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Connaught Battery and the Defence of the Atlantic Coast, 1906-1941

Roger Sarty and Bruce Ellis

Editor's note: A sequel to this feature will appear in an upcoming issue of Canadian Military History and will explore the legacy of Connaught Battery and its condition today.

Status of Halifax Harbour Defence in 1906

Connaught Battery, on the shores of Halifax harbour, has virtually been ignored by historians despite its prominence during a pivotal period in Canadian maritime defence.¹ After taking over the fortifications of Halifax from the British army in 1905-6, when the Imperial armed forces withdrew from the Canadian coasts, the Dominion government built the battery from 1913 to 1916 as part of a larger programme to bring the fortress up to date. The battery's story bridges the transformation of the fortress from a British bastion against the United States to a Canadian strongpoint that guarded the North Atlantic shipping lanes upon which Britain's survival depended during the two world wars.²

A thorough modernization of the Halifax fortress had been nearly completed when the Imperial troops departed, but this happened at a time when coast defence practice was changing rapidly. Sandwich Battery and Fort McNab, whose heavy, long-range guns commanded the outer harbour, were well placed for another full generation of useful service, but the same was not true of the defences close-in to the city. These included electrically controlled anti-ship mines that in the event of war were to be laid in Eastern Passage, the

channel between Ives Point and Point Pleasant and the mouth of the North West Arm. To prevent the enemy from destroying or running through the minefields, a form of attack that was likely to come at night, there were electric searchlights and seven batteries of medium and light quick-firing guns at Point Pleasant, Georges Island and Ives Point, and at Fort Clarence on the Dartmouth shore. The Royal Navy, however, had never trusted the army's harbour mines, and in 1904-6 succeeded in having them abolished. That left inner defence exclusively to shore batteries at a time when the speed and intensity of Japanese destroyer and blockship attacks on Port Arthur during the Russo-Japanese War suggested that quick-firing armament should be moved towards the mouths of harbours to stop such strikes before they reached anchored shipping or port facilities.³

Hesitant Steps before the First World War

The officers of the new Canadian garrison immediately took up the problem. By the fall of 1909 the staff at Halifax, with assistance from British army and naval officers, had concluded that three 4.7-inch quick-fire (QF) guns from Georges Island and searchlights from Fort Clarence

should be moved to a new battery near Falkland Village, south of Purcells Cove. Two other new batteries, at York Redoubt and on McNabs Island, would receive the guns from Fort Clarence and two of the forts at Point Pleasant.⁴ The scheme was tested with encouraging results during 1910 when the Fort Clarence searchlights were operated from temporary emplacements at Falkland. These "dispersed beam" lights projected a broad fan of illumination to a range of 1,200 to 1,500 yards. In conjunction with similar lights at Ives Point, they created a brightly lit corridor over the shipping lane from York Redoubt back through the Ives Point-Point Pleasant channel, a distance of some two miles. Thus, if a sufficient number of guns were properly placed, they would have a good chance of smashing even a determined night attack.⁵

Finding money to carry out the program was the problem. In maintaining the fortress with a garrison of over 1,000 regular troops, the militia department had already stretched its resources at a time when the unexpectedly high cost to the federal government of new transcontinental railways brought restrictions on defence spending. The department finally expropriated the Falkland site in the spring of 1912, but funds for construction there were not provided until a year later, and then



Dumping granite fill on the harbourward face of Connaught Battery from the light rail system that assisted construction. This photo was likely taken in early 1916.

only \$24,000 as against the \$75,000 estimated to be the total cost of the fort. By early 1914 most of the money had been consumed in excavating the solid granite site.⁶

