elmendorf Field near

Anchorage. At this point the RCAF counted as 25% of the air forces available in Alaska. The last RCAF move north was 111 Squadron to Umnak Island, a desolate base, where the crews lived in floorless tents, keeping warm under sleeping bags and four blankets. RCAF 111 Squadron took part in an attack on Kiska, led by Squadron Leader K. A. Boomer, an experienced leader who had shot down a Junkers 88 over England in 1941. Boomer shot down a Japanese “Rufe” (seaplane version of the Zero), the only air victory by a member of the RCAF Home War Establishment. He was also the only member of an RCAF squadron credited with air victories over the Germans and Japanese. Boomer was killed in action flying a Mosquito over Germany

in 1944. He was awarded the DFC, and the US Air Medal. By 1943, there was little chance of Japanese attack on North America, and a location for a landing field had been found near Prince Rupert. Thus, the RCAF wound down operations in Alaska, concentrating most of its, by then, more numerous and modern forces on Vancouver Island. The Vancouver Island Military Museum has displays of the air defence of the west coast and one about the joint US - Canadian invasion of Kiska Island - which is another story. An excellent source: https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2018/mdn-dnd/D12-16-7-2-eng.pdf



RCAF Bolingbroke bomber, Alaska 1942. Pilot J. M. McArthur looks quite “dashing.”

DISPATCHES

from VIMM



HAPPY RETIREMENT RICHARD HARDING

Everybody at the VIMM wishes a happy retirement to **Richard Harding** who worked for the City of Nanaimo for 33 years, retiring as Director of Parks, Recreation, and Culture, and Deputy City Manager. Richard was instrumental in making the Centennial building available to VIMM as a new home and has been a great supporter of the museum and its future development.



Roger Bird, Richard Harding, Brian McFadden.

ORDER OF MILITARY MERIT

We are pleased to have on display the medals of Sgt. Harriet Anne O'Neill Edmond, MMM, CD. Members of Order of Military Merit are appointed for exceptional service or performance of duty.



Jim Dickinson, Roger Bird, Brian McFadden, Greg Devenish at AGM.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The AGM was held at the Grand Hotel in early March. The number of museum visitors was up again in 2024 and plans for hiring a new general manager are advanced.

Museum Directors

Brian McFadden President
Greg Devenish Vice President
Roger Bird Past President/Secretary Treasurer

Bruce Davison
Angus Scully

Jim Dickinson
Bill Brayshaw

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