

# Work Point Barracks

Saying goodbye to the military heritage  
Victoria never had a chance to know.

Colin J. MacLock

Think of how young our West Coast history is compared to eastern Canada's. How a mere 150 years ago we still had Fort Victoria downtown, and our harbour was lined with all sorts of buildings housing our proud capital's population and maritime commerce. The fort is gone now and although many stone and brick buildings have survived, many other typical Canadian built wooden structures have vanished. But of all these remaining heritage structures, which ones were uniquely responsible for the protection of all the rest?

In 1878 when a squadron of Russian ships were at the mouth of the Juan de Fuca and when one armed cruiser entered Esquimalt harbour to check out our defences, the Crown got scared because the newly formed province of British Columbia seemed quite vulnerable, especially Victoria and the strategic Royal Navy coaling station in Esquimalt harbour.

B.C.'s agreement to join Confederation included her to be connected with the rest of Canada, and to be protected. The completion to the CPR railhead to Vancouver-Port Moody accomplished the first task and the construction of a coastal defence system was the latter. In Victoria Harbour, the Work Point Barracks were built as Garrison Headquarters for this newly formed Military District No. 11. Work Point Barracks was strategically constructed between

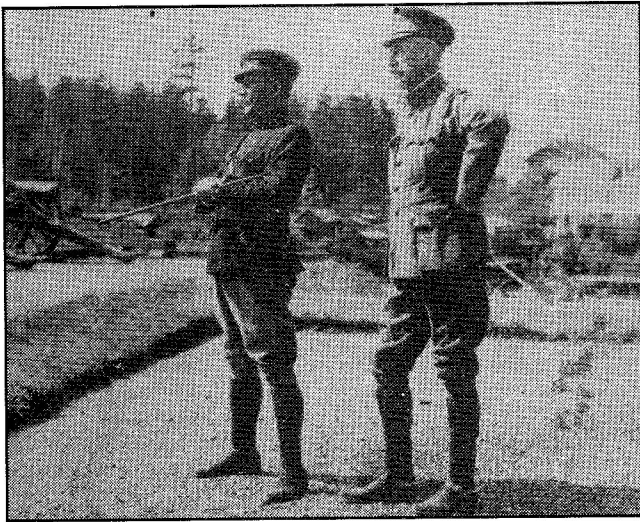
Victoria and Esquimalt Harbours to efficiently command the shoreline defences for both, these being gun emplacements such as Macaulay Point, Brothers Island, Finlayson Point and Victoria Point. Fort Rodd Hill Batteries didn't exist at this time.

The boys that came out on the newly completed CP Railway in answer to the call for coastal defence were "C" Battery, Regiment of Canadian Artillery. Formed in 1887 from the famous "A" and "B" batteries, fresh from fighting in the Northwest Rebellion, they crossed Canada in one of our history's first troop trains, led by Major James Peters. Peters, being an avid photographer, not only recorded on film the first Canadian combat photos in the rebellion, but recorded the trip to Victoria as well. These were printed as "dry point" etchings in the London Gazette in April 21, 1888. Peters also took pictures of their stay in Victoria at the old agricultural hall at Beacon Hill and the building of Work Point Barracks on Victoria's Harbour. The felling of the giant Douglas firs for lumber became the first "recreation" for "C" Battery and Work Point took on a new meaning for the lads. Work Point was originally named after John Work, Victoria's HBC chief factor who owned the land before it was handed over to the crown for defence.

Some of the first buildings to be erected were the three Enlisted Men's Barracks with stable and stores built in 1888, the Gate House in 1890-91 and the Officers' Mess and Quarters 1889-90, where Major Peters, and some of the other senior officers lived with their families. It was Lt.-Colonel Josiah G. Holmes, distant relation of the Pemberton Holmes fame, who picked the building site location. He was the first commander of MD No 11 (BC) to reside in the Officers' Quarters. The whole Barracks was built in record time to be ready and operational, thus relieving the anxieties of the crown. You might say we are indebted to Peters

Etching of one of Peters' photos published in London Gazette 1888 called "Prairie Station". Sandford Collection.





Col. James Peters and Col. Josiah G. Holmes on Work Point Saluting Platform during hand over of Work Point back to Canadian control from the British ca.1909. Sandford Collection

