

15th FIELD ARTILLERY REGIMENT
MUSEUM AND ARCHIVES
BESSBOROUGH ARMOURY
2025 WEST 11th AVENUE
VANCOUVER, B.C. V6J 2C7
CANADA

Yorke Island



Then and Now

Ronald H Pugh

Yorke Island
Then and Now

2003

Cover: **On Guard**

A view up Johnstone Strait with one of the fort's
guns at the ready. 'Artillery' Island in the foreground.



George William Pugh

1917 - 1991

Introduction

This picture of my brother has fascinated me always. It was taken on Yorke Island at the beginning of the Second World War. My questions had been, where was Yorke Island and what was its importance.

This monograph then, is an attempt to answer these questions and to shed some light on my brother's presence on this island.

Named after his father, but to avoid confusion, George had been called Norman. When he enlisted in the Canadian Scottish in September of 1939 he changed this to 'Bill'. I was only five years old in 1939 but remember his visits to the family, in uniform, through-out the war. My memories of this period are not comprehensive but this picture has provided the impetus to study the history of Yorke Island and even to visit the island in 2000/01.

By necessity, this is about Yorke Island, not my brother, but the picture places him firmly in the story.

I would like to present the material in two sections, a short history and an appendix. The appendix will include pictures, then and now, also graphics and pictures of the other forts on the coast to indicate the vital position Yorke Island occupied in the chain of fortifications that protected Canada's West Coast during the Second World War.

Ronald H Pugh
Victoria B C
September, 2003

A short History of Yorke Island

In Canada, before the Second World War, there were only two important fortified positions; the naval base of Halifax on the east coast and Esquimalt on the west.

As early as 1936, it was recognized that there was a need for major alterations to the existing defences. The lead-time for new guns from England being excessive, it was decided to implement an interim plan to use the guns that were available in Canada.

By 1939, one million dollars had been spent on a new battery at Albert Head; sites had been acquired in Prince Rupert, one new battery had been completed at Vancouver and a battery was in readiness on Yorke Island.

Yorke Island was strategically placed to protect the northern 'backdoor' approach to Vancouver and Victoria. The battery was comprised of two 4.7-inch quick firing guns and one 6-pounder. Yorke Island was the examination battery for Johnstone Strait, the 6-pounder was used as the examination gun. Men of the 85th Battery of the 15th Coast Brigade, Royal Canadian Artillery manned the guns. Infantry support, until late 1940, was supplied by a platoon from the *2nd Battalion, Canadian Scottish Regiment*.

Fort Yorke Island and the forts at Victoria, Vancouver and Prince Rupert were designed to a rather simplistic threat formula, conceived by the Joint Staff Committee; an attack by one, armed merchant vessel, with 6-inch guns, an attack by up to four motor torpedo boats, or an attack by up to two submarines with 4.7-inch guns. Such conceptionally limited planning would have left Yorke Island vulnerable to a more realistic attack, or, with no radar, simply bypassed in conditions of poor visibility.

In December 1941, three searchlights arrived. These were Canadian General Electric 60 inch, 800 million candlepower lights, with an effective range of 3500 yards. These were close to the water level so as to help spot periscopes. Each light had it's own Westinghouse generator, driven by a Gardner diesel engine. The lights were remotely operated from the Searchlight Directing Station on the lower floor of the Battery Command Post.

In 1942, the two 6-inch Mk 7 guns on Mk 2 mountings, from the Ferguson Point battery at Stanley Park were brought to Yorke Island, and the Island's two 4.7-inch guns were sent to Ferguson Point. One gun at a time was changed over so as to leave each fort with one operational gun.

The camp, with barracks, kitchen, canteen, drill hall, administration, hospital, quarter-master stores etc were situated near the wharf, on the south side of the Island. The fort itself was perched atop a rocky bluff, which rose sharply to approximately 180 feet, above the western shore. It consisted of, at first, two 4.7-inch guns, later, two 6-inch guns, the Battery Observation Post, magazine, war shelter, gun stores and powerhouse.

The greatest and continuing problem on Yorke Island was the lack of drinking water. It all had to be brought to the island. Later, a cistern was built and water from nearby Hardwicke Island was brought in by scow.

The 40 mm anti aircraft Bofors and the 6-inch guns were the last major upgrade to the fort, although building construction continued all through the war. At wars end some sixty-two buildings of various types were on the Island. With the end of 6 years of war, stores and equipment were returned to Vancouver and the last of the battery personnel left the Island on October 17th, 1945.

Was this engineering and logistical achievement worth it? I will let Colonel Stacey have the last word...


"On neither coast of Canada did a coast defence gun fire a shot in anger during the war. It should not, however, be assumed from this that the guns were useless. An enemy usually prefers to go where defences are *not*, and the purpose of coast artillery was as much to discourage attack as to defend specific targets if an attack took place." ***

