

“DO YOUR LITTLE BIT”:
*The 143rd Battalion Canadian
Expeditionary Force, “BC Bantams”*

A Photo Essay

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Victoria children yet unborn
Will read a page that we'll adorn.¹

THE 143RD BATTALION Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) (Figure 1) was Canada's first “bantam” battalion – a BC battalion created to enlist men under the standard five-foot, four-inch (162.5-centimetre) height required for enlistment into regular service, and of whom the author's great-grandfather was one (Figure 2).² A second bantam battalion was approved soon afterwards in Toronto.³ Recognizing the army's need to enlist more men, and the desire of smaller men to participate in the war, Lord Kitchener had organized bantam battalions in England earlier in the war, and by July 1916, some sixteen thousand bantam-sized British soldiers were in service.⁴

British Columbia mobilized quickly at the beginning of the First World War. Demographically the most British of the Canadian

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¹ “Systematic Efforts to Obtain Recruits,” *Daily Colonist*, 3 December 1916.

² “Bantam Battalion,” *Daily Colonist*, 19 November 1915.

³ “The Bantams,” *Bantam Review* 1 (5 August 1916): 1.

⁴ “Bantams Have But 160 Vacancies,” *Daily Colonist*, 21 July 1916.



Figure 1. The crest from the 1916 Christmas card of the BC Bantams, the 143rd Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force. A Bantam rooster, a small but plucky fellow, was chosen to represent the battalion on its crest. The Latin motto *Multum in Parvo* translates as “Much in Little.” *Source:* Image 197909-38, Box 1, Container 000589-0001, File: “Misc-Military, Personal,” courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BC Archives (hereafter BCA), Robert Ely Collection.

provinces, owing to a flood of immigration from the British Isles between the Canadian Pacific Railway’s completion to Vancouver in 1886 and the outbreak of the war,⁵ British Columbians had close ties to the motherland and were committed to the war effort.⁶ Margaret Ormsby describes how land for training and housing was quickly expropriated: the Polo Grounds in Kamloops were used as a mobilization centre; the training camp in Vernon was expanded; and the Willows Exhibition buildings in Victoria were turned into a training camp. Permanent forces already present in British Columbia as well as men of the active militia were mobilized first. Following that, other battalions were formed and trained for deployment. The first BC troops to leave were the 5th British Columbia Regiment, which departed for the Valcartier mobilization camp in Quebec on 26 August 1914. Prior to that, at the beginning of August, Richard McBride, the Conservative premier of the only province open to attack from the west, had reinforced local defences by purchasing two submarines from a company in Seattle.⁷

⁵ Jean Barman estimates that some 175,000 British immigrants settled in British Columbia in the thirty years after 1891. See Jean Barman, *Growing Up British in British Columbia: Boys in Private School* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1984), 2. In 1921, 74 percent of British Columbians were of British ethnic origin. See Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 363.

⁶ The best general account of British Columbia in the Great War remains Margaret A. Ormsby, *British Columbia: A History* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1958), 375-403. See also Patricia E. Roy and John Herd Thompson, *British Columbia: Land of Promises. The Illustrated History of British Columbia* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2005), 102-12.

⁷ Ormsby, *British Columbia*, 376-82. On McBride’s career, see Patricia E. Roy, *Boundless Optimism: Richard McBride’s British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012). Gregson’s



Figure 2. Jack McCurrach, great-grandfather of the author, pictured here with his wife Nellie and daughter Gladys, ca. 1916. A native of Scotland, Jack moved to Vancouver in 1910 and married his fiancée Nellie when she joined him in the fall of 1912, after missing her trip in April on the *Titanic* due to the illness of a relative. Jack entered the Canadian Expeditionary Force in 1916 as a private in the 143rd Battalion. Shorter than the five-foot, four-inch limit to enlist, at five foot, one and one-half inches, Jack signed up with the 143rd because it was a "Bantam" unit – a special battalion organized for the main purpose of enlisting and training shorter men. *Source:* Author's collection.



Figure 3. Lieutenant-Colonel Alan Bruce Powley, ca. 1916. Born in Drayton, Ontario, in 1876, Powley was involved in real estate when he lived in Victoria. Previously he had been in the jewellery business on Jasper Avenue in Edmonton. In December 1915, as a major, Powley became commanding officer of the BC Bantams. With this appointment he was promoted to lieutenant-colonel. *Source:* Detail of image 198011-011, Box 27, File 8, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BCA, Trio Collection.

The First World War derailed the economy in the Canadian West, brought to a halt the immigration boom of the preceding decades, and caused a massive reverse immigration through enlistment and the departure of soldiers' families. Sources cited by Ormsby estimated a fall in population of 100,000 over the course of the war.⁸

Mobilization of the 143rd Battalion was authorized in November of 1915,⁹ with Major Alan Bruce Powley appointed commanding officer (Figure 3). The *Daily Colonist* reported that the battalion was formed "in response to the petition of a large number of men ... [who] represented that, [being] under the regulation stature ... they were barred from serving their country. It was their desire to 'do their bit,' and they asked that some provision be made for them."¹⁰ In addition, in Canada, by the end of 1915, recruiting within army height standards had become difficult.¹¹ Names of potential recruits began to be collected through ads in the *Daily Colonist*, starting on 19 November 1915 (Figures 4 and 5).

Accommodation for a full battalion was not available in Victoria, so a new location was required, and Beacon Hill Park was selected for


somehow patchy account of Victoria in the Great War makes no mention of the 143rd Battalion. See Harry Gregson, *A History of Victoria, 1842-1970* (Victoria: Morriss Printing, 1970), 81-92.

