
The First Military Intelligence Report of the Interior of British Columbia

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A little more than a century has elapsed since the first colonial militia companies were formed in British Columbia. Since the bulk of the colonies' population was concentrated in the southwest portion of the area, it was only natural that the original infantry companies and artillery batteries should be raised in that locality. When British Columbia became a province, interest in military defences was given an impetus not, as was originally the case, by a renewed threat of a Fenian raid, but rather because of several crises in European affairs involving Great Britain and Russia. The areas to be defended, however, remained the same: Victoria was the provincial seat of government, Esquimalt was the only British naval station on the Pacific coast, Nanaimo was important since it supplied coal to the Pacific Squadron, and New Westminster and Vancouver in the 1870s and 1880s were showing every evidence of becoming large commercial ports.

Up until the end of the century the interior of the province was neglected by Canadian military authorities. For the first fifteen years after Confederation, the interior remained isolated behind mountain barriers. Until the Canadian Pacific Railway provided a means of transportation which permitted the east-west movement of produce from the farms, fields, and mines of British Columbia, the development of the province stagnated and its population remained small.

The construction of the CPR brought with it many economic advantages, but it was equally important as a military transportation route, as had been proven during the Riel Rebellion. To those charged with the defence of the Pacific coast, it was looked upon as a means whereby arms, ammunition, and reinforcements could be rushed from the east should an emergency arise in the west.

It was not until the Venezuelan crisis of 1895-96 and the possibility of an armed clash between Great Britain and the United States arose that Canada, for the first time, took a hard look at the interior of the province from a military point of view. Lt-Col. J. Peters, only recently appointed dis-

trict officer commanding of Military District 11 which included all of British Columbia, made the first Intelligence Report to his superiors in Ottawa.¹

This report is given below, and throughout it one can see Peters' concern for the defence of the railroad and over the ease with which the line might be cut by American forces coming from the south. His solution for the problem – the raising of companies of infantry or squadrons of cavalry – was typical of the period. Earlier applications to form such small bodies of militiamen had been made by patriotic townsmen in the Okanagan and the Kootenays, but limited finances and the seeming lack of any potential threat to the area had resulted in these applications being turned down. This time the case was different. Lt-Col. Peters' report was approved by Major-General W. J. Gascoigne and by Dr. Frederick Borden, the minister of militia. In January 1898 Militia General Orders authorized militia rifle companies to be raised at Rossland, Nelson, Kamloops, Kaslo, and Revelstoke, and in July Vernon was authorized to raise a squadron of Mounted Rifles. These subunits, in turn, were to be reorganized to form the Rocky Mountain Rangers and the British Columbia Dragoons.

27 Oct 1897

From: D.O.C. M.D. No. 11.

To: Q.M.G. Ottawa.

Defences C.P.R.

SIR:

I have the honour to make the following report for the information of the proper Authorities, suggested by a recent trip made by me into a portion of the Kootenay country, in British Columbia.

You are aware of the growing importance of this part of the Province, of the very rapid increase of population, and the many towns springing into existence, which are doubtless destined to become permanent cities in the near future, owing to the character of the numerous mines, now proved beyond dispute, to be of a lasting nature, and no mere boom or bogus speculation.

The population of these towns consists principally of people from the Old Country, numerous Canadians from all parts of Eastern Canada, and a good proportion of Americans.

All the British subjects are capable of bearing arms, and could at any time, if armed and trained, prove a most excellent fighting force.

But so far no attempt has been made in this locality to organize Militia of any description, which in my opinion is a grave error, that should be rectified without delay, and is the object of this report.

¹Public Archives of Canada, Department of Militia and Defence, Adjutant General's Papers, File 69814. Italics in original.

Any person with an eye to the defences of this most important portion of Canada, cannot fail to be impressed with the fact, that in case of trouble with our neighbours south of the border line, the British Columbia mining towns, and the rich mineral country surrounding them would be at their mercy.

Now speaking from a Military point of view, the whole of this Province has the following advantages viz:— Owing to the numerous mountain ranges everywhere, which necessitates the confining of all traffic, and communications to certain well known passes, or water ways, it becomes an easy one to hold, and comparatively few men, well armed, with a good local knowledge of the vicinity, could readily hold their own, or stand off a much more numerous force, *provided always* that the former were prepared in advance, and had seized upon the important points.