*** Colonel C P Stacey, *'Official History Of The Canadian Army
In The Second World War' Vol 1*

PACIFIC COAST DEFENCES 1939 - 1945

SHOWING LOCATIONS OF CANADIAN COAST ARTILLERY BATTERIES AND ANTI-AIRCRAFT DEFENCES

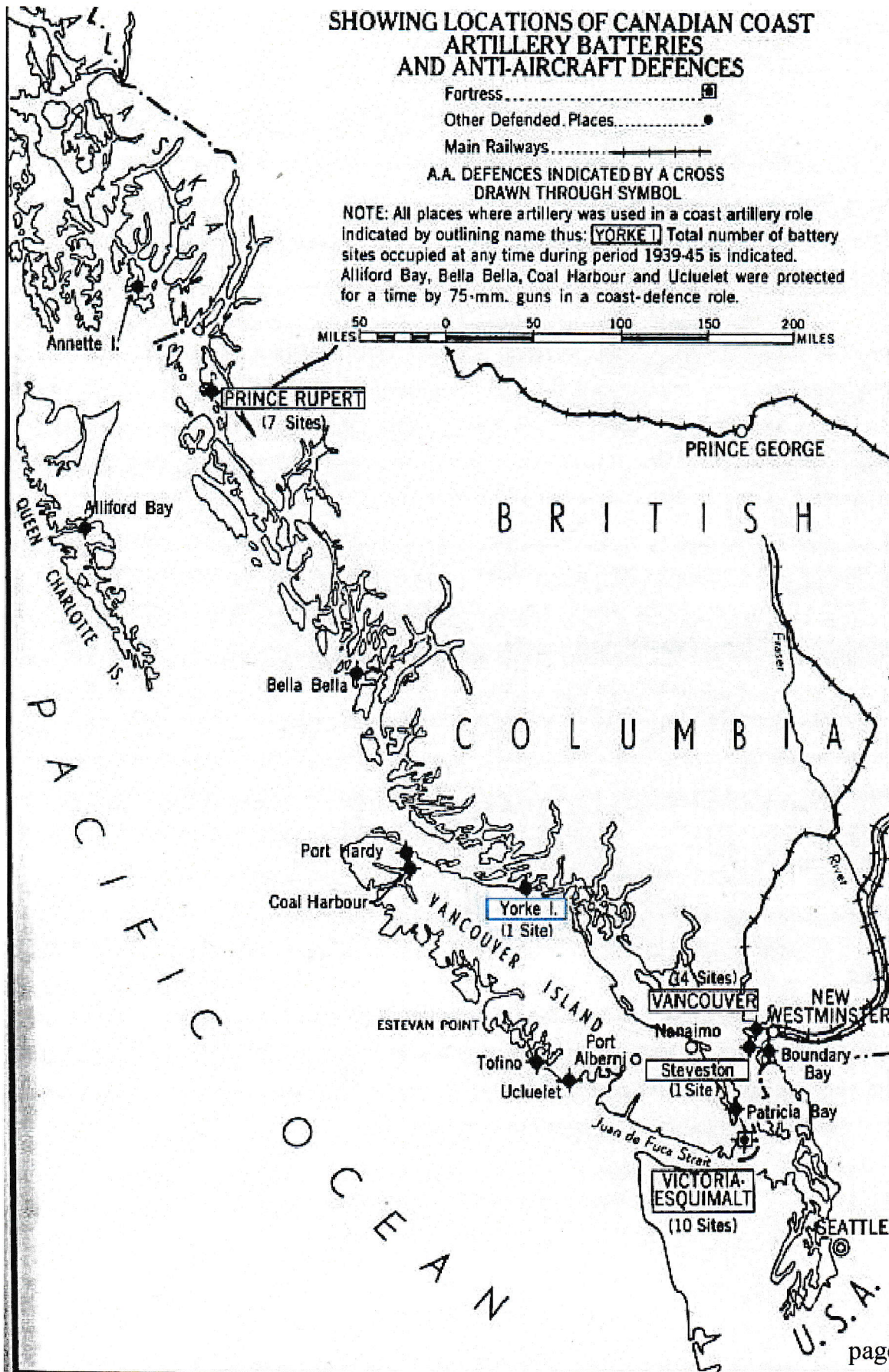
Fortress.....

Other Defended Places.....

Main Railways.....

A.A. DEFENCES INDICATED BY A CROSS DRAWN THROUGH SYMBOL

NOTE: All places where artillery was used in a coast artillery role indicated by outlining name thus: **YORKE I** Total number of battery sites occupied at any time during period 1939-45 is indicated. Alliford Bay, Bella Bella, Coal Harbour and Ucluelet were protected for a time by 75-mm. guns in a coast-defence role.



Appendix



Prince Rupert, Big Guns

Barrett Point:

Three 6-inch Mk 12 guns on Mk 7 mounts

Fairview Point:

Two dismantled US 8-inch M 1888 railway guns on M 1918 barbette carriages



Vancouver, Big guns

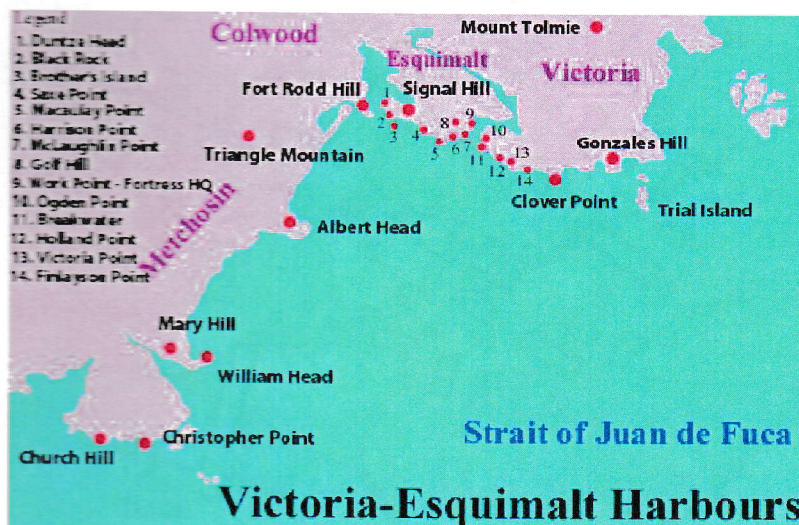
Ferguson Point: (Stanley Park)

