

The British Columbia Corps of Commissionaires

HISTORY

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Commandant and Chief Executive Officer



Early Days and Hard Times

The first settlers on the site that was to become Vancouver built their homes in 1862. In 1886, the bill incorporating the City of Vancouver was passed by the Provincial Legislature. In 1927, Vancouver was only 41 years old and was enjoying a resource industry based boom that was to come to an abrupt end with the stock market crash of 1929. The Depression that followed continued until World War II. It was in these challenging times that the BC Corps of Commissionaires was born and struggled for its existence.

As with the British Corps, the BC Corps had its origin with disabled veterans who, despite the boom, were unable to find steady employment. Three men: Percy Lawrence, A. Farthing and C.B. Strickland formed the Disabled Veterans Association. After some initial success, they approached Lt. Col. A. Leslie Coote, VD, a well-known pre-war officer, for guidance and support. With his assistance, they decided to form a unit of Commissionaires, and extended membership to include any unemployed veteran. Whether handicapped or physically fit, jobs were difficult to find for the returned veteran.

During this same period, the Canadian Corps of Commissionaires was being organized in Montreal and Toronto. While there was probably an awareness of this in Vancouver at the time, there is no record of contact until after formation of the BC Corps. On the 26th of October 1927, the British Columbia Corps of Commissionaires was formally incorporated under the Society Act of British Columbia. The first General Meeting was held on the 10th of November at the offices of the Disabled Veterans Association loaned for the occasion by the Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA). The first problem, understandably, was one of finances. It was agreed that Life Members and Patrons be admitted on payment of a membership fee of \$25.00. The next question was one of eligibility. It was decided that disabled veterans already in the Disabled Veterans Association be given first preference followed by other veterans. Fees for membership were set at \$5.00. It is recorded that at the conclusion of the meeting, Percy Lawrence and James Lee tendered their membership fees thus providing the first capital of the Corps. At a meeting held on the 15th of December, it was also agreed that a limited number of persons be admitted to Honorary Membership on payment of a fee of \$10.00. A unique feature of the BC Corps was

that the Commissionaires were members of the Society rather than the Governors (Trustees) as was the case in every other Division in Canada, a distinction that was to remain until 1996.

The Canadian Corps

By December 1927, the Canadian Corps had made contact with the national body and in February of the following year the Corps accepted the offer to join them as No. 3 Company, Canadian Corps of Commissionaires. On 2 July 1931, the name change to Canadian Corps of Commissionaires (No. 3 Company) was made official. In March of 1928, Lt. Col. Coote, in his capacity as Officer Commanding, visited Ottawa and made contact with Capt. Finney, who at that time was both President and Secretary of the Toronto Company who brought him up to date on the Corps in Eastern Canada. He saw the heads of various Government departments and received many offers of assistance; however, there was a reluctance to be obligated to the Government. He was entertained at lunch by Col. Ralston, Minister of Militia and afterwards addressed thirty Members of Parliament on the work of the Corps. In an interview with the Rt. Hon Mackenzie King he was promised all assistance and instructions were given that all positions in British Columbia that could be filled by returned men should be given to the Corps. After his talk with Capt. Finney it was decided to make the Corps Canada wide. As a first step, on his return journey to Vancouver, he stopped in Winnipeg to promote the idea of a Corps there. Very clearly Lt. Col. Coote believed in the Corps and approached the organization with missionary zeal.

March 30th 1928 saw receipt of a letter from the Army and Navy Veterans of Victoria with reference to formation of a Corps on Vancouver Island. This was followed by another enquiry in 1937 from the "Imperial Veterans Association" on the same subject. At the same time, a letter was received from the Veterans Assistance Commission in Calgary requesting advice in setting up a Corps there. By April 1937, the Corps was established in Calgary; the Victoria and Vancouver Island Division was authorized and on 4 August 1937, the BC Corps gave authority for its formation under the BC Corps Charter where it remained until 1946. In reporting on this affiliation, it should be noted that relations between the two organizations were of a supporting nature rather than that of command. A similar relationship existed between the BC Corps and other Western Divisions as they got their start, although without the legal attachment.

The relationship of the BC Corps to the national organization was cordial but at the same time retained a level of independence that was not altogether surprising. In the early 30's some 70% of the population of Vancouver was of British origin and almost 50% of the BC Corps were British veterans with a strong feeling for the British Corps of Commissionaires. Corps archives show regular correspondence between the two organizations. At the same time, the national organization was sorting out its Headquarters' structure, Bylaws and Rules and Regulations,

individual Divisions were focussing increasingly on their own struggle for survival in a country locked in the grip of the Depression. Finally, 18 December 1941, No. 3 Company was dissolved and the Corps reverted to its original identity as the British Columbia Corps of Commissionaires deemed "to have continued in existence as if it had not previously been struck off." It would be easy to refer to this move as a severing of relations with the national body but this was not the case. While there were concerns with the proposed national bylaws, the primary reason was that the Corps was receiving \$1,200.00 a year from the Vancouver Welfare Federation (Community Chest), which it felt would be jeopardized by a formal association and the required contribution of financial support to the national body. The Corps continued to send a representative to national meetings and assured the Canadian Corps of continued cooperation. Having mentioned grants from the Welfare Federation; it should perhaps be mentioned here that these were subsequently repaid in full once the Corps became self-supporting. Another debt that was repaid in 1929 was the twenty dollars given by The Disabled Veterans Association in 1926 "to start the Corps of Commissionaires".

