



VIMM Newsletter



Fall 2019

Vancouver Island Military Museum

Remembering the Fallen: The South African War

By Angus Scully

In 1899, the Canadian government sent troops to South Africa, to fight under British command in the war against the Boer republics of Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The various Canadian contingents numbered 7 368, including 16 nursing sisters. By the time the war ended in 1902, 270 had died and 252 were wounded. The UK contingent was 355,750, Australia sent 16,500, and New Zealand 6,000.

The Canadian dead are buried in 11 cemeteries across modern South Africa. One of those listed on the memorial in the Vendusie Drift Garden of Remembrance near Paardeberg, is 21-year old Private John Henry Somers from Gordon Head, a seaside neighbourhood in the Greater Victoria city of Saanich.

Fading From Memory?

The Canadian graves in South Africa are well cared for, but today the Boer War is not often remembered in Canada – it was far away and the political controversy surrounding the war has made it an unpopular topic. Nonetheless, Canadians were sent by their government and paid a price. Despite being largely unknown today, there are reminders that the Boer War is still a part of our history, and our lives.

Memory of the Boer War survives in place names. In BC, the most obvious is the town of Ladysmith, named after the town of Ladysmith in South Africa, which was besieged by the Boer armies in 1899 and whose relief initiated some of the greatest battles of the war. Streets in this Vancouver Island town are still named after famous British generals in the war: Kitchener, Buller, Roberts, French, Baden-Powell, and Methuen. Another example is Mount Spion Kop, (and its hiking trails) near Kelowna, named after the hill near Ladysmith, South Africa, where some of the great battles of the war were fought.

Some people became well known as a result of the war. Winston Churchill became a hero and celebrity around the British Empire for his escape from Boer captivity. In 1900 he made a triumphant speaking tour of Canada and began his career in politics. Major General Robert Baden-Powell, the commander of British forces besieged in the city of Mafeking, South Africa, was celebrated for his leadership during the siege, and for writing instruction manuals on military scouting. He went on to found the Boy Scout movement. While commanding the South African Constabulary after Mafeking was relieved, Baden-Powell admired the “Boss of the Plains” field hats worn by Canadian mounted troops and ordered 10 000 for his own force to wear, later adopting them as head gear for the Boy Scouts. The North West Mounted Police (later RCMP) who had introduced this famous hat to the Canadian contingents, also later

(Continued on page 3)



The RCR at Paardeberg.



John Somers was a 21-year-old private from Gordon Head BC.

Vice President's Message

Since our last newsletter and the completion of the Gulf War exhibit, work has progressed steadily on two other new displays, the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) and a little-known story with a direct link to the plan. A short time ago a book was donated to the museum library titled, "Canada's War Grooms", and I must admit this is a story that I wasn't familiar with, in fact I couldn't find anyone who knew about the subject. It's a heart-warming story written by Judy Kozar, a retired teacher-librarian, whose painstaking research has unearthed a fascinating boy meets girl story. As her book says, "It's a story that never grows old". We added this display next to the BCATP exhibit as a fitting reminder of one of the war's happier stories.

The museum summer BBQ was again held at the Royal Canadian Legion, Branch No, 257 in Lantzville. This year 36 volunteers and spouses dined on a sumptuous menu with a choice of steak or chicken, served with a great selection of salads, local grown corn, and desserts for those with a sweet tooth. That's you Phil! A big thank you to the branch ladies' auxiliary for providing a delicious spread.

Remembrance Day is not far away and once again we are gearing up for a busy week. Tours have again been booked for several youth groups during the evenings leading up to the 11th and, as in past years, the museum will be open to visitors after the ceremony at the City Cenotaph. This is usually our busiest day of the year.

Speaking of visitors, the summer period was a record for the museum, and this seemed to be a trend throughout Vancouver Island. Tourism Nanaimo reported similar increased figures, with a large increase of overseas visitors from the U.K., Europe, the U.S., and Asia. Let's hope that trend continues.

Brian McFadden,
VIMM Vice President

Medal Mounting

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



DID YOU KNOW? Canadians died with Custer

On June 25, 1876, 236 U.S. soldiers died at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. General George Custer and 210 men died in one group, while 26 died fighting with Major Reno. Of the seventeen Canadians who served with U.S. 7th Cavalry, 8 died that day. These included Sergeant John Vickory (standard bearer) and Lieutenant William Cooke who died right near Custer. Also, Major Lieutenant McIntosh died in the opening part of the attack, under the command of Major Reno. Cooke's body was exhumed from the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument and buried in his hometown, Hamilton, Ont.

Remembering the Fallen cont'd.

officially adopted the hat, which is still part of their dress uniform and familiarly, if inaccurately, called the Stetson.

