

## "Our Mickey": The Story of Private James O'Rourke, VC.MM\*(CEF), 1879-1957

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# NOTE AND DOCUMENT

## “Our Mickey”: The Story of Private James O’Rourke, VC.MM\* (CEF), 1879-1957

Michael Kevin Dooley

MINER, SOLDIER, LABOUR ACTIVIST — these are the words that sum up the life of Michael James O’Rourke. A simple man who never married, his life shaped by poverty and degradation, Mickey O’Rourke was involved in one of Canada’s defining moments and some of its labour history: as winner of the Victoria Cross in World War I, as a returned soldier, and as a key participant in the 1935 Vancouver Waterfront strike. How did a miner and tunneller in his thirties, working for the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) on the Rodgers Pass tunnel in BC, end up on the front line? And what happened once he returned from the war? This is the story of Michael O’Rourke, miner, soldier, labour activist.

Mickey O’Rourke’s origins are a mystery. Little is known of his family background despite extensive searches in Canada, Ireland, and Britain. According to his military records he was born 19 March 1879 in Limerick, Ireland to James and Catherine (Baker) O’Rourke, although his death certificate listed his date of birth earlier, 3 March 1874. Of his death there is more certainty, 6 December 1957. Orphaned at the tender age of eleven when his mother passed on, his father having died earlier, Mickey’s only known family was two sisters, one in Vancouver, the other in Montréal. When, and how, Mickey came to Canada is unknown. His trail is not picked up again until he enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF),

\*Victoria Cross (VC), Military Medal (MM).

Michael Kevin Dooley, “‘Our Mickey’: The Story of Private James O’Rourke, VC.MM (CEF), 1879-1957,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 47 (Spring 2001), 171-84.

already in his 30s.<sup>1</sup> Undocumented mentions of a stint of seven years in the British Army, Royal Munster Fusiliers, and a period in the militia in Revelstoke, BC give some hints of his life prior to World War I but have proved difficult to ascertain with any certainty. Only snippets are known from his pre-military days: he was Irish Roman Catholic, a miner and tunneller who worked the Rodgers Pass tunnel for the CPR, the BC Electric Tunnel in Coquitlam, and in mines at Fernie, BC. Why did O'Rourke, already in the his 30s, join the military? With the depression of 1913-4 in full force, many resource-based workers were jobless and desperate, O'Rourke among them. A skilled hardrock miner such as Mickey O'Rourke could earn three dollars per week, working ten, twelve-hour shifts, six days per week out of which he had to pay board, and in many cases for tools and other expenses.<sup>2</sup> The army's pay of one dollar per day, full kit and board, free medical care, and the promise of gratuities and pensions, were strong inducements. Patriotism may have also played a key role in the decision of many to enlist, especially those with strong loyalties to England.<sup>3</sup> O'Rourke's military records also indicated he had previous military service in the British Army with the Royal Munster Fusiliers and was a member in the 104th Battalion militia in Revelstoke, BC.<sup>4</sup>

Of his military service we know more. He joined the 47th Battalion — a replacement battalion — in New Westminster, BC, in February 1915. Sent with his unit in June 1915 to the Canadian base in England, Shorncliffe, O'Rourke was then transferred to the 30th and later the 7th Battalions. An older recruit with years as a miner behind him, O'Rourke was hard pressed to adapt to the military discipline required by the CEF. His Form 103 — marking his transfers, promotions, punishments, and awards — notes that in the few short months O'Rourke was at Shorncliffe, he was fined seven days loss of pay for drunkenness and abusive language.<sup>5</sup> By September 1915, O'Rourke joined the 7th Battalion "In the Field"

<sup>1</sup>For more on the CEF see the official history, Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919* (Ottawa 1962) which takes a battle-by-battle look at the Canadians in World War I. O'Rourke was part of the 3 per cent, Irish-born in the original CEF. See Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto 1993).

<sup>2</sup>Jack Scott, *Plunderbund and Proletariat* (Vancouver 1985); Irving Abella and David Millar, *The Canadian Worker in the 20th Century* (Toronto 1978).

<sup>3</sup>For more on reasons as to why men enlisted, see Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 50-2.