Depression Years

Vancouver, 1929 saw the unemployed raiding the City relief office and parading the streets demanding work. By August 1930, Vancouver had 7000 unemployed. By 1932, as many as 34,000 needed relief in Vancouver and 15,000 hunger marchers paraded the streets. By 1935, demonstrations sparked by desperation reached the point where the Riot Act was read in Victory Square. The population of Vancouver at that time was in the neighbourhood of 250,000 with almost a quarter of that number out of work or needing relief. Many of those seeking work were veterans. The Corps was able to find work for some, but very few. For veterans without employment, the Corps set up a depot in a vacant building in Vancouver's Gastown, donated by Maj.

JG Fordham a local businessman and Patron of the Corps. Trustees of the Corps called upon the business community and were successful in obtaining donations of food, blankets and clothing. Sleeping accommodation and meals were provided for about 60 veterans at a time provided they were prepared to abide by the strict rules established by the Corps. With the continuing support of local businessman this was continued until the outbreak of World War II when employment improved and the need declined. Neville Chamberlain's name is forever associated with appeasement, but to veterans who had experienced the horror of Trench warfare in World War I "peace in our time" had an undeniable appeal. At a General Meeting of the Corps 30 September 1938, following the Munich Conference, it was unanimously agreed that a letter be sent to Neville Chamberlain expressing "the loyal support of the BC Corps of Commissionaires at this time of crisis". His reply, on file in the Corps archives expresses, "very warm thanks for your kind message". Subsequent correspondence from Commissionaires reflects the disillusionment that followed when Hitler invaded Poland the following year. As the Depression came to an end, the Corps received a request from Trans Canada Airlines to provide traffic and security services at Vancouver Airport. This was the beginning of a long association that has continued until the present day. It was also in that year that the first trans-continental air service was launched between Vancouver and Montreal.

The Second World War

The advent of war was a great stimulus to the economy and the demand for Commissionaires to fill the jobs available increased dramatically. The strength of the Corps soon grew to 315 with most being steadily employed. There are no records to indicate how many Corps members returned to the Services. It is of interest to note however, that several Trustees attained high rank during the war. Maj. Gen. V.W. Odlum was promoted to that rank to command 2 Canadian Infantry Division and later served with the Diplomatic Service as High Commissioner to Australia followed by service as Ambassador to Turkey and China. Lt. Col. J.P. MacKenzie returned to serve with the Royal Canadian Engineers, later to become Quartermaster General with the rank of Major General. Col. W.W. Foster, DSO, VD, Chief Constable of Vancouver and a former national president of the Royal Canadian Legion was also to reach the rank of Major General, assigned to coordinated Auxiliary Services overseas taking with him Maj. Victor MacLean, who up to that time had been Commanding

Officer of the Corps, to serve on his staff. Lt. Col. W.C. Woodward, an early Patron of the Corps, served as the Lieutenant Governor of the province for most of the war.

Among those who joined the Corps after the war was Victor Louie. Victor was born in Victoria and had his first experience fighting the Japanese in China from 1931 to 1938 where he led a band of guerillas. Returning to Canada at the outbreak of World War II, he joined the Special Operations Executive (SOE), parachuting into Malaya on Operation Tideway Green to work with the Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Army, acting as an interpreter for other members of the team. After operating in the jungle, at times suffering from hunger and disease, he still remembers the thrill of receiving the Japanese Adjutant's sword during the surrender. He worked for Eaton's after the war and, on his retirement took up gardening, winning many prizes for his beautiful flowers. If you saw him handing out suckers to children whose parents were in the welfare day line-up, you would never think of him operating behind enemy lines.

David Birch, born in China of missionary parents was a student in a British boarding school in Shandong at the time of Pearl Harbour. He spent his boyhood in Weih sien Concentration Camp in Japanese-held North China and did not see his parents until after the war.

Bob Rogers who served the Corps well for 17 years both on the job and as a member of the Membership Committee was a member of 419 Squadron RAF in the United Kingdom. On the 29th of December 1944, he was on a bombing mission over Germany when the aircraft in which he was rear gunner was struck in the bomb bay, causing the entire bomb load to explode. The entire plane disintegrated throwing him clear. He descended by parachute, landing in Essen. He was the only one of a crew of seven to survive. With burns, injuries from flak and a sprained ankle he was unable to escape and was made prisoner. Conditions in the camps and his experiences as a prisoner of war until he was liberated in 1945 in Munich were nothing less than atrocious. Bob had an integrity and loyalty to the Corps that earned respect wherever he went.

Corps RSM for many years, Bert Grant joined the Canadian Scottish in 1929 and when war broke out was assigned as a machine gunner to Yorke Island, a hundred and twenty acre islet with two 4.7 inch guns guarding the channel about 150 miles North-West of Vancouver. Such was its isolation and living conditions that it was referred to as "Little Alcatraz". Subsequently, Bert Grant landed in France on D-Day and was discharged with the rank of WO2. When he joined the Corps in 1945, he was assigned as an armed guard at The Daily Province newspapers cashiers' cage. While

in the Corps he was also employed at the University of British Columbia Fire Department from whence he retired with the rank of Captain in 1973.

Commissionaire Charlie Brown at the time of writing is the longest serving member of the Corps, having joined in 1959. His wartime service was in minesweepers off Canada's East Coast. D-Day saw him aboard HMCS CARAQUET, one of an all Canadian flotilla clearing approaches to "Omaha" beach for the Americans. After a brief taste of civvy-street following his discharge, in 1953 he joined the RCAF serving for three years at radar stations on the East and West Coasts. He served for many years as a member of the Corps Advisory Committee and has been anchorman at HMCS DISCOVERY for some 21 years and is still serving. He has written his history of DISCOVERY and was awarded the BC Corps Meritorious Service Medal. The citation for his BC Corps Meritorious Service Medal awarded in 1988 for, among other things, his service with HMCS DISCOVERY, where his dedication has become almost legendary.

