



Building Andy's Range:

The History of the Blair Rifle Range

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Introduction

As commuters race along the four lanes of Mt Seymour Parkway they pass a stretch of bramble-covered chain link fence with little thought of what lies beyond. Many call the overgrown acreage, frequented by teenage party-goers, “the rifle range” but few know much more than that. The history of this place—the Blair Rifle Range in North Vancouver—and the people who once lived here is a story that has been overlooked. It deserves to be told.

Caught in the politics and clashes of ideology of the Depression, hundreds of Canada’s most unfortunate citizens lived and worked on the 110 acres in North Vancouver for two and one-half years. These marginalized men became part of one of the largest “make work” projects in the history of Canada simply because they were single and jobless. The activism and experiences of thousands of men like those at the Blair Rifle Range fuelled a generation of populism and resistance in British Columbia.

Thousands of hours of labour performed for little pay and less dignity generated a valuable asset for the Canadian military. Due to its central location, relatively flat topography and proximity to both urban Vancouver and forested parkland, the Blair Rifle Range remains a prime spot for development. Yet, forty-five years since it closed the Blair Rifle Range is an overgrown and contentious wasteland. Except for one two-year period, it has never generated a penny of tax revenue for the municipality.

Location and Early History

The portion of the District of North Vancouver between the Seymour River in the west and Indian Arm to the east

Front photo: “Fill at west end”, photograph appended to Works Progress Report, Blair Rifle Range at North Vancouver BC, August 31, 1934. Library and Archives Canada.

(referred to as “Seymour”) has often been regarded as a cache of land destined for housing development. Studies and proposals to develop the area beginning in the 1960s have resulted in heated public debate and even court cases. At the core of the controversy are the divergent values of preserving forested recreational land and large scale housing and commercial development.

Within the Seymour area a 644 acre parcel of land owned by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) called “Northlands”. CMHC is the federal crown corporation formed after the Second World War to secure housing for returning soldiers. Today it acts as Canada’s housing agency and is involved in many aspects of housing policy. The southernmost parcel of Northlands (labeled “1” in Figure 1) is the 10 acre portion once occupied by the Blair Rifle Range.

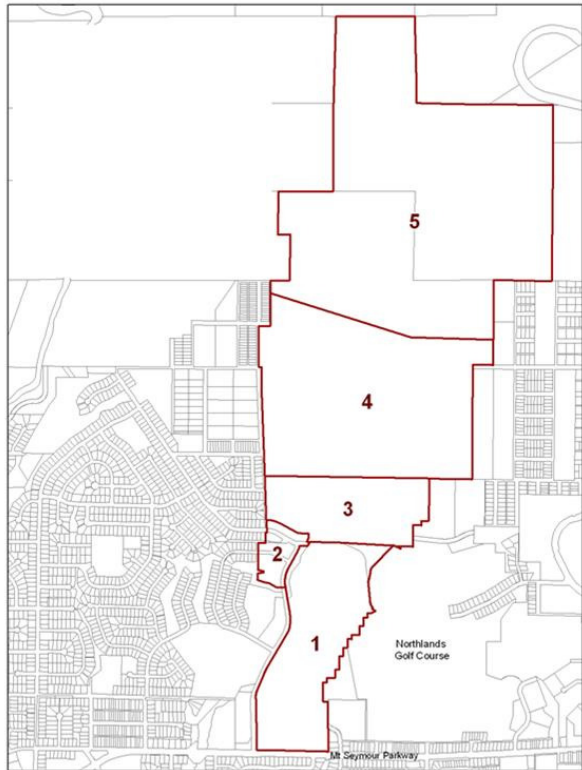


Figure 1 - Northlands property is divided into five sections; the Blair Rifle Range is Section 1

Northlands has been part of the District of North Vancouver (DNV) since the municipality was established in

1891. A 1926 aerial photo examined on behalf of CMHC in 1972 showed “that much of the site had been recently logged and burned” (Gartner Lee, 8), a standard practice of the era.

Northlands was expropriated from DNV in 1927 by the Department of National Defence (DND) to construct a Rifle Range, but only the most southern portion was used for that purpose. The District was paid \$25,000, although it asked for double that amount. (Richard Parr, DNV Assistant Municipal Solicitor, Report to Council, September 19, 1996)

In 1929, Canada like most western nations, was plunged into economic crisis. Historians call the Great Depression “one of the worst disasters of the twentieth century” (Brennan, in Howard). Times were tough for everyone including Canada’s military. Canadian Forces Director of History Colonel CP Stacey commented it was “fair to say that economy was the dominant consideration in the military policy of every Canadian government until after 1935”. (Stacey, 32)

Despite tough finances, the North Vancouver Rifle Range formally opened and was given the ‘Blair’ moniker in 1930, to honour Major R.M. Blair, a prize winning sharp shooter from the Seaforth Highlanders in Vancouver. (Roy, 29)

In June 1931 British Columbia had 28% unemployment. Single unemployed men were more severely impacted by the Depression than any other group. They could not find employment and were not entitled to relief payments (the forerunner of today’s welfare) if they lived at home after the age of 16. Not wanting to be a burden on their families, thousands of young men congregated in Vancouver from across Canada, living in “hobo jungles” along the railway tracks. Their transient status made them ineligible for relief. They joined other men who were veterans of the First World War and seasonal workers. Single unemployed men were the lowest priority of local and provincial governments dealing with a long list of those needing help to

survive the Depression. As their numbers grew, the homeless men were courted by left-leaning radical organizations, and this compelled action from government.

When local governments and provincially run relief programs failed, DND became responsible for managing a national scheme of Unemployed Relief Camps in 1933. The military saw an opportunity to finance “construction projects of military importance” through the use of unemployment relief funds. (Stacey, 33) The Camp scheme was drawn up and overseen by General Andrew McNaughton from Defence Headquarters in Ottawa.

A total of 162 DND Relief Projects were established in Canada; 73 of them in British Columbia. Over the course of the Unemployed Relief Camp program 62,000 men were placed in Camps in British Columbia (Gorman, 119, Lefresne, 177). Most projects involved road and airfield construction. Four were tasked with building or expanding Rifle Ranges for the military.

The Blair Rifle Range Camp was the largest of the DND’s Rifle Range projects. (LeFresne, 37) Other DND Relief Projects in the Vancouver area were located at White Rock (highway construction) and Point Grey (for unemployed members of the militia only). The remainder were much further away from population centres such as the Fraser Valley and the Interior.

Under the terms of the DND Camps, the men were provided with bunkhouse accommodation, military issued clothing, military rations, medical and dental care. The clothing provided included army garments “nearing the point of condemnation” that had been in storage since 1918. The Seaforth Highlanders saw the donation of their worn out coats and trousers to unemployment relief projects as a way to get “newer” stock for themselves. (Roy, 36)

Work at the DND Camps was 8 hours a day, five and one

half days per week. Labourers were given an allowance of twenty cents a day, and the total cost per worker was to be kept at less than \$1.00 per day. Camp Superintendants and other supervisory personnel were drawn from the ranks of the unemployed, and paid up to \$150 per month. The government said registration in the Camps was voluntary, but the men had no other choice because if they refused to go, they would not receive relief. They often referred to themselves as “slave labour”, abandoned by government.

