

Mr. H. F. G. Letson
August 13, 1973

Interview ____, Tape 1, Track 1.

Mr. Specht: Maj.-Gen. Letson, could you tell me what year you were born?

Mr. Letson: Sept. 26, 1896.

Mr. Specht: You were born in Vancouver?

Mr. Letson: Born in Vancouver, yes.

Mr. Specht: What part of the city?

Mr. Letson: Well, it was Oppenheimer Street which was named after the first mayor of Vancouver. It's not Pender Street East....a very select part of the town at the present time.. (chuckles).

Mr. Specht: When did your family come to Vancouver?

Mr. Letson: Well, my father came here about 1890, I think.

Mr. Specht: What was your father's occupation?

Mr. Letson: He founded the firm of Letson and Burpee, machinists and founders.

Mr. Specht: Where was the mill located?

Mr. Letson: The shop was at the same location that it's at now, 172 Alexander Street. I can just dimly remember seeing Indian canoes across the street where the old North Vancouver ferry used to go across. There's a picture too.

Mr. Specht: That must have been one of the very first industries in Vancouver.

Mr. Letson: Well, there were others....Prior, McLennan, McFeely, and oh, there were quite a number because you see, Vancouver was burned down in 1885 and then the various industries started up. The firm of Letson and Burpee was making canning machinery for the canning of salmon. My father invented quite a number of the machines that were used at that time.

Mr. Specht: Was your father from Eastern Canada?

Mr. Letson: He was from the Miramashee in New Brunswick, Chatham.

Mr. Specht: How about your mother's side?

Mr. Letson: They came from Chatham as well.

Mr. Specht: Which high school did you attend?

Mr. Letson: I attended what was called Vancouver then it was called King Edward High School. I went there in 1909.

Mr. Specht: You joined High School Cadets.

Mr. Letson: In 1910 or 1909, yes.

Mr. Specht: What is the training you received with the Cadets?

Mr. Letson: Well we had training in normal drill and in rifle shooting. We had gymnastics squads. We had a bugle band and we had various forms of training in such things as bayonet fighting and all that. We put on a show when we finally went to Australia. We had a very good gymnastics squad and we had to keep on our toes because there were only 67 out of 80 of us who were to go to Australia. So we were really working pretty hard to make sure we'd get a place.

Mr. Specht: Was this the first time that you had some experience with riflery?

Mr. Letson: Oh yes. You see I was only 13 then.

Mr. Specht: You developed an early interest for it?

Mr. Letson: Yes, to my amazement. I don't know why because I had no military background whatsoever in my family. Except for one uncle who had succeeded my father as manager when my father died in 1904. That's manager of Letson and Burpee. He had been an officer in the militia in New Brunswick. He was the first graduate in Science from U.N.B. He was very keen in rifle shooting and I think that's the reason I became interested in it.

Mr. Specht: Other than that, though, the high school cadets was your first acquaintance with the military.

Mr. Letson: Yes, except that I think I was in some church, Boy's Brigade for a few months.

Mr. Specht: What year did you enroll at U.B.C.?

Mr. Letson: Well, I matriculated to McGill in 1912. Then we went to Australia and then I went to work for a year. I went to McGill College, as it was then known, in October 1913. U.B.C. became U.B.C., as such in October of 1915. I was then a third year student.

Mr. Specht: What did you specialize in at U.B.C.?

Mr. Letson: Mechanical engineering.

Mr. Specht: Did you pretty well know that this was what you wanted to do when you started?

Mr. Letson: Oh yes, became my father before me and all of his family had been in it.

Mr. Specht: You were only at U.B.C. one year and the war broke out.

Mr. Letson: That's right. I was there 'til the 16th of March 1916. I was only there a short time. But I had the privilege of getting not only my Big 'M' letter for Rugby from McGill but I also got the first Big Block letters from U.B.C. for rugby. We won the championship for English rugby.

Mr. Specht: The war broke out in August 1914, I wonder if, as a student at the time, did you have any idea of international affairs. Were you very interested?

Mr. Letson: Oh, I was interested in it because I remember the Imperial order of the Daughters of the Empire, had an essay com-

petition in 1912. The title of it was "What would Canada's role be in the event of a European War?" So I went up to the big auditorium and wrote my essay. I did it all in an hour and a half and handed it in. The old principal who was Mathews, really burned me up. He said that all I came in there for was to get out early from classes and to get out to do my Cadet training. He was really pretty stuffy about it. I told him I had finished my essay and had turned it in. So about 6 weeks later I was summonsed to his office and he said he wished to appologize to me because I won the silver medal for my essay!