⁸ Ormsby, *British Columbia*, 396.

⁹ Sydney Allinson, *The Bantams: The Untold Story of World War I* (Oakville, ON: Mosaic Press, 1982), 182-83.

¹⁰ "143rd Battalion," *Daily Colonist*, 23 April 1916.

¹¹ See http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/chrono/1914conscriptio_n_e.shtml.



PERMISSION HAS BEEN GRANTED TO FORM A

BATTALION OF

British Columbia Bantams

B. C. B.'s

Men of small stature, 5 ft. 4 in. and under, who are willing to SERVE KING AND EMPIRE, are eligible for this Battalion. Age 18 to 45.

The Mother Country has bantam battalions that have proved themselves second to none. Bantams, come forward and show you are willing to

DO YOUR "LITTLE BIT"

Make your application to W. J. COX, 1181 P. O. Box, or personally at Crown Realty Co., 1218 Government Street, Victoria, B.C.

B. C. B.'s

WHO ARE THEY?

British Columbia Bantams

Men of small stature, 5 feet 4 inches and under, who are anxious and willing to SERVE KING AND EMPIRE, debarred from other regiments by army regulations which call for men of 5 feet 4 inches.

It is proposed to apply for permission to form a regiment, which will be known as "The British Columbia Bantams"—B. C. B.'s.

All men whom this may concern are invited to forward name and address to W. J. C., Post Office Box 1181, Victoria, B.C.

The Mother Country Has Bantam Regiments. Why Not British Columbia?

Bantams, Come Forward and Prove That You Are Worthy of Being a Citizen of the British Empire!

Application Form

Name

Address

Cut This Out and forward

Applications may be made personally at the Crown Realty Co., 1218 Government St., City, opposite Union Bank.

Figures 4 and 5. "British Columbia Bantams. Do Your 'Little Bit.'" Recruiting ads for the 143rd Regiment from the *Daily Colonist* that ran in November and December 1915. John Cox, the contact on one of the ads, then living in Esquimalt, was from London, England. He was four feet, eleven inches tall.



Figure 6. The BC Bantams in front of their barracks, beneath the Garry oaks at the north end of Beacon Hill Park, ca. 1916. The *Daily Colonist* describes the site as “under the spreading oaks facing Heywood Avenue at the entrance to the park.” Erection of the “hutments” began in February 1916, with some 400,000 feet of lumber donated by the City of Victoria, and a month later the camp was under construction by the Bantams themselves as well as by the Royal Canadian Engineers. Conceived as a single building, by late April 1916, the *Colonist* notes, the extensive camp included “barrack rooms, mess rooms, store buildings, hospital, orderly room, guardroom, etc.” Separate tents served as officers’ quarters. *Source:* Image 197909-38, Box 2, Container 000502-0001 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BCA, Robert Ely Fonds.

the battalion’s barracks. The Prince Rupert Hotel on Bastion Square, with immediate room for four hundred men, was secured as temporary headquarters while the Beacon Hill Barracks were completed in May, 1916 (Figures 6, 7, and 8). Major Powley wanted the battalion to be on strength by the spring of 1916, but he would wait almost a year to secure the men needed, and even then they would be more than one hundred men short of the target of 1,050.¹²

¹² “Temporary Home for Bantams Is Engaged,” *Daily Colonist*, 10 February 1916.



Figure 7. The BC Bantams' barracks at Beacon Hill Park, Victoria, ca. 1916. Note the rustic board-and-batten siding of these utilitarian structures. *Source:* Image 197909-38, Box 2, Container 000502-0001, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, vca, Robert Ely Fonds.



Figure 8. The Bantams' barracks at Beacon Hill Park, ca. 1916. *Source:* Image 197909-38, Box 2, Container 000502-0001, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, vca, Robert Ely Fonds.

RECRUITING

Recruiting was the single most important activity carried out by any battalion, for without men there would be no battalion. Voluntary recruiting in Canada, as in Britain, was successful at the start of the war. By 31 March 1915, Canada had sent 36,267 men to England, over twenty thousand of whom had been born in the British Isles.¹³ As the conflict progressed, however, the army wanted more men in the field – in January 1916, Prime Minister Borden committed 500,000 troops to the war effort¹⁴ – and it became more and more difficult to find them. Recruiting had been easier at the beginning of the war, in part due to high unemployment,¹⁵ but unemployment eased as men enlisted and vacated jobs. As well, news from the front began to come home, and it was not pretty. The second Battle of Ypres in April 1915 introduced chlorine gas to the war and saw nearly six thousand Canadian casualties in a little over a month.¹⁶ In May 1915, the second Battle of Artois produced over two thousand Canadian casualties, and the Battle of the Somme, which continued over most of the last half of 1916, saw some twenty-four thousand Canadian casualties.¹⁷ It would become increasingly hard to convince men to volunteer for battle.

In the fall of 1915, to encourage enlistment, the Canadian Army accepted a new policy that enabled any patriotic group or person to form a battalion instead of relying on established militia to take the initiative.¹⁸ Although approved in November 1915, the 143rd Battalion Canadian Expeditionary Force, BC Bantams, got official permission to begin recruiting on 20 February 1916 after delays caused by bad weather and poor housing facilities. Late in March 1916, District Orders were issued to allow and encourage men under regulation height to transfer from other units to the 143rd Battalion.¹⁹

The main recruiting office for the BC Bantams was at the corner of Broad and View streets in Victoria (Figure 9). That summer, a satellite office was opened at the corner of Fort and Government streets under

¹³ J.L. Granatstein and J.M. Hitsman, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1977), 23.