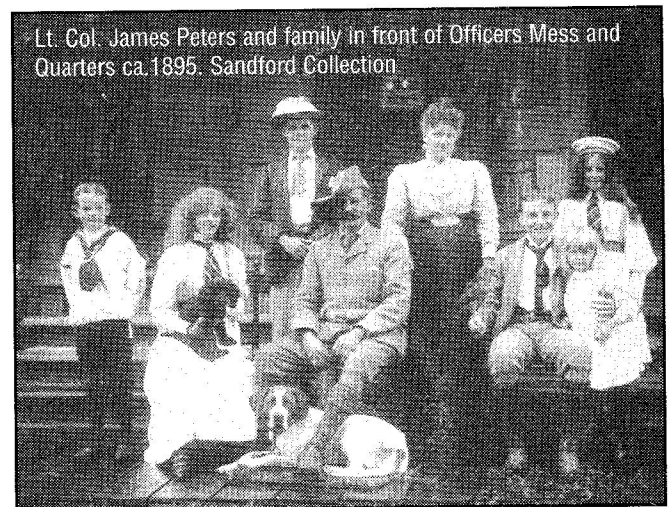
and Holmes for their fine leadership and enterprising performance in creating the cornerstone of Canada's western coastal defences, preventing this portion of Canada from having Russian as its official language.

In 1893 the Dominion agreed with Britain to build an imperial fortress at Esquimalt on a cost-sharing basis, and this is when the Royal Marine Artillery arrived with their Royal Engineers to build all those brick buildings from Work Point to Dockyard, shore up and improve armament of existing coast artillery emplacements and build new ones like Fort Rodd Hill. It is surprising to learn that these British gunners also helped build Victoria's first golf course in the plains between Work and Macaulay Points. In 1893 Holmes went back to Winnipeg, "C" Battery returns to Quebec and Peters, promoted to Lt.-Colonel, assumes command of MD No 11 (BC) for a short time, then follows Holmes to London. Twenty-five of the 5th (BC) Regiment of Canadian Artillery militia unit and one officer were sent to Africa in 1899. It wasn't until 1905 that the British showed signs of relinquishing control when they officially closed Esquimalt Naval station, then later pulled out of Work Point. Holmes returns as commander in 1906 and in 1909 Col. Peters returned to take Command of MD 11 as Holmes retires. At the same time Lt.- Col. Arthur N. Currie took command of 5th (BC) Regiment Canadian Artillery militia, having had his training previously at Work Point. He would later rise to the rank of Lt.-General commanding the Canadian Corps during the Great War, (remember Vimy Ridge) and would be knighted a few times for saving many thousands of Canadian lives.

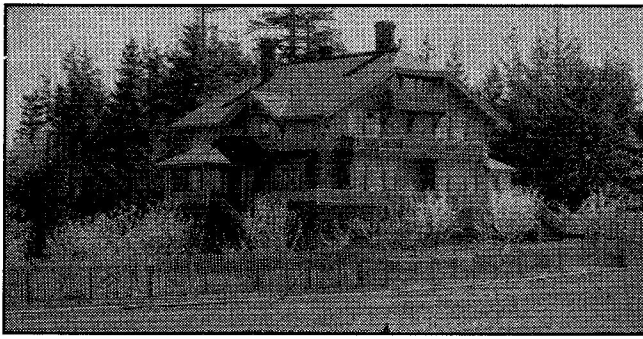
After the Great War, the Officers' Mess and Quarters became second alone to Government House as a hub of social and cultural activity. Eligible young ladies from around the region would be invited to the Mess Hall banquets and sports events to meet junior officers. Remember when Victoria harbour had a time gun a few decades ago. It all started back with a time gun booming the 12:00 noon and 9:00 pm signal from the saluting platform in front of the Mess, and was so accurate that ships in the harbour would adjust their chronometers to the signal. It was Holmes that was responsible for starting this time gun tradition in Victoria harbour back in 1888. And in politics, the now retired Col. Peters became one of the founding councilors of Esquimalt. Royalty visited Work Point with all the pageantry in the Mess when the young Prince of Wales arrived with his entourage in 1919; this of course was before his famous scandalous abdication that became world news.

Brigadier General MacNaughton was another notable who commanded from Work Point in 1928 and resided in the Officers' Mess and Quarters. He can be remembered for his clever use of labour from the detention barracks, who were mostly navy boys, to build the cement retaining works for the tidal pools erected on the beach in front of the Mess for the officer's to swim and sun during leisure. This I am sure fueled a continuing rift between Army and Navy. MacNaughton went on to become the Chief of the General Staff at Army Headquarters in Ottawa in 1929 as well but also gained notability for his advancement in the development of radar by creating a usable cathode tube monitor.

At the beginning of Canada's participation in the Second WW an interesting milestone for gender advancement occurred at Work Point. The forming of the Canadian Women's Army Corps (CWAC) happened



Lt. Col. James Peters and family in front of Officers Mess and Quarters ca.1895. Sandford Collection



McClure house built for Peters next to region's first golf course. Sandford Collection

right here on our doorstep, not in Ottawa. In 1941 Lt. Col. Joan Kennedy was given the job of enlisting women and was no doubt the first women officer to enter the Mess. She had her office in the Administration Building next to the Mess. A stone cairn with a bronze plaque was created by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board for Work Point to commemorate the service of the CWAC and Kennedy, but the Base intervened and had it placed at the Naval and Military Museum instead. Part of the inscription reads; "Opened the first CWAC office on the Esquimalt Base on 29th August, 1941", but should read; "opened the first CWAC office at Work Point Barracks on 29th August, 1941", because WP was not a base at the time, it was Fortress Headquarters.

