

*Researched by: Jeremy Swanson CWM*  
*Edited by: Fred Gaffen CWM*



**HMCS Niobe at anchor.  
 Cornwallis Harbour, Nova  
 Scotia, 1912.**

On Trafalgar Day, 21 October 1910, the 6-inch gun cruiser H.M.S.

*Niobe* sailed into Halifax Harbour with all flags flying and firing a 21-gun salute. Following Sir

Wilfrid Laurier's call the previous May for an all-Canadian navy, the government had purchased *Niobe* and *Rainbow* to form the nucleus of the new navy. Under the command of a Canadian-born Royal Navy officer, Captain W.B. Macdonald, she had sailed from Devonport, England, on 12 October, arriving to a rousing welcome at Halifax from a very enthusiastic public. The Canadian Press was not enamoured of the idea behind the purchase, however, as was evidenced by a headline in *Le Devoir* "...canadienne en temps de paix, impériale en temps de guerre..." Nevertheless the significance of the occasion was not lost on Canada's youth, and recruits, French and English alike, flocked to join the ship.

The *Niobe* had been laid down at the Vickers yard in Barrow, England, on 16 December 1895, one of the second group of eight "Diadem" class protected cruisers built for the Royal Navy. She was launched on 20 February 1897 and completed her fitting-out trials at the dockside on 6 December 1898. On completion of her sea trials she exceeded her designed steaming speed owing to the fitting of more powerful engines than those of her sister ships, and a thinner

protective deck which reduced displacement. After uneventful service with the Royal Navy, *Niobe* underwent a major refit in 1907 and was placed in the reserve fleet. In June 1910 she was prepared for the journey to her new home in Canada.

On completion of her first flag-showing mission to ports in Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, *Niobe* was sailing from Yarmouth to Liverpool, Nova Scotia, when she ran aground in thick fog near Cape Sable, receiving 19 holes in her hull. With the help of a British cruiser and a prevailing tide she was able to lift off and return to Halifax.



**HMCS Niobe in drydock undergoing repairs to her hull after running aground at Cape Sable. Halifax, 1911.**

After a fierce parliamentary debate in Ottawa over costs, she was repaired and turned into a training ship until the outbreak of war in August 1914. Hurriedly prepared for war in five weeks, H.M.C.S. *Niobe* now commanded by Captain R.G.

Corbett, R.,N. sailed on her first wartime operational mission to escort the transport Canada, carrying The Royal Canadian Regiment to garrison duty in Bermuda. On her return to Halifax, it was discovered that her boilers were worn out and in September she entered dry-dock for repairs.

By October 1914 *Niobe* operational again, and after joining in a fruitless search for a reported German surface raider in the straits of Belle Isle she was posted to serve with the Royal Navy's 4th Squadron on station between Shelburne, N.S., and New York. *Niobe* logged 30,000 miles on convoy and blockade duty through the spring and summer of 1915. The patrol was a difficult one for *Niobe*'s crew who would stay on sea duty for 16 days at a time before returning to Halifax to refuel and provision.

In this period *Niobe* stopped and searched many ships bound in and out of U.S. ports, and several prize ships were taken. To help morale, passing British liners would contribute fresh provisions, candies and gifts to *Niobe*'s crew.

Eventually, the arduous sea duty took its toll and in September 1915, her funnels near collapse and her engines worn out, *Niobe* returned to Halifax, where she was used as a depot ship for the rest of the war. On 6 December 1917 she was moored 700 yards from the ammunition ship Mont Blanc, which caught fire after a collision with the Belgian relief ship Imo in Halifax harbour. *Niobe* was the first ship to give the alarm after collision, and Warrant Boatswain Albert Mattison and six ratings bravely left *Niobe* and boarded the Mont Blanc in an attempt to scuttle her. They were all blown to pieces in the resulting explosion which destroyed much of Halifax. *Niobe* was extensively

damaged in the explosion and her superstructure and funnels were wrecked. Numerous fires were started on board which destroyed the ship's records.



**HMCS *Niobe* in Halifax Harbour showing damage after the explosion of 6 December 1917.**

*Niobe* was repaired and continued to serve as a depot ship until 1920, when she was sold for scrap and broken up in Philadelphia. All that remains of *Niobe* today are guns from her main armament, recently restored after coastal defence use in the Second World War. One is in Market Square, Saint John, N.B., while the other is on display outside the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John.

### Synopsis:

Laid down 16 Dec. 1895	Sold to RCN July 1910
Launched 20 Feb. 1897	Commissioned September 1910
Completed 6 Dec 1897	First Lay-up December 1912
First Refit 1907	Paid off September 1915
Cost to Build £600,000	Sold for scrap 1920 £40,000

<b>Technical Specifications</b>		
Displacement:	11,000 tons	
Length:	450 ft. (waterline) 460.5 ft. (overall)	
Beam:	69 ft.	
Draught:	27.5 ft.	
Armour:	Deck:	4 in. maximum - 2.5 in. minimum
	Casement:	4 in. maximum - 2.5 in. minimum
	Gunshields:	4.5 in. maximum - 2 in. minimum
	Armour belt:	6 in. maximum - 2 in. minimum
Engines:	2-shaft, 4-cylinder, triple expansion 30	
	30 Belleville boilers developing 16,500 H.P.	
Engine Weight:	1,525 tons.	
Max speed:	17-18 knots	
Coal fuel:	Capacity:	1-2,000 tons
	Consumption:	17-19 tons per hour
Oil Fuel:	Capacity: 400 tons	
Armament:	16 6-in. guns, 14 12-pdr guns	
	12 3-pdr guns, 2 18-in. torpedo guns	
	2 Maxim QF (37-mm) guns	
	All guns had individual electrical hoists with manual back-up	
Complement:	48 Officers	
	663 Other Ranks	

### **Bibliography:**

J.A. Foster, *Heart of Oak: A Pictorial History of the Royal Canadian Navy*.  
 Jack Macbeth, *Ready, Aye, Ready: An Illustrated History of the Royal Canadian Navy*.  
 K.R. Macpherson, *Canada's Fighting Ships*.  
 Gilbert Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada, Vol 1*.  
*Jane's Fighting Ships (1899-1918)*.

### **Photo Credits:**

Maritime Command Museum, Halifax;  
 National Defence;  
 National Archives of Canada.

### **Thanks to:**

Harold Wright, Partridge Island Research Project.  
 Marilyn Gurney, Marcom