The staffs in Halifax and Ottawa then reconsidered the fortress reorganization plan. Over the years of discussion it had become more elaborate, the projected cost of the whole programme rising from \$167,500 to \$200,000.⁷ Colonel (later Major-General Sir) Willoughby Gwatkin, a British officer on loan to the Canadian Militia who had become Chief of the General Staff in October 1913, took the lead in scaling down the plan in light of funds and troops actually available. He was probably also influenced by candid advice sent to the Canadian government by the British Admiralty that the large-scale American attacks that had always governed the strength of the Halifax defences could no longer be contemplated because the expanding United States military could now be

held off only with an enormous effort on land and at sea. Quite aside from that, the British Empire had been pursuing a policy of reconciliation with the United States. The real and growing danger was of hit-and-run raids by German cruisers to disrupt North Atlantic shipping, and against this form of attack the existing gun armament at Halifax was more than adequate, although, in some cases, poorly placed.⁸ Gwatkin won agreement that as many as five of the inner forts should be abandoned, and that none of the planned new batteries except Falkland should proceed. Undoubtedly the money already spent influenced the decision to continue the work at Falkland, but defences on the western approaches to the inner harbour were urgently required even if the steep hills there made less than ideal sites for quick-firing artillery; these guns were most effective in sweeping the surface of the water from low positions.⁹

Despite the renewed commitment to build the Falkland battery, work ground to a halt in the spring of 1914. The government had finally voted \$70,000 for the Halifax defences in fiscal year 1914-15, but these limited funds were needed to purchase modern searchlight equipment from Great Britain.¹⁰

The First World War

The outbreak of war between the British Empire and Germany on 4 August 1914 quickly translated plans into action. On 22 August, Militia headquarters telegraphed authority to Halifax for the expenditure of \$46,000 on fortification construction, including \$25,000 for Falkland battery.¹¹ The governor-general, the Duke of Connaught, was closely watching developments at Halifax. He deeply mistrusted Colonel Sam Hughes, the Minister of Militia, and was especially critical of the

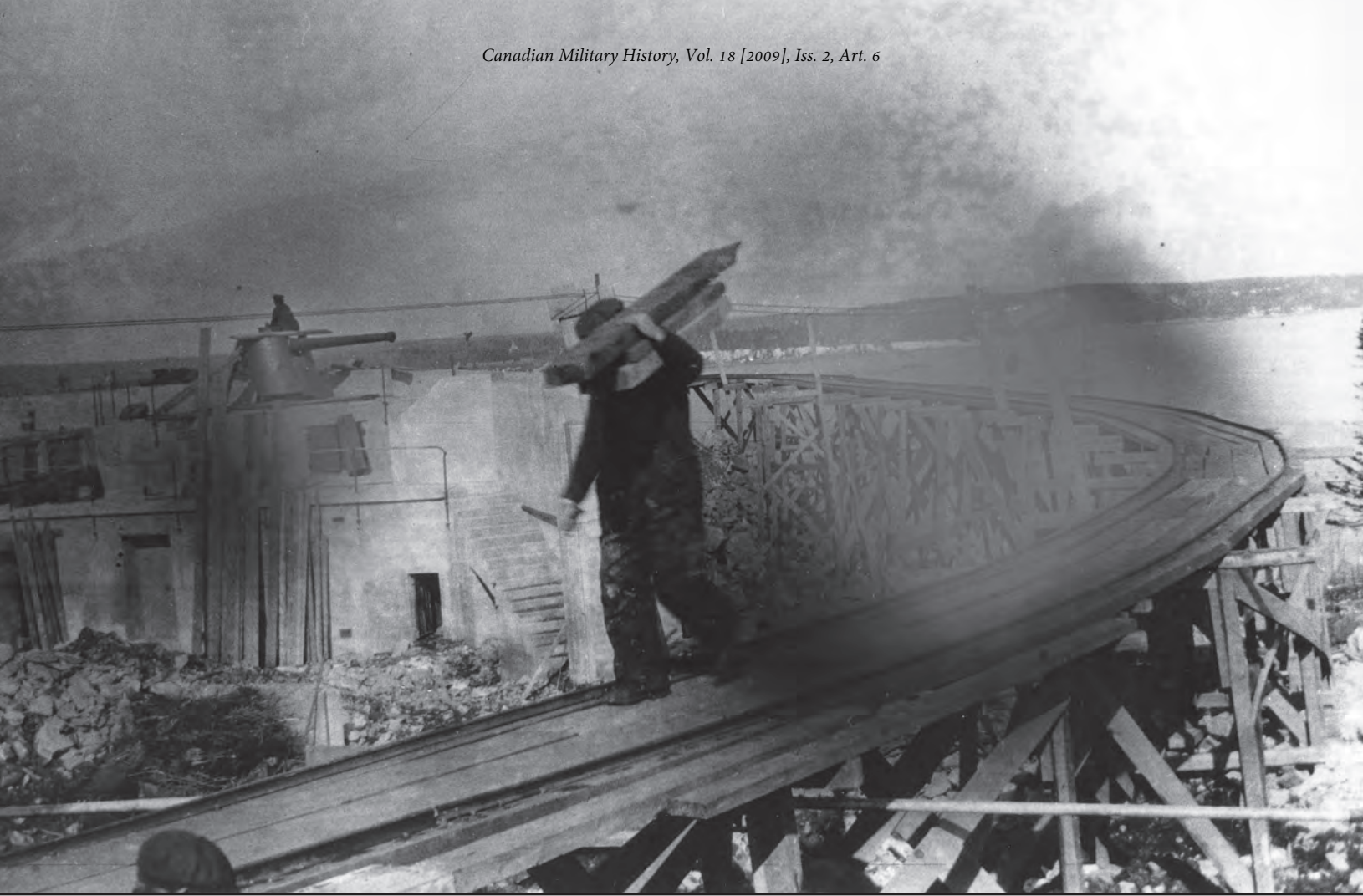
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Map drawn by Mike Bechthold © 2009