Mr. Specht: What did you think would be Canada's role?

Mr. Letson: Well, I said that in the event of a European War, that Canada would be involved to the extent of supporting the mother country, if it spread.

Mr. Specht: How did you view Canada, as an independent country or as part of the British Empire?

Mr. Letson: Well that's a hard question? Quite as an indepent country but...also as a part of a group. A closer knit group then, I think than it is now. No, we weren't taking orders from anybody from the U.K. but we felt that from our heritage that we should support a good cause. Treaties meant something then. When a treaty was broken, we felt that we should do something about it. But, speaking personally, in the First War, everybody was going and we all were almost afraid we'd miss the show, that's all. It wasn't any great soul searching decision as to whether you should go to support England or whether we should fight Germany. As far as I was concerned, I'd seen one fellow go. I was thinking, "My God, this is going to be over before I get there." I was

the senior member of the family with a widowed mother, I didn't feel that I could go right away although she didn't in any way oppose me going. But I didn't get away until 1916.

Mr. Specht: When C.O.T. formed, only a couple of months from when the war started...I believe it was October 1914.

Mr. Letson: That's right.

Mr. Specht: Did you take part in that in any way?

Mr. Letson: Yes, I was in that. I took my Certificate 'A' and Certificate 'B'. We used to drill in a warehouse down on Drake Street near Granville. It was very difficult to drill because there wer posts every 6 or 8 feet supporting the thing. Major Logan was the Major then, I think and Wesbrooke was the Commanding Officer. A lot of fellows went from that corps at various times, to the Patricias when they were university grads. Then I was interviewed to go to England to take a commission. The British wanted Canadians to go over and take commissions. I remember being interviewed by the Commanding Officer of the district who was Col. Ogilvie. He said, "What corps would you like to be associated with?" I said, "I'd like to go in the Royal Horse Artillery." He was a gunner himself and he said, "Yes. Have you any private means?" I said, "just the clothes I sat in." He said, "You'll have a Hell of a time!" So I waited and waited and nothing happened. So I enlisted. Meanwhile having passed my examinations for officer, I was gazetted as an officer in the Seaforths so I was a private soldier and an officer at the same time....on paper. Then I became a Sergeant the next day.

Mr. Specht: While you were at university, rather than enlist

right away as a lot of your colleagues would have, you wanted to definitely go ahead for an officer's standing.

Mr. Letson: Well I wasn't so concerned about that. It was really the situation of the family at home, having two younger sisters and a younger brother and I being the head of the family, it was a bit difficult.

Mr. Specht: I see. Can you remember how the COTC first got under way? Were students themselves involved in setting it up or was it spearheaded more by faculty?

Mr. Letson: Well the C.O.T.C. had been set up some years before the first war in various universities. I think it was almost automatic. McGill had started and we were part of McGill. I couldn't say who really sparkplugged the thing, I don't know. I think it might have been Harry Logan and Wesbrooke and Jordan. He was a professor of mathematics. Those are officers I remember.

Mr. Specht: What do you recall of President Wesbrooke? Did he have military experience? Overseas?

Mr. Letson: I don't think he did. He may have had C.O.T.C. or something of that kind. Bill Gibson would know.

Mr. Specht: Dean Brock was Commanding Officer of the Western Universities Battalion when it first started in 1916. You joined it.

Mr. Letson: That's right. I joined it the first day that there was enlistment. 16 of March 1916, I remember that day.

Mr. Specht: What was your rank when you started?

Mr. Letson: I joined as a private and then in about a week I

was made a Sergeant. Then I was Company Sergeant^{nt} Major until I was commissioned.

Mr. Specht: Did you go to camp Hughes with the contingent?

Mr. Letson: Yes.

Mr. Specht: Was Camp Hughes an extention of the training you received on campus?

Mr. Letson: Yes, in fact we had a batallion there, 1100 strong. It was more serious military training than we'd had in the C.O.T.C. Then I was sent to the School of Musketry on account of being a rifle shot, in Ottawa. Just after I was commissioned, I was sent there and then came back to Camp Hughes to join the outfit just before we left for overseas.

Mr. Specht You went overseas with the batallion?

Mr. Letson: Yes.

Mr. Specht: Did you think it was a good idea to have all the university people and professionals in one batallion?