¹⁴ James W. St. G. Walker, "Race and Recruitment in World War I: Enlistment of Visible Minorities in the Canadian Expeditionary Force," *Canadian Historical Review* 70, 1 (1989): 8.

¹⁵ Granatstein and Hitsman, *Broken Promises*, 34.

¹⁶ Ian F.W. Beckett, *The Great War* (Harlow, Essex: Pearson, 2007), 236; G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer and Controller of Stationery, 1962), 92.

¹⁷ Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*, 92.

¹⁸ Walker, "Race and Recruitment," 8.

¹⁹ "Small Men Will Be Granted Transfers," *Daily Colonist*, 25 March 1916.



Figure 9. The corner of View and Broad streets, Victoria, February 1916. A poster reads "British Columbia Bantams Recruiting Office," and portraits in the window include King George V and the Governor General of Canada, the Duke of Connaught and Strathearn. Source: *Daily Colonist*, 27 February 1916.

a marquee on a lot owned by the Canadian National Railways.²⁰ The Vancouver office was at 45 Hastings Street East and then moved to 330 W. Hastings (Figure 10); and, by March 1916, recruiting offices had been set up in Edmonton, Calgary, and Lloydminster.²¹ In Calgary, Lieutenant John Alexander Greenhill managed to secure a hotel barroom as an office from which to recruit. (Alberta was under prohibition at this time, and the bar was unoccupied.)²² By July, a recruiting office had been established in Kamloops, and British subjects or men sympathetic to the British cause also came from Yukon, Washington, Oregon, and California.²³

An unlikely celebrity helped with recruiting. On 29 March 1916, an undersized vaudeville performer known as Little Lord Roberts walked into the Victoria recruiting office and announced his desire to enlist

²⁰ "Military Notes," *Daily Colonist*, 28 June 1916.

²¹ "Band Instruments for Bantams Here," *Daily Colonist*, 11 June 1916; "Bantams Start on Expedition," *Daily Colonist*, 15 June 1916.

²² "Band Instruments for Bantams Here," *Daily Colonist*, 11 June 1916.

²³ "Bantam Who Served in Many Campaigns," *Daily Colonist*, 1 July 1916; "Show Gratifying Interest in Unit," *Daily Colonist*, 8 March 1916.



Figure 10. The only regiment for undersized men in western Canada, the Victoria-based Bantams also recruited in Vancouver. Here, a group of Bantams pose at a recruiting office at 330 West Hastings Street. A banner reads “Enlist with Battling Bantams 330 Hast. W.,” and posters in the background read “Send More Men,” “Enlist To-day,” and “To Which do you Belong?” The Bantams’ lieutenant, Robert Ely, is standing at far left. *Source:* Image 197909-38, Box 1, Container 000589-0001, File “Misc. Portraits,” courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BCA, Robert Ely Fonds.



Figure 11. Robert Canton, the English-born midget known by his vaudeville name of Little Lord Roberts, purported to join the BC Bantams at the end of March 1916. Estimates of his height vary considerably. Here his height is given at one foot, ten inches, which was almost certainly incorrect. *Source:* http://www.peoriacountyillinois.info/photos/lord_roberts_peoriatheater_1900.jpg

(Figure 11). "Attestation papers were duly exercised," noted the *Colonist*, "in which the man described himself as being 3 feet in height ... As soon as the papers were made out 'Lord Roberts' was introduced to the officers and at noon had lunch with the battalion at Beacon Hill ... A parade (tomorrow evening) will be called at Beacon Hill shortly after the evening meal and the men, led by 'Lord Roberts,' will march to the theatre."²⁴ Based for part of his career in New York, Little Lord Roberts spent a portion of his performing life with the Ringling Circus. Born in England, his real name was Robert Canton.²⁵ His actual height is in question. In the *Victoria* paper he is described as three feet tall (thirty-six inches), in another article he is described as thirty inches (two feet, six inches), and elsewhere as twenty-two inches (one foot, ten inches), but this last estimate seems a bit of an exaggeration.²⁶ Little Lord Roberts had a successful career and was able to afford not only cigars but also a large Maxwell car, apparently sold to him by the tallest salesman (six feet, four and one-quarter inches) at a dealership in Albany, New York.²⁷ His enlistment charade (there is no record of his attestation) must have been great publicity for the battalion as well as for his own stage show.

By mid-April 1916, 445 men had enlisted in the Bantams,²⁸ and, by the end of July, their strength was apparently up to nine hundred.²⁹ By this time, the recruiting officers were feeling frustrated with their efforts, with Lieutenant Greenhill commenting that "the entire country has been combed clean [of recruits]."³⁰ Later the same month, the *Daily Colonist* states: "While recruiting for the 143rd Overseas Battalion has not been as fast as those in charge would have wished, it is interesting to note that it is proceeding at a faster rate than any other battalion now seeking recruits."³¹ Because of the recruiting difficulties, and because standard battalions were accepting shorter men, which was seen as an unfair advantage, after July 1916 the Bantams began taking men taller

²⁴ "Nanaimo Musicians Join Bantams," *Daily Colonist*, 30 March 1916.

²⁵ *Evening Citizen* (Ottawa) 30 May 1934; "A Midget Romance," *New York Times*, 28 March 1909.

²⁶ "Smallest Man Owns Large Car," *Oakland Tribune*, 14 October 1917; see www.tias.com/9314/PictPage/1922826198.html.