Workmen mount a 4.7-inch Quick-Fire gun at Connaught Battery in early 1916.





Above: A workman carries timbers along the construction trolleyway in front of one of the 4.7-inch guns.

Below: A view from Connaught Battery looking out over Halifax Harbour.





This air photo, taken in June 1944, shows Connaught Battery from the rear of the position. Note the anti-submarine nets in the top right corner of the photograph. By the Second World War the original guns had been replaced with dummy guns meant to deceive the enemy.

latter's failure to give the fortress a higher priority before the outbreak of war. Rear Admiral R.S. Phipps Hornby, Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Navy's North America and West Indies Station, was also very concerned about the situation. When in mid-September Gwatkin began to reduce the garrison mobilized at Halifax in response to the Royal

Navy's success in securing the North Atlantic shipping lanes, Hornby had the Admiralty make a strong protest to the Canadian government: "...Halifax is an essential base for British cruisers protecting trade to and from Canada and the reduction ordered effects the safety of the base considerably." Although Gwatkin cancelled the troop withdrawals, the

Duke of Connaught asked Hornby to make a special report on Halifax. The Admiral, who feared a desperate rush by German warships on the port, particularly if the war began to go badly for the Central Powers, urged that Falkland battery should be rapidly completed.¹²

The Falkland position had not been chosen with ease of construction



CFJIC RE 84-175

Connaught Battery showing two of the three 4.7-inch Quick-Fire guns in the summer of 1916.

in mind. Water transportation was the only practicable form of access, necessitating the construction of a pier at a cost of at least \$10,000, and the erection of a cable car on large wooden towers to lift heavy loads to the top of the 160-foot hill at a further cost of over \$3,000. Materials were moved over the rugged ground of the site in carts on a light rail system.¹³ Although these arrangements were not completed until June 1915, there had been considerable progress in the construction of the battery by that time. The massive concrete platforms to which the gun mountings were to be bolted had been poured, and equipment was already being installed in the buildings for the searchlights. To save time, only the foundation of the electrical generating station (the "engine room"), and the structure of the associated oil storage building were built in concrete; both can still be seen in the clearing immediately to the north of the main battery site. The rest of the work, including the searchlight emplacement on the foreshore below the hill, was in wood. One 10 September 1915, a detachment of approximately 50 engineer troops began to operate the three lights at Falkland.¹⁴ Two months later, the governor-general showed his continued interest in the fort by