Not much is known by the public about the important role Work Point Barracks played in our history. With all the pressures of development these days a lot of our Canadian built heritage and culture is quickly vanishing, and it might be because it is just military history, and not the more noticeable Navy history. Most of these nineteenth century wooden structures at Work Point have already been demolished in recent years since the Navy has taken over the site, and more are on the demolition list. Unlike the rest of Canada's built heritage that may be closer to Ottawa, these federal heritage buildings seem to be less protected and easier to remove without much notice. It may also be easier for CFB Esquimalt to remove key heritage elements from a surplus Army base as long as no one realizes how important a role it played to our joining to Confederation and more recently, with the Japanese at our doorstep during the Second WW, its role as the center for Pacific Command! Yes, the chiefs of staff came from Ottawa, some like the famous Gen. George R. Pearkes, and commanded the Army, Air force and Navy all from Work Point. There is still evidence today, no matter how childish it seems, of a major resentment by the navy for having been commanded by the Army out here, and it apparently has effected decision making

when it comes to preservation and designation of this federal, regional and local military heritage.

If one visits our local museums it may be difficult to find any mention of what has been said here or see any evidence of these mentioned notables gracing the walls. It is almost as if they have forgotten Work Point Barracks and most certainly the old Officer's Mess and Quarters which is now simply referred to as Building 1027 in most correspondences. If anyone wishes to see these historic wooden buildings, some are still there at Work Point, at the end of Head Street in Esquimalt. Walk through past the Gate House which has been unmanned since the Princes Patricia's left in the mid 90's. Pass along through to the left onto the parking lot in front of the old Administration Building (now the Haida Bldg 1020) and look behind. There you will find the old historic Officers' Mess and Quarters, much as it looked in the 1890's except for the larger windows where the Mess was expanded in the 50's.

The interior is empty, heat has been turned off, and ornamental bushes have overgrown the outsides. Between the main doors there is still evidence of where a few Bronze plaques were once placed. One large square one commemorated the construction of the building for "C" Battery Royal Canadian Artillery, and the other, a familiar oval bronze plaque. read: Heritage Building - Township of Esquimalt. Both were removed by a civilian base properties officer who no doubt had no heritage credentials to personally "defrock" a heritage building. This is how things move around at the base it seems, and when it comes to community interest in preservation, expect to hit a brick wall. The mandate at present seems to be clear off the existing heritage buildings, and then open up the land (which has now become more valuable only in real estate terms) to community for public input.

At present there have been some proposals for re-use



Contemporary aerial view of historic Officers' Mess and Quarters. Gregg Eligh



South face of historic Officers' Mess and Quarters ca. 1908.  
B.C. Archives

of some of these buildings by the Victoria College of Art. They wish to create a satellite Campus and Work Point Arts Project Society as a Regional Visual Arts Centre. They also, with the help of some preservation luminars, applied to the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada to have the surviving buildings, and especially the Officers' Mess and Quarters, become designated as Historic Sites.

Unfortunately, the DND dug their heels in and said no to artists, no to historic sites, and stated that in the near future they will be announcing a call for proposals to demolish the building, even though it has a Federal Heritage Building Review Office rating of "Registered". Indeed, the FHBRO has a policy that heritage buildings

which are "Registered" are to be maintained and secure for future generations! Well, forget about that. CFB Esquimalt has left the building for "demolition by neglect". If you are a vagrant, you can move right in because the Base has insufficient funds for proper security in that area. And if you want one of the smaller buildings to take home, go ahead, a Base properties officer did, he took one of the Out Buildings from the Mess and put it on his oyster lease in Tofino.

Col. Peters would be rolling in his grave at all this nonsense. In fact, if he were alive today, he wouldn't tolerate it. Incidentally, his monument, naturally the biggest one, exists in prominent view within the Veteran's Cemetery which ironically is a Historic Site. It is sometimes called "Gods Little Acre" located south of the Gorge Vale Golf Course off Colville Road in Esquimalt.

*Colin J. MacLock (BFA in Art History) is a practicing Fine Artist, serving as a board member of the Community Arts Council of Greater Victoria, on the Heritage Advisory Committee for the Township of Esquimalt, and as chair of the Work Point Arts Project Society, has for the past 5 years devoted much time towards saving the historic Officers' Mess and Quarters.*

**Photo #2 should read:**

Col. James Peters and Col. Josiah G. Holmes on Work Point Saluting Platform during hand over of Command of Military District #11 (BC) to Peters as Holmes retires.