

"Pro Rege et Patria"



Preserving the History of The Royal Westminster Regiment

BY DALE AND ARCHIE MILLER

The 111-year-old white wooden armoury of The Royal Westminster Regiment, longest-serving Reserve Army unit in British Columbia, sits protectively on the hill overlooking downtown New Westminster and looking southward across the Fraser River toward Mount Baker.

As a civilian, you might find the process of gaining entry a little daunting, though the requirement for security is readily understood, given the times in which we live.

You push a button beside the exterior door, a disembodied voice bids you enter, and the door unlocks. Once inside, you will find yourself in a cavernous drill hall, in the far corner of which is the Regimental Museum.

Run by The Royal Westminster Regiment Historical Society, the museum is actually in the old gunroom of the original 1895 structure and still contains the firing ports and sloping floor to support cannon fire over the Fraser River.

The museum, opened in 1973, is small but filled with fascinating, colourful displays that portray The Royal Westminster Regiment and its antecedents, beginning with the Royal Engineers in 1859 and culminating in the current designation of "Royal" being granted to The Westminster Regiment in 1967.

You will be warmly welcomed and, depending on your preference, given a personal tour of the displays, or left to wander on your own, knowing that there are knowledgeable people close by to answer all your questions.

You'll see weapons, uniforms, medals, photos, trophies

and flags. One of the most popular and intriguing displays is a large diorama of model military vehicles that accurately shows what The Westminster Regiment (Motor) looked like on full parade.

As you might expect, many of the volunteers who are so dedicated to preserving the history of the Regiment and to educating the public about it, are part of the military family themselves.

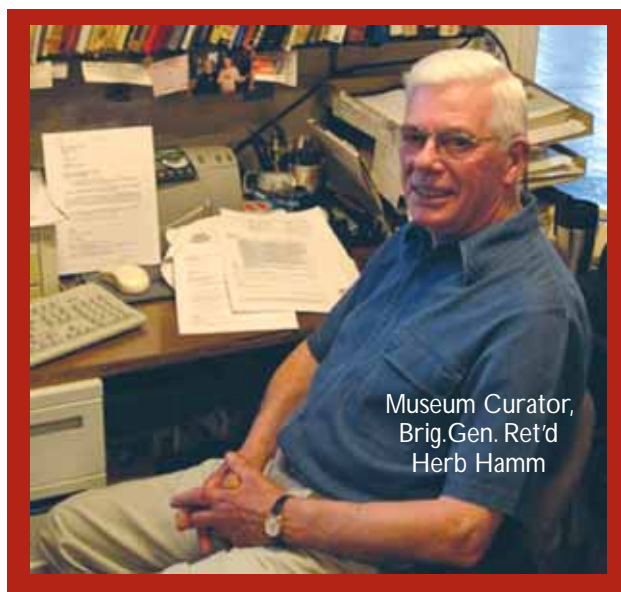
Lt. Col. Ret'd Basil Morgan, Curator Emeritus of the museum, joined cadets while in school and then became a soldier in 1933.

He started working with the museum over 30 years ago and became fascinated with the stories and information he found there. Now 90, he still spends many hours each week at the museum, answering questions, doing research and telling the story of those soldiers who went before - the sacrifice and dedication of "ordinary people who were trained to kill."

Museum Curator, Brig.Gen. Ret'd Herb Hamm, joined The Westminster Regiment in 1952, serving twice as Commanding Officer, as Aide-de-Camp for Lts. Gov. John Robert Nicolson and Walter Stewart Owen, and as CD Commander Militia Area Pacific.

One of the recent projects in which he was very heavily involved was the restoration of two 19th century cannons that had been on display at the Westminster Quay. He was president of The Royal Westminster Regiment Historical Society in 1999 when the group decided to rescue the cannons. They researched the cannons, found a restoration site, located materi-

als and fundraised to make the dream a reality. Five years later, in 2004, they were placed in front of the Cenotaph in the Memorial Plaza in front of New Westminster City Hall on Royal Avenue.



Museum Curator,
Brig.Gen. Ret'd
Herb Hamm

Photos: Archie Miller

“We think they’ll be an asset to where they are,” says Herb. “It’s a proper tribute to our predecessors.”

Not all museum volunteers have a military background. Lila Wood takes care of most of the clerical and computer work for the museum. For her, it’s important for people to understand that “the military is more than a bunch of people in uniform marching off to war.” She sees the military as a huge family and recognizes that one of the roles the museum plays is to provide a place where members of that military family can come and remember.

“They can talk about their memories and experiences and people here will understand.”

Recently a father and son visited from Ontario and spent the whole day at the museum. The son was fascinated by the artifacts and displays of the museum, but his father spent most of his time reminiscing about his war experiences.

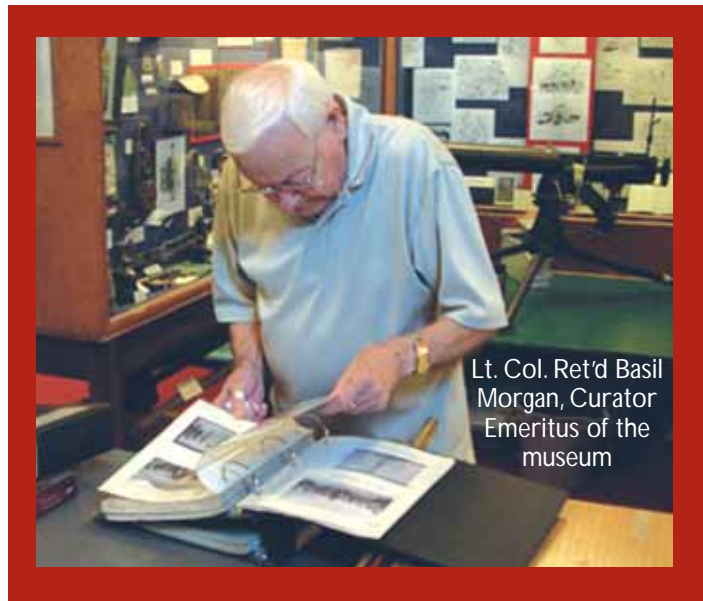
“He wanted to talk and I wanted to listen. It doesn’t matter how many medals I have to identify or artifacts to catalogue, if someone comes in and wants to talk, I’ll gladly put it all aside.”

Earlier this year, thieves stole two bronze plaques that were mounted on monuments in front of the armoury. One of the plaques was the city’s dedication to the regiment and the regimental museum. The other was a dedication to Jack Mahony and Filip Konowal, two Regimental Victoria Cross winners from World War II and World War I respectively.

“Basically, someone has stolen them for scrap,” says Herb, outraged. “The fact that someone would do that in the first place just boggles the mind. The war they were fighting in gave people the freedoms that we have today - someone has taken terrible advantage of it.”

The museum, located at the corner of Queens Avenue and 6th Street in New Westminster, is open Tuesdays and Thursdays from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Admission is by donation. Call 604-526-5116 for information or visit their website at www.royal-westies-assn.ca.

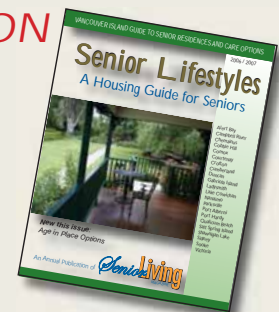
Authors Archie and Dale Miller do historical research, presentations and writing in New Westminster.



Lt. Col. Ret'd Basil Morgan, Curator Emeritus of the museum

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