The assignment of single unemployed men to isolated camps did little to quell their radicalism. In fact, it provided them with more grievances and made them easy targets for political and worker organizations.

The Blair Rifle Range Unemployment Relief Project

The Blair Rifle Range Unemployment Relief Camp

(Project No. 134) was opened on January 4, 1934 and closed on June 25, 1936. It housed about 75 labourers and 15 civilians at a time, but like all of the other camps, the roster of men was constantly changing. Some camp residents were transferred, others left on their own accord and others were evicted for various reasons, including union organizing. The final tally for the Blair Camp showed its occupants performed 55,083 man-days of work over a two and one-half year period.



2009 Google Earth image.

Reports and detailed statistics on the work performed at Blair

were submitted monthly to Ottawa, with great attention to detail. Two files have supplied the bulk of the detail about what happened at Blair during those years, and these are listed in the bibliography. The Works Progress Reports included a large number of maps to which photographs had been attached. Names of individuals who were present at the Camp between March and June 1936 are taken from these files.

The monthly reports contained statistics and brief written summaries of the work accomplished and were submitted to DND Headquarters in Ottawa over the signature of the Military District Commanding Officer. Everything from the number of linear feet of roadway graded to the amount of dirt excavated was recorded and sent to Ottawa each month. This precise record-keeping has proven to be a rich source of information about the workings of the Camp and the men who lived there. The archived plans from 1934 indicate that a good part of the military rifle range was already in existence when the Relief Camp was established. Seven firing berms, each at 100 yard intervals, plus two target areas were in place. A Caretaker's residence was close to Keith Road (now Mt Seymour Parkway) and the Competitor's Building paralleled the old road.

The Blair Rifle Range Unemployment Relief Project was tasked with clearing, excavating and grading a new 16 foot wide road east of the old road to allow extension of the existing firing berms. The areas between each firing berm were to be filled and flattened with soil taken from other parts of the site. The relief workers were also to construct their own Camp for accommodation. Thirteen buildings and perimeter fences were completed by October 1935. The buildings were located in the southeast corner of the property.

Project No. 134 was administered by the Department of

Clare Sherwood, Camp Foreman

Clare Everard Sherwood was a civil engineer who was 47 years old when he became the Foreman of Project 134 in January 1934. Born in New Brunswick, Sherwood worked for the District of North Vancouver between 1923 and 1932 as the Superintendent of Works. He was married with three sons and lived in the central Lonsdale area.

On December 16, 1932 the District entered bankruptcy and a Commissioner was appointed to manage its affairs. One week after assuming the job, Commissioner Charles Tisdall cut the District's Department of Works to a "skeleton staff of six men". (Davis, 70) Sherwood may have lost his District Engineering job as the municipality faced its own financial crisis.

Relief Camp Foremen were unemployed civilians nominated by the Engineering Institute of Canada. Sherwood's engineering background would have been useful at Blair where road construction was a major component of the work performed.

Sherwood must have made some friends in government, because a memo placed on the project files from the Deputy Minister of Labour on April 24, 1936 directed DND's Chief of the General Staff that Sherwood is "to be continued to be employed" as Foreman of the Blair Rifle Range Project.

Sherwood moved to Lethbridge Alberta in the 1940s where he worked for the Ministry of Transport.

-compiled from historic records including
City Directories, 1921 census,

National Defence's Military District 11 based in Esquimalt. General E.C. Ashton was commanding officer of the District. Ashton later became Chief of the General Staff at Ottawa Headquarters in 1935.

The Project Superintendent at the Blair Rifle Range was Clare Everard Sherwood, who remained at the project for the full two and one-half years. Two other civilians were also at the project for the entire period: W. Hutchinson and C Waddup.

Sherwood's biography is listed at left. The identities of Hutchinson and Waddup are more tenuous and are described later. The Superintendent (Foreman) supervised four Gangbosses, 1 First Aid Attendant, 3 Machine Operators and Drivers (after May 1935), 3 Cooks and 1 Clerk. Seventy-five labourers were chosen by the District Officer Commanding (D.O.C.) of the Military District, in consultation with the Employment Service of Canada.

Initially, the Blair Rifle Range Camp workers were housed in the Competitors Building until the first camp accommodation was completed. General Ashton was optimistic in January 1934 that the project would be complete by September, but as the Depression wore on, so did the Rifle Range Project. The first task was to build a new road and begin clearing and construction of buildings. Despite heavy rain in March 1934, General Ashton reported that "good progress has been made on the new roadway, and also on the construction of the camp. Work on the grading further up the Range will be commenced this month."



"Fill on west end of 600 yd F.P." Photograph appended to Works Progress Report, Blair Rifle Range at North Vancouver, February 28, 1935.

A system of hand-operated dump cars running on narrow gauge railway tracks was used to move fill from one part of the Range to another. On May 10, 1934 Gen. Ashton reported that “track had been laid from the east side of the range to the 300 yd firing point on the short range, in order that the crib at that point may be filled.” The March 1936 Works Progress Report reveals that the steel rails were provided by both the Municipality of North Vancouver and the Public Works Department (provincial government). The municipality also provided 9 dump cars (4 complete and 5 with parts missing) in “fair” condition. North Vancouver District also provided a large amount of miscellaneous equipment, such as switches, spikes and axles. It appears that Sherwood’s connection with the bankrupt District Municipality of North Vancouver paid some benefits to the Blair Project.

In April 1934, Ashton reported, “the new roadway has been cleared throughout the length of the Range, and grading is in progress”. Ashton also noted the camp construction program was complete.



“Hauling firewood with truck”, Photo appended to Works Progress Report, Blair Rifle Range at North Vancouver February 28, 1935. Library and Ar-

By July 1934 the new road was completed, except for ditching. With the completion of the Camp facilities and the new road, work turned to excavation and filling around the firing berms. Some men were put to work on building maintenance, tool repairs and gardening.

A team of horses was hired and worked for 211 days between April 1934 and March 1935, but unlike many other Unemployment Relief Projects, the Blair Rifle Range was not supplied with any equipment by the Public Works Department. This became a source of disgruntlement among management. Each month a mostly blank page in the project's monthly report to Ottawa was titled "P.W.D Equipment" with the description below in block caps: "NIL".

In late 1934 General Ashton pressured Ottawa to supplement the manual labour at Blair with machinery, and repeatedly noted that work was being "carried out entirely by hand". In his May 11, 1935 report to DND Headquarters, Ashton reported that no equipment had yet arrived:

...the work has been handicapped to some degree due to lack of additional transport, as the length of haul now is really too great for the efficient use of light track and dump cars. It is very desirable at the truck for which provision was made in the current period's pro forma be supplied at the earliest date possible.

In March 1935, DND supplied one 1.5 yard Ford dump truck to the project. In a memo to District Headquarters in Esquimalt in May 1935, Col EJC Schmidlin of the Directorate of Engineer Services in

Ottawa directed that all future reports should note the presence of the DND supplied equipment. From that point on, the reports read like a scoreboard: DND 1 PWD 0. In July 1935 a second DND truck arrived. DND 2 PWD 0.