²⁷ *Oakland Tribune*, 14 October 1917. He died of a heart condition at the age of seventy-two. See *Capital Times*, 1 October 1966.

²⁸ "Bantam Battalion Is Making Progress," *Daily Colonist*, 16 April 1916.

²⁹ "Bantam Recruits Sent to Sidney," *Daily Colonist*, 29 July 1916. However, Powley stated that the figure in July 1916 was about five hundred. See Powley to the Historical Section Canadian War Records Office, 20 March 1917, Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), RG 9, vol. 4701, f. 9.

³⁰ "Bantams Can Muster Nearly 800 Men," *Daily Colonist*, 7 July 1916.

³¹ "Bantams Have But 160 Vacancies," *Daily Colonist*, 21 July 1916.

than five feet, four inches.³² The plan was to later trade their taller recruits for the smaller men of other units.³³ They were now “not wholly a bantam battalion,” Powley noted, but they maintained the moniker for various reasons. In the end, the average height was still below five feet, six inches.³⁴ August proved to be a slow month due to increased employment opportunities and the demands of the harvest.³⁵ Recruiting slowed even more after that; indeed, Canadian recruitment in general fell after July 1916. Earlier that year close to thirty thousand men were being recruited monthly, by July it was eight thousand, and towards the end of the year it had fallen to about three thousand per month.³⁶

THE MEN OF THE 143RD

In the early months of 1916, the Victoria newspapers presented the outlines of the battalion. Officers were listed, their service was summarized, and, as time passed, their promotions were noted. A search of the Canadian Library and Archives database for men assigned regimental numbers starting with 826 or 827 provides a near-complete summary of enlistments in the battalion.³⁷ The newspapers also noted details of some of the enlisted men, particularly those with unusual or exceptional histories. An Armenian, Mihran Yardunian, whose parents were killed by Turks, came to Canada from the United States to join the Bantams in an attempt to avenge his parents’ deaths.³⁸ Harold Harker, twenty-seven years old and residing in New York, apparently walked to Vancouver to join the Bantams;³⁹ inspired by Harker’s story, Private Norman McDowell walked from Kamloops to Vancouver.⁴⁰ An Italian, a resident of San Francisco but formerly of Victoria, also signed up.⁴¹ In May 1916, Victor de Pessemier (regimental number 826500), a twenty-five-year-old Belgian-born French Canadian, became the smallest man in the battalion at a height of four feet, eight and one-half inches.⁴² Frederick Johnson joined in July. He had been a member of the First

³² Powley to the Historical Section Canadian War Records Office 20 March 1917, LAC, RG 9, vol. 4705, f. 9.

³³ Powley to R.F. Green, M.P., 5 October 1916, LAC, RG 9, vol. 49, f. 8-5-122.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ “Comparatively Poor Results Reported,” *Daily Colonist*, 15 August 1916.

³⁶ Walker, “Race and Recruitment,” 18.

³⁷ See www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/cef/001042-100.01e.php.

³⁸ “Bantam Recruit Wants His Revenge,” *Daily Colonist*, 22 June 1916.

³⁹ “Bantams’ Strength Is 219 Members,” *Daily Colonist*, 4 March 1916.

⁴⁰ “Walks Many Miles to Join Bantams,” *Daily Colonist*, 15 March 1916.

⁴¹ “Italian Recruit Joins Bantams,” *Daily Colonist*, 9 April 1916.

⁴² “Military Notes,” *Daily Colonist*, 2 May 1916.

Australian Contingent to land at Anzac Cove on Gallipoli.⁴³ Private George Mendes came from Mexico to sign up with the bantam unit. It was his second time entering battle – the first was with the Royal Field Artillery.⁴⁴ Thomas Paterson, a well-known lighthouse keeper from Cape Beale, near Bamfield, who had saved many shipwrecked lives, joined the battalion in September.⁴⁵ Another recruit was F. Zavadsky, a Polish tinsmith who had previously received the St. George's Cross, a Russian decoration awarded for heroism, while fighting in the Carpathian Mountains.⁴⁶ An unusually large recruit signed up in Vancouver in April 1916. Thomas Nagel, nearly six feet tall and 250 pounds, joined as a band member (bass drum), upon whom there were no height restrictions.⁴⁷

One member of the 143rd Battalion died while in barracks at Beacon Hill. Thirty-four-year-old private James Varley Johnson, a native of England, was initially believed to have influenza. As it turned out it was spinal meningitis; he died only a few days after getting sick, and the whole of No. 2 Company was quarantined for several days after his death. A funeral with full military honours was held for Johnson, who left a widow and three children behind in North Vancouver. He was buried in the Ross Bay Cemetery.⁴⁸

THE TROUBLE WITH BEING SHORT

The sheer fact of being short caused some problems for the Bantams. The first challenge was to find uniforms and boots that fit properly.⁴⁹ Not long after the battalion's band was formed, it was found that marching tunes needed to be adjusted. The tempo of a standard song such as "It's a Long Way to Tipperary" was not conducive to marching with a shorter stride, and the resulting march was out of step. Non-standard marching tunes were chosen for the Bantams because of their faster pace.⁵⁰

Even weapons had to be different. The infamous Ross Rifle, the firearm used by the Canadian Army in the first half of the First World War, was fitted with a shortened "Bantam Butt" to accommodate shorter arms. In 1916, the Ross Rifle was replaced by the Lee-Enfield, which

⁴³ "New Bantam Recruit Was at Gallipoli," *Daily Colonist*, 8 July 1916.