<sup>4</sup>No records were found in the Militia archives housed in New Westminster, BC of his militia service, and only limited records were found in the British archives of a Lance Corporal M. O'Rourke, Royal Muster Fusiliers, awarded the Indian General Service Medal of 1909 for Northwest Frontiers Action of 1908.

<sup>5</sup>O'Rourke was not alone in drinking heavily while in Britain; Morton found many of the Canadians, especially in the first six months of the war, spent their time in England on an almost continual alcoholic binge. O'Rourke's punishment was not out of line with others disciplined for similar offences. Anyone caught breaking one of the numerous regulations was taken to the guardroom deprived of cap and belt, and left in a cell over night before

— in France. 7th Battalion had already spent six months at the front before O'Rourke joined it, fighting trench warfare, and facing decimation at the battle of Ypres. Shortly after Mickey joined the unit, his battalion undertook a series of trench raids and deadly minor battles.

Mickey O'Rourke's role in the war was as a stretcher bearer on the front lines. In quieter times he performed first aid duties, assisting the Medical Officer on sick parades and some clerical work. During battle, however, stretcher bearers were on the front lines, unarmed and exposed as they attempted to carry out the injured. Stretcher bearers were a combination of non-combatant corps — some opposed to carrying arms — while others were volunteers from the CEF, often older men like O'Rourke.<sup>6</sup> They spent most nights in the trenches taking out any wounded who could not be evacuated in the day, while other soldiers were sent on patrols, and ration parties went back to the reserve to bring up food, water, and mail. Others worked as manual labour, deepening ditches, digging latrines, and building new dugouts, repairing much of the damage done the night before. Others still took part in costly raiding parties, where hit and run attacks on enemy trenches were mounted to seize prisoners and documents.<sup>7</sup>

In May 1916 the Battalion saw battle action at Mount Sorrell and Aries, taking heavy casualties. By late June 1916 Michael O'Rourke was sentenced to fourteen days Field Punishment #1, his second punishment for drunkenness.<sup>8</sup> In addition to being assigned heavy work details, field punishment — the replacement for flogging after its abolishment in the late 19th century — included tying the offender to gun carriage wheels exposed to the weather and in full view of other soldiers, prone to embarrassed glances, flies, and cramps. Colonel Creelman described the

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facing his company or battery commander the following morning. For extreme offences or in cases where the army chose to make an example out of an offender, his colonel or a full court martial would decide his fate. Punishments could range up to a week's detention or 28 days' field punishment. Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 26, 82-3.

<sup>6</sup>See John Graham, *Conscription and Conscience: a history 1916-1919* (New York 1971). See Denis Winter, *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (London 1978) for more on Military Service Acts and History of Friends (Quakers) and others opposed to the war and conscription, but willing to serve in non-combatant units.

<sup>7</sup>Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 126.

<sup>8</sup>An offense in the field while on active duty in France was treated more harshly than a punishment while not on active duty. A field general, court martial was capable of recommending death. There were 25 such deaths recorded by the CEF, including one member of the 7th Battalion, Private Henry Kerr who was executed by firing squad in France, 16 November 1916. Kerr's record is one of a continual discipline problem, after being treated for syphilis with mercury and arsenic, both known to have drastic side effects, Kerr's fellow soldiers asked that he not be sent to the Front. In November 1916 on the Front Line he hid in a bunker when the 7th Battalion moved to the front. Found after 24 hours, Kerr was court-martialed and shot two weeks later. National Archives of Canada (NAC), Records Group (RG) 24, volume 2538, *Death Sentence & Execution CEF*.

punishment of two of his men as "tied up with their backs to the wheel of a telephone cart, both are doing F.P. No. 1 which includes being tied up for two hours each day. Their food's limited to bully, biscuits and unsweetened tea and if their unit is on the march, they accompany it on foot."<sup>9</sup>

For the men, front line duty involved living in narrow, muddy trenches, in terrible conditions of filth, which included offensive odours and rats. They lived like animals — fully clothed, crawling with lice, and constantly exposed to all types of enemy fire, with little sleep and poor food. Exposed to these conditions for years on end, soldiers faced deprivation that took a terrible toll on their health. A tour at the front generally followed a rotation of between five and six days on the front line with 5-6 days in reserves, before a period in rest areas where training and work details were carried on and the whole cycle began again.