Librarian – The Dawson Free Public Library

One of the more interesting characters in the Corps history is Ferdinand Enevoldsen, a veteran of World War I, who joined the Corps in 1928 at 68 years of age. The volume of correspondence between Enevoldsen and the Corps is a fascinating commentary on the times and covers the period 1929 to 1954. One of his narratives tells the story of his being wrecked in a full rigged sailing ship on an island off the Malabar Coast of India. In fact, his experiences were such that he wrote two books himself.

A Sergeant by 1933, the Corps was somewhat taken aback when he requested that the Vancouver office select and order books for the Dawson Library on his behalf. Most appear to have been ordered from the Times Book Club in England although some were purchased locally. In those days a book sold for anywhere from one dollar to two-fifty.

In 1943, as a Captain in the Pacific Coast Rangers, he was energetically and successfully recruiting for the Rangers in the North. At his point he was over eighty years of age. However, once he had Yukon Rangers Unit No. 135 established he recognized the need for a younger person to take command and stepped down the same year.

Enevoldsen was also a prospector and his letters are full of his activities in this field. Always enthusiastic, and always an optimist despite hardships and setbacks, his letters give a real sense of what it was like to head out into the wilderness looking for the “big strike”. It was also interesting that some of the Corps Headquarters staff were grubstaking him in his endeavors. His last letter, written at 94 years of age, was still full of reports on his prospecting and activities of mining companies in the North. To read his letters is to gain a real appreciation for what is meant by “leading a full life”.

Coleopy Park Developments

Following World War II, once the Corps finances began to improve Stephen Coleopy, the Executive Secretary at the time, gave some thought to finding a way to provide affordable housing for retired elderly members of the Corps. Unfortunately, although he completed much of the groundwork he passed away before the project was completed. It was left to Air Commodore A.D. Bell-Irving who was Commandant of the Corps, with the assistance of the Corps Trustees and office staff to see the project to completion. The project, comprising 36 units of low cost housing, at a cost of \$200,000.00 and named after Stephen Coleopy who was a strong supporter of this project. Financing was arranged through the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation. The first tenants moved in 1 May 1959. It is interesting to note that none of the original tenants were Corps members although all were veterans or widows of veterans.

With the completion of the project, it became necessary to set up a separate Society, “Coleopy Park Developments”, but the Directors continued to be the Trustees of the Corps and the office staff oversaw the operation, working with a local building management company. The Corps RSM, Bert Grant took a personal interest in the project, continuing to provide caretaker and maintenance services until it was torn down.

In 1989, it was recognized that the buildings no longer met modern standards and the land it occupied was under utilized. Plans were made to redevelop the site and with the leadership of B. Gen. D.J. Anderson, CD plans were made for redevelopment. Additional information on B. Gen. Anderson appears later in this narrative. The new development, which was opened in March 1991, consists of a Seniors Complex of 36 units and Families Complex of 22 units, including handicapped units. While there is no

longer an implicit obligation for BC Corps Trustees to serve on the Board of Coleopy Park Directors; the current Board are still Corps members. It is also gratifying that there are more Commissionaires or their widows currently living in Coleopy Park than at any time in the past.

Command and Control/Care and Responsibility

The Corps has prospered because of the strong personal commitment of those charged with its care. Each Generation has shaped the Corps to meet the demands of the times and, following military practice, provided that essential firm base required to continue to the next. It is fair to say that, in the early days, the Corps was managed more like a society than a business with heavy reliance on volunteers to conduct its business. The assistance provided by the Welfare Foundation was tacit acknowledgement of the social service provided by the Corps. All who were involved demonstrated a strong personal commitment to the well being of its members. Without that commitment, the Corps would not have survived.

Patrons

In the thirties and forties, most prominent businessmen had served in the First and Second World Wars so it is not surprising that the list of Patrons and Trustees sounded like a “Who’s Who” of Vancouver.

Early Patrons included the Mayor of Vancouver, Gerry McGeer, Col. W.C. Woodward, founder of Woodward's Stores Ltd., who also served as Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia through World War Two, Lt. Col. Victor Spencer, whose large department store used to sponsor the Santa Claus Parade in Vancouver until taken over by Eatons, Col. The Most Rev. A.J. de Pencier, Anglican Archbishop of British Columbia, and Col. H.S. Tobin, DSO, VD, ADC, former Commanding Officer of “Tobin’s Tigers”, the 29th Infantry Battalion, to mention just a few. Although not established as such, some Patrons approached the role of Trustee by virtue of their interest and the degree of support provided.

Management and Responsibility

The early records of the Corps show Percy Lawrence, Esq., as President and A. Farthing, Esq., as Secretary. Lt. Col. Coote was initially listed as an “Advisor”, then Commanding Officer. At this time, every Commissionaire was a member of the Society. Not all were seeking employment. Some joined to support the organization,

or for the fraternal association. In 1931, on recommendation from Lt. Col. Coote, they decided to form a Board of Directors, to be known as Trustees. While there had been a Secretary in the original organization, it was at this time that the position of Executive Secretary was established to carry on the day to day business of the Corps. Until that time, the secretarial function had been performed on a volunteer basis, as in fact was that of the Trustees and Commanding Officer. In 1933, at the suggestion of the Commanding Officer, a standing committee known as the General Purpose Advisory Committee was formed. This committee, initially comprising ten Commissionaires, provided advice and information to the Commanding Officer as well as assisting with the administration of the Corps. This committee too operated on a volunteer basis. They were involved in the discipline of Corps members, recruiting, canvassing for employment, arranging Corps meetings and social events, dealing with members' delinquent in payment of Corps dues, and visiting the sick. "Just a minute", you say, "Corps dues?" Yes, in 1985, they were \$2.00 per month and a Commissionaire could be released for non-payment. The Committee not only set the level of dues but also recommended the disciplinary action. For a brief period in the early days, when the Corps was small, and had a set establishment of Non-commissioned ranks, they also functioned as a promotion committee. In later years, the Advisory Committee become known as the Membership Committee and in 1996 reverted to the title, "Advisory Committee".