allowing it to be named Connaught Battery.¹⁵

Henry Eugene McKeen and Connaught Battery

In peacetime a large project such as the construction of Connaught Battery would be overseen by the most senior Royal Canadian Engineer officer in the Maritime provinces. The immense volume of wartime work, however, meant the job fell to a junior officer. Henry Eugene McKeen, of Woodstock, New Brunswick, was a 24-year-old provisional lieutenant in the 1st (Brighton) Field Company, Canadian Engineers, a unit of the part-time militia, when he came to Halifax late in 1914 for active service with the Royal Canadian Engineers of the Permanent Force. Although McKeen had had little military training or experience, he was a practicing civil engineer, having graduated from the University of New Brunswick in 1910. As Divisional Officer 3, he was in charge of construction services for the seaward defences and was responsible for 500 civilian workers. Connaught Battery was merely the biggest of the several projects under his supervision.¹⁶

McKeen faced an enormous task in completing the gun positions. The design, probably adapted from standard British drawings, combined the three emplacements, with their associated magazines and crew shelters, into a large reinforced concrete structure 90 yards long and 20 yards wide. The entire position had to be excavated in granite; once the concrete work was complete, the seaward face was covered with 17,000 cubic yards of broken stone and the slope of the hill was contoured to better protect the site. Further excavations were made to the rear of the gun positions to create a sheltered site for the artillery detachment's wooden barracks.¹⁷

Wartime conditions created special problems. Congestion on the railways, and the navy's closure of the port during periodic alarms whenever the possibility of an attack was conceived delayed shipments from distant suppliers and, in the latter case, held up the transportation of material and shifts of workers from the Halifax waterfront to the battery. Some crucial materials were simply not available. Sand was in such short supply that workers had to scrape up the thin topsoil from surrounding areas to provide fill for the protective slope in front of the

battery. During the winter of 1915-16 construction continued around the clock, but the severe weather caused a high rate of absenteeism among the 200 labourers who normally worked at the site. The military was not pleased with the quality of the work force. "Owing to the enlistment of the better class of English-speaking

labourers," complained Major-General Thomas Benson, General Officer Commanding in the Maritime Provinces, "it has been necessary to employ foreign labour to a larger extent than is desirable, as they can only be used to the best advantage at digging, mucking, etc, and owing to their numerous holidays." The 80

Russians employed on the project, for example, disappeared for three days in January 1916 to celebrate the old and new style Russian Christmas.¹⁸

These frustrations told heavily on McKeen. By the spring of 1916, he was on the edge of physical and nervous collapse, so much so that he was given two months



Another aerial view of Connaught battery, taken in June 1944, looking over Purcells Cove and into the Northwest Arm. Halifax is on the right of the Arm. The barracks, engine room and other support facilities for the searchlights are immediately north (above) the main battery.



A military band leads a procession of troops to garrison Connaught Battery. The wooden tower (right) was part of the cable system used to lift loads up to the battery from the pier on the shore.

medical leave. Showing a certain bureaucratic naivete, McKeen had concentrated his waning energy on supervising work at the site and had failed to keep the financial records up to date. When in May he was offered a posting to an overseas unit, Major-General Benson had to cancel the appointment as McKeen was required in Halifax to verify the large number of unaccounted bills that were flowing into fortress headquarters. Soon after, a letter arrived from Militia headquarters which reported the Duke of Connaught's impatience with the slow construction, and strongly criticized the delays and soaring costs. Since 1913 nearly \$250,000 had been spent, over three times the highest prewar estimate. Happy to say, Benson firmly rejected

the censure and instead commended McKeen's work. He was justified in doing so, as wartime inflation and the heavy expense of winter construction had similarly escalated the costs of other projects in Halifax.¹⁹

Connaught Battery Becomes Operational

During the clash over the ledgerbooks, the battery was being readied for operations. The components of the guns – three 4.7-inch QF, two of which had originally been mounted in Fort Clarence, and one in Fort Charlotte – were delivered to the site in January 1916. These weapons fired a 45-pound projectile at a rate of 12 rounds

per minute to an effective range of about 8,000 yards. The 70-man artillery garrison was provided by the 1st (Halifax) Regiment, Canadian Garrison Artillery, a militia unit, began to arrive in February. Test rounds were fired from the guns early in August, and later that month the Duke of Connaught attended a ceremony that officially opened the battery.²⁰ McKeen was finally posted overseas in September, and served in Belgium and France in 1918 before returning to Canada and becoming the first postwar commanding officer of the 1st (Brighton) Field Company, CE, his old militia unit.²¹