Mr. Letson: No, it was a poor idea but to be honest we weren't thinking about that because all our friends were there. We were very happy and had a very congenial group. We had a few outsiders. I don't use that term in any derogatory sense. But it was a poor thing and it wasn't done in this war, fortunately. This batallion was broken up for reinforcements as soon as we arrived in England...in order to reinforce the batallions that had just come out of the fighting in the Somme. Many of them who should have been officers eventually and they were badly needed by 1918 were no longer with us. They were killed. Oh no, it was a poor idea. The British did the same thing. They had the Post Office Rifles and various things like that. They

should have been reserved for officer training.

Mr. Specht: So although the batallion was broken up and you felt rather bad about it at the time it was probably a sensible thing to do rather than to risk all the.....

Mr. Letson: Oh yes, well it wasn't that. All the batallions were being broken up then all of them. They couldn't reinforce our number....196...you see they couldn't reinforce that number so they broke them up. We weren't the only ones who were broken up. Many many, many were broken up. I only had five days in England. I was on five days arrival leave, which you got. I was in Edinborough and I got a telegram to report back. I was in France two days later.

Mr. Specht: Who were you attatched to in France?

Mr. Letson: The 54th Kootenay Batallion.

Mr. Specht: Were you brought up to the front right away?

Mr. Letson: Yes, right to the front right away.

Mr. Specht: What sector?

Mr. Letson: Well it was just North of the Somme and they were moving up into the Vimy Sector from the Somme. I joined them down on the Somme.

Mr. Specht: What was your rank?

Mr. Letson: Lieutenant.

Mr. Specht: What were your duties ?

Mr. Letson: Well, I was a platoon cammander. You commanded a platoon.

Mr. Specht: A platoon of infantry?

Mr. Letson: A platoon of infantry yes.

Mr. Specht: What kind of arms were in your platoon?

Mr. Letson: We had rifles, Lewis guns...that's all.

Mr. Specht: The 54th...what division was that a part of?

Mr. Letson: 4th division...11th brigade. General of Vancouver who just died last year, was the Brigadier General of the 11th brigade.

Mr. Specht: Then you were positioned along the Vimy Ridge front. Were you aware at the time of the Vimy Ridge assault?

Mr. Letson: No, no.

Mr. Specht: You weren't informed?

Mr. Letson: No.

Mr. Specht: You had undergone some training in preparation for the actual battle.

Mr. Letson: Not very much. They did before Vimy....for the big attack but I was out of it then. I was wounded on the first of March and Vimy was the 8th and 9th of April.

Mr. Specht: What kind of action did you see on the front?

Mr. Letson: Well,^I/just saw the odd trench raid and shelling and then I was wounded on this attack. It was a disasterous attack on the first of March. We used gas and although my Commanding Officer pleaded with them that we shouldn't go over the top because the wind had changed....but we went anyhow. We were ordered to go. Of course the Germans were up on their targets all ready ^{of}/course, for us. So we lostof our officers we had 13 wounded and 11 killed. Of the 500 men there were 300 I think that were wounded or killed.

Mr. Specht: What was the purpose of this raid?

Mr. Letson: It was reconnaissance for the big attack on the

9th of April. We didn't know.

Mr. Specht: Were you after information?

Mr. Letson: That's right. Probing and finding out what the defences were like. But we never got there.

Mr. Specht: Were you wounded at that time?

Mr. Letson: Yes, so my period of service in France was rather limited.

Mr. Specht: You received a military cross.

Mr. Letson: Yes, for that action, yes.

Mr. Specht: Where did you convalesce?

Mr. Letson: Well I was in France in hospital until the end of May. Then I was at Camberwell Green which is a British Hospital in Southeast London until December. Then I came home in a hospital ship and I went to the military hospital here.

Mr. Specht: Were you discharged from the services then?

Mr. Letson: I got home in early '18. I was discharged in 1919, I think....something like that. I was working with C.O.T.C. at that time.

Mr. Specht: As an instructor?

Mr. Letson: I was adjutant.

Mr. Specht: The adjutant of the C.O.T.C. contingent?

Mr. Letson: Yes, and I was still a student at the time. I was the only one in my class so I headed the class alright! I was the only degree student in mechanical engineering. So the professor would sit on one side of the table with his feet up and his pipe and I'd sit on the other side. That was the class.

Mr. Specht: Who was the professor?

Mr. Letson: Killam. He's still alive. Laurence Killam. He was President of the B. C. Pulp and Paper Company.

Mr. Specht: President Wesbrooke was.....

Mr. Letson: No, he died just before the Armistice. He died in 1918.