At the Battle of the Somme in September 1916, O'Rourke was awarded the Military Medal for bravery at Mon Ouet Farm. According to official records, O'Rourke's medal was awarded for conspicuous gallantry initiatives when:

in the absence of order he [O'Rourke] initiated a counter attack against the advancing army, who had arrived within bombing distance of our trenches. He led the men in his immediate sector over the parapet (i.e. the "top" of the trench), maintained his position well in advance, successfully bombing the enemy from several points of vantage. He endeavoured to hold on to No Man's Land.<sup>10</sup>

According to O'Rourke:

The Germans many of them got into a sap very early in the morning. [A sap was a forward, narrow trench used as listening post.] I bombed them for three hours until the supplies of bombs ran out. Then I lay in the hellhole sniping. A Lewis Gunner came up and I sent for ammo but while I was waiting he was killed. I got another Gunner from the 4th Battalion but the same fate awaited him. Finally I came in contact with a German in a Sap. Our respective conditions were such that I could see him but he could not see me. I located a bomb and threw it with the desired effect intended. I took his rifle and a lot of bombs called potato markers which also I sent into the enemy positions.<sup>11</sup>

Over the next six weeks the Battalion saw action at Thiepval Farm and Courcellette. Following Courcellette the CEF was withdrawn from the Battle of the Somme, having suffered 24,000 casualties.<sup>12</sup> In October 1916 O'Rourke was granted ten

<sup>9</sup>NAC, Manuscript Group (MG) 30, E8, Creelman diary, 13 August 1916, 70. Cited in Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 84.

<sup>10</sup>The Military Medal. Authorized by General Byng on Army Form RO803 (Honours and Awards). CEF Files, Ottawa.

<sup>11</sup>*Daily Province*, 10 January 1918.

<sup>12</sup>Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force*; and *The BC Regiment: The Dukes* (Vancouver 1975).



*Michael O'Rourke, c. 1917. Credit: Columbian (Newspaper - BC).*

days leave — a leave in which much of his time would be spent trying to reach London.

The 7th Battalion was involved in the Vimy Battle and was one of the key assault units in April 1917. For the CEF, Vimy was a military success that established the international reputation of Canadian soldiers. Later, O'Rourke was part of the 1st Division Train from November to February 1917, a vast network of trains, roads, bases, and dumps, which tried to keep the front line divisions supplied, bringing up reinforcements and provisions, and returning with sick and wounded. In this period the Battalion saw some relief from front line fighting before moving to the Hill 17 area to prepare for upcoming battle. The 7th Battalion was one of the leading assault battalions at Hill 17, where the Germans launched 22 counter-attacks over three days to recapture the high elevation stronghold captured by the Canadians. The 7th Battalion suffered heavy casualties. It was one of the worst battles of the entire war for the 7th Battalion.<sup>13</sup> Stretcher bearers were the first line in the triage operation and decided whether an injured soldier's chances of survival were good enough to merit the dangerous task of bringing him back to the hospital. One soldier later recounted, "what man who carried wounded ... could ever forget the terrible groaning, cursing and pleading of the poor fellow, half rolling off a shoulder-high

<sup>13</sup>Douglas E. Harker, *The British Columbia Regiment: A History* (Vancouver 1977).

stretcher ... Who could ever forget the dark brown and purplish stain that seeped through the stretcher canvas and all too often dripped down our backs and arms."<sup>14</sup> Such was O'Rourke's job.

In recognition for his actions at Hill 17 from 15-18 August 1917, O'Rourke was awarded the Victoria Cross in a ceremony at Buckingham Palace. According to the *London Gazette*, O'Rourke was awarded the medal "for most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty during prolonged operations."<sup>15</sup> Official records state that:

For three days and nights Mickey O'Rourke, who is a stretcher bearer, worked unceasingly in bringing in wounded to safety, dressing them and getting them food and water. During the whole period the area he worked was subjected to severe shelling and swept with heavy machine gunfire and rifle fire. On several occasions he was knocked down and partially buried by enemy shells.

Seeing a comrade who had been blinded rambling ahead of our trench, in full view of the enemy who were sniping him Pvt. O'Rourke jumped out of his trench and brought the man back being heavily sniped while doing so. Again he went forward about 50 yards in front of our barrage and under heavy and accurate fire from enemy guns and snipers brought in a comrade.