Also associated with the South African War is Mohandas Gandhi who lived in Durban South Africa at the time and organized the South African Indian Ambulance Corps. Gandhi and his volunteers helped evacuate, and tend to, the wounded, especially at the battles around Spion Kop. Gandhi and 34 of his men were awarded the Queen's South Africa Campaign medal.

In the military, terms used by the Boers have been adopted from their Afrikaans language and are commonly used around the world. Boer troops were organized into mounted units called commandoes. When the Boers circled their forces to create a defensive perimeter, it was called a laager. The Royal Canadian Dragoons adopted the springbok (an antelope) on their badge, because a sentry sounded the alert after seeing a spooked herd of springboks frightened by the stealthy approach of Boer soldiers.



The springbok badge of the Royal Canadian Dragoons.

Canadians in Battle in South Africa

The RCR at Paardeberg

In February 1900, several Boer commandoes under General Piet Cronje were in a defensive laager near Paardeberg, surrounded by a force of 30 000 British, including the 897 men of the Royal Canadian Regiment. In an attack across the Modder River, the RCR lost 18 killed and 63 wounded but played an important part in the British victory. General Roberts, the British CinC, said, "Canadian now stands for bravery, dash, and courage." Piet Cronje surrendered his force, the first Boer loss of the war, and ten percent of the total Boer army went into captivity.

The RCD and the Canadian Field Artillery at Leliefontein

In November 1900, The Royal Canadian Dragoons and "D" Battery of the Canadian Field Artillery were acting as a rear guard for a retreating British column. Attacked by a force three times their size, the Canadians held off the Boer commando. Three Canadians were awarded the Victoria Cross. The only action where Canadians have been awarded more VCs was Vimy Ridge. The Royal Canadian Dragoons celebrate Leliefontein Day annually. It is observed by the reunion of present and former Dragoons, as well as a regimental dinner and a remembrance parade.



British graves and memorials atop barren Spion Kop. The British soldiers were buried in the trenches where they died.



The Canadian Mounted Rifles wearing distinctive Canadian "Boss of the Plains" hats.



The CMR at Harts River

The 1st Battalion of the Canadian Mounted Rifles was largely recruited from the North West Mounted Police. In March 1902, CMR scouts tracked and located a Boer force that a British column then attacked. A group of 21 Canadians, under Lieutenant Bruce Carruthers, was cut off by the Boers. The Canadians refused to surrender and fought until their position was overrun. 18 of the 22 were killed or wounded. Apart from Paardeberg, Harts River was the bloodiest day of the war for Canada, with a total of 13 killed and 40 wounded. Wounded, Lt. Carruthers survived the battle and the war, and started the Canadian Signal Corps, becoming Assistant Adjutant General for Signalling in 1906.



Nursing Sister Georgina Pope.

Canadian Nurses in South Africa

Lieutenant Georgina Fane Pope was born in Charlottetown, the daughter of William Pope, a Father of Confederation. She trained as a nurse at Bellevue Hospital in New York City. Lt. Pope served two tours in South Africa. From 1899 to 1900 she was senior nurse at the British military hospital near Cape Town and, among other duties, helped care for 230 cases of enteric fever. In her second tour of duty in 1902, she was senior nursing sister of the unit of Canadian nurses in Natal. For her services in the South African War, Lt. Pope was awarded the Royal Red Cross (the first RRC was awarded to Florence Nightingale).

JERICHO BEACH: 1920-1939

By Greg Devenish

Jericho Beach seaplane base was founded in 1920 on the southern shore of English Bay, Vancouver, and played an important role in the development of civilian and military aviation in Canada from 1920 to 1939. Despite restricted funding and a struggle to establish itself, Jericho Beach would prove its worth in supporting federal agencies and lay the foundation for military operations in WWII.

It wasn't long after WWI that the government was quick to demobilize. In April 1919, the government, after heated debates, passed an aviation bill to regulate aviation in Canada. The Air Board secured one hundred aircraft and in 1920 the Canadian Air Force (CAF) was established.

The air force decided to build a series of seaplane bases across Canada. The British Government provided 100 aircraft and the U.S. government donated 12 Curtiss HS-12 flying boats. The B.C. Government donated the land and paid a portion of the construction costs for the seaplane base at Jericho. The base was rather spartan, with a large cement apron, wooden slipway, wooden frame buildings and wooden hangars with canvas walls (Bessonneau hangars). Four Curtiss HS-21 flying boats formed the backbone of the Jericho fleet.



This Curtiss HS-2L (G-CYBA) was the first aircraft assembled at Jericho in 1920. Note there is no roundel. In the background is a Bessonneau hangar.