⁴⁴ "Pte. George Mendes" (photo), *Daily Colonist*, 13 August 1916.

⁴⁵ "Enlists with Bantam Battalion," *Daily Colonist*, 17 September 1916.

⁴⁶ "Russian Veteran Enlists with 143rd," *Daily Colonist*, 8 October 1916.

⁴⁷ "Pleased with Way Unit Is Filling," *Daily Colonist*, 21 April 1916.

⁴⁸ "Death was Sudden," *Daily Colonist*, 14 May 1916.

⁴⁹ "Bantams Gathering Here for Service," *Daily Colonist*, 16 February 1916.

⁵⁰ "Bantams to Hold Recruiting Rally," *Daily Colonist*, 26 April 1916.

was also available with a Bantam Butt;⁵¹ but the Ross was still used for training purposes to free up more of the Lee-Enfields for France. The Bantams were issued Ross rifles on 18 April 1916,⁵² undoubtedly with Bantam Butts, and used them for the duration of their training in Canada.

Good-natured if predictable jibes went with the territory of being shorter than average. The battalion was referred to at least once as “Powley’s Pullets”; recruiting ads could not resist the exhortation “Do Your Little Bit”; and the men were dismissed as “shorties.”⁵³

TRAINING AND SIDNEY CAMP

Intended as an infantry battalion, the BC Bantams trained as such. Once the barracks were complete, noted the *Daily Colonist*, “careful attention was to be given for some weeks to squad drill, after which company and battalion exercises would be inaugurated.”⁵⁴ Signal (communications) training was conducted while the battalion was in Victoria, and the newspaper noted that night training, with strange lights flashing from the park, had confused local residents.⁵⁵ Training in the use of guns was considered for Beacon Hill Park in late May 1916, when Victoria City Council gave the Bantams authority to open a miniature rifle range at the old rock quarry at Beacon Hill.⁵⁶ A bayonet fighting squad was also formed while in barracks (Figure 12).

Summer training for the Canadian Expeditionary Force generally consisted of mobilization to “camp” so men could learn to live in the field. The only mobilization camp in British Columbia at the beginning of 1916 was on the range south of Vernon, in the Okanagan Valley. It was expected that fifteen thousand troops would be under canvas in British Columbia that summer.⁵⁷ Throughout the spring, the *Daily Colonist* considered the arguments for and against establishing a training camp on Vancouver Island. The conundrum of the Bantam Battalion was voiced by the *Victoria Daily Times*: “The purpose in taking the soldiers to Vernon is for battalion and brigade drill instruction, but with the Bantams not up to strength they will not be ready for some time to take

⁵¹ R.G. Haycock, “Early Canadian Weapons Acquisition: “That Damned Ross Rifle,”” *Canada Defence Quarterly* 14, 3 (1984-85): 48-59.

⁵² “Rifles Issued to Bantams Yesterday,” *Daily Colonist*, 19 April 1916.

⁵³ “Bantams Can Muster Nearly 800 Men,” *Daily Colonist*, 7 July 1916.

⁵⁴ “Have Orders to Recruit in Alberta,” *Daily Colonist*, 1 June 1916.

⁵⁵ “Military Notes,” *Daily Colonist*, 10 June 1916.

⁵⁶ “Military Notes,” *Daily Colonist*, 23 May 1916.

⁵⁷ “Troops Likely to Train at Vernon,” *Daily Colonist*, 10 March 1916.



Figure 12. A bayonet fighting squad of the 143rd at the Beacon Hill Barracks. These soldiers were trained by Lieutenant Robert Ely (far right) and Sergeants Lawrence and Farquhar. In the background are St. Joseph's Hospital and Victoria's Anglican Cathedral. Source: Image 197909-38, Box 1, Container 000589-0001, File "Groups," courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BCA, Trio Collection.

this class of training."⁵⁸ Ultimately, the Bantams did not get shipped to Vernon, and, due to their low numbers and their excellent barracks at Beacon Hill, doubts continued regarding whether they would go to a summer camp at all.⁵⁹

A location on Vancouver Island would help reduce the demand on Vernon and would be much more accessible for local battalions. Several locations were considered, including a golf course in Colwood,⁶⁰ but eventually the army selected a location on the Saanich Peninsula on the edge of Sidney, where the 143rd and the 231st Battalion (Seaforth Highlanders) from Vancouver trained between July and November 1916. The Bantams walked from Victoria to Sidney Camp (Figure 13), which was located at the west end of what is now Beacon Avenue in Sidney.⁶¹

The camp itself was fitted with all the necessities of outdoor army life, including living quarters under canvas, training space, cooking facilities, a water system, and sanitary facilities (Figures 14 and 15).

⁵⁸ "Wants Bantams Kept Here This Summer," *Victoria Daily Times*, 8 April 1916.

⁵⁹ "Considering Sites for Island Camp," *Daily Colonist*, 5 May 1916.

⁶⁰ "Island Training Camp Is Proposed," *Daily Colonist*, 27 April 1916.

⁶¹ Sidney Camp existed into the late 1930s. The Mary Winspear Centre now occupies the location. Personal communication, Brad Morrison, April 2014.



Figure 13. The 143rd Battalion marching from Victoria to Sidney, July 1916. Lieutenant-colonel Powley led seven hundred men from Beacon Hill Park on 3 July 1916. They camped overnight at Prospect Lake in Saanich and arrived at Sidney at about noon the following day. Powley is in the middle of the photo on his horse. *Source:* Image 198011-011 Box 157 003/031, Container 000334-0157, File 7, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, vca, Trio Collection.

