

# B.C.'s Rugged Rangers

By Graham Chandler

THE HOME FRONT

After the surprise attack on the U.S. Navy base at Pearl Harbor on the early morning of Dec. 7, 1941, anti-Japanese sentiment quickly grew along the west coast of British Columbia. Fears of a Japanese invasion were real and traditional military protection of the west coast and B.C. interior was stretched thinly. At the same time, thousands of able-bodied men in farming and resource sectors like logging, mining, fishing and others weren't available for overseas service. It was they who volunteered for the Pacific Coast Militia Rangers (PCMR), which grew to 15,000 men in 138 companies spread across B.C. and the Yukon, each with a local civilian in charge.

Ottawa set the wheels in motion. The month after the Pearl Harbor attack saw a letter from the chief of general staff at Department of National Defence to Pacific Command in Victoria asking it to do everything possible to "satisfy public opinion in respect to military security, provided it can be done without prejudice to our major war effort." Suggestions included "home guard platoons or detachments as part of the reserve army."

Organization of the PCMR then proceeded in quick time. Priority was given to Vancouver Island and the mainland coast, where loggers were among the first to enlist. Retired British Army brigadier E.J. Ross, who had served with guerillas on the Northwest Frontier of India, led the recruitment effort in the Duncan area, and summed up the loggers in a Vancouver Sun interview on

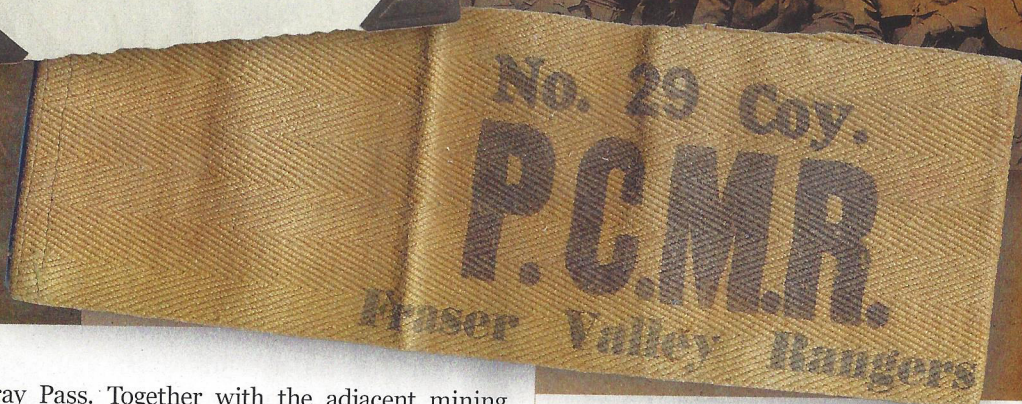
April 22, 1942: "What we need in these Rangers, damn it all, are men who know the bush, real men who are strong and who have got ahead on their own." He said he discovered that loggers can make roads faster and better than any Royal Engineers, they can handle dynamite and control rivers and streams. Another retired brigadier, W.J. Colquhoun, commander of the Nanaimo force, was quoted, too: "Let the Japs come. They'll find a mash of hornets' nests if they attack this island."

Under the leadership of Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas H. Taylor from its inception, by April 1942, 5,000 men and 35 PCMR companies had been organized. They came forward in droves, from 15-year-old boys to Boer War veterans in their 70s. After four months, 10,000 had been sworn in.

University of Victoria Professor Emeritus Robert O'Brien remembers how he was recruited while working at Pioneer Mines in the B.C. interior as an apprentice accountant. "One day in early 1942, a little man in khaki jodhpurs arrived at the mine and the superintendent said 'All single men with a rifle will report to the sports field forthwith,'" he recalls. "I had my dad's Winchester 30-30 deer rifle and had just adjusted the sights, so I was the winner of a shootout." He says he was then put in charge of a squad to defend the nearby 7,500-foot



Clockwise from lower opposite page: Rangers practise shooting; a copy of *The Ranger*, October, 1942; Staff Sergeant George Stevens (right) and another recruit; rangers train with French troops, March 1944; PCMR armband for No. 29 Company.



McGillivray Pass. Together with the adjacent mining town of Gold Bridge, Pioneer Mines formed its own No. 35 Company of the PCMR.

Another Victoria resident recalls when his father, Frank Joseph Hronek, signed up with No. 1 Company of the PCMR in Victoria in September 1942. "He was a logger by trade," says Joe Hronek. "He had enlisted in the 2nd Battalion Canadian Scottish in Alberni, but received an honourable discharge due to a violent reaction to a vaccination for overseas duty." Hronek says his father was typical of the keen PCMR interest among those unsuitable for military service for a variety of reasons.

