Cy Peck, VC, the Prince Rupert Company, and the Great War

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Abstract: On 24 April 1915 Major Cyrus Wesley Peck and his 225-strong contingent of men from Prince Rupert, British Columbia crossed the English Channel bound for No Man's Land. The day was also notable for being Peck's forty-fourth birthday. Peck, the owner of a real estate and insurance firm, had been instrumental in raising the Prince Rupert company in November 1914—managing to keep the unit together as it went through training in Canada and later England. Upon reaching the front lines the company reinforced the badly depleted ranks of the 16th Battalion (Canadian Scottish), which had been shredded two days earlier in the Canadian army's baptism of fire at Kitchener's Wood. Peck was made a company commander and the Prince Rupert troops were distributed throughout the battalion. This meant the story of Prince Rupert's contribution to the Great War essentially mirrored that of the renowned Canadian Scottish battalion. On 3 November 1916 command of the battalion went to Peck. On 2 September 1918 Peck's gallant leadership of the battalion in winning the pivotal Drocourt-Quéant Line battle earned him a Victoria Cross and the Canadian Scottish one of their most treasured Battle Honours. This article is part of a special collection of papers originally presented at a conference on "The North and the First World War," held May 2016 in Whitehorse, Yukon.

Cryus Wesley Peck's relationship with Canada's North began, as it did for so many North American men and women at the turn of the twentieth century, with a lust for gold. Born 26 April 1871 in Hopewell Hill, New Brunswick, Peck had moved with his family at age sixteen to New Westminster, British Columbia. The decision to move west was prompted by an economic depression that brought the family's long-standing shipbuilding business close to bankruptcy. Having specialized in brig construction, Peck's father, Wesley, was able to transfer his skills to the west coast by launching a company that primarily built tugboats for the logging industry.

Upon high school graduation, Peck moved at age nineteen to the United States in 1890. Having little luck finding employment he returned to New Westminster in 1892. Attracted to the military, Peck spent short periods serving with two Vancouver militia units—the 6th Regiment Duke of Connaught's Own Rifles and the 5th (British Columbia) Field Artillery. Soon after he went east, possibly to pursue a permanent military career, joining the 43rd Ottawa and Carleton Battalion of Rifles and then moving to Toronto where he was certified as a military instructor.

Seeing clouds of war stirring over South Africa, Peck took ship to England in 1896 with hopes of volunteering for the British Army. Less certain that war was imminent, the army turned him away on the basis that they had sufficient colonial volunteers in their ranks. Peck returned to Canada and it was at this juncture that his eyes turned northward—attracted by the adventure and prospect of riches to be had in Yukon's Klondike gold fields.

Peck headed for the Klondike in 1900 just after turning twenty-nine. As was true for so many, however, he arrived well after the gold rush—for those seeking claims they would work themselves—was largely over. Rather than return home once again defeated, Peck joined his cousin, Don Moore, at Port Essington (Spokshute) in British Columbia's north. This village was some 800 km south of Dawson City, Yukon, at the mouth of the Skeena River. It served as the service centre for the region's fish canneries, fishermen, fur traders, and miners.

In 1903 Peck, Moore, and another unknown partner opened the Cassiar Packing Company about 8 km inland from the Skeena's mouth. In its first full year of operation the cannery produced an impressive 17,380 tins of salmon. It went on to become one of the longest operating canneries on the west coast, although not under Peck family ownership.

By 1908, the economic centre of Skeena had shifted to the newly-created community of Prince Rupert. Situated on an island, Prince Rupert provided access to a deepwater port and was intended to become the terminus for the Grand Trunk Railway project, which reached the town in early 1914.

Integrating well into the new community, Peck put his military instructor training to use by joining the local militia and quickly gaining the rank of sergeant. Soon thereafter Ottawa authorized formation in Prince Rupert of the 68th Regiment (Earl Grey's Own Rifles), and Peck took command as its lieutenant colonel.[1]

With the outbreak of the First World War, Peck faced a dilemma. He was forty-three, at the older end of the age range generally considered fit for combat service. Many friends advised him that his age would surely disqualify him for overseas service, that he should stay in Prince Rupert secure in his rank and use his influence to recruit others for the war. Peck, however, had no interest in this course of action. In November 1914 he relinquished his command and—along with his cousin Don Moore, age thirty-seven and holding the rank of captain in the regiment—departed Prince Rupert at the head of an ad hoc unit dubbed the Prince Rupert company and comprised of 225 volunteers. They left by ship for Victoria.

Peck is often described as a towering man of great breadth. In reality, according to his attestation papers, he stood just five feet eight inches. But in a time when most men that height had chests measuring thirty-five to thirty-six inches, his was thirty-nine. He weighed about 225 pounds—the heavy build of a rugby player.