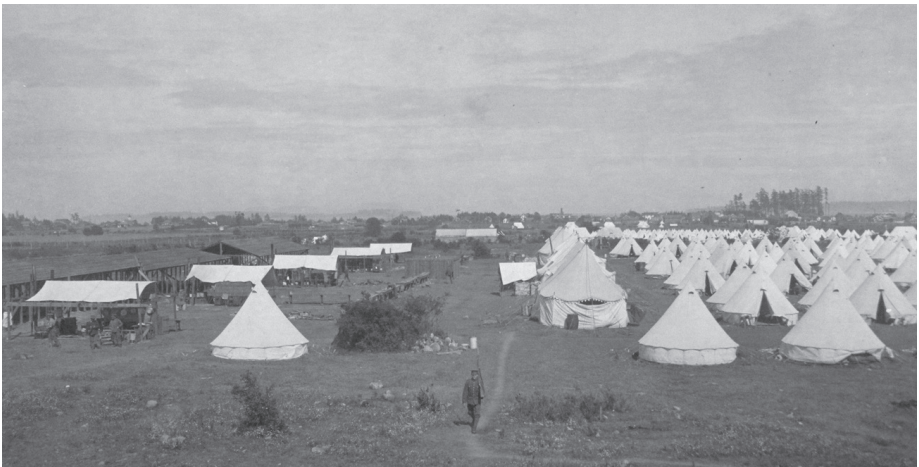


Figure 14. The sea of tents at Sidney Camp, temporary home to the BC Bantams (143rd Battalion) and to the Seaforth Highlanders (231st Battalion) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, ca. July 1916. The view is towards the east, with the waterfront town of Sidney in the background and Haro Strait beyond. *Source:* Image 198011-011, Box 167 015/031, Container 000334-0167, File 2, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, vca, Trio Collection.

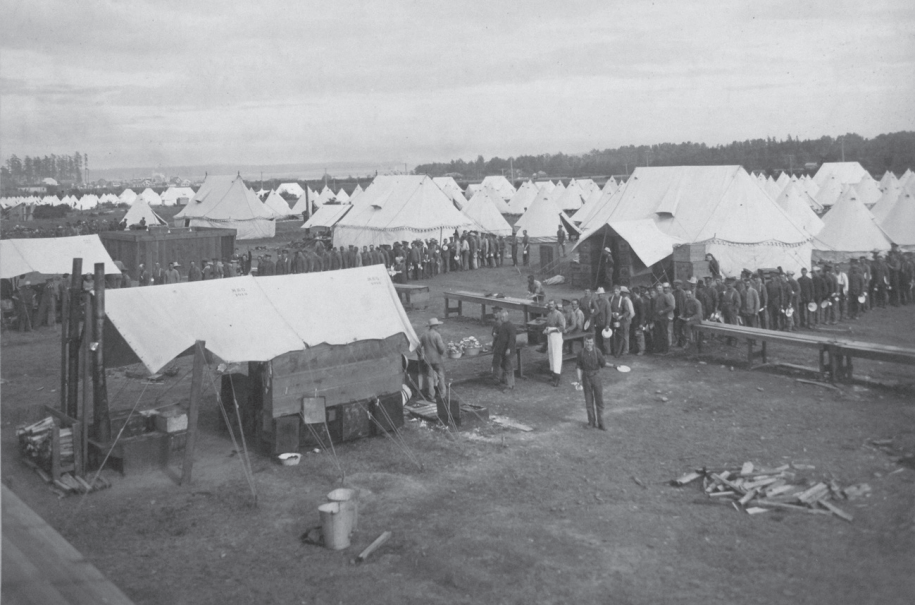


Figure 15. It was an ambitious matter to feed the seven hundred men of the BC Bantams. Lining up for meals at Sidney Camp, ca. July 1916. The view is to the southeast, with Sidney Island in the background. *Source:* Image 198011-011, Box 159 007031, Container 000334-0159, File 1 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BSA, Trio Collection.



Figure 16. Sidney Camp, ca. July 1916. Bayonet practice of the BC Bantams (143rd Battalion) and Seaforth Highlanders (231st Battalion). The view is to the west, with the Malahat in the distance and the lower slope of Mt. Newton at far left. *Source:* Image 198011-011, Box 23, Container 000334-0175, File 1 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BSA, Trio Collection.



Figure 17. Men of the BC Bantams (143rd Battalion) and Seaforth Highlanders (231st Battalion), at bayonet practice with bales of hay, ca. July 1916. Looking east towards the outskirts of Sidney. *Source:* Image 198011-011, Box 23, Container 000334-0175, File 1, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BCA, Trio Collection.

The capable Colonel Duff Stuart served as both camp commandant and District officer commanding. Military facilities included a drill ground with several small rifle ranges. The routine consisted of drills, bayonet and rifle practice, and trench training.⁶² Rifle and musketry training was essential preparation for France, and instruction was provided by Captain Williams. Bayonet training garnered much media attention: trenches were dug across a field, and dummies, representing the enemy, were hung on wires on the far side of the trenches. The trick was to learn how to charge across a trench and straight into the fray (Figures 16 and 17). “The troops are lined up a certain distance away,” noted the *Colonist*, “and their duty, at the word, is to charge through the intervening trenches, and reaching the dummies, to stick them with their bayonets and toss them over their shoulders as they pass.” The dummies weighed forty-five kilograms or more, so running through a trench to skewer them took both strength and fitness.⁶³ Machine gun training, bomb throwing, and horse handling were also taught, although only the officers did the latter as the men of this infantry battalion had

⁶² “Island Camp Ready by Monday, June 26,” *Daily Colonist*, 16 June 1916; “Royal Inspection of Sidney Troops,” *Daily Colonist*, 25 July 1916; “Troops Will Move to Sidney Camp,” *Daily Colonist*, 1 July 1916.

