

Lieutenant Colonel Cyril Burton North DSO MC (1887-1960)



Cyril was born in Nova Scotia in 1887. He graduated from Mount Allison University and did post-graduate work in mining in Halifax. He moved out to British Columbia and in 1914 was working as a mining engineer in the Kootenays when the war came.

Along with several other mining engineers he enlisted as a sapper in 6th Field Company and left North Vancouver with the first contingent.

In 1915 he transferred to the Royal Engineers, was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant and posted to their 177th Mining Company. In May 1916 he returned to the Canadians as a Major and assumed command of the 1st Tunnelling Company.

At the Battle of Messines on 7 June 1917 nineteen huge craters were blown, the largest by far at 95,600 pounds of explosive was the one fired by Major North. During the First World War he was wounded twice, once at the 2nd Battle of Ypres and once at Passchendaele. He was decorated with the DSO and MC, awarded the Bar to his DSO, and mentioned in dispatches five times.

After the war, he became manager of the Dolly Varden silver mine north of Alice Arm in BC. He was remembered in Stewart BC for riding his horse into a local store and ordering from the saddle. While in Alice Arm he dated a local nurse Marion Davison. They married in Vancouver in 1929, then went on to the Duthie mines at Smithers an underground silver-lead-zinc mine. In 1933 he took charge of B.C. Nickel at Choate, B.C.

When the Second World War came he re-enlisted and was given command of No 2 Tunnelling Company on 1 Jan 1941. He assembled it at Mickleham UK by combing the entire Canadian Force in England for miners. It took 2 months to form the company and they arrived in Gibraltar on March 10. There they constructed a huge, underground hospital, complete with road, storehouses and artesian wells. Maj North was replaced by Maj Tatham on 1 May 42. On 17 Feb 1943 recently promoted Lt Col North was appointed Assistant Quartermaster General (Director of Works and Construction) in Ottawa and took charge of five works (labour) companies in Canada - a position he held until Jan 1945.

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After the war he became chief of the engineering staff during construction of the First Narrows tunnel, which delivers water from the Capilano River to Vancouver. He also became a consulting engineer for the Kemano Aluminum Company at Kitimat where he worked on the tunnels for the aluminium plant.

But his most outstanding achievement was as the project manager during the blasting of Ripple Rock in the Seymour Narrows, in 1958. Ripple Rock was an underwater, twin-peaked mountain on Vancouver Island's east coast. At low tide it was only nine feet below water and a deadly marine hazard. Before it was removed, at least 20 large and 100 smaller vessels were badly damaged or sunk and at least 110 people had drowned. Two previous attempts had been made to blow it. Both had failed. Between November 1955 and April 1958, tunnels were driven from the mainland out under the water and chambers under Ripple Rock filled with 1,270 metric tons of Nitramex 2H. At 9:31 on the morning of April 5 1958 the explosives were detonated. Over 635,000 metric tons of rock and water were displaced by the explosion. The blast made the passage safe by increasing the clearance at low tide to about 45 feet. It was the largest peacetime, non-nuclear explosion up until that time.

On August 4th 1960 he passed away at Shaughnessy Hospital and was buried in Mountain View Cemetery in Vancouver. He was survived by his wife, his daughters Margery and Elisabeth and granddaughter Teri-Lynne.