On a subsequent occasion when the line of advanced posts was retired to the line, to be re-coordinated, he went forward under heavy fire of every description and brought in wounded men left behind.

He showed throughout an absolute disregard for his own safety going wherever there were wounded succoured and his magnificent courage and devotion in continuing his rescue work in spite of exhaustion and incessant heavy fire of every description he inspired all ranks and undoubtedly saved many lives.<sup>16</sup>

Years later when asked about his Victoria Cross, O'Rourke stated: "sure I don't know what the fuss is all about, it was me job you see to take out the wounded. There was a lot of machine gun and sniper fire. I could not do anything else but keep on goin', you know what I mean..."<sup>17</sup>

O'Rourke was hospitalized in September 1917, likely with the severe sciatica that was to later render him medically unfit to serve overseas.<sup>18</sup> Back into the cycle of trench rotation, training, and reinforcements, in October 1917 the Battalion was part of the third battle of Ypres, which lasted four months and resulted in over a million casualties in total.<sup>19</sup> O'Rourke reported being gassed at Ypres. Down to

<sup>14</sup>Fred Noyes, NAC, MG 30, E393, Foster memoirs, 29-30. Cited in Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 190.

<sup>15</sup>*London Gazette*, 8 November 1917.

<sup>16</sup>CEF files, Ottawa; *London Gazette*, November 1917.

<sup>17</sup>Vancouver *Sun*, 29 December 1929.

<sup>18</sup>Sciatica was due to exposure to wet and cold. Medical Board hearing, March 1918. CEF Files, Ottawa.

<sup>19</sup>Leon Wolff, *In Flanders Fields: the 1917 Campaign* (London 1958).

394 men after months of heavy fighting, the Battalion was awaiting reinforcements when in November 1917 O'Rourke was again awarded leave to the United Kingdom. In early December O'Rourke was transferred to Shorncliffe, England before being shipped home in January 1918 on a Furlough granted to those with long service overseas. Reporting back to duty in March 1918, O'Rourke was kept on home duty in Vancouver, part of the 11th Garrison Artillery, and took part in bond drives across the western USA until his discharge in July 1918. While on war bond tours, O'Rourke spoke to crowds in his rich Irish brogue, sometimes addressing thousands, about his war experiences. Kept on the home front due to increasingly poor health, O'Rourke was given a medical discharge for severe sciatica and a marked degree of disability.<sup>20</sup> As a testimony to O'Rourke's popularity, not long after his return home a letter was published in the *Vancouver Sun*, sent from a soldier in France. The letter indicated the men missed him, loved him, and were glad he was in Canada.<sup>21</sup>

His service in France, over 27 months, including reports of being hit by shrapnel in the thigh and suffering gas poisoning, left him one of the few survivors of the 7th Battalion. Over 6000 men had served in this unit: 1440 killed in action, 3924 wounded in battle, and 134 taken as prisoners of war. Only 32 of the original 1009 men were to return, many of whom had been wounded multiple times. The Battalion earned 480 decorations, including three Victoria Crosses, one given to Private Mickey O'Rourke. Taking his discharge pay of \$416, gratuity and allowances in San Francisco, O'Rourke followed the tracks of many discharged soldiers who went to the West Coast of the USA to recover their battered health and to escape the harshness of much of the Canadian winter.<sup>22</sup> While in San Francisco O'Rourke was hospitalized for bronchial pneumonia, a condition aggravated by his service on the front lines, a legacy which was to remain with him throughout the post-war period.

Physically, O'Rourke was seen to be in relatively good health. Mentally, O'Rourke's medical records speak of nervous irritability, being unable to stand noise, crowds or excitement. He had difficulty settling down or returning to his former work as a miner. The specialist psycho-neurologist at Vancouver's Shaughnessy Veterans Hospital diagnosed these problems as having psychological, not physical, origins. The doctor's diagnosis of nervous irritability due to service led to O'Rourke's being recommended for a 10 per cent disability pension in 1920.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Medical Board hearing, March 1918.

<sup>21</sup>*Vancouver Sun*, May 1918.

<sup>22</sup>Desmond Morton and Glenn Wright, *Winning the Second Battle: Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life, 1915-1930* (Toronto 1987).