Two 6-inch guns, until 1942 replaced by two 4.7-inch guns

Point Grey:

Three 6-inch Mk 7 guns on Mk 2 mounts

Steveston Battery: Two 18-pounder guns



Victoria - Esquamalt, Big guns

Christopher Point:

Two dismantled US 8-inch M 1888 railway guns on M 1918 carriages

Mary Hill:

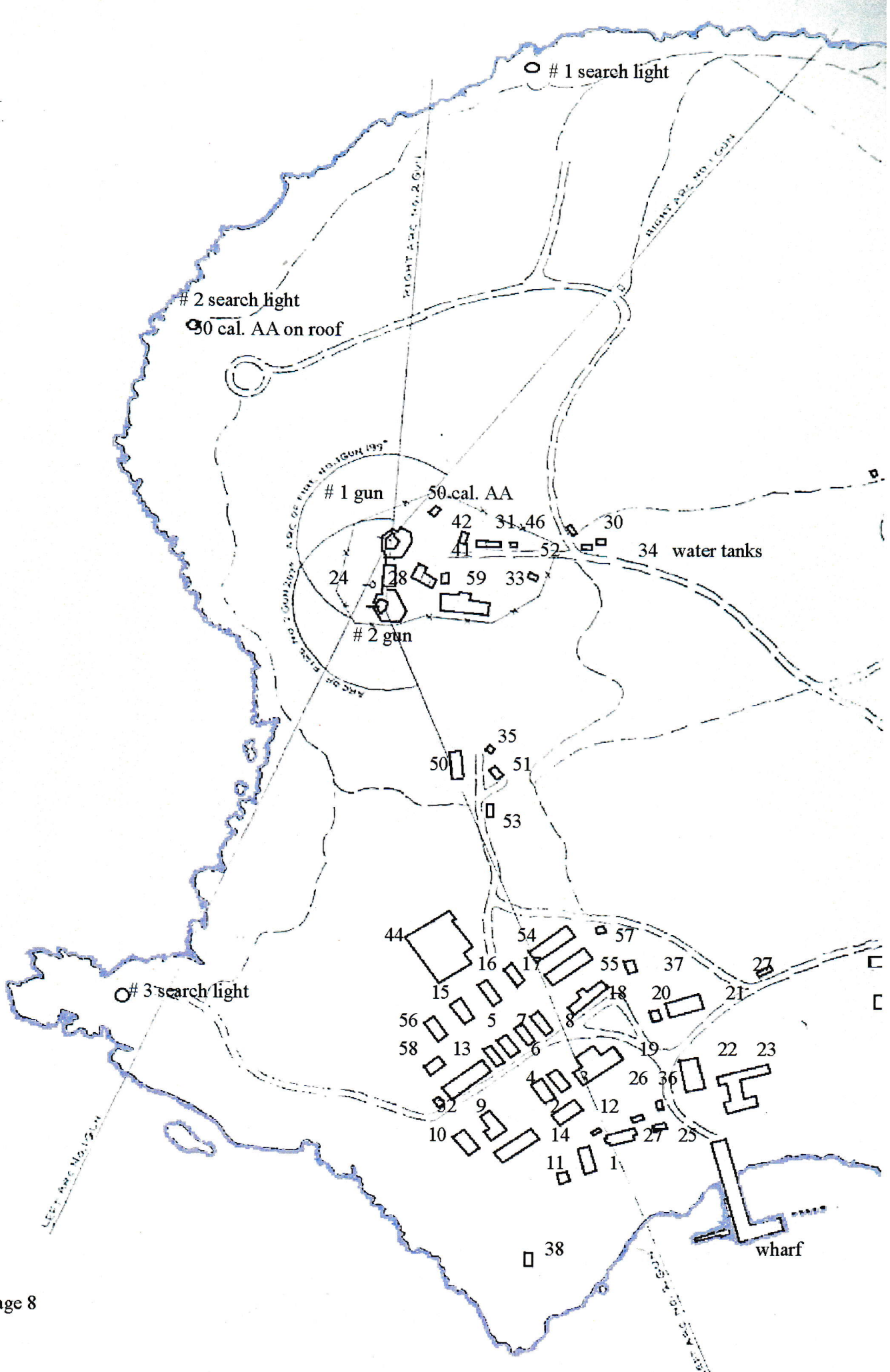
Three 6-inch Mk 7 guns on Mk 2 mountings

Albert Head:

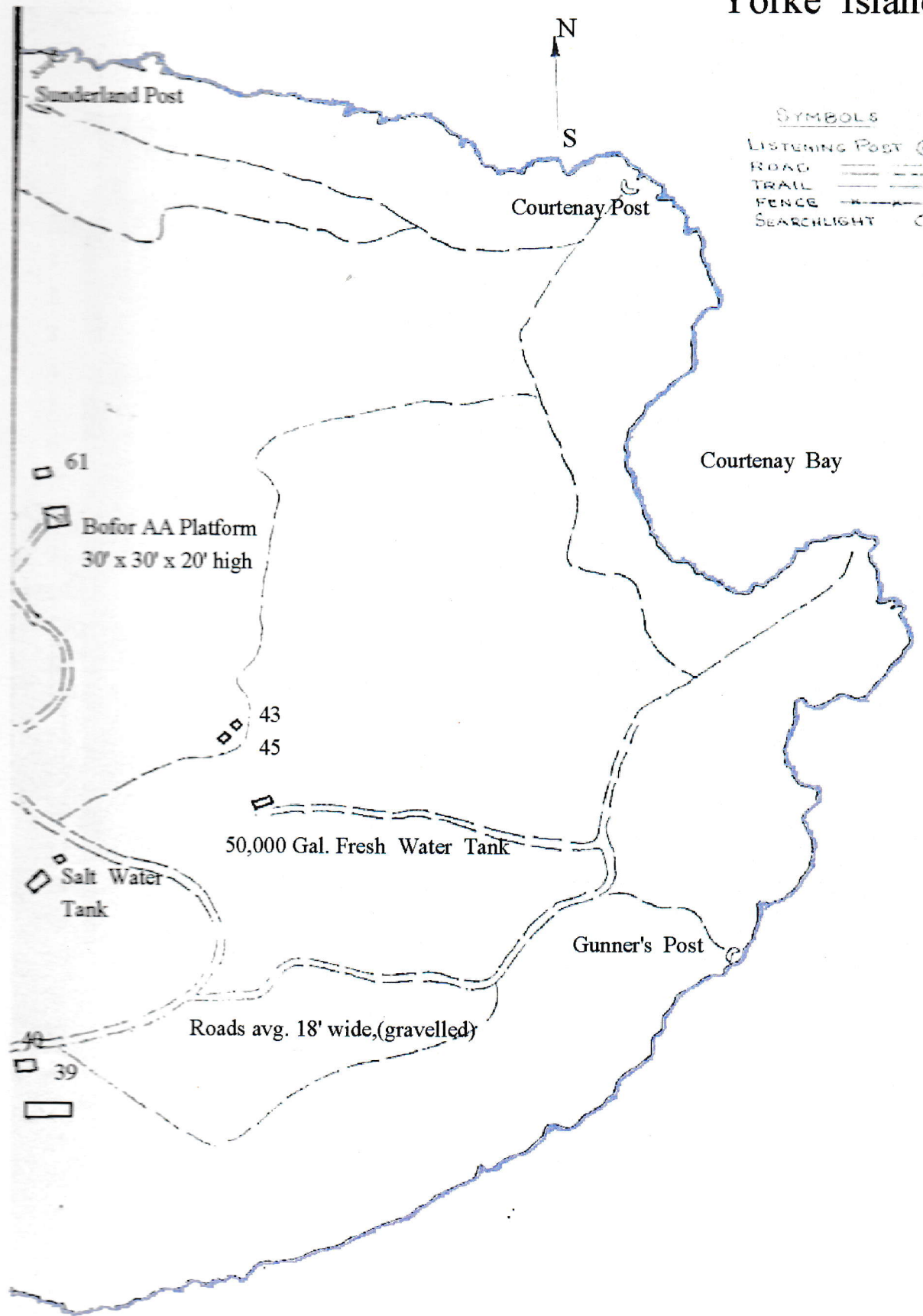
Three 9.2-inch Mk 10 guns on Mk 6a mountings

Macaulay Point:

Two 6-inch Mk 7 Guns on Mk 2 mounts



Yorke Island, B.C.



FORT ARMAMENT

- 2 x 81 GINCH MK 7 ON TR 2 MTS
- 1 x QF 6 FOR SCVT HOTELIERE
- 2 x 40 MM BOFOR'S ANTI AIRCRAFT
- 2 x 50 CAL. ANTI AIRCRAFT
- 2 RACE 15 100'
- AUG 1945



Yorke Island, with a view looking down Sunderland Channel

With the felling of the trees and the spoil from the foundations left on the surface, the fort was highly visible from the air. All the eggs, guns - control - ammunition storage, were in one basket. Further, most of the camp buildings were constructed of wood, connected by wooden walkways, in a forest, on an island with no natural water.

Right:
Key to the map on the previous two pages

85th Coast Battery Yorke Island

January 1945

| <u>Bldg</u> | <u>Description</u> | <u>Bldg</u> | <u>Description</u> |
|-------------|---------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | Q.M. Stores | 32 | SGTS' Ablution |
| 2 | Orderly Room Staff | 33 | Gun Stores |
| 3 | H. Q. Hut and Kitchen | 34 | Navy Quarters |
| 4 | Wet Canteen, Gunners | 35 | Night Quarters |
| 5 | Spare Hut | 36 | Oil Stores |
| 6 | Spare Hut | 37 | RCE Workshop |
| 7 | Spare Hut | 38 | CXO Hut |
| 8 | Spare Hut | 39 | Hospital |
| 9 | SGTS' Mess and Kitchen | 40 | Hospital Staff Quarters |
| 10 | Visiting SGTS' | 41 | Dist. Gunners Stores |
| 11 | P.A.D. HQ Stores | 42 | Old Magazine |
| 12 | RCCS Sleeping Quarters | 43 | Radio Station |
| 13 | Ablution | 44 | Gymnasium |
| 14 | RCE Workshops | 45 | RCCS Power House |
| 15 | SGTS' Quarters | 46 | Ablution Hut (Fort) |
| 16 | Left Section | 47 | No. 1 Searchlight |
| 17 | Right Section | 48 | No. 2 Searchlight |
| 18 | Library, Recreation and Canteen | 49 | No. 3 Searchlight |
| 19 | Mess Hall, Kitchen and Store Rm | 50 | S/L and Camp Power Plant |
| 20 | CXO Office and Station | 51 | RCE Workshop |
| 21 | Administration Building | 52 | AA Crew Shelter |
| 22 | WO'S Quarters | 53 | Oil Stores |
| 23 | Officers Quarters | 54 | Right Section Hut |
| 24 | Crew Shelter | 55 | Left Section Hut |
| 25 | Guard House | 56 | RCE Hut |
| 26 | QM Stores (clothing) | 57 | Tractor Shed |
| 27 | QM Stores | 58 | Drying Room (Laundry) |
| 28 | Officers Shelter | 59 | Magazine |
| 29 | Oil Stores | 60 | Stores, Gun |
| 30 | Lecture Hut | 61 | Stores, Shell |
| 31 | NCO'S Shelter | 62 | SAA Stores |



Above: The MV Goldstream at anchor where the wharf used to be.