As all our towns are situated within a short distance of the border, and connected with most of the United States cities by rail, or steamer, it is absolutely necessary that we should in some way be able to produce, on the shortest notice, some sort of armed resistance, otherwise we should find this valuable country, quite in the hands of our enemies, for as I endeavoured to show before, the almost impregnable points once secured, would mean a certain victory to the parties *there first* irrespective of numbers, which would hardly count where natural advantages are so important.

Let me illustrate for instance the case of "Nelson", a town not more than five or six years old, and now with a population of 2000 and increasing at a rapid rate, with two lines of railroad running into it at present, also steamer communication with ports on Kootenay Lake; a place bound before many years to become a thriving city.

As you know it is situated in the centre of a rich mining country, the exact value of which is as yet unknown.

Now imagine a War declared with the United States of America. The place is absolutely *unarmed*, that is this section of the country, is quite devoid of game, so no one keeps arms about their homes, and there being no rural population or settlers anywhere the usual scattered supply of Rifles, in the keeping of different families, does not exist. I must say that beyond a few Winchesters in the local shops, there are no weapons whatever.

The rigidly enforced Regulations as to carrying weapons in any of our mining localities also tends towards a dearth in these articles.

Within nine hours by rail Nelson is connected with a large City in the State of Washington viz:— "Spokane Falls" with a population of 30,000 and where a U.S. Militia Force is organized, and also two companies of U.S. Regular Troops are stationed at Fort Vancouver close to Portland, Oregon, the transport of which is only a question of a few hours.

Now, there is nothing to prevent a train load of Troops, simply moving into Nelson, and taking possession, we could offer not the slightest resistance, especially if no warning was given, as would certainly be the case.

But the matter would not end here, for such a force once at Nelson would quickly seize the C.P.R. Steamers at Robson, and next day would find them at Revelstoke, a C.P.R. divisional point.

Once there, which nothing could prevent, a few hours would see the destruction of all the railway workshops, and most likely the place held, and our important trans-continental highway shut up. All this could be done with impunity, simply for the reason that we have no means at hand for even checking them.

Again, some years ago I rode from Hope, a C.P.R. station in the heart of the Fraser River Canyon over the Hope Mountain on a good pack trail to within a few miles of the frontier in three days.

It would be simply child's play for any filibustering party, to do the same, and strike the line at a most vulnerable point, and do damage which would take an immense amount of time and money to repair, as the railway twists and turns on the perpendicular cliffs of the river, winding through tunnels, and around rocky projections where injury to a track can be so easily and quickly accomplished.

Allow me also to point out Vernon. A glance at the map will explain the various positions any raiding force could without difficulty, ride to Vernon, secure the branch line, and in a few hours tap the C.P.R. at Shuswap Lake.

So if we suppose a simultaneous advance on all three points mentioned, it is not difficult to foretell what would be the result.

It is true that we have 300 organized Militia at Vancouver and New Westminster viz:— 2nd Batt. 5th Regt. Artillery, which are intended to assist in manning the Esquimalt Defences, as artillery men, but even assuming that they could be spared from this duty, their work would be cut out in looking after the terminal City, Vancouver, and New Westminster, where the natural advantages for defence are not in any way equal to those in the mountains, with the disadvantage in addition of having such populous Cities as Seattle, and Tacoma such a short distance to the south.

I have not mentioned Rossland, with a population of 7000 and quite near the line. Its connections with the C.P.R. system makes it also of importance.

The unquestionable danger which in my humble opinion exists to the retaining of the C.P.R. in working order, has only lately developed in I might say the last seven, or eight years, owing of course to the mineral wealth, now proved to be permanent, which tends towards connections both by land, and water, and all with the one object, the tapping of our Trans-continental road, the source of which communications all rise near the boundary, and run north, thus the danger is continually increasing as these improvements proceed.

With these facts before us the advisability of immediate action would be apparent.

I wish to respectfully point out that in my opinion, owing as before

stated, to the vast ranges of Mountains, all communications must follow the passes, lakes, or rivers.

As an instance even on some of the largest sheets of water, such as Arrow Lakes, by which means the C.P.R. could be reached as stated previously, from Nelson, a landing for the object of securing Revelstoke could only be made at Arrow Head, owing to the Mountains on either shore, which admit of only one passage ie., the Valley of the Columbia.

It is in this way that nature aids us in reducing the means of assailing the Railway to a few, and easily defended valleys, not to be found in other portions of Canada, therefore adaptable to the defending capacity of a small force, but the fact must not be lost sight of that this advantage would apply equally to friend or foe, and the side first securing the overwhelming superiority of position must gain the day.