Work continued with the limited equipment until January 1936 when the Blair Project benefited from the closure of Project 26 in Hope, where an airfield construction had been undertaken. A tractor was shipped to North Vancouver, where it was given a “thorough overhaul”. They also received grading equipment from Project 26. The new tractor enabled DND engineers to contemplate a “fresh program of work”, however “cold weather” in February 1936 meant the tractor was “unable to operate”.

By the end of the Project, 18,000 cubic yards of material had been excavated and placed as fill between the firing points. (Brig MacDonald to DND July 27, 1936) The fill was often described as “solid rock” and “hard pan”. This is in addition to land clearing, camp construction and road building that was undertaken. The monthly reports also itemized the cost savings



“A View of the Camp”. Canada. Dept. of National Defence / Library and

realized by the military by using relief labour for the project. At the end of the project, it was reported that “the estimated cost of the work actually performed if it had been executed by contract or day labour at prevailing rates” was \$68,796. Brig. MacDonald

concluded that “the establishment of the Relief Camp at Blair Rifle Range has enabled very valuable work to be performed in connection with the development of that area.” (letter McDonald to Ottawa, July 27, 1936)

Some of the buildings constructed were “semi-permanent” and were clad with siding. After the first year, Blair Camp included an Office, Hospital, Wash House, Cookhouse and Diner, Wood Shed, Watchmen’s Hut, Meat House, Store Room and Bunkhouses. A miniature community was in place.

Relief Camp Unrest and Strikes

During 1934 and 1935, Relief Camp Workers in British Columbia, and other parts of the country, formed the Relief Camp Workers’ Union to organize and represent men in the Camps. The centre of the Union organization was in Vancouver. The disgruntled Relief Camp workers referred to themselves as “inmates” and the DND projects as “slave camps”. The Camp workers had many specific complaints but it was “the hopelessness of life these people are kicking about, not the camp conditions.” (Arthur Evans, quoted in Howard, 44)

A list of demands was drawn up, including an end to the twenty-cent-a-day system, to be paid regular wages, Workers Compensation coverage, recognition of Camp Committees, a system of unemployment insurance and the right to vote. A short strike took place in December 1934, with the men agreeing to return to the camps after some minor concessions were reached with BC Premier Duff Pattullo.

A full camp walkout was organized for April 1935. By April 14, 1400 men had congregated in Vancouver (Gorman, 129). The strikers received widespread support from the community, including the City of Vancouver, religious, business and trade union organizations. Parades, “tag days” and rallies were organized through April and May 1935. According to

police reports, a May Day rally at Stanley Park drew a crowd of 30,000. (Kealey, 268)

The workers at the Blair Rifle Range Camp were involved to some degree with the strike. Based upon the Camp's monthly reports, the complement of men working at the Blair Rifle Range was relatively stable, except for the March to June 1935 period when work and residency fell off by about 30 percent.

General Ashton reported to Ottawa that in March 1935 at the Blair Rifle Range, "fair progress only was made...due to...the attitude of the men in the camp". During the early days of the April 1935 strike Ashton reported to Ottawa that "the strength of this camp was low".

"...fair progress only was made...due to...the attitude of the men in the camp"

General Ashton to Ottawa, March 1935

In March 1935, 2,216 man-days of work was performed, in April it fell to 1,663 and 1,549 in May. The amount of excavation work completed had dropped considerably in the first four months of 1935, a further indication that some of the men had left the Blair Rifle Range Camp to join the strike in Vancouver.

In North Vancouver, the community rallied around the Relief Camp strikers. A Mothers' Week Committee was formed in May of 1935 "for the purpose of giving a real home cooked meal to as many relief camp strikers as possible". (North Shore Press, May 10, 1935). The same month a committee of fifteen citizens was elected to force the government to institute a policy of work and wages, as well as the abolition of the relief camps. Three North Vancouver women were commended in the local newspaper for donating magazines and jig-saw puzzles to

unemployment relief camps. (North Shore Press, May 17, 1935)

On May 24, 1935 the St John's Churchmen's Club in North Vancouver passed a resolution "favoring abolition of the present relief camp system and suggested as a substitute, a scheme of useful work at reasonable and living wages". It was also reported that the CCF (Co-operative Commonwealth Federation) had hosted a dinner and "various forms of amusement" for twenty-five relief camp "boys". (North Shore Press, May 24, 1935)

While generally critical of the radical elements in the Relief Camp Workers' Union, an editorial in the North Shore Press (April 19, 1935) conceded:

"The record amount of money contributed through the tag day staged in Vancouver on Saturday last by the 1700 men in the city from the camps for unemployed men in British Columbia demonstrates the sympathetic interest that the general public entertains for all of the men whom circumstances have compelled to avail themselves of the accommodation provided by the camps."

Two months into the 1935 Relief Camp strike many of the men headed to Ottawa in the hopes of meeting the Prime Minister and presenting their grievances. Their trip via freight train was stopped in Regina where on July 1, 1935 a riot erupted. One striker and one policeman were killed and scores more injured. The "On-To-Ottawa Trek" and its connection to the Unemployed Relief Camp program are famously documented in Canada's labour and social history. In 2010 the 75th Anniversary of the Trek was recognized with a plaque at Crab Park in Vancouver.

Considerable archival records exist for this period of social upheaval in British Columbia, including RCMP surveillance reports, testimony before the Regina Riot Inquiry

Commission, copies of the Relief Camp Worker Union newsletter and both mainstream and radical newspapers. There are also a number of oral histories by the strike leaders. Yet, despite the sizeable impact of the events, the Blair Rifle Range Camp is not mentioned in any of these documents. In the absence of specific evidence, the reasons for the lack of radical leadership by the Blair Rifle Range Camp requires hypothetical reasoning.

One explanation may be as simple as good food. Complaints from many of the other camps focussed on the quality of the military rations. Often camp food was considered to be of poor quality and minimal volume. The cooks at Blair may have been more talented than elsewhere.

Being close to a populated centre is another possible reason. Almost all of the other Unemployed Relief Camps in British Columbia were located away from the urban Vancouver area, in places such as Agassiz, Nelson and Boston Bar and it is from these locations that most of the strike leaders originated. The workers chosen for the Blair Camp may have been considered more trustworthy to be in a location just a few miles away from the radical organization leadership.

In fact, the North Shore Press (April 19, 1935) suggested moving the Camps closer to populated centres may be a way of quelling unrest:

“If the governments were to establish a series of auxiliary camps in the vicinity of centres of population and to give the men in outlying camps the privilege in contingents, of residence in an auxiliary camp for a few weeks say twice a year by this means satisfying to some extent their wishes for an occasional return to city life, it is possible that the men would find their lot much more endurable and that these strikes...would disappear.”

Gradually, as the Relief Camp Strike wound down, unemployed men returned to the Camps. By July 1935, Brigadier MacDonald wrote to BC's Attorney General that there were 1308 vacancies in British Columbia camps, however only 7 of those were at the Blair Rifle Range. (Letter from MacDonald to Sloan, July 4, 1935). Works Progress Reports showed the amount of work performed at Blair began to climb again in June 1935, reaching a high of 2,238 man-days in January 1936. In June 1936 when the Blair Rifle Range Camp was shut down, only 377 man-days of work was performed.