Below: The MV General Caldwell at the wharf.





Officers Quarters: Above, during an inspection, Below, still standing, but not for long.





Previous pages:

The wharf was the life-line of the fort. All personnel, supplies, building material came across this wharf. Larger vessels tied up along the front of the wharf (at right angles to the General)

The house was the oldest and only building on the island before being taken over by the Officers at the start of the war.

Top left:

The Fort, number one and two guns and the Battery Observation Post.

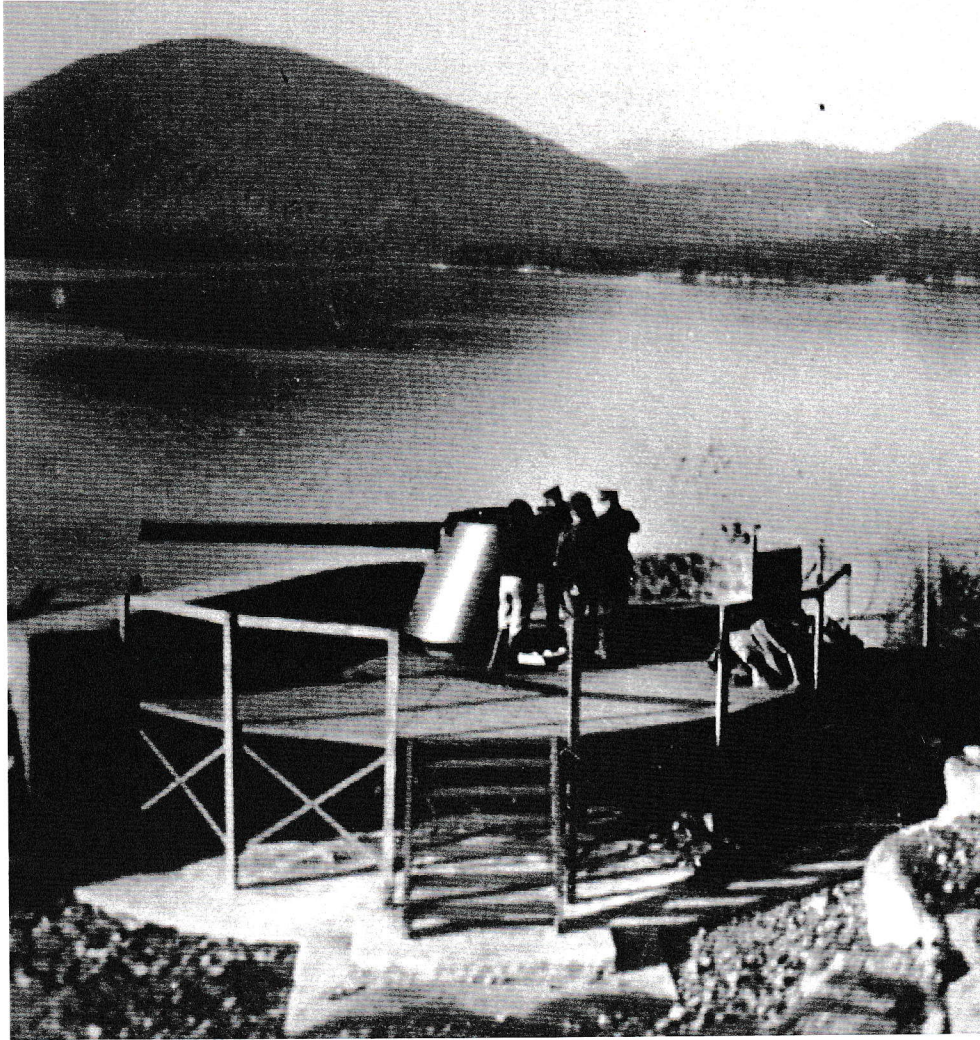
Bottom left:

Number two Searchlight

Bottom right:

The Fort today, just visible upper center.

