

## SUBMARINE MINING OF ESQUIMALT HARBOUR 1893-1905

At the beginning of this century, the submarine mining defenses at Esquimalt were considered equal in importance to the other forms of protection against seaborne attacks available at the time.

In ports throughout the Empire, these defenses were used to complement coastal gun batteries, obstructions and mobile forces, and for this purpose the British Government provided teams of specialist officers and men of the Royal Engineers, together with the necessary equipment, to set up and maintain submarine mining installations.

The authorities concerned had given serious consideration at various times to the inclusion of a submarine minefield at the entrance to Esquimalt Harbour as part of the overall defence plan. A minefield actually existed for only a few short years of that period. Troops specially trained in the techniques of submarine mining were included in the British garrison at Esquimalt from 1893 to 1906.

Initially, their presence was due to anticipation in London, England, that the minefield at Esquimalt would be provided at an early date. However, the Admiralty did not approve the final plan for the minefield until 1898.

Back in 1863, British naval and military experts had given underwater explosive devices some recognition as important weapons of the future in naval warfare. But for the present, submarine mines were considered to be an engineer's device, rather than a naval weapon.

In spite of the Royal Engineers' prerogative in submarine mining in the British service, the first submarine miners to serve in the British garrison at Esquimalt were Royal Marine Artillerymen in a group comprising 2 officers and 31 marines specially trained on the Royal Engineers' submarine mining course at Chatham, England.

Research does not suggest that the Royal Marine Artillery (R.M.A.) Detachment which garrisoned Esquimalt between 1893 and 1899 was ever actively engaged in the laying and maintenance of a submarine minefield, or in training the militia gunners at Victoria for duties with such a minefield.

The plan approved in 1898 allowed for a minefield which was to maintain 32 one-hundred-pound electro-contact mines, 4 fifty-pound electro-contact mines in the shallows under Rodd Hill, and 22 five-hundred pound observation mines in a 200-yard wide friendly channel.

Outside the minefield, an examination anchorage was to be established beyond a line from Black Rock to the east end of the salt lagoon on the west shore of the harbour entrance. For the close protection of this minefield, two batteries, each of

two 12-pounder Q.F. (quick firing) guns were to be erected at Belmont and Black Rock to supplement the 2 six-pounder QF guns at Duntze Head. One searchlight was to be mounted at Rodd Hill and two at Duntze head to illuminate the minefield at night.

Under the terms of a new agreement between Canada and Britain for the defence of Esquimalt, effective 30 September, 1899, the R.M.A. was replaced by a garrison of Royal Artillery (R.A.) to man the gun batteries of the defences, and Royal Engineers to lay and maintain the minefield, to man the searchlights and to maintain all buildings in the fortress. In the spring of 1900, 48 Company (Submarine Miners) and half a company (44<sup>th</sup> Fortress) of the Royal engineers arrived at Esquimalt from Chatham, England.

By 1902 a mine test room and minefield observing station had been built at Duntze Head, and lead-covered cables had been laid on shore between the observing station and connection points for the southern half of the minefield. Submarine mining stores were held ready for immediate use at Duntze head. The fortress mobilization plan allowed two days for laying the mines and bringing the minefield to a state of operational readiness.

In May 1903, two new mine-laying vessels took to the water at the Bay Street yard of the Victoria Machinery depot. These steam 'miners;' belonged to the Emerald; Class of 'laying-out vessels'. They were 56 feet long, had a 13-ft beam, 5 foot 9 inch draught, two propellers and a large balanced rudder, with a normal crew of 7 or 8.

After they came into service, it seems quite likely that mines were actually laid at the entrance to Esquimalt Harbour and the minefield regularly maintained in position. It appears certain that this minefield was lifted in 1905, that all mines and mining equipment were handed over by 48 Company to the Royal Navy, and that they were shipped from Esquimalt when the Royal Navy base was vacated. No other mines have been laid at the harbor mouth since.

Minefields, controlled by army personnel and confining ships to narrow channels in time of war, had never been popular with the Royal Navy, and eventually the Admiralty won control of minefields from the Army, and the transfer began in 1904.

A Daily Colonist report of 08 March, 1905, just as the Royal Navy were pulling out to return to England, reads in part: -

The mines laid at Esquimalt by the submarine mining branch of the Royal Engineers were being raised and will be shipped to England as a result of the dismantling of the station. Moreover, the Submarine Mining Corps now affiliated with the Royal Engineers of the Work Point Garrison are to be disbanded.....

The handover of the Esquimalt defences from the British Garrison to the Canadian Forces a year later, in 1906, records the Canadian replacement for the Royal Engineers as 3 Fortress Company Royal Canadian Engineers, and there seems to be no record of this company having any duties with regard to a minefield at Esquimalt.

Before the 48 Company RE left Esquimalt, they were given the option of joining the Canadian militia or returning to England with no stigma attached. The TOPAZ was sold out of service to the General Contracting Company of New Westminster, BC, and the BERYL was retained by the Canadian Army and used for general water transport duties until the mid-1920s.

The responsibility for the searchlights (electric lights) and emplacements was then carried out by the R.C.E. until 1938, when these duties were transferred to the Royal Canadian Artillery unit on the Esquimalt Station.