As things turned out, Connaught Battery had been finished in good time. Early in 1915 the Admiralty had warned the Canadian government

about the possibility of German submarines crossing the Atlantic, but the threat took on a new dimension when *U-53* sank five Allied ships off Massachusetts in October of the following year. The Germans were indeed preparing large submarines with an armament of 15 cm guns as well as torpedoes and mines for distant operations. The Admiralty feared that U-boats might run into Halifax on the surface at night, and therefore the searchlight and quick-fire gun batteries were of increased importance because neither the small Canadian patrol vessels available nor the Royal Navy's cruisers on station could effectively deal with the "super submarines." Connaught inherited further responsibilities when in the summer of 1917 the Canadian navy installed an anti-submarine net between Point Pleasant and Ives Point. Shore batteries were essential to defeat enemy attempts to break through this barrier. Another danger was that powerful enemy surface warships might break out of the North

Sea under the cover of foul weather and strike at overseas bases before British squadrons could respond. The reality of the German threat became clear in August-September 1918 when three large U-boats inflicted substantial losses on shipping in Nova Scotia's coastal waters, and laid mines – which fortunately did no damage – in the Halifax approaches. Connaught, like the other Halifax forts, was maintained at a high state of readiness until the armistice on 11 November 1918. The manning detachment was withdrawn on 24 December, leaving only a small caretaking detail.²²

The Interwar Years

During the interwar years, 1919-1939, the fortress became a backwater. Governments bent on costcutting slashed defence spending, and Militia headquarters gave mobile field units priority over the garrisons on the coasts. Connaught Batttry

did, however, attract a large share of the limited funds available for fortification construction. In 1924-25, the wooden searchlight emplacements on the shore and the temporary battery command post immediately to the north of the gun emplacements were replaced by concrete buildings. The searchlights were run regularly for maintenance and training, but the guns were very seldom fired as 4.7-inch ammunition was in short supply, and the battery was too near to the city and the main shipping channel for safe shooting.²³

Connaught Battery De-Activated

The battery's service as an operational coast fort was in fact drawing to a close. In 1931 Major-General A.G.L. McNaughton, chief of the General Staff, finally laid to rest the traditional premise of Canadian home defence that preparations could be made to meet an invasion from the

Workman excavate solid granite to make way for the Connaught Battery barracks.



United States. He immediately applied the new policy at Halifax, where three forts, including Connaught, were struck from the defence scheme. In 1932 the ammunition was removed from the magazines, and the guns were designated reserve armament available for other ports in the Maritimes. The fate of the battery was sealed in the mid-1930s when the navy decided that in a future war the fortress' antisubmarine net would be installed between York Redoubt and Maugher's Beach. New quick-firing batteries would have to be built ahead of this line. In 1938, when preparations began to defend the Maritimes in the event of a war in Europe, the battery's guns were removed.²⁴

Connaught Battery nevertheless played a significant role in the defence of Halifax during the Second World War. Because of delays in the provision of modern searchlights, the battery's lights were fully manned and operational from 26 August 1939 until the spring of 1941. In the meantime, the main part of the fort was used as temporary accommodation for artillery units. Late in 1941 the whole site became the camp for 2nd Fortress (Electrical and Mechanical) Company, RCE, which was responsible for construction and works maintenance services in the fortress. For a few years after the war, buildings at the battery were used as quarters for married military personnel. All of the wooden barracks were declared surplus and dismantled in 1952-53.²⁵ Thereafter scrapmetal scroungers stripped the fortifications of all steel fittings and did a good deal of damage. Residents of the surrounding areas also covered the site with dozens of car wrecks. In 1971 the provincial government purchased the fort from Crown Assets²⁶ and removed the "automotive decorations."