Therefore the gist of my argument is, that arms should be on the spot, and means of organizing, at *short notice*, some force to block certain points of strength and importance.

Excellent men would always be available, both in physique and character.

For instance allow me to quote Nelson; outside of the population of the town itself, there are a large number of miners at work in the various prospects in the vicinity.

I inspected 250 men of the Halls Mines at dinner and it is needless to say, I was convinced of the fighting qualities of these people and their value in case of trouble, provided means were at hand to instruct them in handling of the Rifle.

The majority of these employees are Cornishmen; they with the other British subjects could in a short time be moulded into shape and would provide a formidable opposition to any invader, if posted in some of the commanding positions before mentioned.

I firmly believe that the C.P.R. in this Province during its passage through the mountains where damage once accomplished, is so difficult and costly to repair, could be safely guarded against any attacks, but I am equally convinced that, should trouble arise with the United States, any day might see our line in the possession of a hostile force, who if once in possession of the Nelson or Vernon route, could afford to laugh at any efforts we could make to dislodge them from either the East or the West.

An Invader now has absolutely *nothing* to fear, and you may be quite certain that the opening of hostilities would see a raid, as I have attempted to describe.

While on the other hand if we had some force to oppose them with they could not push on and secure the road, without first utterly destroying any force we might have in their rear.

Without presuming to dictate, I think however, it is my duty to point out that some effort should be made to ensure as far as possible the unobstructed operation of this great highway in times of War as well as peace, and

consider it especially wrong to neglect this precaution, when as I say, nature provides means to aid a small number of men, and enable them to carry out what a large army would fail to do in an ordinary country.

From conversations which I had with C.P.R. officials, I am certain that the facts are well known to the Heads of this Institution, but owing to the trade relations, which they necessarily have with the United States, they are too diplomatic to take the initiative in applying for any Military protection, but rather wish it to appear to our neighbours that the C.P.R. is anything but a military road.

If any suggestions were desired of me, I would advocate the building of good, strong, plain Armouries or Store Rooms, at the three divisional Railway Points in the mountains viz:— "Kamloops", "Revelstoke", and "Donald", each to contain say 100 Rifles and two Maxims. The Railway people should be asked to detail a man to look after these arms, and keep the same in good condition, under the direction of the D.O.C. of the District.

If Militia Corps could be raised and organized at these points, the care of the arms would become a simple matter.

I have no doubt that Companies could be raised at these points. At Kamloops, for instance, an application to form a Company with the names of the Officers and men has already been submitted.

In addition to this if generous encouragement was given towards the support of Rifle Associations a great incentive would be given towards men to join.

At all events, arms should always be available at these points, with a certain amount of Ammunition; if this idea was carried out, the men could easily be found to form good serviceable companies.

Nelson as stated previously is of the utmost importance and here a stand of 200 Rifles, with two Maxims should be placed. I have no doubt that a Company could be kept together easily, with the assistance of a Rifle Association.

One company of 42 men each would be sufficient at these points, and could be added to in case of need.

At Rossland a similar course should be followed, and as in the case of Kamloops an application has already been forwarded by men, with the necessary names to form a Company. This application went forward some Months ago.

Vernon before mentioned has made a similar request to be allowed to organize, but a list has not yet reached me. It is a most important position, but the open nature of the country should suggest a mounted outfit for this company, as there is in the vicinity a large number of ranchers, all excellent horsemen, and like the inhabitants of the Prairies to the East, no man dreams of any other mode of locomotion, except on the back of a Broncho.

This habit produces an excellent type of Militiamen, which is steadily increasing, as the excellent farming country of these parts becomes daily more opened up.

It would be unpopular to suggest any company formation otherwise than a mounted one, for the reason that any other would be of little use, owing to the style of the country, quite different from the other points mentioned, and as a great number of young Englishmen of good families are located about Vernon, who as I say are daily in the saddle, they would hesitate joining any corps which necessitated abandoning their horses.

There is also another route by which the C.P.R. could be tapped, through the East Kootenay Country, via Fort Steele.

But I understand that a similar Corps could be organized among the Settlers there, on the same lines as suggested for Vernon, but personally, I have not yet inspected this portion of the Province.

My knowledge of the other routes spoken of, is based upon what I have noted on different shooting trips, which I have made at various times when ample opportunity was given me to take notice of these matters, and the information I venture to give you is fairly reliable.

J. PETERS

Lt-Col. D.O.C. M.D. No. 11