Major Claire C. MacLaurin was appointed as the station's superintendent. He played a prominent role in expanding the base and improving the facilities. He also saw a need to generate revenue for the base and secured contracts from various Federal departments to complete forestry and anti-smuggling patrols and aerial photography. Also provided was transport for fire fighters and equipment. These activities continued throughout the 1920s. One of the more important milestones occurred in 1920 when Jericho Beach was involved in the first cross country flight (Halifax-Vancouver) which took 10 days! On September 11, 1922 Maj. MacLaurin died in an airplane crash. Truly an architect of a fledging air force, he had proved its worth. Fortunately, MacLaurin was replaced by Superintendent L.E.A. Godfrey. For the rest of the twenties Godfrey worked hard with limited budgets to keep the flying operations relevant.

On April 21, 1924 the word "Royal" was added and the RCAF was born. The adoption of the RAF's uniform and motto was a "price to pay", wrote historian Larry Milberry "for RCAF survival". At Jericho Beach, Number 1 Operational Squadron was formed.



A Vickers Vancouver had a top speed of 96 mph. Note addition of roundels and open cockpits. In 1939, the aged Vancouver was the only big asset that stood against Japanese attack.

During the Great Depression there were more restricted budgets, reducing Jericho's permanent strength to just 78 officers and 100 airmen. But the government did approve funding for five Vancouver Flying Boats. In 1933, No 1 squadron was designated No. 4 Flying Boat Squadron.

Funding was so short there was no budget for wireless communications, so Jericho Station continued to stock carrier pigeons. In 1922 MacLaurin wrote about the use of pigeons.

"We have given them (pigeons) a great many practice flights during our flying, and everyone has been successful in returning to the loft in good time. In experimenting the other day with different wrappings for throwing them from a machine in flight, one pigeon failed to clear itself from the wrapping and dropped 1000 feet into the water. However, in some miraculous way it managed to shake free and returned to the station two days later."

Throughout inter-war period the base focused on smuggling, immigration, narcotics, and fishery patrols.

Pilot Jack Hunter recalled;

“We often went out on fisheries patrol to check the amount of net being used by fishermen in Howe Sound and the Strait of Georgia...one day landing beside a... fisherman, who was using twice the legal footage limit. I signaled him to approach the aircraft and (he) started up and charged me at full bore. I pulled out a Very pistol ...and let fly at him. The Very light bounced off his deck and you never saw a boat go in reverse as fast in all your life.”

By 1936, German, Japanese, and Italian aggression sparked an increase in military spending. In 1938 No. 4 Squadron was designated a Reconnaissance Squadron and a detachment of No. 6 Torpedo Squadron arrived complete with Northrop Deltas. New seaplane bases were built at Bella Bella, Prince Rupert, Ucluelet and Alliford Bay. Jericho's Vickers Vancouver flying boats were fitted out with bomb racks and machine guns.



Jericho airmen in front of Fairchild FC-2. Note the uniforms.



A Blackburn Shark completing torpedo practice in English Bay. (You wouldn't do that today!)

On September 10, 1939, Canada declared war on Germany. Activity at Jericho Beach became more urgent and there was a tenfold increase in air activity. On September 12, a Stranraer flying boat carried out the first war time coastal patrol. During WWII, Jericho became an operational center, managing military operations on the West Coast.

Jericho represents the foundation years of the RCAF. The aircrew and ground personal were part of the early pioneers in aviation. Using obsolete surplus WWI warplanes, these aircrew developed new flying techniques, connected isolated communities and made aviation relevant by completing a number of tasks, from forestry patrols to aerial photography. More importantly, the naysayers, doubtful at first of the airplane's worth, soon recognized the value of aviation and gave the RCAF a new lease on life.



A picture of Jericho Beach Base hangars taken in 1925. Notice the permanent structures.

The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP)

By Brian McFadden

When the Second World War began, Canada was an ocean away from the scene of fighting in Europe. This geographical distance, however, would allow Canada to make one of the most important contributions to the war effort. Under an agreement signed in 1939, known as The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP), the Canadian Government agreed to provide facilities and training for airmen from every part of the British Commonwealth. This was an enormous undertaking when you consider at this time the Royal Canadian Air Force had only 4000 personnel, less than a dozen airports of its own, and training facilities for only 400 ground crew per year. Now, the RCAF was expected to train thousands of airmen and women, recruit instructors, build air bases, acquire aircraft, and develop training schools for different specialties. By war's end there were more than 150 training facilities and every province had BCATP installations.

During its time of operation, the BCATP had a fleet of 3,540 training aircraft with a ground organization of more than 104,000 men and women, and had built over 7,000 aircraft hangers, barracks, drill halls for air bases, and training schools - from coast to coast.



Training was both challenging and rigorous and pilots, wireless operators, navigators, bomb-aimers, air gunners, and flight engineers went through months of rigorous training at specialized schools.

Canada had become, in the words of U.S. President Roosevelt, "The Aerodrome of Democracy."