Gentlemen of the Board

Following are brief sketches on some Board Members, primarily those who served as Chairmen. They are by no means complete but in reading about them one cannot help but be struck how fortunate the Corps was to have men of such stature take an interest in the Corps.

Lt. Col. James P. Fell was the first Chairman. Originally, he had served in the Royal Artillery, reaching the rank of Captain. In 1911 he organized the 6th Field Company, Canadian Engineers, in North Vancouver and took half the Company with the original Canadian Division to France in 1914. He did much to put the Corps on a firm financial footing from which the Corps could continue to build. He also maintained an ongoing liaison with the British Corps, exchanging ideas and always searching to improve. His term as Chairman extended for twenty-three years (1931-1954). It was during his term that Mr W.G. Murrin, Esq., a senior executive of the British Columbia Electric Railway Co Ltd., (later BC Hydro), served on the Board (1931-1960) providing much valuable support.

Air Commodore Duncan Bell-Irving served as Commanding Officer 1957 to 1959, joined the Board and served as Chairman from 1959 until his retirement in 1965. A/C Bell-Irving went to war as a Seaforth in the 16th Battalion (Canadian-Scottish) in World War One and was commissioned in the 3rd Gordon Highlanders. After serving in the trenches, he transferred to the Royal Flying Corps in 1915. Initially, he was an observer/gunner. On December 14th, 1915 while returning to base, a Fokker E III piloted by the German ace Max Immelman attacked them. He was shot down and seriously injured. On returning to duty in 1916, he learned to fly and was the first Canadian-born airman to achieve "ace" status. He received an MC and bar for his exploits. Between wars he developed and commanded the first RCAF auxiliary squadron to fly. He also organized the first Air Cadet Squadron in Canada and talked Squadron Leader Nick Carter, a former Royal Naval Air Service Officer who later became a Corps Trustee, into leading it. He returned to active service in World War Two, finally completing a most distinguished and adventuresome career with the rank of Air Commodore. While he contributed much to the continued success of the Corps, he will perhaps be most remembered for his work in the planning and setting up of Coleopy Park Developments. For more information on the career and times of this remarkable man, "Gentleman Air Ace", the Duncan Bell Irving Story by Elizabeth O'Kiely is well worth a read.

Squadron Leader A.W. (Nick) Carter, OBE, MBE served as a Trustee from 1945 to 1977. In 1912, he was head rider at the Calgary Stampede. In 1916, he went overseas and joined the Royal Naval Air Service. Posted to a squadron attached to the French he took part in daylight bombing raids. He rose to the rank of Captain, and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for conspicuous courage – twice shooting down German aircraft when outnumbered, on one occasion five to one. On returning to Canada, he was appointed to the newly formed Canadian Air Board. He left the civil service in 1923 and founded A.W. Carter Ltd., Hudson automobile dealership in Victoria, expanding to Vancouver in 1933. He told of having to teach potential customers how to drive before he could sell a car. Nick Carter was a quiet man, providing solid support to the Corps. It was he who set up the first bookkeeping system to meet the requirements of an expanding organization.

Air Vice Marshal Stevenson, CB. Legion of Merit (USA) was another who won his Commission on the battlefield in 1916, later transferring to the Royal Flying Corps, receiving his wings in 1918. In 1921, he joined the Canadian Air Force rising steadily in rank and responsibility. In 1944, he was appointed Senior Canadian Officer on the staff of Lord Mountbatten, Allied Commander South East Asia. After a distinguished

career, AVM Stevenson retired in 1945. He served as a Trustee for 20 years and held the position of Chairman from 1965 to 1967, retiring from the Board ten years later.

Lt. Col. C.C.I. Merritt, VC, ED, QC who served as Commanding Officer (1959-1967), Trustee (1959-1984) and Chairman (1967-1969). He served on the Committee (1962) set up to establish a pension plan for the Corps office staff. It was interesting to note that during this period the Corps payroll was in excess of 510,000.00. It was on his recommendation to the Board that the Corps auditors, Touche Ross & Co., were consulted and a new accounting system established using the services of a payroll service company.

Gp. Capt. Alf Watts, AFC, ED, QC served the Board from 1961 to 1987 and as Chairman from 1969-1971. With a genuine concern for the lot of the veteran, he was the first World War Two veteran to be elected National President of the Royal Canadian Legion. It was in his time as Chairman that negotiations were begun leading to the BC Corps of Commissionaires re-joining the national organization. The realization of that initiative fell to Col. D.F. Spankie, OBE, CM, ED, Chairman 1971 to 1975, a long serving member of the Irish Fusiliers of Canada (The Vancouver Regiment) who had served in a number of staff appointments overseas, returning with the rank of Colonel. In addition to his association with the investment firm of Pitfield, Mackay, Ross which made him a natural choice for Financial Advisor, he was an internationally respected military historian. Col. Spankie wrote the first history of the BC Corps entitled "Carry On", which he dedicated to Air Commodore Duncan Bell-Irving. He retired in 1989 after 23 years service to the Corps. He was followed by Air Vice Marshal Walter Orr, CBE, CD and in turn Maj. K.J. McRae, CD who served with both the British Columbia Dragoons and the British Columbia Regiment, NPAM 1939-40, Active Service 1940-1946 and Militia from 1947 to 1957 with the "Dukes". He was Advertising Director for the Vancouver Sun newspaper. He became a Trustee in 1977 and served as Chairman 1977 to 1981. Maj. McRae was also the first member of the BC Board to serve as National Chairman, a post he held with distinction from 1983 to 1985 after which he was appointed an Honorary Governor. At the time of writing, he is the longest serving member of the BC Board, having served from 1971 to the present. He was awarded the Commissionaire Distinguished Service Medal in 1996.

