

THE PACIFIC COAST MILITIA RANGERS

By Bill Nangle CD

Very early in 1942 the population of British Columbia became nervous, as the possibility of Japanese attacks on their coast became a very real possibility. Even today a person only has to cruise a small portion of the nearly 26,000 km of the provinces rugged coastline to realize that any enemy force could land there unnoticed, and many people started to realize this fact.

The public concern was fanned by the realization that Hong Kong, Malaya, Burma, and the Philippines had all been unprepared for a Japanese invasion and had in fact either fallen to the enemy or were currently under attack. British Columbians reflected their concerns in letters to the editor in the various daily newspapers around the province. The letters regularly appealed for the establishment of local home guard companies.

Major-General R.O. Alexander, Commander of Pacific Command advised the National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa in writing that he had been under considerable pressure to form home guard companies, and that Pacific Command was giving it serious consideration. The General also noted in his letter that in some locations members of the BC Provincial Police had already started to organize local auxiliary units without any aid or support from the Defence department.

Of interest is the fact that several communities, such as Grand Forks, Stewart, Courtenay, and Victoria, had organized their own unofficial home guard units even before Pearl Harbour was attacked. It is well known that the members of the Victoria Fish and Game Club organized patrols of the Sooke Lake pipeline and Jordan River power station six months before they were officially organized as Number 1 Company, PCMR. Number 1 Company had a strength of 297 volunteers.

On 23 February 1942, the Department of National Defence issued a press release, which announced its intention to form home guard units in "every B.C. coast town and strategic point in the interior." The initial name of "Coast Defence Guards" was soon replaced by the designation "Pacific Coast Militia Rangers" (PCMR), and the unit was officially formed on 14 March 1942. Major Tommy Taylor was appointed the first Commanding Officer, and was soon promoted to Lt Colonel.

Many men in BC could not join the regular forces as they were in reserved occupations. Some of them were too old, some too young, and

others were medically unfit for fulltime service. But all could enlist in the PCMR, and they did so in droves. The response to the initial recruiting drive was overwhelming, with Ranger Companies first organized in the areas of greatest concern such as Vancouver Island and the coastal areas.

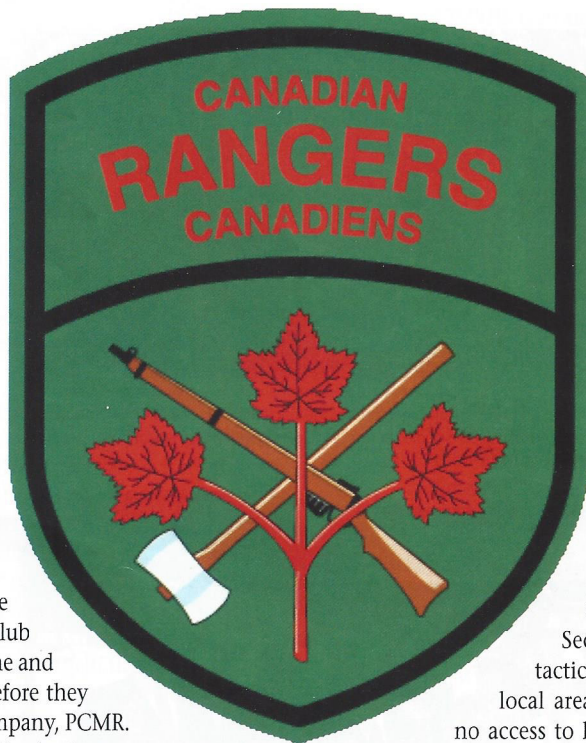
Originally the Rangers were organized as a reserve militia unit, but on 12 August 1942 the Federal Government decided to make them part of the Active Militia of Canada. This move to the active militia required the Department of National Defence to compensate any man injured in training. Even though the Rangers were a part of the Canadian Army, they received no pay because they served voluntarily. Many of the Ranger new recruits

had had previous military service during the First World War. Within the first four months some 10,000 recruits had stepped forward and enlisted in the PCMR and, by August 1943, the Rangers reached their peak strength of 14,849 men.

The Rangers did not wear regular army battledress. They wore tan floppy hats, and tan coloured "Dry-Bak" hunting jackets and pants, which were much more suited for wear in the coastal areas. As had their eighteenth century Ranger ancestors, the PCMR discarded traditional military dress and adapted clothing much more suitable to their environment.

The role of the PCMR was three fold. Firstly they were to patrol their local area and report any suspicious activity. Secondly, Rangers were trained in guerrilla tactics and were designed to fight only in their local area, keeping in mind that the Rangers had no access to heavy weapons. Thirdly, they were to be the eyes and ears of the regular force acting as scouts. At the time it was believed that if the PCMR were required to help fend off an invasion, they would be most successful by engaging in hit-and-run tactics, and obstruct any enemy invasion force.

We know now, through available historical documents, that the Japanese were in fact looking at the Canadian west coast. What's more in 1941, the Japanese cypher code was broken and it revealed that the Japanese were in fact taking a great interest in the BC coastline. Additionally, in January 1941, copies of a message from Tokyo to Washington were sent to the Japanese consulate in Vancouver,



advising them to switch their emphasis from publicity and propaganda to intelligence gathering. This telegram made special reference to the 'utilization of our Second Generations and our resident nationals.' This is one of the reasons the Japanese were removed from the coastal areas and placed in internment camps.

War did in fact come to the west coast on June 20th, 1942, when the Estevan Point lighthouse, on Vancouver Island, was shelled by a Japanese submarine. This act led people to really believe that BC was next on the Japanese invasion list. Luckily this invasion never took place.

The editorials of the day show that the PCMR was a valued part of the province's defence. In the minds of many British Columbians, the PCMR guarded the province, but most significantly they also provided psychological reassurance for the general population.

August 1943 saw the PCMR at what Pacific Command regarded as its peak strength. On 5 November 1943, PCMR HQ officially announced its intentions by a letter that highly recommended the Ranger companies proceed to reduce their numbers. It should go without saying that this letter did not go over very well at all with the Rangers. Many of the Company Commanders wrote their HQ to object to this order.

In the end the Rangers soldiered on as all good soldiers do. The final disbanded order came in September 1945. At its height, the PCMR consisted of 128 companies, and at its finally disbanded it consisted of 122 companies.

Less than two years later on May 23, 1947, the Canadian Government, realizing the value of the PCMR, formally established the Canadian Rangers as a sub-component of the army reserve, to provide a limited military presence in many of Canada's remote locations.

Today, they are still a totally volunteer force, and there are approximately 5000 Rangers in 166 Patrols, which in turn are looked after by five headquarters located at Victoria, BC, St. Jean, Quebec, Borden,



Ontario, Gander, Newfoundland, and Yellowknife, NWT. These HQ units are staffed with full time regular and reserve soldiers.

Today's Rangers are responsible for conducting sovereignty and surveillance patrols, conducting Northern Warning Site patrols, and reporting suspicious and unusual activities in their area. They are also used to collect local data of military significance, and help with local search and rescue operations.

So 75 years after they were first formed, the Rangers are still out there helping protect Canada and following their motto: "Vigilans".