



LIǵʷILDAǻʷ RESEARCH CENTRE



We are starting regular newsletter updates to share exciting history from the Archives with the community. Some of you know these stories but others do not, so it is our pleasure to introduce you to our third edition of: **Tales from the Vault.**

Cape Mudge bombarded by gunboat, 1860



Image is of a Chemainus mural painted in 1984 by artist Harry Heine, of the HMS Gunboat Forward.

With the establishment of the Colony of Vancouver in 1849, the British navy became a common and ever-present force on the British Columbia coast.¹ Settlers arrived in growing numbers and in 1858, with the increase in population because of the gold rush we along with all other Indigenous people, began to feel greater pressure from settlers, resulting in mounting opposition to the growing settlements. For this reason, James Douglas, Governor of the colony, requested a greater naval presence on the island.²

The *HMS Forward*, was one of two screw-driven gunboats fitted in 1859 for service to counter the o-called “Indian threats” along the coast. Armed with 68-pounders forward, 32-pounders aft, and two 24-pound howitzers amidships, these gunboats were a show of British Naval power.³ These ships were used to move colonial officials around the coast.

¹ Gough

² Douglas

³ Appleton

Both the *Forward* and the *Grappler* were used to visit Indigenous communities, to move government officials throughout the coast on business such as “inspection” and treaty making, and for delivering settlers to part of Vancouver Island. These boats were used as coercion, sometimes simply by their presence and at other times by their gun power.

In the summer of 1860, the *HMS Forward* was deployed to the Liḡwɪłdaḡw village at Cape as a show of force.⁴ The British estimate that the village at Cape Mudge was home more than 4000 people during this period, which included members from all Liḡwɪłdaḡw nations.

The incident began after several Liḡwɪłdaḡw people were accused of theft and were thought to be in the village at what is now IR 10, just north of Cape Mudge. At this time, the village was protected by a stockade wall.⁵⁶ In search of those accused, Commander Robson, on the gunboat *Forward*, arrived to make the arrest. When his demand was not met, he fired “one or two shells over the stockade, then at the canoes, and lastly at the stockade itself.”⁷

The Liḡwɪłdaḡw are reported to have opened fire on the ship, but its side-plates protected the vessel and its crew. The *Forward* then used its cannons to bombard the village, destroying houses, canoes and ultimately claiming Liḡwɪłdaḡw lives.⁸ Richard Mayne, a British navy man, writes of this attack in his journal:

*Their village at Cape Mudge, which, being stockaded for protection against the other tribes, they no doubt thought would be equally efficacious against white men. H.M. gunboat 'Forward' was sent there to demand restitution; and, on approaching the village, she was fired upon from the stockade with loud shouts of defiance. The gunboat first fired a shell or two over; but, Indian-like, they mistook this leniency for inability to hit them, and coming out in front of the stockade fired several volleys at her, which fortunately, however, fell harmless against her rifle-plates. She then opened fire upon their canoes on the beach, and lastly upon the stockade; and it was not till several men were killed that they came to terms, and restored the stolen property.*⁹

Robson’s action using “gunboat diplomacy” against the natives was seen as justifiable by his superiors and naturally met with the full approval of the colony. In the eyes of the settlers, Robson was a hero.¹⁰ These acts however are not remembered as heroic by Liḡwɪłdaḡw people and those who’s ancestors were fired upon. While this may not be the most the most lighthearted or humorous story, it is an important part of our history, one that should not be forgotten.

⁴ Walbran

⁵ Gowlland

⁶ Mayne

⁷ Gough

⁸ Walbran

⁹ Mayne

¹⁰ Appleton



"Kwakiutl in canoes." Photograph by Edward S. Curtis, 1914.

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