Next in the Chair was Wing Commander Gordon Bell-Irving, CD. Gordon was attached to the RAF during World War Two, completing fifty low-level sorties over Germany flying Mosquito fighter-bombers and became a career officer at war's end. As the son of AVM Duncan Bell-Irving, he felt a sincere family obligation to follow his

father's lead in the Corps. A project close to his heart was Coleopy Park Developments and he was very active in the planning aspects of its re-development in 1990 and 1991. Unfortunately, he died and was unable to see the project come to fruition.

Wing Commander Don Bain was a young Flying Officer piloting a Halifax bomber heading for Aachen in the summer of 1943 when he was badly shot up by night-fighters five minutes before reaching the target. He pressed on, only to find that his hydraulics and bomb doors would not operate. On his return to England, he outmaneuvered two other enemy fighters. Unable to crash land because of his bomb load, he ordered his crew to bail out. He then directed the plane to a safe area where it crashed into a hill and exploded and bailed out himself, breaking both ankles badly on landing. Subsequently, he was awarded the DFC and went on to a distinguished career in the RCAF. He served the Corps as a Trustee, for 17 years until his death in 1993 following a brief illness. It was Wg. Cdr. Bain and B. Gen. Anderson who formed the Selection Committee to select the Corps' first Commandant in 1984. He also provided a great deal of much appreciated guidance and support in the early days of his term.

Col. W.J. (Jack) Aird, CD served as a Governor from 1977 to 1997 and Chairman 1987 to 1990. A former Commanding Officer of the British Columbia Regiment, District Commander he was also a past President of the Armoured Corps Association and Chair of the Conference of Defence Associations. He also served on the National Executive and was made an Honorary Governor of the National Board. In his civilian career, he was a senior executive with Fraser Valley Dairies. Col. Aird cared deeply about Canada, the Canadian Forces and the Commissionaires. More than that, he played an active part and made major contributions to all three.

B. Gen. D.J. (Doug) Anderson, CD, served as a Trustee from 1981 to 1996 and Chairman from 1990 to 1992. In addition, he was President of Coleopy Park Developments during its re-development. At that time, it was the accepted practice that the Vice Chair of the Corps would be also President of Coleopy Park. B. Gen. Anderson was a former Commanding Officer of the Seaforths. He commanded Pacific Militia Area and also served as Senior Reserve Advisor to the Commander Mobile Command until his retirement in 1976. He was a Commanding Officer. He was a Commanding Officer of the Corps, Provincial Commissioner for St John Ambulance in BC, Past President of the Last Post Fund, Past Chairman of the Conference of Defence Associations, Past Vice President (West) of the Army Cadet League of

Canada and, Past Chairman of the Canadian Infantry Association. Somehow, while participating in all these activities, he also managed to operate successfully his own printing business. Unfortunately, he passed away in 1996. If one could summarize his life in one word, it would be “service”. He was a major contributor to all the organizations to which he gave his time and talents.

Commander D.M. Johnston, KStJ, CD, has been a Trustee since 1979 and served as Chairman from 1992 to 1995. He is a former Commanding Officer of HMCS DISCOVERY, is currently Chancellor of the Priory of Canada, St John Ambulance, Past President of the Last Post Fund and has served as Honorary Consul of Malaysia and as an Executive Member, Canadian Forces Military College Advisory Board. In civilian life, he is a lawyer with a prominent Vancouver law firm.

Col. Ron Webster, CD has been a Governor since 1985 and Chairman since 1995. His Service began in 1944 with the US Merchant Marine, which was followed by aircrew training in 1944 and a transfer to the Infantry in 1945. He spent 44 years with Richardson Greenshields of Canada Limited retiring as Vice President. He also served as Honorary Consul of Bolivia and plays an active leadership role in the community. He has had a long association with the Artillery in Vancouver and served as Honorary Colonel of 15th Field Regiment. His presence in this history represents the passing of an era in that he will be the last World War Two veteran to chair the Board. It was during his term that the BC Corps made a major structural change whereby the Commissionaires voluntarily relinquished their position as the voting members of the Society, ceding that responsibility to the Trustees, who with that change assumed the title “Governors”. This move brought the BC organization into line with that used by other Divisions of the Corps.

Commanding Officers

There have been twelve Commanding Officers since the inception of the Corps. Each served on a voluntary basis giving as much time as their personal careers and activities allowed. Lt. Col. Coote, mentioned earlier was the first. Maj. Barker-Benfield who served for one year only followed him.