Mr. Specht: Were you then adjutant.

Mr. Letson: Yes, I was adjutant when he was there. He was still alive. I was the first graduate in Mechanical Engineering. I took my degree in April 1919. He died, I think in October 1918.

Mr. Specht: When you got back from the war, were you concerned that the C.O.T.C. instruction was right up to date with what was happening in Europe?

Mr. Letson: No, I wasn't really because to become an efficient officer and soldier there's a lot of preliminary work. The A.B.C.s of it which are fundamental to all branches of the service. And they're as fundamental today as they were in the Peninsula War really. That's all you can get in the C.O.T.C. with your other duties. You can't really get out in the field. We didn't have any field exercises or anything of that kind.

Mr. Specht: So you thought that C.O.T.C. was at the time just giving a person the rudiments and background.

Mr. Letson: That's right.

Mr. Specht: Plus his technical courses through the university.

Mr. Letson: That's right. Of course it's improved a lot now but that's all we had there at Fairview at that time.

Mr. Specht: Having to start up all of a sudden during the war, wasn't it quite a problem getting facilities arranged,

proper equipment and starting the whole organization?

Mr. Letson: Well we did the best we could with what we had, that's all we had to do. It was somewhat similar at the outbreak of this war. We hadn't boots or clothing or a thing else. They just weren't there. The money hadn't been voted between World War I and World War II. The same thing applied before the outbreak of World War I.

Mr. Specht: Do you recall the reasons why the C.O.T.C. was disbanded right after the war?

Mr. Letson: Well, I would say that it was the feeling that there'd never be another war and therefore it would be a waste of time. There was a certain and logical antipathy toward anything military.

Mr. Specht: Was that because of the experience with World War I? The heavy casualties?

Mr. Letson: I can't really answer that question because I don't know what prompted the powers that were in control. There were a lot of university people at that time who were anti-militaristically inclined and had been all through. I'm not saying that in a derogatory sense. It was their religion that they didn't want it that way and they were in power so they short sightedly said, "no more!"

Mr. Specht: When you finally made it to the front, was it anything like what you had imagined?

Mr. Letson: Yes, I think it was except that the mud was deeper and we were more uncomfortable. When you're up to your waist in mud for a week it's not much fun.

Mr. Specht: What were your personal feelings after the war

about the Army and the C.O.T.C.?

Mr. Letson: Well, I felt that we should continue to give military training for two reasons. One, I think it's a good general disciplinary training that is good for anybody whether they ever go to battle....and we hope they never will. It's not that you're training for war. You're training so that if a war ever comes you're disciplined and ready to do your part. That's the way I felt about it.

Mr. Specht: You weren't in agreement with a lot of people who said that World War I was the war to end all wars. You weren't quite so sure about that.

Mr. Letson: Well no. And history has proven that to be correct. I hope sincerely that there'll never be another war. Soldiers don't want war. They're the ones who get it.

Mr. Specht: Were you quite interested in military history?

Mr. Letson: Yes, I was.

Mr. Specht: How did you develop the interest?

Mr. Letson: I don't know how I developed an interest. I was interested in the history of the British Army. I hadn't had too much history at either high school or public school. We got a little at public school but I didn't have any history that I recall in high school at all. I think everybody should have a knowledge of history. Various phases of history interest different people. Some people are interested in ancient history. As far as I'm concerned I'm interested in history that goes back about 200 years. That's enough for me. The men then were almost as they are now. They're like our grandfathers and great grandfathers. But when you get way, way back it's awfully hard to

figure reactions of the people to the Babylonian days or something like that. But that's only my personal thing. My history has been concentrated on that as much as possible but being an engineer, you can't really be an authority on history because you haven't got the time to read it all.

Mr. Specht: You graduated in 1919 then you went to London University and did a Ph.D.

Mr. Letson: That's right. Well I went in 1919 then I went as an instructor for two years at U.B.C. There I taught everything from Chemistry to Descriptive Geometry to help out those who were coming back from overseas and were having difficulties. Being given their year in some subjects there's be little gaps. I was to do my best to tutor them. That's really what it was. I tutored them in the hours that they weren't at lectures. My hours were rather strange. Before lectures in the morning and at noon hour. Then after lectures in the evening were my office hours.

End of track I

Mr. Letson
August 13, 1973

Interview ____, Tape 1, Track 2.

Mr. Specht: You went to London University and got a Ph.D. in Engineering....

