

End of the Idyllic Summer of '39

By Gerry Madigan

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Part 1

Introduction

Historic Commercial Cable Building at Hazel Hill, Nova Scotia will be demolished in the very near future. This despite all efforts taken over 10 years to save it from destruction. The Commercial Cable Rehabilitation Society tried its very best to save and restore the historic building but were unable to do so in the end. Truly it is a sad to see its loss, not because it is a remarkable building, but for what it represents, our history.

The Commercial Cable station constructed in 1888, was at the forefront of a communications revolution in its day, as one of the largest cable relay stations in the world housing some of the most technologically advanced equipment available. Nine thousand miles of cable carried news of world events and communications between Europe and North America faster than any other means. Its very existence was a vital communication link.¹



Hazel Hill, NS

Hazel Hill station was closed in 1962. Bit by bit Guysborough County and many other rural communities are losing what amounts to large pieces of their heritage because of a rapid state of decline and the lack of investment necessary to sustain them. The reasons vary but truly it is due in large part to the stinginess in economic opportunities and the failure of government to invest in rural communities that is at the heart of the matter. We see that constantly by the conditions of our roads and in the sad state of rural services and

infrastructure.

Guysborough County's fate is one marked by this trend as well as the continued out-migration of our young people to economic opportunities elsewhere. Their hopes for a future in raising a family and a living wage should be here but lie elsewhere. The evidence lies in declining school enrolments, business closures or contractions, the loss of public infrastructure post offices, or general stores because the population no longer exists to viably support them. This out-migration, if you will, is largely due to failures to adequately invest in rural economies or technical opportunities that offer some hope for our young to stay here and invest in the future. It wasn't always so.

Much will be lost with the eventual demolition of the Commercial Cable station. With it goes a part of Guysborough County's remarkable history. Hazel Hill was once an important asset not only to Guysborough County but to Canada. It had to be willingly protected from harm or destruction. It is now suffering a fate facing many other Nova Scotia rural communities in similar circumstances. Guysborough, Cape Breton, and elsewhere were once important both

strategically and economically to Canada. There is evidence of that in the measures taken here during the Second World War. It all happened here one idyllic summer in 1939.

Idyllic Summer

War loomed on the horizon in 1939. Yet in the spring and summer of that year, Canada and the world only hoped for the best, yet the worst was also feared. Still there were some bright spots that summer. One welcome diversion from the inevitable was the Royal Visit of their majesty's King George VI and Queen Elizabeth (the Queen mother) to Canada 17 May to 15 June 1939. The Royals arrived in Canada that May to much fanfare, receiving warm welcomes wherever they travelled.

The Royal Visit was just a whirlwind tour with a side trip to the United States. By 15 June the Royals made final stops in Nova Scotia at Pictou where they travelled by rail from New Glasgow to Antigonish. Their visit soon ended thereafter. They sailed from Halifax and less than three months later, Canada and the world were at war.ⁱⁱ



It didn't seem so though on August 30, 1939, which was a typical summer day in the Strait of Canso area, reporting a balmy 27C. It had not rained in days. But there was uncommon activity there. Lead elements of the Pictou Highlanders arrived and occupied quarters at Hazel Hill NS. The Highlanders rented some space from the Commercial Cable Company to house a total of 25 men who would eventually be billeted there for local defence. This was roughly a platoon strength of men.ⁱⁱⁱ

It was odd that a military unit was stationed there at

all, after all, Canada was still at peace. War was only declared 10 September 1939 that was still some days away. And war was never ever a certainty. There was always hope for peace despite the shades of a looming disaster that lay visibly on the horizon.

Winston Churchill in "The Gathering Storm" warned of the impending dangers. His and others persistent warnings were disparaged, cast aside many times over in the public eye. He was

considered a war monger so his warnings were largely ignored or discounted by world leaders until later proven in action, word and deed that autumn of 1939.

There always was a vain hope for peace, that war could be avoided and that any impending disaster could be avoided at all costs, even through appeasement. Peace was the option truly desired. It was paid in kind through a treaty that ostensibly guaranteed peace in our time. But in the end, war was only delayed, the end was the inevitable and the expected reality.

Hitler eventually attacked Poland on 1 September 1939. Two short days later, Great Britain and France were at war with Germany. Behind the scenes, Canada made vain last diplomatic efforts. The Canadian government cabled peace appeals to Germany, Italy and Poland on 26 August 1939.^{iv} Mackenzie King's diplomatic efforts had no effect. What was to be, came to be.

Mackenzie King's government took steps beyond this failed diplomatic effort. Amongst the dispatched telegrams that possibly passed through the Commercial Cable Company were those of his government commencing Canada's mobilization of its Armed Forces.