<sup>23</sup>In hindsight, this condition would today be clearly seen as the symptoms of "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder." While the Canadian Parliament gave Canada the most generous pension rates in the world, fewer than 5 per cent of Canada's disabled veterans received full benefits, the majority receiving pensions of 25 per cent or less. Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 258-9. O'Rourke medical files, Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC) file.



As the doctor also commented that Mickey's problems were exacerbated by his drinking habits and the vices that the life of a miner, living in camps and mining towns, would entail, O'Rourke was denied even that limited pension. O'Rourke was not alone in suffering mental angst after the war: thousands of returned veterans were pensioned off with mental disorders and many others turned up in the numerous psychiatric hospitals run by Veterans Affairs.<sup>24</sup> The aim of the pension program was not to provide enough support to live on, but rather to restore a soldier's will and ability to work. O'Rourke launched an appeal of the 1920 decision, winning a pension of ten dollars per month — awarded for his neurasthenia — after the personal intervention of the Governor General of Canada, General Byng.<sup>25</sup>

Following his victory over the pension board, O'Rourke spent several years at various jobs in California, then working in the fisheries in northern British Columbia, and by 1923-4 he was employed on the Vancouver waterfront at the grain elevators. O'Rourke was described in one newspaper article, "as a picturesque character with a rich Irish brogue, a kindly nature, with a well concealed generosity that was a tradition in dockside labour." Working grain elevators, however, proved too much for O'Rourke's health. His military service had left him with chronic chest problems made worse by the dust of the grain elevators and he suffered from recurring bouts of bronchitis. Dust from the elevators caused consumption and emphysema among many grain handlers and longshoremen on Vancouver's waterfront.<sup>26</sup> In 1926, the Board of Pension Commissioners — forerunner to Veterans Affairs — awarded O'Rourke an additional 5 per cent disability pension for his chronic bronchitis, bringing his total pension amount to 15 per cent or \$11.25 per month. Pensions for disabled veterans were based on the wage rates of unskilled labour, ensuring that many veterans lived in poverty.<sup>27</sup> Such was the case with Mickey O'Rourke.

His war record made him well-known in Britain, the US, and Canada, with articles about his war exploits appearing throughout the 1920s. Bob Douchette, a columnist writing the "Returned Soldier's Man," wrote about O'Rourke and the concerns of other returned soldiers.<sup>28</sup> O'Rourke impersonators were found in Britain in the immediate post-war years and, as late as the 1930s, in New York and Seattle.<sup>29</sup> Despite his stature as a war hero, O'Rourke lived in one of the poorest, roughest areas of Vancouver, a neighbourhood he was to live in for the next 27 years, moving between a series of cheap hotel rooms. In 1926, while staying at the

<sup>24</sup>Morton and Wright, *Winning the Second Battle*.

<sup>25</sup>"Neurasthenia" was a term commonly used to describe a wide variety of mental disorders.

<sup>26</sup>Robert McDonald, "Working," *Working Lives: Vancouver 1886-1986* (Vancouver 1985), 29.

<sup>27</sup>Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 264.

<sup>28</sup>Bob Douchette was called "the returned soldier's man" in Vancouver *Sun* articles throughout the 1920s. Douchette wrote articles about O'Rourke's 1929 visit to London.

<sup>29</sup>Letters found in VAC file, Ottawa.

Haden Hotel, O'Rourke had his medals stolen, an event he showed little concern over.<sup>30</sup> O'Rourke was not alone in facing post-war poverty. By 1921, one-fifth of all returned veterans and almost all disabled veterans were unemployed, with few programs in place to help them. Employers preferred able-bodied workers over disabled veterans and the few that hired disabled veterans were often faced with employees unable to cope with their old jobs.

On the tenth anniversary of the armistice, O'Rourke and other Canadian Victoria Cross winners or their surviving family members returned to Buckingham Palace for the celebration. Fares were covered by the federal and provincial governments and the Canadian Pacific Railway. Crowds of well-wishers gathered to see them off, including a large contingent from the inner city, the waterfront, and the 7th Battalion Comrades Association. The sudden popularity embarrassed O'Rourke who, as the second most decorated man in Canada (behind Bill Bishop the air ace), shunned media attention and rarely told the story of his Victoria Cross-worthy actions. This seemed at odds with his reputation on the Vancouver docks. O'Rourke was now a member of the Vancouver and District Waterfront Workers' Association, a hard drinking, hard playing, no nonsense type, who often seemed hard pressed to hold his tongue, speaking out frequently.