Mr. Letson: Yes- and I came back in October 1923

Mr. Specht:...and you were on the U.B.C. campus....

Mr. Letson:...as an assistant professor of mechanical engineering.

Mr. Specht: Did you have associations with the militia until the C.O.T.C. formed?

Mr. Letson: I had continuous.... I was on leave from the militia when I went to England during that time. I was able to shoot at Bisley a couple of times there during that time, 1922-1923.

Mr. Specht: Which unit were you attached to?

Mr. Letson: British Columbia Regiment.

Mr. Specht: What rank did you have?

Mr. Letson: I was a Captain on reorganization and at that time I was a Major.

Mr. Specht: Where was your headquarters?

Mr. Letson: In the Beatty Street Armouries.

Mr. Specht: Were you considering a career in the military at this time?

Mr. Letson: No, I was always an engineer.

Mr. Specht: Did you have any associations with U.B.C. while you were/ⁱⁿthe B.C. Regiment?

Mr. Letson: I was President of the Alumni Association in 1921, I think. So of course I kept in touch. Well, you say when I was with the B. C. Regiment...you see I came back in 1923. And I was with the B. C. Regiment right along while I was a professor at the university. Then I became Commanding Officer

of the British Columbia Regiment with a rank of Lieutenant Colonel in 1926, I think. Then when Col. Logan retired in 1930 they asked me to give up that command and take it on. He asked me to take it on.

Mr. Specht: Do you remember how the C.O.T.C. got started in 1927, 1928?

Mr. Letson: I don't really know how it got started. I think Col. Logan was one of the instigators of it and DEan Brock and the rest of them felt that we should again reorganize the C.O.T.C.

Mr. Specht: As a faculty member, do you remember supporting the idea yourself?

Mr. Letson: Oh yes, very much so, very strongly.

Mr. Specht: Were you actively involved in any of the reorganization?

Mr. Letson: Well no, because I was then commanding the B. C. REGiment so I had my hands full with that. I lent moral support.

Mr. Specht: Do you recall any of the opposition to the U.B.C. C.O.T.C.?

Mr. Letson: Well, I don't recall specific instances but I know that there was a feeling among certain people on the faculty. I don't think Klinck was in favour of it. He didn't say very much. Buchanan, I don't think was in favour of it. I'm sure he wasn't. But we were able to overcome, as they say... (chuckles).

Mr. Specht: One of the fears expressed was that if they set up a military establishment on campus that it would start on to influence some of the campus activities.

Mr. Letson: Well, it never interfered. Nobody ever asked anybody to join it. It wasn't compulsory.

Mr. Specht: They set up a committee...

Mr. Letson: Yes, there's always a committee. That was in the regulations for C.O.T.C. All universities have a military committee.

Mr. Specht: That committee could act as an intermediary between the military interests and those of the academics on campus.

Mr. Letson: There was never any conflict between them.

Mr. Specht: In the first year of their formation they used the Beatty Street Armoury, I believe, for their parades. Is that correct?

Mr. Letson: I don't remember.

Mr. Specht: From your point of view as a Commanding Officer of one of the local units, I'm wondering to what extent you co-operated with the C.O.T.C.

Mr. Letson: Well, we co-operated as much as we could. But there wasn't very much that we could do. It's a matter that the university controls entirely....whether they have or whether they don't have a C.O.T.C.

Mr. Specht: How about the use of Army facilities?

Mr. Letson: Oh well, we naturally co-operated in that respect.

Mr. Specht: Did you think that the C.O.T.C. would fill a need that was felt in the militia?

Mr. Letson: Yes, I felt that it was a very necessary thing to have university trained people who also had their military training to become potential officers in the militia. That was born out by the great number of officers that came from the C.O.T.C. into my regiment, the B. C. Regiment. Partly I suppose because

I was an ex-commanding officer. Such outstanding officers as Worthington, who was the Commanding officer of the British Columbia Regiment in the Second World War and was killed at

. He was an outstanding officer who had graduated from U.B.C. George Okulitch.....and there were a great number of them. Dave Verchere, Mr. Justice Verchere, I think he was C.O.T.C.

Mr. Specht: Do you recall the steps of how you became Commanding Officer?

Mr. Letson: Well, I was asked by Col. Logan and the District Officer Commanding if I would take on command of the C.O.T.C. and give up the British Columbia Regiment. I still had some months to go as Commanding Officer. But Col. Logan had to give up and he asked me if I, having been an ex-member of the C.O.T.C. , would take it on and I agreed.