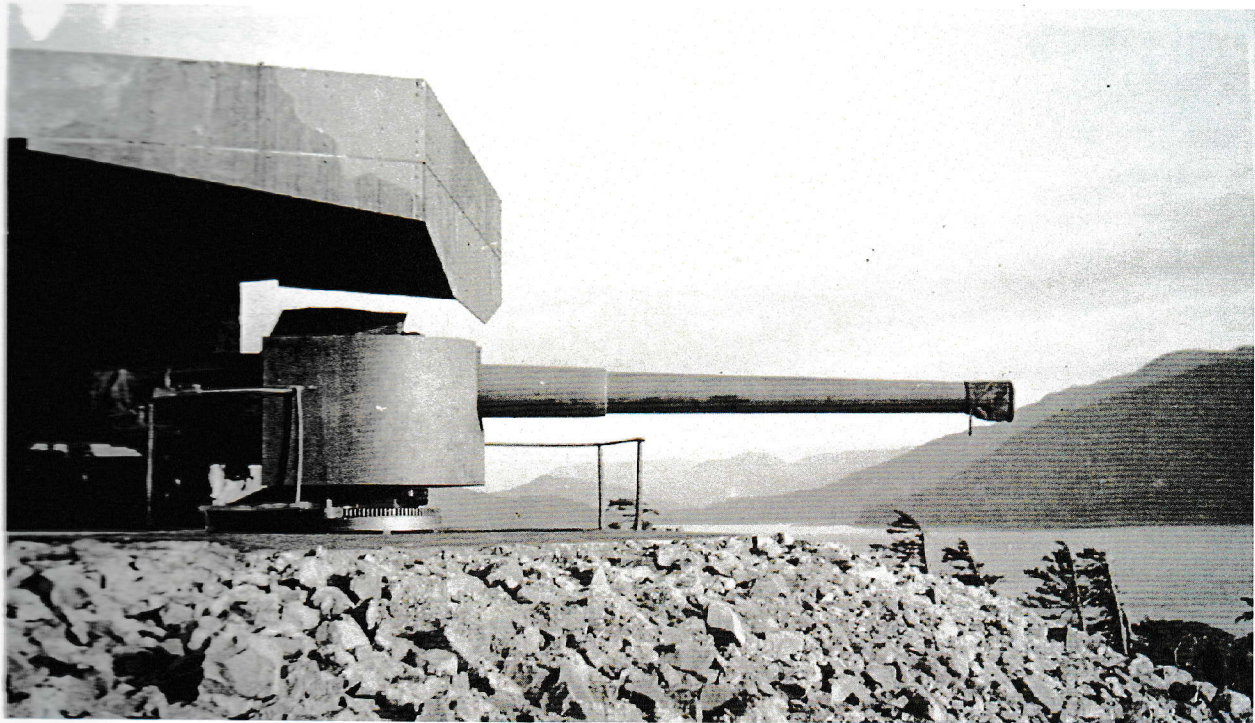




One of the original 4.7-inch guns at Yorke Island

The Big Guns

In 1939 - 1945 the headquarters of the 5th B.C. Coast Brigade was located at Signal Hill, near Naden. This was the site of a battery between 1899 - 1938. The 9.2-inch Mk 10 guns of this battery were transferred to the new site at Albert Head and placed on newer Mk 6A mounts. The fire command post for Albert Head was on Triangle Mountain. These were the biggest guns on this coast.



6-inch Mk7 gun on a Mk2 mount at Yorke Island

Next in size were the 8-inch guns of Christopher Point. These were dismantled U.S. M 1888 railway guns on M 1918 carriages. Two independent fire control towers for this battery were at Church Hill and Beechy Head, necessary as these guns, despite their age, were on high elevation mounts. This meant that the target was not always visible from the position of the gun. As well, two of these guns were at the Fairview Point Battery, Prince Rupert. The 6-inch Mk7 of 1895 featured the short screw Welin breech. It could be opened with only two motions, thus rate of fire was tremendously increased. The Mk7 was a very successful gun for coastal defense, in service until the late 1950's. Two 6-inch Mk7s' were at Macaulay Point Battery, three at Mary Hill Battery, three at Point Grey Battery, and two at Yorke Island. The only fault lay not with the guns but rather with the Mk2 mount. This was a low angle of elevation mount, only allowing the gun to be elevated 15 degrees, thus restricting the placement and range of the gun.

Note: many of the forts were updated during the war, which has not been noted here. As the Battle of Midway, June 1942, was considered the turning point of the war in the Pacific, only the guns in place before this date have been listed. That is, the period of greatest threat to the coast, September 1939 to mid 1942.



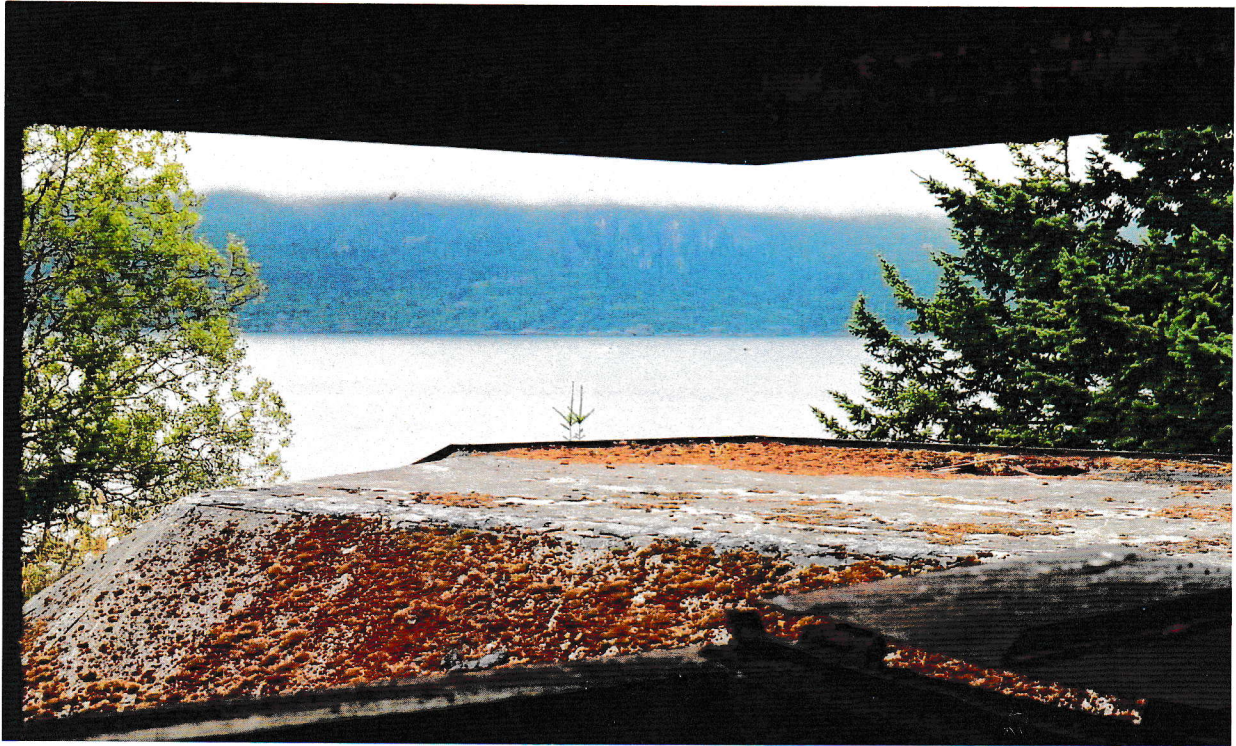
A view looking up Johnstone Strait, from inside the enclosure.
The rear of number three Searchlight.