**Local Committee
Seeks Abolition
Of Relief Camps**

A meeting of interested persons was held in Board of Trade room Wednesday evening at which an initiating committee of fifteen was elected to arrange for a conference from which a committee of action can be formed to plan the enforcement of the Pattullo government's promises of work and wages and the abolition of the relief camps. A further meeting will be held Wednesday, May 22 at 8 p.m. at the same place, Board of Trade room, ferry wharf. All interested are welcome to attend.

Archival records show that in the last three months of the project, 103 individuals resided at Blair Rifle Range. These records provide some valuable insight to the demographics of the Camp at the time and may be used to describe the population that lived there.

The ages of the relief workers during that period ranged from 19 to 62. Of the 99 residents with a nationality listed, 57 were British (including Scotch and Welsh), 26 were Canadian, 10 Irish and 2 Scandinavians, demonstrating the Colonial face of British Columbia in the era. They came from a wide variety of backgrounds, most commonly labourers and loggers. 'Barber', 'Fireman', 'Waiter' and 'Blacksmith' were also listed as usual occupations. Most of those at the Camp during this period (81) worked as labourers, but some of the unemployed were put to

work in the kitchen, as watchmen and in other service jobs. Civilian staff worked as Gangbosses, Cooks, Machine Operators and Clerks. About half of the residents (57) in the last three months of 1936 had been there for less than 6 months. Forty-three had been at Blair for longer periods, some for 2½ years.

Many of the Blair Rifle Range residents may have been veterans of World War 1, and therefore comfortable with the military discipline of the camps. Foreman Sherwood had enlisted in the Canadian Army in June 1918 although the war ended soon after. To test this hypothesis we used the Blair Camp records to identify individuals who were between 18 and 45 years of age between 1914 and 1918. These names were then compared with names in the database of soldiers of the First World War held by Library and Archives Canada (LAC). By comparing birth dates, residence and the listed ‘usual occupation’ from the Blair Registers with the LAC database, possible connections were made. Searches of historic City Directories of the Vancouver area, the 1921 Census of Canada, provincial death records and newspaper obituaries were also conducted. Many of the Unemployed Relief Camp residents were transient and therefore difficult to trace. Additionally, having spent time in a Relief Camp was a social stigma not often shared in obituaries.



“Diner with [kitchen] crew”, May 1934

Identifying individual archival records and comparing them to relief camp residents was further complicated by the fact that the Blair Rolls included only initials and no first names. The effort to identify Camp individuals focussed on those with unusual surnames and two first initials. Together these archival records help to paint an intimate portrait of some of these men. Photos of the Blair Rifle Range Camp paint a rather bucolic image. The campsite appears to be well organized with electricity and telephone lines. The grounds were maintained like a tiny village with flower beds and vegetable gardens. Surrounded on all sides by forest the camp may well have been a pleasant place, despite the hard manual labour required on the Range. The credit for this likely goes to the Camp administration. As the Camp reports from 1934 and 1935 show, management was willing to put pressure on DND to supply equipment to the project in order to lessen the burden on the workers.

The Project No. 134 Camp made a significant contribution to the expansion and improvement of the Blair Rifle Range for the military. The men who passed through the Camp to wait out the Depression, performing hard manual labour for little compensation, were an important part of Canada's history.

Closing the Camp

When RB Bennett's Conservative government was defeated by Mackenzie-King's Liberals in 1935, the Depression was easing and the DND Relief Camps were slated to close. The Blair Rifle Range Project ended on June 25, 1936.

In the months between March and June, 1936 as work continued, DND also turned its attention to the re-assignment of civilian and relief workers to other locations. Nationally DND was directed to transfer as many men as possible to the railways to work in a relief capacity. (Gorman, 159) At the end of June, 1936, half of the remaining Blair Rifle Range residents were re-assigned to railway work. Five were declared unfit.



This 1941 picture shows "A" Company of the 2nd Battalion Westminister Regiment at Blair Range, North Vancouver, BC for machine gun practice. <http://www.surreyhistory.ca/berry.html>

In his final report to Ottawa, Brigadier MacDonald concluded

...this Rifle Range is now fully equipped for the use of 24 targets at all ranges, with the exception until the old Competitors Hut is removed 12 targets only can be made use of from the 1000 yard firing point.

The Camp's other buildings were left on site for use by the military who would train there. Mechanical equipment such as the tractors, trucks and graders as well as engineering tools were also left on site for the future use of the military.

1936-1968

An isolated location on the North Shore with road access, the Blair Rifle Range was an ideal location for the military. Its history in the Second World War, and the surrounding years, reads like a 'who is who' of military units in the Vancouver area. The famed Westminister Regiment used the Range for training, and because "there was no official transport...a privately owned lumber-truck and an ancient Ford truck would be brought into

service to convey The Regiment to Blair Range. These would always be hopelessly overloaded and usually badly overheating on the way.” (Wilks, p 38)

During the war years (1939-1945) Blair was used for rifle, machine gun, small arms and grenade training 12 to 14 hours per day, 52 weeks a year (Vaughan, 8). It was valued for its size, being the only 1,000 yard range in the Vancouver area (Leith, Hamm interview). Standard military weaponry of the period included the Lee Enfield Mark IV rifle (.303 calibre), Bren Light Machine Gun and #36 Mills Bomb pineapple grenade.

In 1939, the Seaforth Highlanders trained for overseas assignment by marching, led by a Pipe Band, through Vancouver to the Blair Range (Roy, 55) where they trained with rifles and machine guns. The Vancouver Regiment, the British Columbia Regiment, the Irish Fusiliers, and the 15th Field Artillery also trained at Blair. The range also hosted military trainees from outside the province. In July 1941, newspapers reported twenty-two members of the Edmonton Fusiliers were stationed at Blair Rifle Range, and were called out to assist in fighting a forest fire in the Seymour watershed. (Medicine Hat Daily News July 19, 1941)

The Vancouver based units participated in significant overseas battles including Dieppe, Italy and the liberation of The Netherlands. The number of soldiers potentially passing through the Blair Rifle Range is staggering when one considers that 181,000 British Columbians enlisted in World War II. Westminster Regiment alone enlisted 4,236 soldiers during the war; 134 were killed. (War Diary p 206) The BC Regiment lost 122 officers and men. (bcregiment.com)

There was also time for rest and relaxation at Blair Range during the war. A long time resident of the area recalls that women were transported by truck from the ferry at the foot of Lonsdale to dances at the Rifle Range. (Echoes, p 117)

After the war, the range continued to be used by the



CANADA
PRIVY COUNCIL
CONSEIL PRIVÉ

566

TO HIS EXCELLENCY
À SON EXCELLENCE

The Right Honourable Roland Michener, C.C.
Le très honorable Roland Michener, C.C.
GOVERNOR GENERAL AND COMMANDER IN CHIEF
OF CANADA
GOUVERNEUR GÉNÉRAL ET COMMANDANT EN CHEF
DU CANADA

Report of a Committee of the Privy Council ON MATTERS
OF STATE
Rapport d'un comité du Conseil privé sur les AFFAIRES
D'ÉTAT

PRESENT
PRÉSENTE

The RIGHT HONOURABLE
Le très honorable

P. E. TRUDEAU

THE HONOURABLE
L'honorable

P. T. HELLYER
M. SHARP
G. J. McILRAITH
A. LAING
A. J. MacEACHEN
C. M. DRURY
E. J. BENSON
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J. CHÉRIEN
B. S. MACKASEY
D. S. MACDONALD
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G. PELLETIER
J. DAVIS
J.-E. DUBE
S. R. HASPORD
D. C. JAMESON
E. W. KIERANS
R. K. ANDRAS
J. A. RICHARDSON

APPROVED
5 DECEMBER 1968

May it please Your Excellency
Qu'il plaise à Votre Excellence

The Committee, therefore, on the recommendation of the Minister of Defense Production, pursuant to the Surplus Crown Assets Act, advise that Your Excellency may be pleased to authorize the sale as aforesaid and that upon provision by the Minister of Defense Production of a satisfactory description of the land and the easement, Letters Patent do issue transferring title to the land to Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation reserving thereout the mines and minerals and an easement required for the power line of the British Columbia Hydro and Power Authority.