Mr. Specht: Did you want to?

Mr. Letson: Yes I did. I regretted not fulfilling my full term as Commanding Officer of the B. C. Regiment but it was only a matter of some months. I felt that it would be a nice thing to do and it gave me an extended term of service. I would have gone to the reserve of officers at the expiration of my time as Commanding Officer of the B. C. Regiment. So it worked very well for everybody.

Mr. Specht: Prior to becoming Commanding Officer you used to give lectures to the students didn't you? You gave a series of lectures on the Gallipoli Campaign?

Mr. Letson: No, that was when I was commanding officer.

Mr. Specht: Was that an area that you had studied and become quite interested in?

Mr. Letson: Well, I was very interested in it as I'd read a lot about it. Histories of it in German, Turkish, the British and the French....of course all translations. I had a lot of slides made of it. Another thing was that in reading campaigns and trying to impress on you audience the difficulties encountered in moving from A to B, I suddenly realized that the Galipoli Peninsula wasn't too far removed in point of view of distance and size from taking the university as the tip and going up along through False Creek and Burrard Inlet up to Port Moody. That would be a certain spot on the Galipoli Peninsula. Going up the Fraser on the other side was going up toward the Bosphorus. I made a big map that showed this. So when you said, "They had to march from the university to Port Moody and it took them 10 hours..." The students immediately had a grasp of what it was. Whereas if you'd said that they had to go from Hellas Bar to Balair Line, it doesn't mean a thing! To me it didn't anyway. That's where I was always lost in studying history....just to realize. But if I say to you, "Can you make it to Port Moody on your flat feet in 10 hours?" You'd say, "I think I can." or "It's impossible." That was the prime reason that I chose that. It gave you a good example of practically every phase of war.

Mr. Specht: How did you find the facilities at U.B.C. compared to being part of a militia unit which obviously would have been well equiped.

Mr. Letson: Well, I thought they were quite adequate. There was a very good instructor and he acted as orderly room sergeant. He was there from the permanent force and could devote all his

time to it. I could only devote my noon hour.

Mr. Specht: How were such instructors chosen?

Mr. Letson: Well, they were chosen from the permanent force, Fellows who had been outstanding non commissioned officers.

Mr. Specht: Would you have had any choice?

Mr. Letson: No.

Mr. Specht: Staff Sergeant Smith was I believe, was an instructor during the entire time that you were commanding officer. What do you recall of him?

Mr. Letson: Well he was a very conscientious and interested chap. He wanted to improve his education by all means possible. He wanted to take his First Class Certificate of Education so I helped him as much as I could in that but I found that some of the problems he had in doing arithmetic, long division and cube root and things, I'd forgotten because I'd used a slide rule so much. (chuckles) But he was a good chap and he became a Major I think, during the Second World War.

Mr. Specht: Did you ever set up joint training exercises with militia units?

Mr. Letson: Yes, on one or two occasions we were able to join in with them on some of their training but not to any great extent as I recall it.

Mr. Specht: Did you find it an advantage being commanding officer of C.O.T.C. because you had close connections with the militia? Did you find ways you could use the two together?

Mr. Letson: Oh yes, I think that applies. Very much so because I knew all the militia officers and they took an interest in the corps. They were always looking for good young officer

material and quite often some lad in the corps would say that he'd like to get a commission. I'd say, "Well, what do you want to go to? Do you want to go to the Seaforths or the Irish?" I could put in a word for him and recommend him or otherwise.

Mr. Specht: You also succeeded in getting the Jericho Country Club. Was that a military establishment at that time?

Mr. Letson: No, it wasn't a military establishment. The Jericho Country Club wasn't taken over until during the war, during the '40's sometime.

Mr. Specht: You were also ever interested in musketry. Did you encourage that?

Mr. Letson: Oh yes, we had some very good shots in the C.O.T.C. We used to go over to the Blair Rifle Range and shoot on Saturday sometimes on Sunday.

Mr. Specht: This was a strong personal interest of yours?

Mr. Letson: Very much so. It always has been and still it is. I'm a life Governor of the Dominion of Canada Rifle Association. This will be the first annual competition, national competition which ended last Saturday that I haven't attended since the war.

Mr. Specht: I noticed that in one of the Commanding Officer's reports of the early thirties there was a statement that there was a need for a miniature rifle range.

Mr. Letson: Oh yes.

Mr. Specht: Did you eventually get something set up?