Myths about O'Rourke began to abound in the press, taking on increasing colour as the years passed. These included tales of him having served in the Boer War, having received the French Croix de Guerre, and of his legendary drinking. In a story from 1951, O'Rourke is reported to have been presented with a new suit of clothes and some money for the trip to Buckingham Palace in 1929. According to this rendition, after receiving the money and clothes O'Rourke disappeared for three weeks while Veterans Affairs and the Royal Canadian Legion searched desperately for him, before he turned up again, in old ragged clothes, the poorest of the poor. Such sensationalist stories written long after the fact must be taken with a dose of caution.<sup>31</sup>

Starting in 1926 and continuing into the late 1940s, O'Rourke underwent physical exams every two years, conducted by the Board of Pension Commission. His medical records reported continued problems with chronic bronchitis, a poor nervous condition, and, in later years, emphysema, cholecystitis, and gastritis, attributed by a doctor for the Battalion as related to service conditions, including the terrible environment of the trenches and the poor rations. In 1930, O'Rourke was admitted to the Shaughnessy Veterans Hospital for one month with severe stomach pains. He blamed his inability to eat properly and work steadily on various physical ailments.

<sup>30</sup>Rumours abounded that rather than being stolen, O'Rourke pawned his military decorations at a store on Main Street in Vancouver when he needed money. Another rumour had the BC Regiment redeeming the medals but neither story has been confirmed. The medals were, however, either recovered or reinstated.

<sup>31</sup>The stories of 1929 did not show up in the record until the *Sun* and *Province* articles of 1951.

During these years, O'Rourke's work patterns were a series of casual jobs, including one for the Coast Stevedoring Company of Vancouver where he worked on an intermittent basis but was not a member of the union or a member of a work gang. This was not unusual, as the vast majority of waterfront workers in this period were unorganized. Finding a job meant ingenuity, persistence, and often came down to a matter of connections. Longshoremen repeatedly fought for control over the hiring process in an attempt to prevent men from swarming the docks at all hours of the night and day, waiting for hours in wretched weather to look for work. Foremen hired crews with friends and favourites and were not above taking bribes.<sup>32</sup>

Work on the Vancouver waterfront was not easy. It involved long hours, heavy work, and uncertain employment. Ships were unloaded by longshoremen, and supplemented by machines. While winches lifted slings onto ships, longshoremen used brute strength to move boxes, sacks, and bundles often in excess of 100 pounds. These jobs were not only exhausting but were dangerous as well — especially for workers loading cement, a job where tuberculosis was prevalent. Accidents, occupational diseases, manual lifting, and irregular wages guaranteed few workers "enjoyed either a comfortable or lengthy old age."<sup>33</sup> Tuberculosis was rampant and a dreaded killer.

O'Rourke's employers reported to the Commission that casual workers were often picked crews, specialists in one area who generally did heavy work in all types of weather. O'Rourke, the Coast Stevedore report stated, was physically unable to do the heavy work and was given a preferred position — because of his war record perhaps — as a swamper responsible for loading and unloading trucks, and later as a watchman. Despite being moved to less physically demanding jobs, O'Rourke lost a lot of time to illness. Company reports state that they gave O'Rourke work to keep him from "starving to death" paying him about 80 cents per hour. His only other income was his pension of \$11.50 per month and a twice annual Victoria Cross gratuity of \$48.50.<sup>34</sup> According to his employer, "[O'Rourke] was only given work because of his previous association with the pier and the Boys' and Men there, he is a liability from under which we will be forced to get out in the near future."<sup>35</sup>

Despite his disabilities, O'Rourke continued to work whenever he could find it. On 18 June 1935, wearing his Victoria Cross and Military Medal and carrying the Union Jack, O'Rourke led a parade of 1000 striking waterfront workers in what

<sup>32</sup> McDonald, "Working," 29.

<sup>33</sup> Robert McDonald and Logan Hovis, "On the Waterfront," *Working Lives: Vancouver 1886-1986* (Vancouver 1985), 71.