Number Three Searchlight, Then and Now.





Opposite page, top:

A view out over the first floor roof, from the second floor of the Command Post

Right:

A view from the second floor of the Command Post looking down towards number three search light (just visible in the trees)



Opposite page, bottom:

This is the original Battery Command Post (notice the brick construction)

Left:

The foundation for the new two story Battery Command Post was poured on 30/10/43. This concrete building was built behind the original command post. One of the 40 mm AA guns was mounted on the roof. Remote control of the search lights was from the old command post, now reduced in height and given a new roof.



Above:
District Gunners Stores and work
shop, although this building had other
uses at different times. Bld. 41

Left:
The 50,000 gallon fresh water cistern.



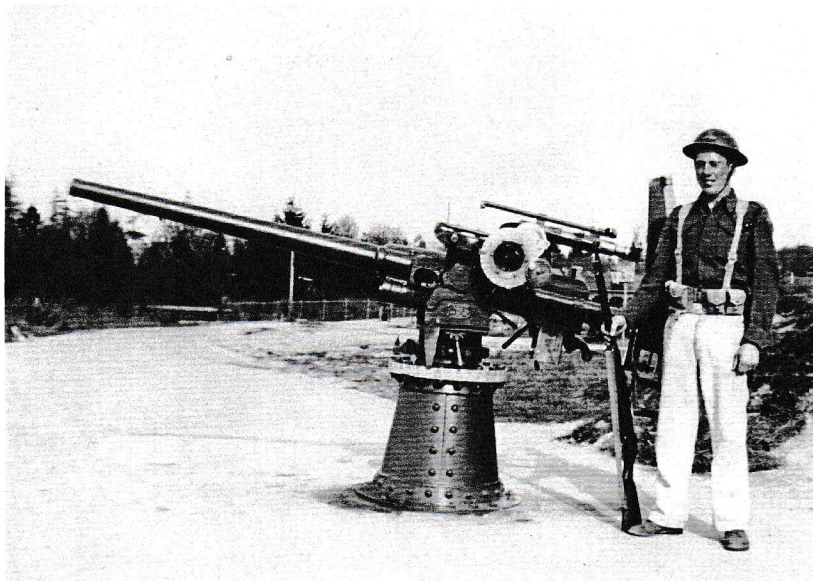
Above:

The area behind number one gun.



Right:

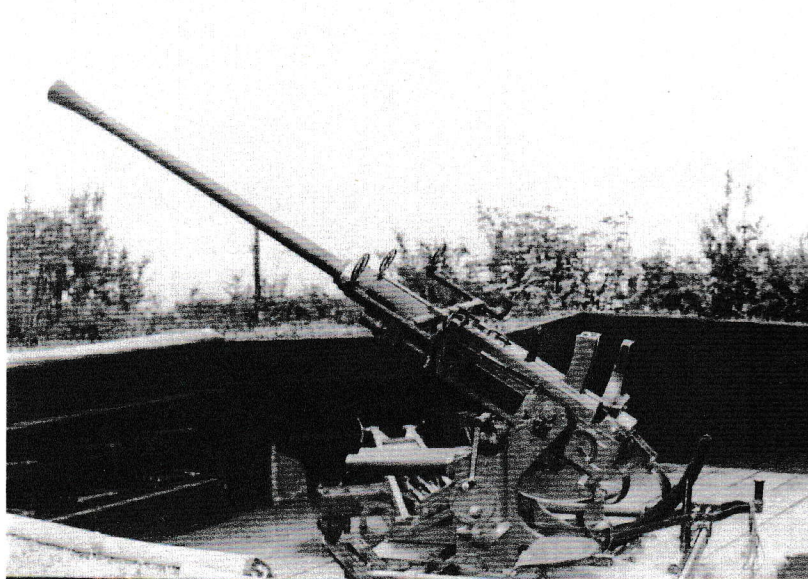
The door leading down to the
ammunition magazine.



Six-pounder Hotchkiss
- fired a six pound shell,
hence the name. The caliber
was 2.244 inches or about
57 mm.

This gun was at Point Grey.

The one at Yorke Island was
mounted just in front of the
Battery Command Post.



40 mm Bofors:
Again, this example is at
Point Grey.

At Yorke Island, one gun
was mounted on top of the
Battery Command Post,
the other was mounted on
top of a thirty by thirty by
twenty foot high tower in
about the center of the island.