Mr. Letson: Yes, under the Arts building. We did it rather surreptitiously. But it was all installed and steel plates put so that no bullets could go into Buchanan's classroom. He was the Dean of Arts and there was no noise....as a 22 doesn't

make any noise. And we couldn't very well be shooting when there were classes on because the fellows that were shooting couldn't be in two places at once. It was quite amusing. But finally those who opposed it couldn't do anything about it because it was already done!

Mr. Specht: Do you remember Dean Brock's reaction when he learned of this.

Mr. Letson: Oh, Dean Brock knew about it all the time.

Mr. Specht: I meant Dean Buchanan.

Mr. Letson: Oh, he really hit the roof I understand. He talked to me rather roughly about it and I'm afraid I gave it back just as good as he gave it to me....which I can do.

Mr. Specht: One of the C.O. reports also says that militia by 1932, '33 was recognizing the C.O.T.C. as an excellent source of officers. Did you built up a lot of confidence and credibility in C.O.T.C.?

Mr. Letson: Oh, I think so. We were always recommending chaps for commissions when they graduated. We had such fellows as Volkoff who was one of my foreign legion along with George Okulitch. Volkoff took the highest marks that have ever been made at U.B.C. He won a scholarship and he had no money what ever but he said that he'd had two years at St. Petersburg University, he wouldn't accept it. It should go to the next fellow.....which is pretty wonderful. Volkoff then became the head atomic scientist in Canada.

Mr. Specht: Who were there in what you call you foreign legion?

Mr. Letson: Well, they were these Russians. There was George Okulitch and his brother and Volkoff and a couple of others. They were all white Russians who came over and came to U.B.C.

Mr. Specht: They left Russia during the revolution?

Mr. Letson: Yes, and worked their way across. They were all brilliant students at U.B.C.

Mr. Specht: Wouldn't they have to be Canadian citizens to be in the C.O.T.C.?

Mr. Letson: Yes, but I somehow forgot about that for a couple of years. They had two years in it...and that's maybe why I called them my foreign legion. But that isn't important. I figured that they got their training and nobody was going to rap my knuckles too badly about it.

Mr. Specht: Wouldn't that mean some bureaucratic problems though, because you'd have to account for their pay?

Mr. Letson: Well, the pay was all funded anyhow and we were putting the pay away to build the Armoury. They didn't get any pay.. It was quite legal. It was just the fact that they were supposed to hold citizenship papers which they didn't do. They got them as soon as they could.

Mr. Specht: What do you think is the main value of university educated officers as opposed to an officer who goes through the ranks or through military colleges?

Mr. Letson: Well, that's a hard one. The only point about it is that it would apply in any field, science or a profession or a business....a reasonable education is no handicap to anybody in any profession

Mr. Specht: In what way did you think the C.O.T.C. could best serve the armed forces?

Mr. Letson: I'm speaking of the old C.O.T.C. I thought the best way it could serve was by giving them training well, so that in the event of an emergency, they had their basic training and were ready to go into more advanced training immediately.

Mr. Specht: From your own war experiences what values and lessons did you want to see the officer cadets gain?

Mr. Letson: Well, the first one was to have some knowledge of the rudiments of military training. But primarily that they'd get the necessary discipline and realize what a factor good discipline it is in all aspects of military....from the bottom right to the top. To give orders you must be prepared to take them.

Mr. Specht: You were commanding officer during the worst years of the depression when military spending was cut back. Did this affect the C.O.T.C. very much?

Mr. Letson: Not very much because nobody joined the C.O.T.C. at that time for the money they were going to get out of it. We were funding most of our pay, as I recall it...I'm speaking of the cadets...in the hope that someday we'd have an Armoury. When the second World War came along we had a considerable fund which was the starting fund as I recall it, although I wasn't here then....for the building of the new Armoury.

Mr. Specht: I was wondering if the militia units themselves had real budget cuts as there was still the same demand for officers.

Mr. Letson: Yes, there were. The officer was kept

at a higher level. We had officers and non commissioned officers for very few. So we were sort of a unit of all chiefs and very few Indians.

Mr. Specht: In 1934, 1935 there was a very strong anti-war movement on campus. Do you have any recollection of that?

Mr. Letson: I don't really. I can recall I commanded the Canadian Bisley team in 1934 and I was in England. There was a certain feeling. There always has been one in various years depending on who's there...if they can get a group together. Students like everybody else have to have something to do... if it's pro C.O.T.C. that's fine, if it's anti-C.O.T.C. that's seems fine with them too. As long as they've got some cause.. whether it's pro or against.