<sup>34</sup> By 1934, O'Rourke's pension had been increased again, to 40 per cent. During the Depression, veterans on any pension were not eligible for municipal relief. Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 274.

<sup>35</sup> *Employer Report to the Board of Pension Commissioners* (Coast Stevedores), VAC file, Ottawa.

has come to be known as the Battle of Ballantyne pier.<sup>36</sup> Police reports not only record O'Rourke's presence at the pier, but also include a clear photograph of him surrounded by strikers. Workers were demanding wage increases, union recognition, and a Fair Dispatch System. In a strike-lockout position for two weeks prior to the Battle of Ballantyne pier, strikers — largely longshoremen — were also trying to rid the waterfront of scab labour. Allied against the workers were not only their own stevedoring and shipping employers, but many other local bosses, some politicians and elements of the media, all orchestrated in a "Citizens' League" that was determinedly anti-union and blaming the strike on the "Bolshevik menace."<sup>37</sup>

Earlier attempts at unionization had largely failed, and company unions prevailed in many workplaces until 1934, including Canadian Pacific. After the company union signed an agreement considered unacceptable by its members, they elected Ivan Emery, a communist, to head the Vancouver District Waterfront Workers' Association (VWWA). The immediate issue behind the showdown was not union recognition or hiring practices, but the issue of handling "hot" cargo loaded by unorganized workers in Powell River. Workers at the Vancouver docks refused to unload the cargo, with strikes at all BC ports following. Employer reaction was swift: all militant workers were fired, while hundreds of scabs were hired. Scab workers were given free police protection. Employers also created two company unions: the Vancouver Longshoremen's Association (VLA) and the Canadian Waterfront Workers' Association (CWWA). Membership in one of the two company unions was required for employment and membership was only with the approval of the Shipping Federation. The showdown boiled over on 18 June 1935.

As strikers marched towards Ballantyne pier with the intention of picketing the docks and "persuading" scabs to join the strikes, squads of police on foot and on horseback lined the streets along the railway tracks. As the marchers and police came into each other's view, the police attacked, using tear gas and "billie" clubs, beating many of the fleeing marchers. When the RCMP charged, O'Rourke was dragged out of danger by a sergeant.<sup>38</sup> Scores of men, including 14 police officers, were hurt in the ensuing battle, which ultimately resulted in the VWWA's defeat, and the creation of an employer union.

O'Rourke was not a union leader and there is little indication that he was even active in the union at all.<sup>39</sup> So how do we account for his turning up to lead the

<sup>36</sup>For an account of the Ballantyne strike by an eyewitness, see John Stanton, *Never Say Die: the Life and Times of John Stanton, A Pioneer Labour Lawyer* (Ottawa 1987). The front cover of Stanton's book includes a picture of the Ballantyne pier strike, with Mickey O'Rourke seen in the foreground holding a flag.

<sup>37</sup>See Stanton, *Never Say Die*, 1, for a look at who was in the Citizens' League which Stanton identifies as being patterned on the Committee of One Thousand in the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919.

<sup>38</sup>Vancouver City Archives, Special Police File, re: 1935 Strike.

<sup>39</sup>Searches made under the federal Access to Information Act and the BC Freedom of Information Act, and to the RCMP, the Vancouver City Police, the BC Provincial Police,

striking marchers? According to retired union members, after the arrest of union leaders in the hours before the strike, when marchers were told they would not be allowed to go to the pier to confront scab workers, O'Rourke stepped forward and offered to lead the marchers. In later years O'Rourke is quoted as saying, "when I saw we were beat, I beat it but not before I heaved a brick at a Mounted Policeman's head though." One contemporary news story reported O'Rourke coming face to face with the Vancouver City Police chief Foster, who the paper incorrectly identified as his old commanding officer.<sup>40</sup>

After the strike O'Rourke again disappeared from the public eye, reappearing only in hospital records after continuing health problems, and in the newspaper after he declined an invitation to meet Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh on their tour of Vancouver in June 1951. O'Rourke declined as he couldn't stand the ceremony, or the crowds, and was worried his legs wouldn't hold up. In an area where Royal Visits received considerable fanfare, O'Rourke's decision not to attend — the only VC winner not there — was treated quite adversely by the local media.<sup>41</sup>

