

History Nook

What Happened to Percy Postlethwaite?

by TOM WELCH
for the Orcas Island Historical Society

Was it, as the San Juan Islander newspaper article stated, the first engagement in the boundary dispute between the United States and Great Britain? Was it a simple abscondment, much as sailors used to 'drift away' from their ships in friendly ports? Or was it, as the British authorities concluded, a much more sinister event? Time, in this case, will never tell, and only the mountain knows the truth of the strange event that occurred on June 25th, 1911, on top of Mount Constitution.

There is little doubt that the newspaper was engaged in a bit of hyperbole when it stated that the opening engagement in the boundary dispute had taken place that June of 1911, particularly as it occurred some fifty years after the Pig War ended. And there never were any engagements between the two forces, warlike or otherwise, on Orcas Island. But a real-life mystery did occur on the mountain that month when Lieutenant Percy Postlethwaite of the Royal Navy went missing from his

post. Shortly before, the Royal Navy had stationed Lieutenant Postlethwaite on Mount Constitution to monitor a high-powered light they had placed on the mountain. Many on Orcas Island had seen the light shining on the mountain the previous week. But when the light could not be seen on Sunday, June 25th, from the Fort Skymalt post on Vancouver Island, the British authorities dispatched a troop of Hussars under Captain A.R. H. Grahame, K.C.B., to investigate.

In the early summer of 1910 Mrs. Rice, owner of the Olga Hotel, was given a Kodiak bear cub by her good friend Ella Higginson, a famous writer. "Higgy" was the toast of Olga throughout the summer, petted and admired by local residents and visitors alike. A cute little guy, the cub seemed to enjoy all of the attention, and everyone thought he was a fine addition to the community. Until he escaped that October when he slipped his leash, headed for the local hills, and couldn't be found. As the search continued, "Higgy" did what bear cubs are supposed to do...he grew. And

grew. And grew, until suddenly the local community began finding evidence that a very LARGE Kodiak bear was in their midst. Missing sheep, orchards torn up in the night, and occasional brief sightings told the community that something had to be done about "Higgy".

Upon arrival on Mount Constitution Captain Grahame and his Hussars could find no trace of Percy Postlethwaite. The light appeared intact but not working while they repaired the light, some continued the search around the top of the mountain. Later that day they came across many small shreds of Lieutenant Postlethwaite's clothing, which led them to the conclusion that he had, indeed, been eaten by "Higgy", the Olga Bear.

The hunt for "Higgy" continued for two more years, until Sam Lighthouse spied him digging up a garden on the old Brenaw place near Doe Bay in June, 1913, and dispatched him with five shots from a .22 rifle. "Higgy" weighed almost 1,500 pounds when he was shot, thanks, no doubt, in part to Lieutenant Percy Postlethwaite.

Thank you to the History Nook Sponsor

Orcas Island
Eclipse Charters
at the Orcas Landing

Now Open
for Wildlife Tours!
Ask about our 1/2 off special
360 376-6566