Approved
Roland Michener
5th December 1968

military for training and firearms qualification. "It was quite ordinary for us to go to the range," according to Terry Leith (interview) who served during the 1950s. The soldiers were required to "qualify" twice a year.

Responsibility for scheduling and maintenance at Blair fell to the Military District. When the range was in use, a red flag would be raised at the lower end of the range and a sentry would stand guard in radio contact with those further up the range. Members of the Westminster Regiment (Leith interview) recall using mortars, rifles and

machine guns at Blair Range. "Run down drills" required shooters to fire their weapons from the berms in the standing, kneeling and prone positions before collecting their gear and running to the next berm. The soldiers must have appreciated the levelling and filling between the berms by the Relief Camp workers. While practicing at Blair, soldiers stayed overnight in the wood heated huts fitted with pot belly stoves. The RCMP

also used Blair for firearms qualification.

Early residents of Seymour and Blueridge recall that the sound of gunfire from the range was a regular part of living there in the early 1960s.

Heavy military use left the land previously occupied by the Blair Rifle Range contaminated with lead, copper, miscellaneous metal and possibly unexploded munitions. The reality of this contamination began to emerge in the 1970s.

Ownership Transfer to CMHC

In 1968, residential development was beginning to surround the Rifle Range and the military moved to Chilliwack. The Department of National Defence declared the Blair Rifle Range “surplus” and transferred it to the Crown Assets Disposal Corporation.

In 1968, the land’s assessed value was \$110,000 and the DNV Municipal Council attempted to buy it back from DND for half of that amount. This offer was refused because the federal government wanted to receive “market value” of over \$1 million. (Memorandum, Richard Parr, Assistant Municipal Solicitor, September 19, 1996)

On February 5, 1968 the Policy and Planning Committee of DNV Council met with North Vancouver-Capilano MP Jack Davis to discuss the property. Minutes of that meeting show that Council and Davis believed that turning the property over to CMHC “as soon as possible” would prevent DND or “the highest bidder” from “sitting on the property” indefinitely, which would be the “worst development”. The agreed course of action was for CMHC to apply for the land “as soon as the DND declares it surplus” and then the District would ask the Province to form a CMHC-Provincial partnership to develop and sell the property for housing.

At a meeting held in July 1968 in Vancouver between “all

interested parties”, a request was made on behalf of the Squamish Indian Band (who presumably were not present) for the right to purchase 110 acres of the Blair Rifle Range Property and establish a new reserve. In a memorandum to Cabinet on November 1, 1968, Minister of Defence Production, D.C. Jamieson, advised that “it so happens that the desired portion is the choicest acreage and comprises the only access road to the whole property”. Did the parties fear the Squamish would be the “highest bidder”? Having CMHC take over ownership may have been a way of keeping the land out of aboriginal hands because Squamish ownership would “interfere with the proposed project” .

Jamieson’s memo added “of course, any member of the Indian Band wishing to purchase land on an individual basis would be welcome”. Ironically, rumours persist that the Blair Rifle Range may be part of an aboriginal land claim settlement.

The 1968 purchase price by CMHC for 640 acres of land, including the Blair Rifle Range acreage, plus four of twenty-two buildings on the Range was \$1,846,500. Cabinet approved the sale on December 5, 1968. In forty years the market value of the land appreciated 6,595%!

CMHC Ownership

Since the Blair Rifle Range closed, the surrounding forest has gradually recovered the site. The firing berms can still be seen on satellite images and parts of the road is used unofficially as trail. After taking ownership in 1968, CMHC has tried many times to develop the Northlands parcel and fulfill their development mandate. Despite Municipal Council and MP Davis wanting CMHC to become the owner in order to prevent another body from “sitting on the property”, the latter is exactly what has happened. For almost 50 years, CMHC has been an absentee landowner, unable to find compromise between the community’s demand for slow growth and their own desire (at

times supported by local and provincial governments) to develop the land. It has often been an acrimonious debate.

As early as the 1970s, efforts by CMHC and DNV to proceed with development at Northlands have met with community opposition. The Blair Rifle Range is only a small portion of the Northlands parcel and initially the entire 644 acres was zoned as Urban Reserve for future housing. The citizens of the Seymour area have repeatedly opposed projects that would cause the loss of wilderness and have favoured a slow growth strategy to recognize the transportation and infrastructure challenges in the community. This attitude has been reflected in numerous rejections of development proposals by the municipality. In 1988, CMHC sold the Blair Rifle Range section of Northlands to a developer, but when they were unable to have the land re-zoned, foreclosed on the sale. A court ruling found the developer responsible for municipal property taxes for 2 years before it was returned to CMHC. In 1995, CMHC took the District of North Vancouver to court when the municipality passed a series of bylaws changing the zoning in part of Northlands to Park, Recreation and Outdoors (PRO), effectively restricting residential development to only the lower Blair Rifle Range portion.

DNV won the court challenge but the five year process left a bitter relationship between everyone involved, an animosity that persists. Under the terms of the 2003 Seymour Local Plan, construction of new housing units east of the Seymour River are limited to 50 units per year, far fewer than what CMHC envisioned. The by-law approving the new Seymour Local Plan was adopted in December 2003 and remains part of the Official Community Plan. In March 2014, citing ongoing transportation challenges, DNV Council passed a unanimous motion halting all development in Seymour until 2016.

After the acquisition of the Northlands property in 1968, a plethora of studies, proposals, court cases and citizen activism

have almost exclusively dealt with issues of wilderness preservation and urban infrastructure. Aboriginal interest in the land emerged during the Seymour Local Plan discussions in 2000, when the Chief Leonard George of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation asked for the Blair Rifle Range lands for residential development purposes. (correspondence, Leonard George, June 16, 2000) Only brief mention has been made of the social and labour history that occurred during the 1930s at the site. Similarly, its prominent place in Canada's military history has been only briefly acknowledged.

Contamination

Several environmental studies have been conducted on the Blair Rifle Range land on behalf of DNV and CMHC. Most of the reports are freely available at the public library. The main purpose was to determine the property's suitability for future housing development after its heavy use as a military Rifle Range.

Several of these reports have been consulted to understand the extent to which the property is contaminated:

- Blair Rifle Range Landscape Reconnaissance prepared by Don Vaughan and Associates, May 1972
- The Villages of Northlands Phase I Environmental Investigations, Gartner Lee Consultants, May 1995
- Environmental Investigation of the Blair Rifle Range, North Vancouver, British Columbia, Golder Associates, September 1995

In 2004 CMHC asked Golder Associates to review all of the previous studies in light of updated environmental standards.