Ron Mayled of Bullhead City, Ariz., who was in his early teens at the time, echoes that enthusiasm. He remembers the day his father Henry, a Trail smelter worker, enlisted in the PCMR in Kinnaird, near Castlegar—No. 53 Company PCMR. "One evening a military officer went house to house and signed them up," he says. "They had a good response, most of the guys wanted in." Typical of their vigilant duties, on one occasion he was sent down to the Columbia River to determine how wide it was at Kinnaird. Power lines for the smelter—a potential military target—ran along the bank.

Typical, too, of the Rangers' duties and exuberance, a May 1942 Vancouver Province story reported them in early action planning. "Right now the Rangers are meeting in 53 different places around B.C.," it said, with an example: "They know places they'd permit the

Japs to infiltrate for 30 miles—because 30 miles inland is a narrows where they could wipe out the entire invasion force. They know canyons where they plan to scale 150-foot trees and just snipe."

Uniforms were originally a simple left armband with the initials PCMR and the company designation. But in time, they had tunics styled after the practical timber cruisers' jacket and pants, with a hat similar to today's Tilley. The Rangers' hat badge, authorized on Aug. 12, 1942, consisted of a crossed carbine and logger's axe backed by a totem pole behind a circle with the words 'Pacific Coast Militia Rangers' around a maple leaf. Underneath was the PCMR Latin motto, *vigilans, for vigilans*.

Equipment was always basic. Members could use their own rifles—ammunition was supplied—or they could purchase a rifle for \$5 with a government certificate. Most were .303s, 30.06s or 30-30s.

Some companies had a marine element. The Gambier Island group—No. 119 Company—consisted of 40 First World War veterans. Led by Captain Francis Drage, the local Justice of the Peace, it had a marine patrol unit headed by a professional boom master.

PHOTOS: CFB ESQUIMALT NAVAL AND MILITARY MUSEUM—VR996.005.231; CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM; CFB ESQUIMALT NAVAL AND MILITARY MUSEUM—VR996.005.046; CFB ESQUIMALT NAVAL AND MILITARY MUSEUM—VR996.005.205; CFB ESQUIMALT NAVAL AND MILITARY MUSEUM



From top: PMCR No. 29 Company, the Fraser Valley Rangers; rangers relaxing; the PCMR cap badge; a lumberman with rifle from *The Ranger*. Opposite page: The stand down issue of *The Ranger*, October 1945; rangers on patrol; a stand down parade in Kelowna, B.C.



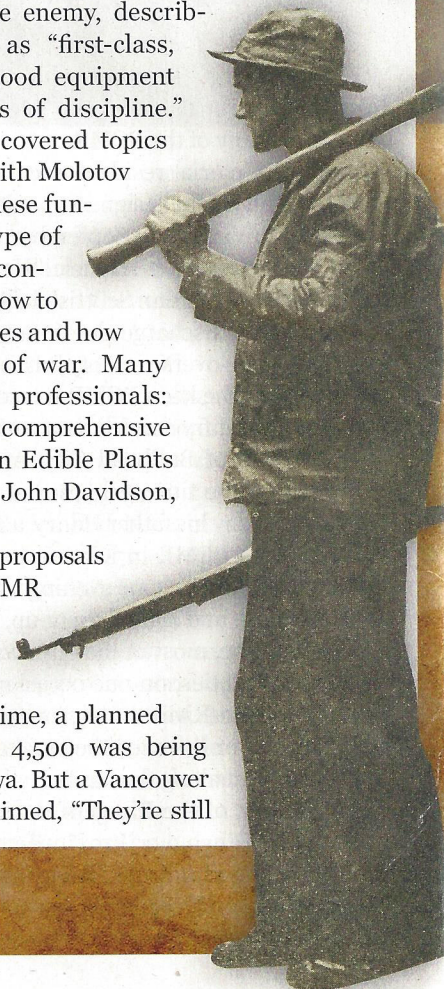
Selected training on the basic essentials of guerilla warfare was given by regular army units, such as two-week stints at the Royal Canadian Engineers' training centre at Vedder Crossing (near Chilliwack in the Fraser Valley). Those trained would head back to their units and pass on skills like shooting, map-reading and travelling in the bush. Often this would consist of weekend exercises and manoeuvres, night and day, summer and winter. It was all without pay, but training costs, out-of-pocket expenses and travel were generally covered.

The force was in many ways peculiarly non-military too, according to one researcher. Kerry Steeves, in his 1990 MA thesis in history at the University of British Columbia, wrote that democracy often ruled decisions. "The PCMR operated in a democratic manner: if the commander of a Ranger company was disliked by his men, he could be voted out of his position," he writes. "Similarly, if Rangers disagreed with directives from PCMR headquarters they were quick to express their displeasure and threatened resignation. This would have been impossible in the regular army, but in the PCMR—composed of citizen-soldiers—it was a commonplace pattern." Steeves reckoned the social equality between ranks, and the egalitarian way in which the PCMR operated, expressed the New World frontier values of British Columbia in the 1940s.