O'Rourke had a hard life, subsisting on his disability pension (at highest \$56 per month), the twice a year VC gratuity of \$48, and casual jobs whenever he could get them, which occurred less and less frequently as he aged. A heavy drinker, O'Rourke lived in a dingy downtown hotel room, cashed his cheques and spent most of his time in nearby bars, not an uncommon existence for thousands of returned soldiers. By 1953, a Department of Veterans Affairs field investigator reported that Mickey had lived in the same second-rate Chinese hotel for five years, where O'Rourke paid \$20 a month for his room only. In the report, the investigator depicted O'Rourke's room as very untidy — apparently recently vacated by some of his drinking cronies. His health was not good, his appearance untidy, unkempt, and dirty. Unlike earlier reports where O'Rourke was described as "a tidy, well-dressed man with a soldierly appearance," this report stated that "he had obviously just recovered from one of his frequent bouts." The area O'Rourke lived in was one of the poorest areas in Canada, where many of Canada's returned soldiers from both World Wars and Korea ended their days, along with a large population of Aboriginals, drug addicts, and people with mental health problems.

Soon after the field inspector's visit, O'Rourke was admitted to Shaughnessey Veterans Hospital again, this time after becoming intoxicated on Canned Heat

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and the BC Attorney General failed to find any references to O'Rourke in reference to union leadership, or even as a committee member or activist. As the records show, the extensive use of paid informants and provocateurs failed to turn up any mention of O'Rourke, a well-known figure. It is likely that his role in the union was minimal. Extensive files do exist on other figures involved in the union, including known members of the Communist Party.

<sup>40</sup>Vancouver *Sun*, Vancouver *Province* articles, 1951, 1956, 1957.

<sup>41</sup>Newspaper reports in the Vancouver *Sun* and *Province* were extensive and do not show O'Rourke in a balanced light.



*Michael O'Rourke, 1956.  
Credit: Vancouver Sun.*

(CHOH). O'Rourke was badly beaten up and robbed and, to make things worse, his optic nerves were damaged by the CHOH. He spent another month in the hospital before he was transferred, under section 29 of the Mental Health Act, to the George Derby Facility in Burnaby, BC. At the Veterans Affairs' facility, O'Rourke was diagnosed with senility and arteriosclerosis. As neither friends nor family stepped forward to care for O'Rourke, that is where he ended his days, signing over his power of attorney, pensions, and VC gratuity to the hospital in exchange for his care.

O'Rourke was again invited to London for the 1956 VC centenary celebrations, with all expenses to be paid for by the government of Canada. Initially Mickey was reluctant to go, worried that it was both too much for him and a trick to send him to Essondale, a psychiatric hospital for severe cases and the crimi-

nally insane. Eventually he decided to go, prodded by a family member and the media. Described in the papers as "the Fighting Irishman," O'Rourke's antics were well reported in the Vancouver media and included the ever-growing legends of his past: the episode with the suit, the brick incident, and the 1951 refusal to meet the Royal couple. Upon his return to Vancouver, Mickey moved in with a family member, reportedly causing more trouble with his drinking, until his death in 1957, which was also well-publicized in the Vancouver media. His funeral included a large number of dignitaries, representing all levels of the government and the Army, as well as his friends from the neighbourhood, dock workers, and the remaining Veterans of the 7th Battalion. Editorials after his death eulogized Mickey with such disparate characterizations as "he wouldn't want words of praise," "he wasn't modest or shy," "he knew the world makes a legendary figure of such a man," he was "a philosopher born," "he saw himself no different from other men," and "he asked little, to be left alone, to do his duty as he saw and with no interference and he did the same." Friends reported on his charitable and generous nature, while others commented on his hard-bitten, tough nature, describing him as just another guy.

Mickey's portrait now hangs in the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa, painted by Canadian War Artist, Ernst Fosberry, and depicting O'Rourke in his uniform and helmet, holding a folded stretcher over one shoulder, a lit cigarette in his rough and callused, cupped hands, his features tired and worn. His medals are on display

at the Beatty Street Armoury, on loan to the British Columbia regiment by a relative of O'Rourke's. They remind us of 'Our Mickey': miner, soldier, labour activist.



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