It is not possible to tell if any further testing was conducted as the report, requested through Access to Information, was highly redacted. CMHC refused to disclose the information as it contained “trade secrets, financial, commercial, scientific or technical information”. (letter to author from CMHC April 1, 2014)

As a result we are only able to discuss the contamination issues by looking at the 1972 and 1995 studies. The reports are summarized in the following sections: Target Area Contamination, Firing Berm Contamination, Dump Sites and General Debris.

Targets

There were two main target structures on the Blair Rifle Range; referred to as the North Target and the South Target. They were constructed of reinforced concrete (Vaughan, p 2) and the surrounding area was covered in sand and sod (Vaughan p7). At some point after 1968, 2,000 cubic metres of soil from around the North Target was levelled and bulldozed into McCartney Creek as part of the decommissioning process. (Golder, p30-1) Portions of the North Target’s wooden structure are still in place and are in remarkably good condition.

<i>BC Ministry of Environment Contaminated Sites Regulation Standards for contaminants found at Blair Rifle Range:</i>	
Residential Use Limit (RL), parts per million	
(ppm)	
<i>Copper</i>	<i>100 ppm</i>
<i>Lead</i>	<i>400 ppm</i>
<i>Zinc</i>	<i>500 ppm</i>
Highest Concentrations Found at Blair, 1995	
<i>Copper</i>	<i>12,505 ppm</i>
<i>Lead</i>	<i>27,307 ppm</i>
<i>Zinc</i>	<i>559 ppm</i>

In addition to a concrete retaining structure, the South

Target contained a parallel wooden structure and berm soil. By 1995, the South Target had been removed. (Golder, p5)

A Small Arms Range to the east of the main target range was used for 22 calibre weapons. The Small Arms Range had a level firing area, a target to the north and a berm separating it from the road (Golder p 15). The Small Arms Range target area was intact at the time of the Golder investigation. (p.12)

When weaponry was used on the range, the bullet fragments or “slugs” discharged from the firearms landed on or near the targets. The slugs were 30 calibre (.303) steel or copper and a chemical analysis showed they were 96-97 percent lead with the balance copper and zinc. An analysis of 1 cubic foot of material produced eight pounds of slugs. (Vaughan, 8) Vaughan estimated that a total 252,000 pounds of lead was present in the combined target areas.

During its active years as a Rifle Range, the immediate



area behind the target structures at Blair was mined for copper and lead bullets, but it has not been mined for “some time”. (Vaughan p 2) Golder (1995) agreed that the bullet fragments may have been recovered in the past, but likely only the largest pieces. (p 11)

Environmental Consultants Gartner Lee conducted a more intensive study of the target areas in 1995, using hand excavated test pits and groundwater sampling. (Gartner Lee,p3) Two pits were dug in the southwest side of the North Target. In one pit (T5), lead concentration of 9,393 ppm was found. (p16) The British Columbia Ministry of Environment’s current Contaminated Sites Standards for put the acceptable limit of lead in soil for human health protection as 400 ppm. In another pit (T6), the lead was 265-381 ppm. A test pit behind the North target found a concentration of 2001 ppm in the upper .3m of soil.

In late 1995, Golder Associates did secondary testing of the target areas. At the Northern Target, 46 test pits were excavated by hand and the soil screened and scanned with metal detectors (Golder p 17) . It found lead concentrations as high as 27,307 ppm and copper concentrations up to 12,505 ppm.

Golder (1995, p 31-2) estimated that at the North and South Target Areas combined, 9,200 cubic metres of soil was above the provincial Residential Land Use (RL) criteria. Of that, 2,200 cubic metres could be considered Special Waste which is subject to more “stringent regulations” (Golder p 13). The Golder Report identified portions of the former reinforced concrete North Target structure as well as a possible buried utility conduit. (Golder p 25)

The Small Arms Range, on the eastern side of the access road, was found to contain 60 cubic metres of soil containing copper and lead above the RL criteria.

Firing Berms

Seven rectangular firing berms were constructed on the Rifle Range from which soldiers would aim their weapons at the

targets. Each berm was approximately 100 yards (90 metres) apart. The three most northerly berms appear to be about 120 metres in length; the four to the south are about 100 metres. The tops of the berms are about 3 m wide. (Gartner Lee, p 15) Secondary roads to each firing berm led off of the main access road.

Brass shell casings are typically discarded after a weapon is discharged and left on the ground. Copper and zinc concentrations are likely contaminants in these areas. (Gartner Lee, p 13)

Gartner Lee dug one test pit on Firing Berm 6 and found concentrations of 841 ppm of copper and zinc located up to 150 cm below the surface. The consultants used a metal detector around Berms 4 and 5 and confirmed “significant metal concentrations at a distance of up to 20 m on either side of the berms.” (p 15)

Golder (1995) noted that the firing berms were intact, “although heavily rutted in places from current recreational use. There was no evidence found of the access roads to the south of each firing berm. (Golder p 5) They were likely overgrown with brush and trees. Golder dug 60 pits around five of the seven firing berms, concentrating their investigation on Berms 5, 6 and 7 under the assumption that they were the most commonly used. No pits were dug around berms 3 and 4.

The pits were dug with a backhoe and the soil was screened and then checked with a metal detector. Golder found that in addition to shell casings, a large amount of other metallic trash was present. It also located buried electrical conduit and 50 mm steel pipe. They concluded that contaminated soil from buried shell casings exists “along a 10 meter wide strip along the northern edge of the firing berms.” Contaminated levels of copper, zinc and/or lead were found at all five firing berms. The

highest level of lead was in a test pit at Firing Berm 7, where one result was 875 ppm. The highest concentrations existed on Berms 5, 6 and 7. (Golder, p 28)

Eighty-three percent of the soil samples tested from these three firing berms showed contamination in excess of the Residential Use criteria. Dump Sites

Grenades or Other Ordnances

The issue of dump sites was first raised in the Vaughan Report of 1972. The most interesting and unproven allegation is that a grenade dump exists on the site. Vaughan raises the issue after a discussion with Mr D.B. Hunnings of the Jericho Military Base in Vancouver. Hunnings was Commanding Officer of the Blair Rifle Range when it was decommissioned. He told Vaughan that:

...the range was used for hand grenade practice at one time. As with many such explosives, some did not detonate. These were gathered and placed in a pit north west of the northern target area and exploded. However, there exists a possibility that some are alive and buried. (Vaughan p 2)

Vaughan noted the suspected site of such a dump on his site map.

