

Metis Infantry: The Victoria Voltigeurs (Infantrymen)

The Victoria Voltigeurs were a mobile force of Metis militia hand-picked by Governor James Douglas¹ in 1851.

In 1845, the territorial dispute between the British and the Americans on the west coast (called the Oregon Crisis) was settled by extending the border along the 49th parallel to the Pacific, with the exception of Vancouver Island, which remained British territory.

It then became the job of the Royal Navy warships to defend the interests of England on the Pacific coast since the British army had no military garrison there. Due to an agreement with Chile, the British navy had a base at Valparaiso as of 1837, and from there the HMS Pandora was assigned to Vancouver Island in 1846. Two years later the HMS Constance used the excellent Esquimalt Harbour as a temporary base.

Immediately following the Oregon Crisis of 1845, it became important for the British to have a real colony on the west coast to counter any American or Russian claims. In 1849 Vancouver Island was turned over to the Hudson's Bay Company on the basis of a commitment to settle the island. The capital became Victoria, a trading post erected by the company in 1843, and the government appointed a royal governor who was independent of the company. At this point the British navy began its frequent patrols along the west coast.

The royal governor, James Douglas, did not have any troops to enforce regulations or to perform guard duty when needed. Thus, in mid-1851 Governor Douglas formed the Victoria Voltigeurs. This was a small corps of Metis men intended to lend an occasional hand in enforcing justice. The Voltigeurs were mostly French-Canadian voyageurs or "Half-Breeds" - Métis of French-Canadian and Iroquois descent - who were mobilized as circumstances required. Their numbers varied considerably from a half dozen to 30 or so. They were paid and fed for their periods of service and were given trade guns and a company "uniform." Their uniform was a sky-blue Canadian capote with a red woolen sash.

The Voltigeurs lived in a village on Colquitz Creek near the junction with Swan Creek; this was also called "Potage Inlet." Each of the Voltigeur settlers was given a free grant of 20 acres of Hudson's Bay Company land. Some of the Metis men given these grants were: Nicholas Auger, Jean Baptiste Jolibois and John Lemon.

Around the mid 1850s, detachments of Victoria Voltigeurs frequently accompanied Royal Navy expeditions to intimidate any hostile First Nations people. These volunteers were well disciplined and proved to be reliable. In 1853 Governor James Douglas praised them highly, reporting that they "imitated their noble example,"² speaking of the seamen and marines of the HMS Beaver on a punitive expedition to the mouth of the Cowichan River. This first military unit and police force in British Columbia existed until March 1858.

The killing of a Scottish shepherd near Victoria by a few Cowichans and Nanaimos in November 1852 led Governor Douglas to organize an expedition to capture the killers. In January 1853, 110 seamen, 20 naval infantry soldiers and 20 Victoria Voltigeurs arrived at the Cowichan settlement and took the guilty men, immediately trying and hanging them. This same forceful response was used three years later when a chief killed a colonist. To counter any resistance by the approximately 1,400 First Nations warriors, 437 officers, seamen and naval infantry soldiers, as well as 18 Voltigeurs, appeared in the Cowichan Valley.

On January 6, 1853, Douglas stood to face the hostile Indians in advance of his armed and ready-to-shoot marines.

On landing they (the relatives and friends protecting the accused) made a furious dash towards the point which I occupied a little in advance of the Force, and their demeanor was altogether so hostile that the marines were with difficulty restrained from opening fire upon them.³

The sailors and the Voltigeurs did hold their fire, negotiations took place and with this show of strength, the Amerindians turned over the troublemakers, who were once again tried and hanged on the spot.

Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell (with thanks to George and Terry Goulet who gave me the idea and historical reference for this article).
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¹ James Douglas was the son of a Scottish sugar planter and a free Creole West Indian; his wife Amelia Connolly was the Metis daughter of a North West company fur trader and his Cree wife.

² B. A. McKelvie, and W. E. Ireland, "The Victoria Voltigeurs," in *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, XX, 1956, p. 228.