

MILITARY HISTORY

Old B.C. fort was braced for Japanese invasion that never came

*MARK HUME – GLOBE AND MAIL
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An old photo of a searchlight emplacement on Yorke Island is held up in the same spot more than 70 years later on Nov. 7, 2011. JOHN

Thanks to a group of volunteers – many of whom have never met – and a group of veterans who never forgot, a long-abandoned military base on the West Coast has slowly started to re-emerge from the forest.

During the Second World War, Yorke Island, off the northeast shoulder of Vancouver Island, was home to more than 200 men, who manned six-inch guns and swept the dark waters with searchlights waiting for a Japanese invasion that never came.

After the base was abandoned in 1946, the wooden buildings were moved by barge to a nearby village, the wharf fell down, and the fort's massive, concrete gun emplacements became overgrown.

The rocky island, once of strategic importance because it commands the entrance to the waters between northern Vancouver Island and the Mainland Coast, was soon mostly forgotten, except by the men who served there.

Now it is being rediscovered largely thanks to the efforts of Ross Keller, a local military enthusiast, who heard from veterans about the island. For the past few years he has been clearing trails and removing debris to open the area to the public.

BC Parks has protected the area as a conservancy, and a long-term management plan is being developed. Interpretive signs and possibly a new dock will make the site more accessible.

Next spring Catherine Gilbert, promotions co-ordinator for the Campbell River Museum, will raise the fort's profile with a book, *Yorke Island and the Uncertain War, Defending Canada's Western Coast During World War II*.

Ms. Gilbert said she first heard about the fort several years ago, but few local residents knew anything about it. She didn't see the base until Mr. Keller took her for a tour.

"I was really quite amazed, astounded," she said of the fort hidden in the bush under layers of moss.

"I just became obsessed with it," said Mr. Keller, a desk clerk at a Campbell River hotel. "I started spending all my free time camping there, just doing what I could."

Over the years he realized others were also trying to reclaim the base from the bush.

"I see the trails cleaned up ... I know there are people going out there and doing stuff, but I've never met them," Mr. Keller said. "I don't even know who they are."

In addition to doing clean-ups, he has also spent a lot of time interviewing veterans who served on the Island.

One of the first vets he met was John Rorison, who as a 17-year-old in 1941 was stationed on Yorke Island for seven months.

"I guess it was me that got this [revival]going," said Mr. Rorison, whose daughter organized a veterans tour of the fort several years ago. The visit caught Mr. Keller's attention, leading to a visit of his own. His talk with Mr. Rorison inspired him to begin seriously researching the island's past.

Mr. Rorison, a gunner in the 15th Coastal Brigade, said the fort never fired a shot in combat, although there were reports Japanese submarines were lurking in nearby waters, fuelling fears of invasion.

"There was a lot of talk [among the men] that these Japanese battleships could sit 15 miles away and blast us off the island," he said.

Bernie Smith was also stationed on Yorke Island early in the war, when he was 18.

"It was just a rock in the water," he said, recalling his first sight of the fort. "There was a sign on the dock that said, 'Abandon all hope ye who enter here'" – a reference to the inscription above the gates of Hell in Dante's *Inferno*.

Mr. Smith said he got to fire warning shots across the bows of fishing boats that failed to identify themselves.

And recalled one incident in which a vessel failed to pull up as several small rounds fell in the sea nearby. A crew then fired one of the big guns, sending up a huge plume of water.

"That stopped them," he said of the fishing boat from Alaska. "When they came in they were all drunk. They said they thought they were seeing whale spouts."

Mr. Smith also served in France, Holland and Germany, before working for 34 years as a Vancouver police officer.

He's never returned to Yorke Island.

"I have limited vision. I don't suppose I could see much, but I would love to go back," he said.

He is glad there is renewed interest in the old fort.

"It should be restored," he said. "It's part of our history."