

The 1885 Crisis between Britain and Russia

Researched and written by Ralph Drew, Belcarra, BC, September 2012.

In the 19th-century Afghanistan found itself sandwiched between the expanding British and Russian empires. With its strategic location in central Asia, the land was sought by both powers. In 1884, Russian expansionism brought about crisis — the Panjdeh Incident — when Russian forces seized the oasis of Merv in Afghanistan. The Russians claimed all of the territory and fought with Afghan troops over the oasis of Panjdeh. Afghans tried to retake it, but were finally forced to allow the Russians to keep Panjdeh. As a consequence, tensions between Britain and Russia were very high in 1885, and Britain was concerned about potential Russian military action against British interests on the Pacific. On the brink of war between the two great powers, the British decided to accept the Russian possession of territory north of the Amu Darya as a *fait accompli*, and between 1885 and 1888 the Afghan Boundary Commission delineated the north-western frontier of the country, known as the Ridgeway Line.

The Effects of the War on British Columbia

From 'The Mainland Guardian', Saturday, May 2nd, 1885.

That any attack will be made on this Province by Russian cruisers we think very remote, or if such attack takes place it will occur within the next three or four weeks. After that time the risk of approaching these shores would be too great for any ships Russia has in the Pacific. With a more powerful fleet the matter would be quite different, because the temptation to destroy the coal mines at Nanaimo and the destruction of Victoria, would afford them excellent sport; but we don't think there is much probability of such catastrophes. As for any resistance with the means we have at hand, that would not be sufficient to detain them but a very short time; there is nothing, however, like making the best of it, and the preparations for defence should not be relaxed.

The benefits to result from our Province being the rendezvous for Her Majesty's fleet will be of a most important character; they will seek their coal and provisions here, and spend a great deal of money. In case of captures, the prizes will all be brought here and most of them sold. The prize money will be spent and our traders reap the harvest. It is highly probable that extensive fortifications will be erected at various points, particularly at Nanaimo and Burrard Inlet: the first to protect the coaling station, the second the principle naval station. The North Arm of Burrard Inlet will be a famous place in which to lay up the prizes; and if a graving dock is constructed at Bedwell Bay, the North Arm will soon be a very busy place.

The Military Reserves at Burrard Inlet

From 'The Mainland Guardian', Saturday, July 17th, 1886.

In the early part of 1860, Major General [Richard Clement] Moody (then Colonel) Lieut. Governor and Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works for this Province, caused to be laid out naval and military reserves at Burrard Inlet — any person who will take the trouble to glance over the map, on which the reserves are shown, will at once be convinced of the clear sightedness of the designer.

The military reserve at the 1st narrows [Stanley Park] commands the entrance to the Inlet, and these days of heavy guns and torpedoes we could defy the combined fleets of the world. Even allowing that by accident this defence should fail, batteries on the point at the junction of the North Arm [Indian Arm] and Port Moody Arm [Admiralty Point Military Reserve] with long ranged guns could enfilade the whole Inlet.

The capacity of the North Arm is more than sufficient to shelter the combined fleets of Europe. This, and taking into consideration the security on its shores for magazines, storehouses, and arsenal, together with the facilities for repairing ships in the natural dry dock at Bedwell Bay, shows that the selection is incomparably superior to any other place on the Pacific Coast, and also renders Port Moody (the terminus of the Canadian Pacific Railway) absolutely impregnable.