Coming on the heels of the Great Depression, the economic benefits of the BCATP were warmly welcomed by Canadian communities across the country. Even before the plan was implemented, local officials began lobbying the government to build an aerodrome in their community. Canadians took great pride in making the trainees feel part of their communities, and air force personnel warmly welcomed the morale boosting recreation that came from meeting with local civilians who were often invited to station parties and dances. Many women's organizations provided recreational diversions for airmen with summer fairs and winter carnivals, while air station bands frequently provided the entertainment for community events. Although the BCATP was only in operation for five years, its widespread impact can still be felt in many communities today.



War Grooms

By Brian McFadden



By Judy Kozar

Boy meets girl. It's a story that never grows old.
Yet, occasionally, it gets a new twist

During WW II, tens of thousands of Canadian young men served overseas, with the vast majority beginning their overseas service in Britain. As a result of marriages between Canadian servicemen and girls from other countries, Canada welcomed 48,000 War Brides and 22,000 children to its shores after the war ended.

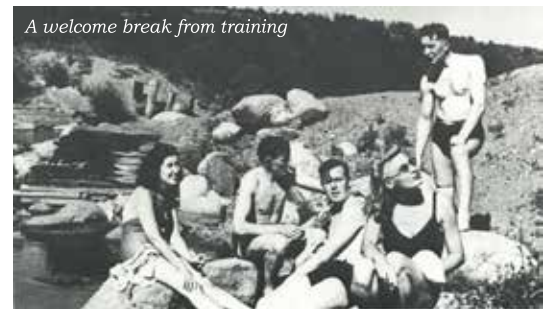
What is less well documented is the story of "Canada's War Grooms".

Many young men came to Canada because of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. Between 1940 and 1945 recruits from various countries were trained as aircrew and became graduates of the BCATP. Many trainee airmen talked about the hospitality of Canadian families who opened their homes and hearts to the young servicemen, most of whom were away from home for the first time.

Because of this scheme there were thousands of eligible young men in training bases across the country and, naturally, there were just as many local girls eager to meet them. The Second World War was a cataclysmic event which changed the lives of millions of people. It was an intense time when people tended to live for the moment. Many Canadian girls fell head over heels in love with these handsome, dashing young men in uniform, and couples often married after whirlwind courtships. Lasting friendships were forged between townspeople and those posted to training schools across the country, and after the war ended in 1945, many young women left to start new lives overseas with airmen they met and married during training. In contrast, as a result of relationships formed during their time in Canada, hundreds of Allied servicemen would return to marry their sweethearts and settle into communities all across the country. Canada's War Brides and War Grooms changed forever the fabric of Canadian society.



Canadian families made sure BCATP trainees had a Christmas dinner.



A welcome break from training



Aircrew trainees hosted by local Canadian families.



War groom Ernie and his Canadian wife Joan on their wedding day.

DISPATCHES

from VIMM



Remembrance Day

VIMM will be open following the ceremonies at the Nanaimo cenotaph and until 4:00pm. Admission is free.



Ralph Clark 1923-2019

Ralph Clark was a VIMM volunteer for 17 years. He was born in Vulcan, Alberta, and joined the RCAF in 1941. Flying Officer Clark served in Bomber Command with 158 Squadron (RAF) and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC). He was a man of great integrity; kind, thoughtful, a loving father, and was loved and admired by all.



Former VIMM volunteer and current supporter, Kristian Baxter.

Former VIMM volunteer freed from Syrian prison

Former VIMM volunteer freed from Syrian prison
Welcome home Kristian Baxter! Kristian was seized and jailed without explanation while visiting Syria last year. He was freed in August. Kristian thanked the Lebanese government, the Canadian ambassador to Lebanon, Global Affairs Canada, and his family for their efforts in freeing him. CHEK News, interviewed VIMM vice president Brain McFadden about Kristian's release and reported: "He's obviously been through a tremendous ordeal and I hope he recovers very quickly from it and gets back to normal life." "McFadden says Baxter has a keen interest in history and was always friendly with the museum's visitors. And he says Baxter looked today the way he'd expect a prisoner of war would." (CHEK News)

Coming Events

VIMM volunteers are reminded that the annual Christmas lunch will be on Thursday November 28 at the Grand Hotel, from 11am to 3pm. Mark your calendar!



VIMM Volunteer Reece Kuhn has joined the Tuesday afternoon crew. Reece is a student at Vancouver Island University.

Museum Directors and Staff

Roger Bird, President

Brian McFadden, Vice President

Phil Harris, Secretary

Pat Murphy, Armoury

Jack Ziebart, Computer

Bruce Davison, Volunteer Coordinator

Bill Brayshaw, Acquisitions

Angus Scully, Newsletter Editor

100 Cameron Avenue, Nanaimo, BC, V9R 0C8 250-753-3814 | ois@vimms.ca | www.vimms.ca

Back issues of the VIMM Newsletter are available on our web site