Maj. Victor MacLean, MC served from 1931 to 1940 when he left for service overseas. At that time, he was associated with Kelly-Douglas & Co. Ltd. Later, he joined the brokerage firm of Ross, Whittall Ltd. Maj. MacLean had served in the First World War with the 16th Canadian Scottish in 1914. He was wounded and taken prisoner at Festubert after which he spent three years in a German prison camp. In the words of

Sergeant Tommy Slater, who also worked at Kelly Douglas, despite the excellent work done by Lt. Col. Coote there were problems in the Corps and there was concern for its future. He approached Maj. MacLean and when asked, told him he could do the job provided he had a good Secretary. It was then that Stephen Coleopy came into the picture. They formed an excellent team. He got the Corps involved with the Community Chest, which gave them an office and the money to pay Coleopy as a full-time Secretary. They were able to get groceries donated to help Corps members and set up and operated the barracks for out of work veterans. It was also noted that when the men asked if they could have a smoker, he went to a friend who was also a patron of the Corps, Col. Tobin, who managed Brewers & Distillers of Vancouver Limited and asked him to provide the beer. He gave them all the beer they wanted provided they took the bottles back. The party was held at the Seaman's Institute on Hastings Street. From all events, a good time was had by all. During his term, the Corps held its first Church Parade, marching to Christ Church Cathedral. While Lt. Col. Coote had planted the seed, it was the partnership of Maj. MacLean and Stephen Coleopy that made sure those early beginnings brought forth fruit.

Lt. Col. J.S. Tait, CBE, VD assumed command in 1940, serving until 1948. He had commanded the Seaforths in World War One.

The records show he was very successful in finding employment for Corps members and worked well with Stephen Coleopy, the Executive Secretary. He was followed by Brig J.C. Stewart, CBE, DSO, CD from 1948 to 1957. Brig Stewart was a retired Permanent Force Artillery Officer and veteran of two world wars. It was during Brigadier Stewart's time that the Corps set up what was then called the Corps "Endowment Fund" which later was more accurately referred to as the "operating capital" of the Corps. He was followed by A/C Bell-Irving and Lt. Col. Merritt who are referred to earlier in this narrative.

Next was Brig The Honorable H.P. (Budge) Bell-Irving, OC, DSO, OBE, ED, CD. Brig Bell-Irving went overseas in 1939 with the first contingent of Seaforth Highlanders and commanded a company of the battalion in Sicily, Italy and North-West Europe before succeeding to the command of 10th Infantry Brigade. He was awarded the DSO and bar, the OBE and was twice mentioned in despatches. He stepped down as Commanding Officer on accepting the honour of being appointed Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia (1978 to 1983). As Commanding Officer he made a point of getting to know the Commissionaires, he initiated the BC Corps system of medals and presented the first Colours to the Corps. There had always been a strong

Seaforth presence in the Corps and the Bell-Irving family played a prominent part. He cared deeply about Canada and had a strong commitment to his Regiment, the community and the Corps.

Brig Bell-Irving was followed by Supt J.J. Atherton (1971-1976), a retired RCMP officer who made a major contribution towards improving training standards in the Corps. He went on to serve on the Board until 1982.

Maj. E.S. Thorne served from 1976 to 1978. During his term he also served as legal council for the Corps and made necessary revisions to the Corps Bylaws. It was Maj. Thorne who first identified the need for a full time Commandant. He also joined the Board, serving with distinction until 1989.

Brig D.J. Anderson followed and then Capt. (N) J.M. Thornton, OMM, CD followed in 1981 serving until 1985 and as a Trustee until 1987. Capt. "Jack" as he was affectionately known by the Commissionaires was an ex Regular and former Commanding Officer of HMCS DISCOVERY It was during his term that the Corps hosted its first National Annual General Meeting. He also fulfilled a long felt need with the introduction of the Commandant's Commendation. It fell his lot to be the last volunteer Commanding Officer of the BC Corps, a post that he filled in the best traditions of the service.

Executive Secretaries

Secretaries and Executive Secretaries of the Corps seldom had a high profile, nor did they seek one. They carried on the day-to-day business of the Corps and provided the stable environment and support that allowed the Commanding Officers and Trustees to play their part.

The first Secretary, E.A. Paige was a well known retired newspaperman. Serving from 1927 to 1930 he was responsible for much of the early publicity and donated a bolt of cloth for the first uniforms. Capt. A. Morlidge, DSO served from 1932 to 1934 until returning to England to become a Chelsea Pensioner. He had served in the 15th "The Kings Royal" Hussars and the 23rd Northumberland Fusiliers in 1918 when he was awarded the DSO.

Stephen Coleopy was the first full-time, paid Executive Secretary. He was a veteran of the regular British Army with eighteen years service with the Middlesex Regiment and wartime services with the Royal Flying Corps. He managed the Corps office from 1934 until his death in 1957, a record 23 years. His service, starting in the middle of a

Depression, through the Second World War and well into the post-war period provided much needed stability through three challenging and radically different periods in the history of the Corps. If there was one person deserving the title “Commissionaire Extraordinaire” which has been used elsewhere in this book it was Stephen Coleopy. He ran the Corps in his day, with the full support and cooperation of the Trustees, Commanding Officers and the Advisory Committee, which he chaired. His name is perpetuated in the Corps’ housing project, Coleopy Park.

The next Executive Secretary (1957 to 1968) was O.K. Kennedy, who had been a member of the office staff since 1941. It is said that he was a hard-nosed disciplinarian of the old school who ran the Corps with an iron hand. Nonetheless, he earned the respect of the Corps and was made an Honorary Commanding Officer on his retirement.

Following O.K. Kennedy was Capt. Fred Gray (1968-1978) whose military service was with the British Military Police. In an interview for the Corps newsletter he observed, “It was not until my first posting as a “Redcap” that I first realized my illegitimacy” Instead of being referred to as Military Police or Redcap, he found they were referred to as “Redcap Bastards”. Such was their reputation that on entering a pub one evening, every soldier walked out. Being a bastard had some merit, he noted, one could get a beer without being jostled!! He was subsequently transferred to the Indian Army, transferring to the Intelligence Corps from which he retired with the rank of Captain. It was in Fred Gray’s time that the Corps took its first step in the use of computers by having the payroll processed by a Payroll Service Company.