Much information, both practical and morale-building, came with the PCMR's magazine, *The Ranger*, which provides insight into the times. The first issue,

Sept. 1, 1942, ran a rather derogatory article called *Can You Recognize A Jap?* It speaks of "buck teeth, slanted eyes, pigeon-toed, and bow-legged" characteristics. Practical articles were on hip-shooting with a Sten gun, and Morse code. Along with stories on camouflage and explosives, the second issue was easier on the Japanese enemy, describing their soldiers as "first-class, courageous, with good equipment and high standards of discipline." Subsequent issues covered topics like tank hunting with Molotov cocktails, the Japanese fundoshi (a G-string type of undergarment for concealing weapons), how to shoot at diving planes and how to treat prisoners of war. Many articles were by professionals: Volume 3 began a comprehensive seven-part series on *Edible Plants of B.C.* by Professor John Davidson, a UBC botanist.

By October 1943, proposals to wind down the PCMR were on the table. Out of the 130 Ranger units and 14,500 men at the time, a planned reduction of about 4,500 was being considered by Ottawa. But a *Vancouver Sun* editorial proclaimed, "They're still





# STAND

STAND DOWN ADDRESS BY MAJ-GEN.  
F.F. WORTHINGTON, C.B., M.C., M.M.,  
G.O.C.-in-C., PACIFIC COMMAND.

# DOWN!

"You men are the  
and Detachments of the Pacific  
over 10,000 in the Province of Briti  
may do you honour. Your work has been well done  
great satisfaction on your achievements.

When I assumed command, you were  
pleased me greatly, and these are some of the things I found  
organization;

I found that, to a great extent, you were made  
age and from men over military age, and that a gap of twenty years  
oldest of the younger group and the youngest of the older group. Many  
of you wear South African ribbons and served your country a half

I have found in you a sense of duty rarely encountered  
most manifest. You were masters of fieldcraft, woodcraft and the ambush  
but good as friends. I found the information you supplied my Headquarters  
Your methods of acquiring some of the information were strange and not  
But you got it! Your bush telegraph was marvellous as it was mysterious  
sets the like of which had never been seen ... but they were

Your work  
spotting and reporting left  
rendering these devices har



**“It was assumed  
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needed,” saying it can’t be assumed that Canada’s western seaboard is forever entirely free from danger.

But in August 1945, after two devastating atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, it became clear. As fast as it grew, the PCMR was officially disbanded a month later, on Sept. 11. Stand down ceremonies were held in several parts of the province. In one of the largest, 2,000 PCMR members marched past B.C.’s Lieutenant-Governor W.C. Woodward at Vancouver’s Brockton Oval on a fine Sunday, Oct. 1, 1945. Two weeks later, in Prince George, 200 attended their ceremony.

It wasn’t the end, however. In May 1946, Lt.-Col. Taylor announced a plan to incorporate a Pacific Coast Militia Rangers Association to carry on the basic work of the PCMR. This was to entail aid in search, rescue and guide operations; to perpetuate the ideals and activities of the wartime Rangers.

Upon reflection, the original need for a force like the PCMR was well-founded, figures Jonathan Vance of the University of Western Ontario’s Department of History. “It was certainly rooted in anxiety of a Japanese attack—not just an open military attack, but

also fifth-column activity, because it was known that the fifth column had been active everywhere that the Japanese had invaded so far,” he says. “In practical terms, given the length of Canada’s coastline, there was no way to guard against such attacks without relying on local citizens from communities scattered up and down the B.C. coast.”

The force was a win-win from the federal government’s perspective, says Vance. “It was assumed that local residents would be vigilant anyway—why not give them some organization, which would therefore provide some means of controlling them and using them to their best advantage?” It would show that the government was sensitive to local fears, sensitive enough to create a military force specifically to deal with coastal concerns. “And it was almost free,” says Vance, “because the men were volunteers.”

Moreover, the PCMR wasn’t a particularly fresh idea. “There was a tradition of this kind of unit from the First World War: the Welland Canal Force and the St. Lawrence Patrol, ad hoc forces established for certain civil defence duties,” says Vance.

The PCMR have their legacy: the Canadian Rangers. Steve Pederson is Platoon Commander of No. 4 Canadian Ranger Patrol Group in Zeballos on northern Vancouver Island and feels the tradition and spirit of the PCMR. “We are still here ready to defend the coast,” he says. **LM**

PHOTOS: CFB ESQUIMALT NAVAL AND MILITARY MUSEUM—HD1996.005.205; CFB ESQUIMALT NAVAL AND MILITARY MUSEUM—VR996.005.213; CFB ESQUIMALT NAVAL AND MILITARY MUSEUM; CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM; CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM—19870254-026; CFB ESQUIMALT NAVAL AND MILITARY MUSEUM—VR996.005.202; KELOWNA PUBLIC ARCHIVES—5237