There is a photograph of the Prince Rupert company men. Peck is seated front row centre with Don Moore to his right. Little is known of the other men in the photograph. Just one is among the twenty-seven Prince Rupert men known to have died in the war and later commemorated on the town's cenotaph. What is known is that upon arrival in Victoria the majority were assigned, along with Peck and Moore, to the 16th Battalion (The Canadian Scottish), Canadian Expeditionary Force.[2]

What is known of the men from Prince Rupert who volunteered for military service is that most were of British heritage and considered themselves loyal subjects of the Empire. Most attended either the Church of England or the Presbyterian Church. From attestation papers, none appeared to be unemployed. Rather, they were bank clerks, management staff at the fisheries, and many were shopkeepers. Of the twenty-seven names listed on the cenotaph, sixteen are also commemorated on a

plaque in the Presbyterian Church, listed as having been members of its congregation.[3]

The Skeena region is home to the Tsimshian and Gitxsan peoples who have drawn upon its rich natural resources for millenia. As was true across the Canadian North, Skeena Indigenous enlistment in the First World War was high. These enlistees came from Prince Rupert, and from the nearby communities of Metlakatla and Lax Kw'alaams (then known as Port Simpson). A popular myth today portrays many Indigenous soldiers serving as scouts and snipers. And there were some. Thirty-year-old Private Dan Pearson earned a Military Medal while serving as a scout with the 47th Battalion. As with many soldiers of the Great War, Pearson died not from battle wounds but from pneumonia, in his case only six months after his enlistment on 15 October 1917.

Although many Skeena Indigenous people were fishermen, the majority of those who enlisted seem to have been assigned to pioneer, forestry, or railway battalions as labourers. Private John Rudland, for example, died while serving with the 1st Canadian Pioneer Battalion during the Battle of Le Transloy on 4 October 1916. In all, it is believed that four Indigenous soldiers from Metlakatla died in the war. Rudland is the only one commemorated on the Prince Rupert cenotaph.[4]

By the time of Rudland's death, Peck and two separate contingents of about equal size that had gone to France and were formally identified as the Prince Rupert company had all passed through their baptism of fire. As mentioned earlier, most of the company was assigned to serve with the 16th Battalion. Peck and his men reached the battalion on 28 April 2015, just six days after it was caught in the middle of the German offensive that saw the war's first gas attack. The heroic action by the Canadian Scottish and 10th Battalion at Kitchener's Wood stabilized the line and saved the situation, but it left half the battalion dead, wounded, or missing.

With the rank of major, Peck immediately assumed command of No. 1 Company. The Prince Rupert men were scattered through the battalion to replace men lost in the fighting. With barely any time to get acquainted, the battalion went into battle again at Festubert and engaged in a bitter fight for what would after be known as Canadian Orchard. After this battle Peck wrote a letter to a cousin, Dodge Moore, who is probably one of Don Moore's brothers.

On the evening of May 20th we were ordered to attack a position near Festubert. Two companies of our battalion had dug in and held and advanced trench for two days under terrific shelling, losing many men. At 7:45 p.m. the artillery lifted and we left the trench. Don was to go ahead with two platoons carrying spades for another company (which was attacking the orchard on the left) and I came along with the other two platoons following immediately. We took as much shelter as we could from an old German earthwork. We had to charge about a quarter of a mile to attack a house on the right of the orchard. Near the house there was a big breach in the breastwork. The house was full of German machine guns at every window all playing on the breach and the garden inside. I stood for a moment talking to Don. He said, "Are you wounded?" (I had been shot through the leg on leaving the trench and was limping badly.) I said, "Yes, but we will have to charge the house and storm it." He said, "All right, but I ought to have more men, as I am losing many." I said, "I'll get some more," and ran back through the gap. Somebody said, "They are charging," and I looked back and saw them start towards the house, but every man seemed to fall. We feared the Germans would counterattack, so we prepared to hold the breastwork. Our platoon leader had been killed and the second platoon had not come up. I finally found them and sent them forward. My wound was worsening but I got a couple of men to help me and went back. I heard nothing of Don. At 2 p.m. I had to leave the battle. The last thing I did was to pledge a brother officer to try and get Don out at daylight if he was still there.

I was helped to the dressing station and then sent out to the clearing hospital. I inquired at every stage for Don. When I got to England, I heard he might have been in hospital. From that time to this I have run down every rumour from every hospital where he might have been but never have we had an authentic report of his whereabouts.

I have been back at the front for six or seven weeks. I have missed Don more than anyone would. We have been together so long and learned to rely on each other for everything. It would be a different war to me if he should turn up as I trust God he will. He might possibly have been badly wounded and captured … Cyrus.[5]

Donald Moore's body was never found. He was thirty-eight and is commemorated on the Vimy Memorial and the Prince Rupert cenotaph. It was a long time before Peck accepted that Moore had been killed.[6]

Peck's wounds had been such that he only returned to the battalion in July, being promoted to second-in-command of the battalion on 12 August. In the midst of Festubert, one of the Prince Rupert company, an H.J. Bradbury, thinking he had "been dropped into hell," was bolstered to see Peck—as he wrote in the *Prince Rupert Journal*—"walking along unconcernedly and not ducking." Bradbury followed until being badly wounded. He last saw Peck standing on a parapet under fire, waving his cane, and shouting: "Come on, boys, come on!"[7]