Conclusion

Connaught Battery is well worth preserving. Its design is unique among the coast artillery sites that survive in Canada. It is the only site which features such extensive concrete works within a single structure. It was also the most important permanent fortification undertaken by the Dominion government prior to the late 1930s, representing, like the founding of the Royal Canadian Navy in 1910, Canada's assumption of the responsibility for the defence of its own shores.

Notes

A version of this article was originally published in Canadian Defence Quarterly, Vol.15, No.4 (Spring 1986), pp.29-33.

1. The only published account is Harry Piers, *The Evolution of the Halifax Fortress 1749-1928* (Halifax: Public Archives of Nova Scotia, 1947), p.63.
2. For an overview of Halifax's significance see C.P. Stacey, "Halifax as an International Strategic Factor, 1749-1949," *Canadian Historical Association Annual Report* (1949), pp.46-56; on the last phase of the British garrison, C.S. Mackinnon, "The Imperial Fortresses in Canada: Halifax and Esquimalt, 1871-1906," (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1965).
3. Roger Sarty, "Silent Sentry: A Military and Political History of Canadian Coast Defence 1860-1945" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1982), pp.16-17, 200.
4. Library and Archives Canada (LAC), RG 24, vol. 2320, HQS 66 vol. 3, General Officer Commanding Maritime Provinces to Secretary of the Militia Council, 20 September 1909.
5. LAC, RG 24, vol. 2322, HQS 66 vol. 8, Officer Commanding 6th Division to SMC, 28 April 1914.
6. LAC, RG 2,1, PC 1442, 25 May 1912; LAC, RG 24, vol. 2322, HQS 66 vol. 8, Master General of Ordnance to Chief of the General Staff, 23 February 1914.
7. Canada, Department of Militia and Defence, Militia Council, *Minutes*, 13 March 1912.
8. Sarty, "Silent Sentry," pp.172-3.
9. LAC, RG 24, vol. 2322, HQS 66 vol. 8, extract of proceedings of interdepartmental

committee, 8 May 1914; LAC, RG 24, vol. 3824, NS 1014-3-2, Stephens to Director of the Naval Service, 6 May 1914.

10. LAC, Manuscript Group 26H, Sir Robert Borden papers, reel C-4382, p.99125, "Militia and Defence: Supplementary Estimates, 1914-15".
11. LAC, RG 24, vol. 2322, HQS 66 vol. 8, Master General of Ordnance to Officer Commanding 6th Division, telegram, 22 August 1914.
12. Sarty, "Silent Sentry," pp.268-9.
13. Canada, National Defence Headquarters, Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), 345.009 (D121); Canada, Auditor General, *Annual Report for 1915-16*.
14. LAC, RG 24, vol.2436, HQC 544, vol.2, Commanding Royal Canadian Engineer, 6th Division to Director General Engineer Services, 6 December 1915; DHH 340.003(D5).
15. Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Cambridge Library MSS, IIF6, Fortress Order 392, 19 November 1915.
16. National Personnel Records Centre (NPRC), job 30, reel 31, HQ 8300-1.
17. LAC, RG 24, reel C-5059, HQC 1407 vol.2.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.; NPRC, HQ 8300-1.
20. P.L. Whitman papers, 1st (Halifax) Regiment Minute Book. 45; DHH 166.009(D8).
21. NPRC, HQ 8300-1.
22. Sarty, "Silent Sentry," pp.306-20, 327-8; LAC, RG 24, vol. 2324, HQS 66 vol. 11, District Officer Commanding Military District No. 6 to SMC, 8 January 1918.
23. LAC, RG 24, vol.2436, HQC 544 vol.3.
24. Sarty, "Silent Sentry," pp.411-12, 547-8.
25. DHH 321.009(D357), Commander, Halifax Fortress to Headquarters Atlantic Command, 12 January 1941; DHH 345.013(D3), "Record of Coast Defence Units Halifax Fortress...", 23 December 1944; LAC, RG 24, reel C-5449, HQS 20-8-12-2 vol.1, District Officer Commanding Military District No. 6 to Secretary, DND, 15 August 1941; DHH 345.009(D96).
26. *Halifax Mail Star*, 1 December 1971, p.1.

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