Churchill's War Room – Chiefs of Staff Conference Room, Gerry Madigan's Archives – June 2014

The Pictou Highlanders commanded by LCol S. MCK. Fraser were called out on 26 August 1939. The Pictou Highlanders were subsequently tasked with local defence and protection duties. The unit was placed on active service on 1 September 1939, some nine days before the government's actual declaration of war on 10 September 1939.^v

The government's move to invoke active service is indicative of how quickly the troops were mobilized and moved to protect key

vital areas that included the Commercial Cable Company. It was a key and vital communication's link. And yet, it has often been observed that "Canada was unprepared for war".

The regular army of 4500 men, augmented by 51,000 partly-trained reservists, possessed virtually no modern equipment. The air force had fewer than 20 modern combat aircraft while

the navy's combat potential consisted of only six destroyers, the smallest class of ocean-going warships. It was a modest beginning.^{vi}

What is significant in the above concerns Canada's reservists. It was remarkable that Canada's 51000 partly trained reservists, were amongst the first to be mobilized and moved quickly to fill the gaps in our local defences.

LCol Fraser's actions in the aftermath of his government's declaration of active service was indicative of the readiness of the reserves to mobilize to do that duty. First above all was the quality of the staff work, some of which must have been ongoing in the background. There were probably warning orders, movement orders and reconnaissance's conducted in anticipation of Canada's coming war footing.

The Highlander's had need for accommodation, winter was only a few short months away. The earliest letters of 11 September requesting accommodations acquisition and approvals points to LCol Fraser's outstanding staff work and leadership. His forethought of planning and proactive approach, anticipated the needs of his command that ensured his men were housed under hard accommodations before the winter snow fell. Failure otherwise meant the Highlanders would have been left out in the cold and under canvas that year.

Canada's partly trained reservists did particularly well, given the circumstances. They reacted quickly and asked the appropriate questions, so it would seem then that the blanket statement that Canada was totally unprepared for war was not totally correct. Canada's reserve leadership was indeed intellectually prepared and ready to take on the task at hand. Canada, as a nation, simply failed to adequately provide the necessary budgets or tools in anticipation of the coming war.

Part 2

The Pictou Highlanders Arrive

On 30 August 1939, the lead elements of the Pictou Highlanders arrived in Guysborough County. It was the beginning of a coming wave of military personnel to the county. Many military personnel of all Canada's Armed Services would descend upon the Canso Strait Area and the eastern shore, most notably at Mulgrave and Port Hawkesbury. The first elements in the strait area were led by LCol S. MCK. Fraser, the designated Officer Commanding, Strait of Canso Defences.



The Strait of Canso, including Cape Breton, was considered a vital area. Cape Breton was indeed an island in those days. The Port at Sydney with its industries and products were of strategic importance not only for convoy to support Britain overseas but also to Canadian industry inland.

The Strait of Canso was a gateway for products coming to and fro on the railway ferry between Mulgrave and Port Hawkesbury. This key link

had to be protected to ensure the free flow of goods and services, vital to Canada's materiel needs during the war. Everything flowed through the Strait to the industrial heartland to build the weapons of war.

In the coming days of early September 1939, LCol Fraser's time was totally devoted to the protection and fence of this vital area. His first step was to lay out his defence and dispositions.

Nova Scotia Public Archives, 2017 – Pictou Highlanders
Aldershot, NS June 1939

His next step was to find lodging and shelter to accommodate his growing force. Finally, he was tasked with training the area defence. LCol Fraser's task was monumental but his key

difficulty proved to be accommodations!

Finding suitable accommodation was problematic even when it was available. LCol Fraser wanted to lease what was known as the "Irish Facilities" for use as the Battalion's Officers' Mess. On 11 Sep 1939, one short day after war was declared, LCol Fraser's request was considered by his superiors but denied as this facility was designated for use as a hospital.^{vii}

It was the problems of means that would become the bane of LCol Fraser's existence over the coming months. The problems of command, the stresses of leadership, and problems of proper equipment and accommodation for his men were to have a dramatic impact on his health.^{viii}

Still LCol Fraser worked out all his initial dispositions by 15 September 1939. His was a far-reaching defence area that not only included Mulgrave but areas as far as St Peter's in Cape Breton. The OC Strait of Canso Defence was responsible for the disposition of 562 men of the Pictou

Highlanders that also included elements of 86th Bty. R.C.A. His command and responsibilities continued to grow to an even greater number of men and materiel throughout the next year.^{ix}

The Pictou Highlander story in Mulgrave was not all glorious. Yes, there were difficulties in getting established. Those difficulties were met with for the most part professionally and with compassion. But the Highlanders were also famous for raising a little hell too.