It was Sid Paget’s lot to be the last Executive Secretary, serving from 1978 to 1985, in all 25 years service, most of which was in the Corps office. His administrative ability provided the necessary stability for the Corps to build on the accomplishments of his predecessors.

The Passing Parade

To this point the narrative has been much on personalities many of them in the senior ranks of the Corps, simply because we more information on them. It is appropriate now to pause and review the passing parade, a progression of people and events that shaped the Corps over the years.

In 1930, the Governor General, Lord Willingdon inspected the Corps. In June 1941, the Rt. Hon W.L. MacKenzie did the honours and in 1946, His Excellency Field Marshal H.R.L. Alexander honored the Corps with his participation.

29 March 1930, Mr E.W. Beatty, President of Canadian Pacific Railways presented the Corps with a flag. In 1982, the Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia, Brig H.H. Bell-Irving presented the Corps with its Colours.

Sgt. Tommy Slater, who is mentioned earlier, came from Lancashire. He was being interviewed by the Curator of the Art Gallery who was rather disturbed by Tommy's accent and decided to see if he could get someone whose speech would be more pleasing to the patrons. On approaching the Corps Secretary he was told, "he could supply a taller man, a shorter man, a fatter man or a thinner one, he could supply a man with any sort of accent but he could not supply a better man!" Tommy got the job.

At the 10th Anniversary Banquet it was noted that the BC Corps was the second largest in the Empire; the London Corps in England being the largest.

In July of 1947, Harry Knight DCM, aged 70, an ex-RSM of the Royal Warwickshires and RSM of the Corps was preparing to sail around the world in his 28ft. Schooner.

The Birch brothers, Charles and George served the Corps for 41 and 45 years respectively. Both became Sergeant Majors and served on the Advisory Committee. Other family compacts were the Bunnetts - Bill senior, now retired and sons Bill and Dave who are currently serving. Les Cairney and his daughter, Leslie Wilkins. Hilda Campbell and her son Colin and Ev Clausen, now retired and her daughter Diana – a world class martial arts student currently working in the Corps office.

Mike Miko who served 1946 to 1990 was the last Commissionaire to bear arms in the BC Corps. In the discussion on carrying arms, both The Province newspaper and Loomis noted that the Corps at that time functioned as an employment agency. They considered Commissionaire their employees and as such accepted the potential liability.

In 1974, Lila Cunningham was enrolled as the first female Commissionaire and assigned to the Westcoast Transmission Building. Betty Easton, who served at Shaughnessy Hospital and the Airport Cashiers thought to be the first female to qualify for the 10 year Long Service Medal. Deanna Weir was the first to join the office staff, first as Receptionist and later as Administrative Assistant. She received the Commissionaire Distinguished Service Medal in 1997.

January of 1974 the Department of Supply and Services conducted their first security-training course in Vancouver. This had now evolved into a professional, much more demanding course to Canadian General Standards Board and Provincial Standards.

Sgt. Lee Dunn, late of the Queen's West Kent Regiment (1938-1946) who served in the Corps 1968-1981 was the first editor of the "Corpsman". Retiring in 1981, there was a hiatus until Commissionaire Les Warnock agreed to accept the task. Once started John Bromley and then Emil Lautard carried on conscientiously until finally, because of practical problems of coordination, it was taken over by the office staff in 1989.

Cpl. George Massie served Granville Island and the Corps well although he was only there for seven years. When he retired, he was presented with a model tow truck with an inscription to remind him of his nickname and his highest one-day towing record. "CAPTAIN HOOK – 21". His smiling face also graced the front of the Corps information brochure for many years.

Social activity has always been an important part of Corps life. In the early days, the Advisory Committee organized smoker, dinner dances, picnics and Christmas parties for the children. Today there is an Annual Governors and Supervisors Dinner, a dinner dance or dinner cruise in the Spring and the Awards Dinner in the Fall. In addition, the Annual Golf Tournament has become a popular event despite the water hazards. But then of course, there's always the 19th hole!!

Looking at the present, the Corps is seeking registration under ISO 9002 quality standards. Once again, we look to the future. Only the Commissionaires can secure that future and it is the responsibility of the Corps to support them and give them every opportunity to succeed.

Change, Change and More Change

In the early eighties, competition was increasing and whatever advantage may have existed with the presence of war veterans was fast disappearing. For over fifty years, the Corps had depended on voluntary efforts freely given by members of the Board, Commanding Officer and the Membership Committee to manage the affairs of the Corps. However, they too had business and personal responsibilities limiting their time. Further, new legislation, changing financial requirements and above all, the

imperatives for change could no longer be adequately dealt with by volunteers, no matter how willing or enthusiastic. The Corps required a full-time Manager. It was decided to combine the functions of Commanding Officer and Executive Secretary into one position, that of Commandant.

On 1 February 1985, Col. Graham Jenkins, CD was installed as the first Commandant. His military career encompassed 29 years Regular Force, Royal Canadian Corps of Signals/Communications Electronics Engineering Branch from which he retired as a Lt. Col. in 1980 and ten years in the Reserves, four before he joined the Regular Force and six after, reaching retirement age as Deputy Commander, Pacific Militia Area. On leaving the Service he was employed for a short period with the University of British Columbia and four years with Consultec Canada Limited, a premier telecommunications firm where he gained valuable experience in marketing and client support. Col. Jenkins was awarded the Commissionaire Distinguished Service Medal in 1997.