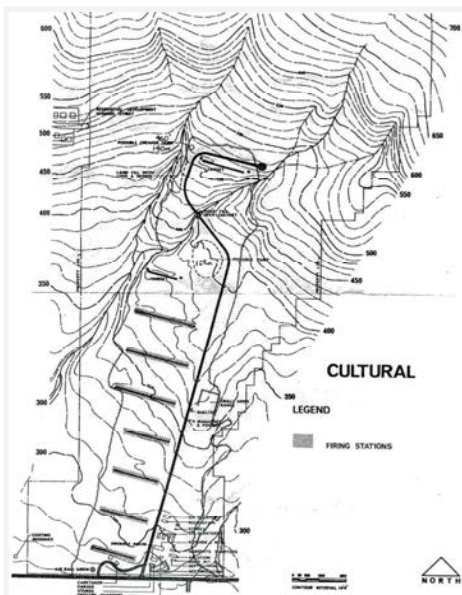
The Gartner Lee (1995) reconnaissance performed a visual inspection of the suspected grenade dump. A metal detector did not find high concentrations of metal near the surface in the grenade dump location. (Gartner Lee, p15) It was not able to further access the location on Vaughan's map "due to the trees". It dug test pits to the south of the grenade dump location in the area of a suspected landfill.(GL, 12)

In its supplementary report, Golder felt that the possibility of a grenade dump was "small", but chose not to

excavate the area. Instead it performed a measurement using conductivity meters and found conflicting results that may indicate metallic objects in the area. However, “the potential for live ordinance prevented excavating in this area.” (Golder p 28)

Golder interviewed Stan Molinsky, a former Army engineer who trained at the Blair Rifle Range in 1943. He did not have any recollection of grenade practice when he was there. (Golder, p.5)

What is striking about the rumours of a potential grenade dump is that very little investigation has occurred. Gartner Lee (1995) reported that they had requested information from DND in Ottawa (p 12). Golder (1995) consulted five DND staff members while preparing their report. Their recommendation was that a specialist be hired to “locate and remove buried suspect objects in the grenade dump area and provide assurance that further undiscovered live ordinance does not exist.” Personnel who trained at Blair Rifle Range in the 1950s told the author that mortars (weapons that fire explosive projectiles) were also used on the range.



Presently, the Blair Rifle Range is on a list of over 800 sites in Canada where DND has determined that the potential exists for unexploded ordinance (UXO). It is classified as “in assessment” meaning that DND is reviewing its historical records to “determine if previous military activities [were] conducted on the site, and that as such UXO may be present. If required, further

surveys by sophisticated metal detectors will also be conducted.” (Email St Germain to author, March 11, 2014) There was no timetable provided for this investigation.

Buildings and Landfills

When the land was sold to CMHC in 1968, the Crown Assets Disposal Corporation stated that 22 structures existed on the site. At least 13 of these were likely those constructed by the Unemployed Relief Camp workers between 1934 and 1936 as the final Works Progress Reports show they were turned over to the military for their use. Historic photos suggest that these buildings did not include foundations. Air photos show the historic placement of the buildings, and Vaughan’s 1972 map also shows the location of an Air Raid Siren which would date to the Cold War era.

Only four of the buildings were sold with the site. The remainder may have been demolished or removed. An air photo taken in 1974 shows that most of the buildings are gone.

A local resident who played in the area as a child in the 1960s recalls seeing abandoned buildings amongst the undergrowth. Another states that the firing berms had concrete bunkers beneath them which teenagers would use as overnight campsites. Vaughan (1972) suggested that concrete foundations, electrical and sewer systems may be buried at the site. Gartner Lee (1995) argue that building remnants and septic systems would no longer be a problem after so many years (p.13)

Due to the amount of clearing, habitation and demolition that occurred during the 1930-1968 period, a significant amount of waste was likely generated. Vaughan identified three possible landfills and dump areas (including the grenade dump) on his map. Site drawings from Library and Archives Canada dating to the 1930s clearly show the location of the Camp garbage dump, not identified by Vaughan. (See page 6)

Gartner Lee (1995) examined historic air photos and found “possible filling or clearing activity” between 1946 and 1957 near the sites identified by Vaughan. Test pits were dug at both these locations and no evidence found that they were used as dumps, (p 12) but it is “likely that buried wastes will be encountered somewhere on the site”. (p 18)

Golder (1995) was unable to see any areas “that were obviously related to landfilling activity”, (p 6) but noted that “landfilled domestic waste would contribute to soil or groundwater contamination”(p.11)

In addition to the landfills and buildings, a considerable amount of debris was identified by all three reports. It is unknown if the car parts, demolition debris and random metal are related to the military period or by later human dumping. No effort has been made to determine its origins.

Groundwater

Golder’s conclusion was that 12,000 cubic meters of soil contaminated above the RL criteria exists on the Blair Rifle Range. Two thousand cubic meters of that amount is classified Special Waste. Contaminated soil inevitably leaches into groundwater and streams running through the property. In addition, large amounts of contaminated soil that were bulldozed into waterways would add to the concentrations.

Mountain Creek flows into McCartney Creek partway down the Range. It flows into Burrard Inlet at Maplewood Flats. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans reported in 1998 that there were elevated levels of lead and copper in the water, creek sediments and soil in the upper reaches of McCartney Creek (reported in PSKF p 3), an observation with which Golder (1995) concurred. The creek and the surrounding land supports many species of fish, birds and mammals.

Remediation

The Vaughan (1972) report noted that the target areas were occasionally “mined” by the military to remove lead slugs which were sold as scrap metal. Vaughan suggested that remaining lead deposits could be removed by “a summer student work camp”. Such a solution is, of course, laughable by today’s environmental standards. Golder (1995) suggested a pilot project to treat the contaminated soil on site. There is no indication this occurred. Contaminated sites in BC are regulated by the provincial Ministry of Environment.

The use of the Blair Rifle Range by the general public for recreational purposes is well known. Vaughan (1972) related that the berms were favoured locations for snowmobiles, skiers, sleds and cyclists (p2). Later reports refer to the unofficial use of the site for recreational purposes, including CMHC’s own proposal to DNV in 1995 which promised to preserve the main access road as a trail for public use. (villages of Northlands, 1995).

CMHC’s goodwill to the community users of the site disappeared when DNV re-zoned a large part of Northlands in 1995. During the debate over re-zoning CMHC – a Crown Corporation – referred to the property as “private land” and called District staff “trespassers”. It does not pay property taxes to the

Year	Name	The Gold Badge	Rank	Corps	City or Town
1874	Blair	Development A.A. Jones	N. M. Beaton Esq	British Columbia Provincial Police	Victoria
1874	Blair	Major A. M. C. Spittal	Kent. F. & Sullivan	Montgomery's B.A. Association	Vancouver
1874	Blair	Major K. C. W. Dilloughby	Mrs. Owen S. Methery	The Canadian Scottish Rifle Club	Victoria
1874	Blair	Major K. C. W. Dilloughby	Major A. M. C. Spittal	The Westminster Regiment	New Westminster
1874	Blair	Captain E. W. Beane	Corporal G. H. Thompson	The Strathcona Highlanders of Canada	Vancouver
1874	Blair	Corporal W. Kayne	Capt. J. P. G. Gault	The Fraser Valley Rifles	Victoria
1874	Blair	Sergeant J. Macneil	Private J. S. Graham	The Western Rifles of Canada	Vancouver
1874	Blair	Sergeant J. A. Waddington	Gunner H. Macneil	The Royal Westminster Regiment	New Westminster
1874	Blair	Sergeant G. N. Macpherson	S/O G. S. Gilliat	The British Columbia Rangers	Victoria
1874	Blair	Kent. F. C. Sullivan	Sergeant J. S. Drott	The Royal Westminster Regiment	New Westminster
1874	Blair	Kent. Corp. G. Westing	Kent. Corp. G. Westing	The British Columbia Rangers	Vancouver
1874	Blair	Sergeant J. A. Waddington	Kent. Corp. G. Westing	The British Columbia Rangers	Vancouver
1874	Blair	Kent. Corp. G. Westing	Sergeant G. H. Macpherson	The British Columbia Rangers	Vancouver
1874	Blair	Kent. Corp. G. Westing	Kent. F. C. Sullivan	The British Columbia Rangers	Vancouver
1874	Blair	Private J. W. Lightbourn	Private J. W. Lightbourn	The British Columbia Rangers	Vancouver
1874	Blair	Private J. W. Lightbourn	Sergeant G. Westing G. M.	The British Columbia Rangers	Vancouver
1874	Blair	Sergeant G. H. Macpherson	Sergeant G. Westing G. M.	The British Columbia Rangers	Vancouver

municipality, nor does CMHC provide a grant in lieu of taxes.

