

Between February 1894 and October 1897, two separate forts were constructed: one at Macaulay Point (site of earlier earthwork batteries), and an entirely new location at Rodd Hill, a bluff of rock overlooking the western side of the narrow entrance to Esquimalt harbour. Both forts would each mount three 6-inch disappearing guns (Mk VI barrels on a Mk IV mounting). Because of limitations of space in Rodd Hill, two of these guns were mounted with a common magazine in "Lower Battery", while the third required a separate battery (along with an underground magazine, loopholed wall, water supply, guardhouse, etc.) on another, higher hill some 200 meters away, named, logically, "Upper Battery."

These guns were sited in concrete emplacements ten feet thick, which were in turn protected by the rock massif of the hillside into which they were sunk. The barrels were normally kept down in the loading position, within the protection of the concrete emplacement (which also had an overhead metal shield). Using a central Observation Post and remote electric dial system to pass target information, the guns would be loaded and aimed while in the "down" position. Only when actually about to fire, would the large hydro-pneumatic system raise the 5-tonne barrel up over the parapet.

The strength of the system was that the barrel was exposed to the enemy for a minimal amount of time, and with naval guns of the time firing on a flat trajectory, it was virtually impossible for an enemy ship to drop a shell on the emplacement, with its sloping rock glacis in front. Disadvantages of the system included a slow rate of fire (perhaps one shot every two minutes), and a propensity for the complicated hydro-pneumatic system to leak.



6-inch Disappearing Gun showing barrel in firing position, inside Menzies Street brick drill hall for training purposes, Victoria, B.C., 1897

The 6-inch guns used "non-fixed ammunition", that is, the explosive cartridge that propelled the shell was stored and loaded separately from the shell or shot. Cartridges were made of raw silk and stored in wooden crates in a special high security section of

the underground magazine. There were five types of shell on the Fort Rodd manifest in 1897: High Explosive (Lyddite), Armour-piercing, Common Pointed (for non-armoured maritime targets), and Shrapnel. The other class of projectile (and the one most often fired) was a solid steel shot (without any cavity for explosives or fuses, it was cheapest to produce). The shells and shot all had the same service weight of 94 pounds (to simplify calculation of elevation and depression) and diameter of 6 inches (150 mm); therefore, lengths of the various types varied.

In addition to these medium guns (intended to fend off an attack by up to six enemy light cruisers), smaller quick-firing guns were sited, in order to deal with the potential threat of fast, unarmoured torpedo boats. At Fort Rodd, a separate emplacement, called Belmont Battery was constructed to house two Quick-Firing 12-pr guns, which were assisted by two sets of "Defence Electric Lights" (searchlights), which were powered by diesel engines and generators concealed in an engine room built into the landward side of a hill.

For heavy, "counter-bombardment" defense, a battery of 9.2-inch guns was built at Signal Hill, on the east side of Esquimalt harbour; in the event, these guns did not become active until 1912, and even then were rarely fired, as the concussion caused much damage to windows in Esquimalt village, directly below the battery.

The Royal Marine Artillery garrison was supplanted in 1899 by a larger garrison of Royal Garrison Artillery personnel, along with a detachments of Royal Engineers, including one specially trained in submarine mining. The local Canadian artillery militia continued to receive instruction and practice in gunnery, and became very proficient, winning several national competitions. Annual training schemes brought both Imperial and Colonial troops into sham battles and exercises, including a full-scale night assault on Fort Rodd Hill and Esquimalt naval base in 1902.

Here's the link to the Victoria and Esquimalt Military re-enactors Association web page.

Most of the images are from Fort Rodd Hill.

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