The challenge was to transform an organization that had operated successfully for many years more like a society than a business into an organization that could compete in the 90s and beyond. There was no instant solution and it was difficult for some to accept the need for change. It was necessary to focus more on being operations and client driven. The pace of change continued to increase and the Corps was pressed to keep up. The collecting of membership dues and Caution Money (the security deposit on uniforms and I Card) were cancelled since they were no longer legal. The Corps made its first step into the computer age with the purchase of two Radio Shack computers - no hard drives in those days. The office staff were taught to use them by "The Baron", Commissionaire Les Warnock who bullied and coerced them until they became proficient. The Corps purchased its first car. Capt. Frank Peterson, a World War Two veteran and retired Superintendent of the Vancouver Police, was recruited and assigned to Vancouver International Airport to work with WO1. Bert West who had been responsible for the detachment for many years. Bert is well remembered for his public relations skills as well as his dedication to the site. A high point in Frank Peterson's career was when he was put in charge of Commissionaires for the Asian Development Bank Conference in 1991. In peak shift, he had 109 Commissionaires. His morning inspections are firm in Commissionaires memories. The pension plan, which no longer suited the demographics of the Corps, was changed to a Group RRSP. The Annual Parade was cancelled in favour of an Awards Dinner, held every Fall. With that, Commissionaires were no longer fined for missing the Parade. The Corps Office, which had been in the Province Building for

many years, was no longer suitable due to deteriorating conditions in the neighbourhood. For the first time, the Corps moved out of the general area of Victory Square into new offices in the centre of town. 1995 and 1996 were critical years for the Corps as an organization. To protect the non-profit status of the Corps it was necessary to change the structure so that the Trustees would be the voting members of the Society and Commissionaires, employees. This could not be done without passing a special resolution at a General Meeting of the Corps. It was also decided to take the opportunity to rewrite the Bylaws and Rules and Regulations to reflect the needs of the current operating environment. A Committee chaired by LCdr. Chris Haines, a Trustee and Lawyer, comprising four Commissionaires, the Commandant and four Trustees worked for two years to develop the necessary changes. Finally, in 1996 a mail-in vote was held so that every Commissionaire could make his or her wishes known. 381 votes were cast. 371 for, 10 against. The BC Corps now had the same structure as all other Divisions of the Corps and the name "Trustees" was changed to "Governors" to conform to National usage.

The Corps continued to grow. In 1985, although the nominal strength was 368 in fact approximately 100 Commissionaires were not working. This arose from two factors. From early days, some belonged for the association and to help where they could. The other factor is that if a Commissionaire resigned they were not allowed to re-join, so quite a few were actually employed outside the Corps retaining their membership against future need. With the change in structure these factors no longer applied. The Corps continued to expand on the lower mainland and new contracts were opened up in the interior in Prince George, Castlegar and many other communities. WO2. Bob Stephenson, CD, former Station Chief Warrant Officer at Baldy Hughes radar site has played a major role in the Corps success in Prince George, and before him Sgt. Lou Blackburn provided loyal service for many years. Sgts. George Turcotte in Vernon, Keith Smith in Penticton and Cpls. Brian Hill in Prince Rupert and Gene Croken in Castlegar also deserve mention. WO2. Bob Slaney, OMM, CD, in Kelowna with 37 years of distinguished military service was awarded the Commissionaire Distinguished Service Medal in 1997. These are the area representatives that make things work in the interior. New opportunities were also sought to diversity into areas other than security to provide more interesting and lucrative employment for those with the necessary skills. To give an indication of progress made, following are the financial statistics for the period.

Annual Report 31 March 1985 Gross \$6,856,656

Wages \$5,500,028

Annual Report 31 March 1997 Gross \$16,698,004

Wages 13,094,425

Administration costs throughout this period have been 5% or less.

In June of 1997, the BC Corps had the privilege of hosting the Annual Meeting of Divisions of the Canadian Corps of Commissionaires. The previous year, Toronto had used as its theme, "The Challenge of Change". In 1997, the BC Corps selected "Making Things Happen". It was evident that there was a momentum developing that can only assist the Corps in its efforts. Ideas that would have been rank heresy only a year ago were being seriously discussed as options for the future. Much progress was made and useful ideas exchanged. It is true that change has always been with us. The challenge is to anticipate change rather than to react to it.

In this narrative, we have mentioned just a few of those associated with the Corps. In so doing we recognize that there are many more who deserve recognition but space and lack of information has of necessity limited our efforts. We are, however, deeply conscious of the fact that none of the achievements mentioned were the work of one person alone. The support, encouragement and entire participation of all those who have helped make the Corps what it is today is acknowledge and appreciated. The changes that have been mentioned are significant, but we cannot just look back. We are proud of our history but the challenge of the future remains. With the dedication of the Board and the staff of the Corps office, the genuine concern and constructive support received by the Corps advisory Committee and quality of the Commissionaires, we have nothing but optimism for the future of the BC Corps and also as a fully participating member Division of the Canadian Corps of Commissionaires.

Forward

70 Years of Service

In 1997, the British Columbia Corps of Commissionaires celebrated 70 years service to the Community. During that time, the Corps has grown from 20 to 650 Commissionaires. In researching this history, one gets a real sense of the commitment and genuine concern for the individual that has brought the Corps to where it is today. It also brings a real awareness of what a privilege it is to be part of that process. With that thought, I dedicated this history of the BC Corps who have contributed to the continuing success of the Corps.

As to the future, I can think of no better words than that traditional military command used by Col. Spankie for his history, "Carry on the Corps".