⁶³ “Bayonet Fighting Is Being Taught,” *Daily Colonist*, 15 August 1916.



Figure 18. Rifle training at Prospect Rifle Range in South Saanich, ca. August 1916. The Bantams had learned basic rifle and musketry training at Sidney Camp, but when they became more efficient they were taken to the Prospect Rifle Range, beyond Prospect Lake and near Heal's Station on the BC Electric Railway line, where a camp and rifle range were set up in 1916. This shooting range was a small-scale and sanitized dress rehearsal for what awaited the Bantams on the Western Front. Note the square targets at the far left, the cedar stumps cut near ground level, and the shallow trench behind the berm. This facility exists almost a century later as Heal's Rifle Range of the Department of National Defence. *Source:* Image 198011-011, Box 159 007/031, Container 00334-0159, File 1 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BCA, Trio Collection.

no need for horse riding.⁶⁴ A separate, larger rifle range was established near Heal's Station (Figures 18, 19, and 20).

In late July 1916, the Bantams and the 231st Battalion received two inspections at Sidney Camp: on 24 July by the Governor General, HRH the Duke of Connaught (Figure 21), and three days later by the inspector-general for western Canada, Brigadier-General John Hughes.⁶⁵ The people of Victoria were invited to Sidney to attend the governor general's inspection, and the *Colonist* reported that the crowd of spectators was "a

⁶⁴ "Want More Men for BC Bantams," *Daily Colonist*, 6 August 1916; "Military Notes," *Daily Colonist*, 2 August 1916; "Military Notes," *Daily Colonist*, 18 August 1916.

⁶⁵ "Details of Sidney Review Announced," *Daily Colonist*, 23 July 1916; "Inspects Sidney Camp Thoroughly," *Daily Colonist*, 28 July 1916.



Figure 19. Mealtime at the Prospect Rifle Range Camp, ca. August 1916. Note the wooden crates with planks between that served as tables, and the boy at left with a dog, possibly a battalion mascot. *Source:* Image 198011-011, Box 159 007/031, Container 000334-0159, File 1, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BCA, Trio Collection.



Figure 20. At the Prospect Rifle Range, ca. August 1916. The BC Bantams are camped in a clearing in the Douglas-fir forest. At right is the kitchen tent. Note the pile of potatoes on the grass beside it. *Source:* Image 198011-011, Box 159 007/031, Container 000334-0159, File 1, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BCA, Trio Collection.



Figure 21. The Governor General of Canada, HRH the Duke of Connaught (second from left), inspecting the troops at Sidney Camp, 24 July 1916. The view is towards the east, with Sidney Island in the distance. Lieutenant-Colonel Powley (on horse, centre) is leading the troops of the 143rd Bantam Battalion. On this occasion the governor general also inspected the troops of the 231st Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders. In 1911, the third and last surviving son of Queen Victoria, the Duke of Connaught, became the first member of the Royal House to hold the post of Canadian governor general. *Source:* Image 198011-011, Box 158 006/031, Container 000334-0158, File 7, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BCA, Trio Collection.

great deal larger than was ever imagined possible.”⁶⁶ Hughes’s report of 27 July 1916 – one of the few surviving government documents relating to the Bantam Battalion – was a good deal less enthusiastic than the glowing comments published in the newspapers. Hughes reported that, after minimal training in Victoria, and after only three weeks’ instruction in Sidney, the inspection went as well as could be expected. His specific comments were not glowing. He notes of Powley: “[He] has had quite a long experience as an officer, but lacks energy and leadership. He can talk, but not practice ... he appears to wish to fully do his duty so as to have his Battalion trained to an efficient state.”⁶⁷ And he continues: “As this is the first Bantam Battalion I have inspected, I was not much impressed with the appearance of the men, and, while there are a lot of well developed small men, others are merely small boys.”⁶⁸ But he did expect that they would be sufficiently trained for

⁶⁶ “Royal Inspection of Sidney Troops,” *Daily Colonist*, 25 July 1916.

⁶⁷ Brigadier General J. Hughes, “Report of the Annual Inspection 1916 of the 143rd Overseas Battalion,” CEF, LAC, RG 9, vol. 6, f. 143.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

overseas: "The Officer Commanding expects to be recruited to full strength in about one month. If so, and proper supervision is given to training, the Battalion should be ready to proceed Overseas late in the fall."⁶⁹

Although no doubt the men tried hard, the army saw their efforts as "fair at best." In a confidential report written on 9 February 1917, Colonel Duff Stuart provides a bleak summary of the ability of Major Powley and the quality of training received by the battalion:

The training period of this Battalion has been marked by a constant flow of discharges on the one hand and of recruits on the other, whereby the percentage of men capable of advancing beyond purely elementary training has rarely if ever risen above 50 at any one time. Systematic and progressive training has consequently been almost impossible. Moreover it has never appeared that the Commanding Officer was capable of a full and practical appreciation of the value of any branch of training, and those of his juniors who have shewn efficiency and keenness have not, in any adequate measure, received the support either of his practical co-operation or of an encouraging interest on his part.⁷⁰

DEPARTURE

In preparation for the battalion's departure, a medical board completed its examination of the men on 14 September 1916 to make sure they were fit to leave Sidney Camp for Europe.⁷¹ However, new and tightened medical restrictions then came into effect, and a second examination reduced battalion numbers by some 150 men, further delaying departure.⁷² On a dreary Halloween day, the remaining men started walking back to the hutments at Beacon Hill Park where they arrived on 1 November 1916 (Figures 22 and 23).⁷³

A more serious problem loomed for the BC Bantams: the British Army, of which the Canadian Expeditionary Force was part, didn't need any more full battalions. Instead, they needed individual soldiers to replace those wounded and killed on the field – bodies to plug holes

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Colonel Duff Stuart, "Confidential Report on the 143rd Overseas Battalion CEF," LAC, RG 24, vol. 1674, HQ 683-348-4.