Chosen to illustrate the age
and quantity of BC's air de-
fence at the start of the
war, these two 13-pounders
are truck mounted.

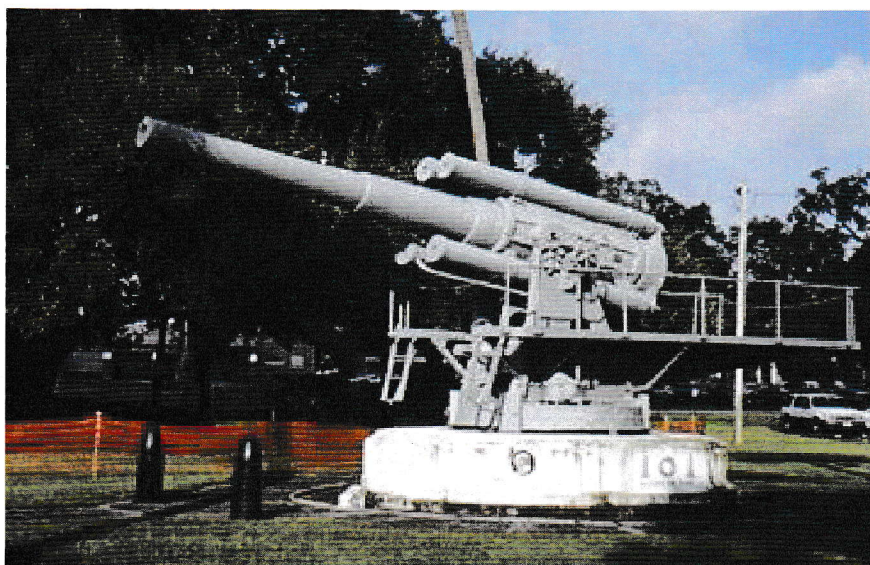
The 13-pounder had a bore
of about 3", 76 mm in metric.

War with Japan was expected. Canada's military planners gave B.C. defence priority. Translated, this means that Canada's four already obsolete 3-inch anti aircraft guns were in B.C. With the German conflict starting first, priorities were changed and the guns were quickly shuffled off to Halifax. This still left two 13-pounder guns for the air defence of B.C. There was only one minor problem - there was no ammunition for the guns in B.C. This was probably a godsend, however, as the breech on one of the guns was so badly worn that it fell open at inopportune moments.

Not to denigrate the 13-pounder, for it, "was a highly successful weapon, although declared obsolete in British service in 1921, it remained in service with the Canadian and Dutch Armies *for several years afterwards*"

Defence of the Pacific coast, in cooperation with the United States, was particularly important in the area of Juan de Fuca Strait, where the Canadian defences were coordinated with the heavy batteries on the U.S. side. Information on the defences here was exchanged between the two countries as early as 1938. There was some concern over the low-angle mountings at Victoria/Esquimalt, resulting in the offer by the United States to loan four, 8-inch guns to strengthen the defences in the area. Two of these guns were in place on Christopher Point three days before the attack on Pearl Harbour.

On a Florida University campus, this eight inch gun is on an M 1918 carriage; as were the eight inch guns at Christopher Point and Fairview Point Batteries.





Above: Not the same shed, but in the same area and similar to the one in the picture of Mr. Pugh.

Below: Barbed wire defenses still in place. (by number three search light)





A government issue cup, a forlorn reminder of the days when men of the army, navy and veterans guard lived, worked, and took their meals here. Garrison duty was never popular anywhere, but particularly on Yorke Island, the desire to get away was very strong. Many who served there spent much time, effort and explored every ruse to get away. There was a house on the island before the military took over, yet the owner was never located, he too had had a desire to 'get away'. This should have been an omen, for with the cessation of hostilities the entire military force 'got away'.

A dream to see Yorke Island preserved, as a great park, on a par with Fort Henry or Fort Rodd Hill must face the reality, Yorke Island is not popular. Few have heard of it, fewer still have been there. Of the thousands of boats that pass the island in a year, a bare handful stop. Partly it is the weather; on any warm sunny day in southern B.C. a chance listening to the weather report will invariably tell of at least a small craft warning in Johnstone Strait. Common knowledge among fisher persons and recreational boaters alike is that the worst boating conditions on Johnstone Strait lie in a short stretch between Sayward and Port Neville. As Yorke Island lies midway between these two, it should come as no surprise to find that, even on what passes for a nice day, the waters in the only anchorage are in constant motion, swirling to and fro. To be fair, Yorke Island is a delight to visit, to explore, and to enjoy. But how does one explain that little under current of relief, even joy, when leaving?

In the fifty-eight years since the end of the war, Yorke Island is gradually returning to nature. Perhaps Yorke Island doesn't need the protection of park status. Perhaps Yorke Island is protecting itself - and the memories of all those who served there in the time of war.

Bibliography

Vancouver Defended:

History Of The Men and Guns Of The Lower Mainland Defences 1858 - 1949

By: Peter N. Moogk, Assisted By: R. V. Stevenson

Official History Of The Canadian Army In The Second World War

Volume One,

Six Years Of War

The Army In Canada, Britain, And The Pacific

By: Colonel C. P. Stacey

And special thanks to: Lt. Colonel R. V. Stevenson, for a special opening of the museum and sharing of the priceless Yorke Island material.

Mr. Stevenson is the Director Of The 15th Field Artillery Regiment Museum,
Museum And Archives Society

Bessborough Armoury, Kitsilano, Vancouver, BC

Photo Credits:

Black and White photos of Yorke Island and Point Grey - 15th Field Archives

Color photos of Yorke Island - By the author