At Mount Sorrel in June 1916, Peck again demonstrated a selfless heroism and devotion to duty that contributed to the growth of his legend. Captain Percy Godenrath was one of those who had accompanied Peck from Prince Rupert. With the 16th Battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Leckie, wounded, Peck led the regiment into a dark, raining night attack. When the battalion wavered in some confusion, according to Godenrath, Peck stepped out front and bellowed: "The 16th never retires! Advance boys!" And they did to win the fight.[8]

From the Ypres Salient the Canadians moved to the Somme in early August. It was at the hellhole of Regina Trench that eighteen-year-old Piper James Richardson rallied the battalion for another attack. Peck witnessed the young man's courage under fire, describing it in his diary "as one of the great deeds of the war." Richardson misplaced his pipes while working with wounded and upon returning to find them went missing; he was never to be seen again. He was awarded a Victoria Cross for gallantry.

On 3 November 1916, Leckie was promoted to brigade command and Peck took over the 16th Battalion. He would lead the battalion through the rest of the war. Peck's first major command battle came on 9 April 1917 at Vimy Ridge. Peck had been suffering a fever before the battle and was still sick, but he led the battalion into the slaughter—one that cost the 16th about fifty percent of its strength. Despite the losses, Peck declared the "whole action magnificent." He also noted that "I became quite ill."[9]

In the fall of 1917 a Canadian federal election was called. Peck was asked to run for Prime Minister Robert Borden's party in the Skeena riding. He accepted with the proviso that, if elected, he would remain in the trenches. Peck won easily. But he refused to return to Canada to

sit in the House of Commons, which, given his age and increasingly questionable health, he could have easily done. He would not take up his seat in the House until his return to Canada in March 1919. He saw his place as being at the front with his troops.

By 1918 the 16th Battalion and the rest of the Canadian Corps were considered the shock troops of the Empire and fittingly it fell to them to conduct the offensive that effectively led to the war's end and an Allied victory. This was the attack on the Drocourt-Quéant Line. For the 16th Battalion the key date was 2 September 1918. Peck was, as usual, out front and seemingly turned up at precisely wherever the battalion ran into trouble—moving at a speed "which was altogether out of keeping with my avoirdupois," as he put it.[10] In the midst of the fray, Peck lunged from the cover of a shell hole and dashed back to a tank whose crew were attempting to withdraw. Directly blocking its path, Peck ordered the crew to turn about and led it back into the battle. "I do not know how the Colonel escaped being riddled by bullets," Sergeant William Reith later wrote.

The situation remained critical. Either retreating or advancing seemed impossible for the Canadian Scottish. Determined to break the impasse, Peck—with Lieutenant John Dunlop at his side—dashed up the hill through intense enemy fire. Gaining the next defensive line, Peck found the Canadian Scottish there thoroughly disorganized, jumbled together with men from the 48th Highlanders of Canada, as well as a few lost members of the British 1st Royal Munster Fusiliers Brigade. Sending the British troops away, Peck ordered the Canadian machine gun officers from each battalion to concentrate their guns on the high ground to the right, and he had artillery brought down on the same spot. He then led what was left of the battalion in a charge on the next defences, and the Drocourt-Quéant Line was won. For his gallantry and personal intercession at the moment when the battle hung in the balance, Peck was awarded the Victoria Cross. This was one of two the battalion won that day—the other going to Lance Corporal John Metcalfe.[11]

As one of his officers put it, Cy Peck "was forever marching in the shadow of death. How he survived is one of the great mysteries of the war."[12]

After the war ended, Peck returned to Prince Rupert in 1919. As he walked along the boardwalks that bordered its muddy, unpaved streets, Peck later admitted to declaring, "I love you better than any spot in the world."[13] Although he would leave the North and ultimately die in

Sidney on Vancouver Island on 17 September 1956, some of his ashes were returned to the Skeena and scattered at Metlakatla Pass near Prince Rupert so that his link to the Skeena and the North would be sustained.

Author

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Notes

1.   Edward Peck, *Cy Peck, V.C.: A Biography of a Legendary Canadian* (Winnipeg: Hignell Press, 2006), 17–28.
2.   H.M. Urquhart personal diary, University of Victoria Special Collections, n.p.
3.   College Heights Secondary School, Prince Rupert Vimy 2012 Study Tour, "Leaving for the Front," https://vimy2012.wordpress.com/lessons/leaving-for-the-front/
4.   "Aboriginal Veterans Tribute Honour List," http://www.vcn.bc.ca/~jeffrey1/LtoZ.htm
5.   Peck, 45–46.
6.   Mark Forsythe and Greg Dickson, *From the West Coast to the Western Front: British Columbians and the Great War* (Madeira Park, B.C., Harbour Publishing, 2014), 97.
7.   Peck, 46.
8.   Ibid., 54–55.
9.   Cyrus Wesley Peck Fonds, MG30–E134, Library and Archives Canada, n.p.
10.   Ibid.
11.   H.M. Urquhart, *The History of the 16th Battalion (The Canadian Scottish) Canadian Expeditionary Force in the Great War, 1914–1919* (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada, 1932), 295–297.
12.   Peck, 141.
13.   Ibid., 27.