First there was the hell raising. The first lead elements of the Highlanders occupied quarters at Hazel Hill NS and allegedly trashed their quarters. The space was rented from the Commercial Cable Company, which justifiably raised the ire of the company's manager resulting in a claim for compensation for damages. It was an inauspicious start that did little neither for regiment's reputation nor for LCol Fraser's health for that matter!

Then there was the good. Certain soldiers on foot patrol came to a farm house one day asking for water. They observed a little girl and were shocked to see the little four-year-old with a leg bent, hobbling about on home made crutches.

The little one suffered from tubercular knee and ankle disease. Her parents were too poor to afford an operation. The soldiers were quite distressed by the sight. They could not bear seeing the little one suffer so. They brought news back to the unit asking for help. The men donated the cash and rushed her to the children's hospital in Halifax for surgery hoping for a miracle.

With the surgery, over and when she returned home, the soldiers of the Pictou Highlanders revisited her. They found her in a cast but more to their surprise she was bright, happy and all smiles with rosy cheeks. They were happy to learn that a little girl would eventually recover from her ordeal to walk and play like a normal child.^x

First Steps

The first steps to winning the war were being taken in Mulgrave in late 1939 and early 1940. The Pictou Highlanders played a huge role. The Pictou Highlanders continued to serve on local defence duties until 31 Dec 1940. They were disbanded that day but immediately reformed and posted for overseas duties 1 January 1941.

Their first stop was Newfoundland. Elements of the unit served there from March to August 1943. They were now a part of Canada's home defence establishment within Atlantic Command. In September 1943, one company was later despatched to the Bahamas where it remained on garrison duty until 28 March 1946.^{xi}

But the larger part of the Battalion was re-designated the "1st Battalion, The North Nova Scotia Highlanders, CASF" on 7 November 1940, who embarked for active service in Northwest Europe on 18 July 1941. The Battalion participated in D-Day, 6 June 1944, landing in Normandy, France, as part of the 9th Infantry Brigade, 3rd Canadian Infantry Division.

The men of the Pictou Highlanders fought bravely and with distinction throughout the North-West Europe campaign until war's end. The battalion was finally disbanded on 30 April 1946.^{xii} But it was in Guysborough and Victoria Counties where the Pictou Highlanders first gelled and

trained as a unit at the end of that summer of 1939. Their service here was the beginning of an odyssey. It was to be the end of idyllic days for some time to come!

ⁱ Helen Murphy, **Commercial Cable Building soon to be demolished**, Guysborough Journal, 12 Jul 2017, Pg. 1 & 3

ⁱⁱ Peggy Feltmate, **White Head Harbour, Guysborough County, NS - Its Stories, History and Families**, Toronto Canada, 2011 (fourth printing 2017), pg. 99

ⁱⁱⁱ Canada, National Defence, Dead Files 46-4-2, **S&T Services, Accommodation for Troops, Strait of Canso Area, 321.009 (D265) Correspondence, Reports, Returns, Requests, Etc. RE ACCN for Troops in Strait of Canso Area, D/15 Sep 1939 / 16 Mar 1940**, Initial Dispositions and Accommodations worked out by 25 Sep 1939, Pg. 4/97

^{iv} A.R. Byers (ed) et al. **The Canadians at War 1939.45 2nd Ed.**, Reader's Digest Assoc., 986, pg. 12

^v Canada, National Defence, Directorate of History and Heritage, **THE NOVA SCOTIA HIGHLANDERS**, Queen's Printer, Ottawa, publication A-DH-267-000/AF-003, pg. 6/9 (2-2-166)

^{vi} Canadian War Museum:

Source: http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/exhibitions/chrono/1931goes_to_e.shtml

Accessed: 27 Sep 2016

^{vii} Canada, National Defence, Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, **S&T Services, Accommodation for Troops, Strait of Canso Area, 321.009 (D265) Correspondence, Reports, Returns, Requests, Etc. RE ACCN for Troops in Strait of Canso Area, D/15 Sep 1939 / 16 Mar 1940, Correspondence on file: 1, Accommodation Arrangements for Pictou Highlanders, H.200- -4 15 Sep 1939, pg. 2/ 97**

^{viii} Ibid Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, 17 Nov 1939, pg. 30-32/97 – personal letter from LCol Fraser CO Pictou Highlanders to OC Military District 6 MGen CF Constantine

^{ix} Ibid Dead Files 46-4-2, File 200-1-4, 25 Sep 1939. Pg. 4/97 Initial Dispositions and Accommodations

^x OZORAK, Paul. **Abandoned Military Installations of Canada, Volume 3: Atlantic**. [Ottawa: Paul Ozorak, 2001]. **ISBN Number: 0969512732 / 9780969512738, pg. 204**

^{xi} Ibid NS Highlanders, pg. 6-7/9 (2-2-166 to 2-2-167)

^{xii} Ibid NS Highlanders, pg. 7/9 (2-2-167)