⁷¹ "Military Notes," *Daily Colonist*, 19 October 1916.

⁷² Powley to the Historical Section Canadian War Records Office, 20 March, 1917, LAC, RG 9, vol. 4701, f. 9.

⁷³ Ibid.



Figure 22. The Bantams trained at Sidney and in Saanich until late in October when, on a wet and dreary day, they marched back to their barracks at Beacon Hill. *Source:* Image 198011-011, Box 157 005/031, Container 000334-0157, File 7, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BCA, Trio Collection.



Figure 23. Small men with big hearts "marching as to war." Their training essentially complete, the BC Bantams return from Sidney Camp to their barracks at Beacon Hill, arriving 1 November 1916. *Source:* Image 198011-011, Box 157 005/031, Container 000334-0157, File 7, courtesy of the BC Museum, BCA, Trio Collection.



Figure 24. This is it, boys! The BC Bantams wait to board a CPR ship for Vancouver, 9 February 1917. They would be in Liverpool eighteen days later. *Source:* Detail of image 198011-011, Box 431, The Great War Album, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BCA, Trio Collection.

in the lines.⁷⁴ Naturally the Bantams desired to stay together as a group, as did many battalions raised at the time, and Powley did his best to make sure this happened. He was given the option of converting the Bantams into a railway construction battalion to facilitate its movement overseas, and this rebranding was confirmed on 7 January 1917.⁷⁵

After a year of overconfident newspaper articles touting how quickly the 143rd would be departing overseas, orders finally came on 6 February 1917 for the battalion's almost immediate departure.⁷⁶ Due to the suddenness of their departure, many Bantams were not able to say goodbye to their families. The barracks were open to families for a day before their departure, and Bantams whose families were in Victoria or nearby

⁷⁴ James Wood, *Militia Myths: Ideas of the Canadian Citizen Soldier, 1896-1921* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 230.

⁷⁵ "Inspection Reports, 143 Railway Construction Battalion, CEF," LAC, RG 24, vol. 1674, HQ 683-348-4.

⁷⁶ "Bantams Receive Marching Orders," *Daily Colonist*, 7 February 1917.



Figure 25. No turning back. Care packages in hand, members of the BC Bantams bid friends and family farewell at Victoria Harbour, 9 February 1917. Emotions range from the poised and confident to the apprehensive and quite possibly terrified. *Source:* Detail of image 198011-011, Box 431, The Great War Album, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BCA, Trio Collection.

could visit them at the camp, but more distant recruits had to make do with letters home.

The battalion was still not up to strength. Major Powley told the *Daily Colonist* that the battalion would number 950 men when it departed for Europe, but the final and official number was 913.⁷⁷ The Bantams were not alone in this attrition, and no Canadian battalion raised after July 1916 reached its full strength.⁷⁸ "Powley's Pullets" finally left Victoria on the *Princess Victoria* and *Princess Mary* on 9 February 1917 for Vancouver (Figures 24-26). They then proceeded by train to Halifax and crossed the Atlantic on HMT (His Majesty's Troopship) *Southland*, arriving in Liverpool on 27 February 1917.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ "Friends May Visit Barracks Today," *Daily Colonist*, 8 February 1917; Powley, to the Historical Section Canadian War Records Office, 20 March 1917, LAC, RG 9, vol. 4701, f. 9.

⁷⁸ Walker, "Race and Recruitment," 18.

⁷⁹ "Thanks Victorians for Loyal Support," *Daily Colonist*, 9 February 1917; Historical Record Report from Bruce Powley to the Historical Section, Canadian War Records Office, 20 March 1917, LAC, RG 9, vol. 4701, f. 9.



Figure 26. The CPR's *Princess Mary* (left) and *Princess Victoria* (right) depart from Victoria Harbour on 9 February 1917 with the entire 913-member complement of the 143rd Battalion (BC Bantams) of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, some of whom wave a final farewell from the decks and rigging. *Source:* Image 198011-011, Box 4/31, The Great War Album, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum, BCA, Trio Collection.

Of the 913 men of the 143rd Battalion who went overseas, 744 rated “Category A” (the men most fit for service) and were transferred to the 24th Reserve Battalion at Seaford, England, until they could fill gaps in other Canadian Corps battalions, such as the 47th Battalion and the 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles. The 169 soldiers remaining at Purfleet were transferred to the Canadian Railway Troops.⁸⁰

My great-grandfather, Jack McCurrach, the inspiration for this research, was transferred to the 47th Battalion and arrived in France shortly after the Battle of Vimy Ridge. In August 1917, after four days on the front lines, he was wounded at the Battle of Hill 70 at Lens and spent the next eight months in hospital. He never returned to battle and spent the last months of the war as a printer with the Canadian Corps’ Stationery and Typewriter Services. At five feet, one and one-half inches, he had done his little bit – and more – for his country.

⁸⁰ Ibid.