Mr. Specht: Do you think that would have affected the morale of the corps?

Mr. Letson: I don't think it affected it very much....at all.

Mr. Specht: How did the corps do in the rifle competitions?

Mr. Letson: Very well indeed. Worthington was possible..as the outstanding rifle shot we had.

Mr. Specht: How would you describe the six years....your feelings about being Commanding Officer?

Mr. Letson: I may be prejudiced but I think the morale was excellent, the work that was put in by the individuals to the corps paid off for Canada and for themselves. A great many of them served with distinction in the second World War. It was a happy time for me. I never felt that as a corps, we were anything but a band of brothers.

Mr. Specht: Was there lots of comradship?

Mr. Letson: Yes.

Mr. Specht: It would be a very small unit at this time....
maybe 50 cadets?

Mr. Letson: Yes, I forget the exact parade strength at that time. I suppose you're right. Do you have the figures.

Mr. Specht: Yes, I would say it varied from about 40 to 70.

Mr. Letson: So it wasn't like a unit of a thousand. We knew each other pretty well. Aside from being students, they were in different faculties. But in this they were all grouped together. It had the advantage too...same as any group of 40 or 50 coming from all different faculties, it was a good thing from a university morale point of view.

Mr. Specht: Opposition to the C.O.T.C. faded very quickly in the late 30's.

Mr. Letson: Yes, but that's always the way it goes....which is natural. Have a war and we say, "Well, there'll never be another one." Then when things start on to looking bad again we waken up and start again. I hope that we don't have to waken up again...not that it'll affect me but...

Mr. Specht: When did you decide who would be your successor as Commanding Officer?

Mr. Letson: Well, when I was appointed to command the 14th Infantry Brigade in December of 1936, I had to recommend somebody to follow me. So I recommended Gordon Shrum. He took over then and of course, he commanded during the war period.

Mr. Specht: Did you start on to view international developments

with some alarm? Do you remember, did you think that another war was coming in the late '30's?

Mr. Letson: Yes, I did. It all pointed that way from 1934 on. I suppose I had a feeling that something was going to happen.

Mr. Specht: How did you view Mr. Chamberlain's appeasement policies?

Mr. Letson: Well, I have an open mind on that because it's very well to condemn the man for appeasement. But on the other hand he gained some time to rearm. I wonder if we'd gone to war then or if the Germans had gone to war then, whether we would have been able to withstand the pressure....as well as we did in 1939. That's a question that wont be answered for a long time. I'm not in a position to know. But I think he did the best he could....and he gained some time.

Mr. Specht: With your hobby of military history, did you have some ideas about the way that warfare would be conducted in the future?

Mr. Letson: Yes, a certain amount because I had taken the advanced militia staff course and had taken militia staff courses before that to be eligible. We all realized that mechanization was going to play a leading role....automatic weapons. Anybody that pondered it at all realized that...but we just didn't have the weapons because they all cost money. We didn't have the air planes....didn't have the trucks.

Mr. Specht: So up until and even during the war there wasn't really the equiprent to train people well.

Mr. LETson: No, there wasn't....using broomsticks instead of guns, you know.

Mr. Specht: You were the B. C. advisor to the Board of National Defence on militia matters, weren't you...even before the war?

Mr. Letson: Yes, that was a board that was set up by the minister of National Defence, Ian McKenzie who was the minister at that time.....representative of the Army the Navy and the Air Force. We were christened by the regular army as commissars because we were a body joined together with no responsibility except to the minister. We had several meetings and made several recommendations. It was really militia recommendations to the permanent force. The chief of the general staff in Ottawa would advocate certain policies and we advocated certain policies. Sometimes they were in agreement and sometimes they weren't. So, I think it was a worthwhile exercise.

Mr. Specht: Also in 1939 when war broke out you were commander of the Fraser Valley defence, for a while.

Mr. Letson: Well, it was called Vancouver Area Defences. That included all the Fraser Valley area....the vulnerable points as far north as York Island. We manned that from the artillery battery here.

Mr. Specht: Then you were appointed military attache to the Canadian litigation in Washington. What was your role in Washington?

Mr. Letson: Well, the role there was largely one of getting equipment. As you know, under the American statutes, you can't purchase military equipment in time of war or in time of peace unless it has been declared surplus to requirements..or obsolete.

So the great thing was, at that instance to get coast guns... We had no artillery on this coast to protect the Straits of Juan de Fuca and that sort of thing. So I was very busy on that.

End of Track II