

Mudge Island

By Ivan Bulic and Joyce White

A little over a tenth of a mile across False Narrows from Gabriola, Mudge Island seems almost a part of its larger neighbour. With no ferries, stores or schools, the Mudgekins - and the little Mudgekins -



have to row their boats to Gabriola for groceries, to ride the ferry to Nanaimo, or attend school.

But this small gulf island (only 1.2 sq miles in size and with fewer than 100 full-time residents) is not simply a smaller version of Gabriola.

Originally labeled Portland Island on early charts, Mudge is part of an island group that includes Pylades, Ruxton, and De Courcy islands. It was officially named after Royal Navy Lt. William Tertius Fitzwilliam Mudge, by Capt George Richards during his 1859 survey of Vancouver Island in HMS *Plumper*.

Today it is hard to imagine the crucial role played by the navy in early colonial British Columbia. Royal Navy ships charted the coast, carried supplies and mails to scattered coastal settlements and Hudson's Bay forts such as Nanaimo, and enforced British law. Naval officers acted as police officers and judges, resolved land disputes, negotiated with local First

Nations, and conducted scientific observations of the animals, plants, geology and climate in the areas they explored.

William Mudge was a quintessential Victorian naval officer. Born in 1831, he entered the navy as a 13-year-old cadet, and came from an old naval family that included Zachary Mudge, first lieutenant in Capt George Vancouver's expedition, after whom Cape Mudge off Campbell River is named.

When gold was discovered in the Fraser River in 1858, Governor James Douglas called for Royal Navy ships to counter the influx of American miners who threatened British sovereignty in the new Crown Colony of British Columbia. The 21-gun, wooden screw corvette HMS *Pylades* was dispatched to Victoria from the China Station. Capt Michael De Courcy was in command. Among his officers were two young lieutenants, William Mudge and Fitzherbert Ruxton.

Mudge later played a role in the San Juan dispute when a detachment of the *Pylades*' marines occupied the north end of San Juan Island. US troops camped in the southern half. The standoff lasted almost 12 years until London asked German Kaiser Wilhelm I to mediate. In a fit of anti-British pique, the Kaiser awarded the entire San Juan Archipelago to the US. The Dominion Government in Ottawa was so incensed by the decision, they resolved to never again allow Britain to meddle in Canadian border affairs.

In 1861 Mudge was appointed flag lieutenant of HMS *Orpheus*, flagship of the South Pacific squadron trying to suppress Maori resistance to the British occupation of New Zealand. On Feb 07, 1863, *Orpheus* sank off the west coast of Auckland, in the worst maritime disaster in New Zealand history. At least 259 officers and crew were drowned. William Mudge among them. He was just 31.

Photo: HMS Pylades