The tone of CMHC's interactions with community members speaks volumes. When a representative of the local High School Mountain Bike Association sought CMHC's permission in 2010 to use the property and maintain the trails it was refused. In an internal memo, Clive Charnley, Principal of the BC Default Management & Real Estate Centre at CMHC states, "I advised [the mountain bike representative] of our position that these are private lands, and CMHC does not sanction any activities on these lands." He curtly concluded, "I don't think we will hear anything further from him". (Correspondence, July 7, 2010)

When the author contacted CMHC for background information for this article, we were similarly dismissed. "No one here wants to talk about it," was the response from the Senior Communications Officer, who also strangely denied that CMHC even owns the property.

A decaying sign posted at one of the easterly entrances is the only public advisory to those who use the property daily for recreation. The sign requires careful reading, and the admonition against "disruption or removal of soil" can only really be appreciated by those aware of the property's history. No effort has been made to remediate the property, despite advice on how that could be accomplished. (Golder, 1995) The potential of live ordnances exists, but even being on DND's "Legacy Program" list, no substantive work in this regard appears to have been undertaken. No one really knows what is or is not present on the Blair Rifle Range and despite several studies reporting contaminants being present, the Blair Rifle Range does not appear on Canada's inventory of Federal Contaminated Sites (<http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/fcsi-rscf/home-accueil-eng.aspx>).

CMHC has been aware of the contamination and the possibility of explosives on the site for a very long time, yet has

seems content to wait for a new owner to deal with the problem. Municipal, provincial and federal governments have not taken a role in pursuing the issue. The most cynical view is this is a way of punishing the community for DNV's actions in 1995. Many in the community hesitate to approach CMHC as they anticipate it will draw a heavy handed response. Conclusion

It is 80 years since unemployed Canadians were put to work building the Blair Rifle Range, and 75 years have passed since Canadian soldiers went to war in Europe. It is over 40 years since CMHC purchased the property to ensure that it was quickly developed. It will soon be 20 years since the District enacted the by-laws which left only the most contaminated part of the Northlands property zoned for housing.

Most of those years have been devoid of in-depth discussion of heritage values or the possibility of historical investigation of the site. Very little has been said about the aboriginal interest in the property, however in November 2014 Chief Bill Williams of the Squamish Band told the Deep Cove Heritage Society that it will be part of the Comprehensive Land Claim Settlement currently under negotiation. He also stated that remediation of the contamination would be expected prior to the Squamish accepting the land.

The history of the Blair Rifle Range comes as a surprise to many residents of the area, the owners of the land and its cultural custodians. We have an opportunity to debate its future in light of this knowledge. At the very least, we can acknowledge the significant events took place on property and their place in our collective past.

Donna Sacuta, 2014
North Vancouver BC

2016 - 2024 Addendum

Since this paper was originally published, the complex story of the Blair Rifle Range has continued to develop.



North Shore News photo

In 2016, in an another apparent public CMHC faux-pas a number of new “Private Property-No Trespassing” signs were erected on trails leading into the Blair lands. Public pressure resulted in them being removed.

In late 2017 a 5-year agreement was signed between North Shore Mountain Bike Association and the parties to maintain trails over the 640 acre area. As part of the agreement the provincial Ministry of Forests, Lands, National Resource Operations and Rural Development took over responsibility for overseeing the land.

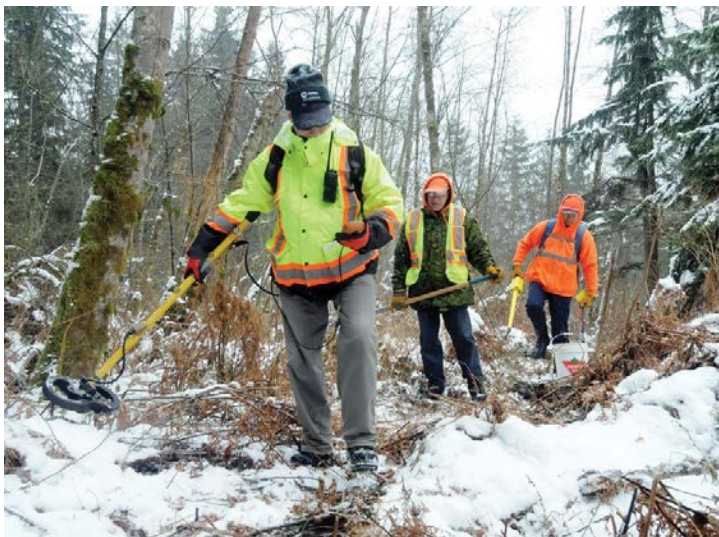
In February 2018, shortly after the new agreement was signed the Department of National Defence (DND) enlisted explosives management contractors. The contractors spent two weeks

hunting for possible unexploded ordnances (UXOs) and forgotten on the former Blair Rifle Range site. About one foot underground near the north target the contractors found an unexploded three-inch mortar.



DND | North Shore News photo

A further six weeks of surveys were conducted and numerous mortars were located and disposed of on-site. The disposal team confirmed that the mortars contained live explosives.



Public meetings were hosted by DND in April 2018 to update the community. The meetings were poorly attended.

The 2018 search team focused on recreational trails and was restricted the search to .5 metres on each side of the trails. Due to the potential of UXOs the parties in 2017 agreed to no trail development in the lower section of the lands, and new warning signs were posted.

In 2021 the provincial government announced a contractor would seek public input to establish a Recreational Access and Management Plan to help define the future use of the land parcel.

2024

In September 2023 the Department of National Defence resumed work to clear the former Blair Rifle Range of unexploded explosive ordnances (UXO).

“Since they returned in 2023, the UXO team has been focused on the wooded areas farther north, finding another 145 kg, consisting mainly of expended or practice two- and three-inch mortars and parts; 37-millimetre expended flite-rite rounds; para-flares; anti-tank practice rounds; and small-arms ammunition.” (North Shore News, April 19, 2024)

The project was expected to extend into 2025.

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Who we are

The BC Labour Heritage Centre Society preserves, documents and presents the rich history of working people in British Columbia. The Society engages in partnerships and projects that help define and express the role that work and workers have played in the evolution of social policy and its impact on the present and future shaping of the province.

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The BC Labour Heritage Centre and the following groups
contributed to this project.

The Boag Foundation



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