

Salute to the Navy's Centennial

The Early Days



The Navy and the War Museum

Bounded on three sides by oceans, cleft on the east coast by a great inland waterway, demarcated, in part, from our neighbour to the south by four of the world's five great freshwater lakes, and home to a host of inland lakes and rivers, it is natural that ships' hulls and men of the sea should have played a role in Canada's short history. The Canadian War Museum too has played its role in portraying, protecting and preserving Canada's naval history.

Lead-up to the Great War



Gallery 2 – Model of CGS *Canada*. CWM 19880001-598

The RNCC

The Royal Naval College of Canada, initially located in Halifax, produced in its first class four future flag officers who played prominent roles in World War II: Rear Admirals EL Houghton; LW Murray; CRH Taylor; and Vice Admiral C Jones. The College was destroyed in the 1917 Explosion and subsequently relocated at Esquimalt.

Before the creation of the Canadian Navy, Canada had either purchased or had built a fleet of some 32 armed vessels for fisheries protection, most notably the CGS *Canada*, a protection cruiser manned and armed in all respects as a warship. Canada's first naval cadets

were assigned to her for training, and during hostilities she was refitted to carry heavier armament. She became HMCS *Canada* during the war and served on east coast patrols.

After lengthy parliamentary debate, the *Naval Service Act* was passed on 4 May 1910, creating the Department of Naval Service. The Act provided, *inter alia*, for ships, a naval reserve service, a naval volunteer force, and a naval college, which was established in 1911 as the Royal Naval College of Canada (RNCC). The *Naval Discipline Act* of 1866 was to apply to the Naval Service.

The Two Cruisers

Two aging coal-fired cruisers, HMS *Niobe* and HMS *Rainbow* were then obtained from Britain for training purposes, one for the east coast, the other for the west.

HMS "*Niobe*" (*Diadem* Class Cruiser) was transferred from the RN on 6 September 1910 and reached Halifax with a skeleton crew on 21 October – Trafalgar Day. Later, she ran aground during a training cruise in 1911. However, she served with the RN 4th Cruiser Squadron along the east coast until paid off in 1915, to become a depot ship, and later participated in rescue operations in the Halifax Explosion disaster..



HMS *Rainbow* (*Apollo* Class Cruiser), the smaller of the two cruisers, arrived at Esquimalt on 7 November 1910 and assumed duties including ceremonial visits, fishery patrols and training. When World War I broke out *Rainbow* was already underway on a mission to find and engage ships of the Imperial German Navy in the Pacific Ocean, in particular the *Leipzig* and the *Nurnberg*, and



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Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia inspects crew of HMCS *Rainbow*. CWM 19890167-005

missed the *Leipzig* by only a day. She sailed out of Esquimalt until de-commissioned in 1917, when her crew was sent to Halifax to join *Niobe*.

In the CWM photo to the left, the Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia, the Hon Thomas Paterson, is seen inspecting the crew of *Rainbow* shortly after her arrival at Esquimalt in 1910. With him is the Canadian-born Rear Admiral (RN ret'd) Charles Kingsmill, the first director of the Naval Service of Canada, and other senior officers. The boy sailor, seen in the picture without a rifle, is typical of the many boys who were recruited into the RN and the RCN and, as evidence of this, a sailor's uniform on display in Gallery 2 is that of a 15-year old Lionel Channing.

The First Canadian Submarines

With the outbreak of war in 1914, British Columbia was concerned with coastline defence. Without authority from either the Federal or Provincial Government, the Premier of BC, Sir Richard McBride, secretly purchased two submarines from a Seattle shipyard that were being built for the Chilean Navy. Thus, for a few days British Columbia had its own



Gallery 2 – Convoy in Bedford Basin. Painted by future member of the Group of Seven, Arthur Lismer. Several examples of dazzle –camouflage can be seen here. CWM 19710261-0344

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navy. A few days after the purchase the Canadian Navy took over the boats, designated HMCS CC1 and CC2, in Victoria where they remained until 1917. They sailed to Halifax escorted by their submarine tender HMCS *Shearwater* and were the first warships ever to transit the Panama Canal under the White Ensign. The *Shearwater* cap and tally on display in Gallery 2 was one of the first to bear the letters HMCS.

Submarine Warfare



Gallery 2 – Cap with HMCS. This cap belonged to a crew member of HMCS *Shearwater*.
CWM 19810718-004

When Germany unleashed unrestricted submarine warfare against merchant shipping, the RN had no effective counter measures to combat it until a system of convoys was adopted. Halifax became a focal point for the assembly of merchant ships destined for United Kingdom ports. The first convoy out of Halifax was coded HX1. The painting by Arthur Lismer “Convoy in Bedford Basin” on display in Gallery 2 shows merchant ships and their escorts, many sporting the newly-developed dazzle form of camouflage. Principles of anti-submarine warfare and equipment were developed including: underwater detection by sound, the means of location of enemy boats by their own radio signals (direction finding) and the use of depth charges.

Significant improvements in weaponry can be seen in the contrast between the crude early Canadian depth charge used in World War I, displayed in Gallery 2, which is much smaller and more primitive than the 300-pound World War II depth charge on display in Gallery 3 replete with tray and thrower.

The newly-created Royal Canadian Naval Air Service flew anti-submarine patrols out of Dartmouth, NS in

1918 until November 11th.

Together, the wartime fleet, although not a very impressive force, successfully met the submarine threat that appeared in Canadian waters in 1917 – 18..

Mine Warfare

Similarly, improvements in the effectiveness of naval mines can be seen by examining the mine laid by the German submarine U-153 off the entrance to Halifax harbour in September 1918 and on display in Gallery 2. This mine floated beneath the surface of the wa-



Gallery 2 – German Naval Mine. Laid off Halifax harbour in September 1918. CWM 19390002-460

ter, anchored to a weight at the bottom. A ship striking one of the four “horns” would trigger an explosion. The much larger and more devastating WWII version can be seen in Gallery 3.

A British and a German naval mine of the 1914 – 1918 period are also on display in the LeBreton Gallery of the museum, the larger of the two, the German, being cut away to show the mechanism for training purposes.

Between the Wars

As the war ended, recommendations for the disbandment of the RCN were narrowly rejected but

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declining economic conditions led to delays in upgrading infrastructure facilities on both coasts.

By the end of the war *Niobe* and *Rainbow* were no longer serviceable, and in 1920 Canada obtained two destroyers, HMCS *Patriot* and *Patrician* from the RN which was divesting itself of surplus warships. In 1922 the RCN paid off the two submarines and *Aurora*, a cruiser acquired at the end of the war. The Naval College was closed and RCN strength was reduced from about 1,000 to some 400. Only the *Patriot* and *Patrician* were retained, together with four minesweeping trawlers.

These two aging ships were subsequently replaced by Admiralty-designed destroyers modified to Canadian specifications. HMCS *Saguenay* and *Skeena* were commissioned in 1931. Subsequently the first

Canadian-built ship to be commissioned into the RCN since the end of WW I was the auxiliary training schooner *Venture* in 1937.

During the last days of peace a Canadian Manufacturers Association went to Britain to investigate war production facilities and brought back details of the Bangor-class minesweeper and the design for the corvette. The corvette was the largest and most successful class of escort warship ever to be built and, with the Bangor mine-sweeper, was one of the principal weapons that brought victory in that most crucial of World War II naval campaigns, the Battle of the Atlantic, the story of which is depicted in the War Museum and will be covered in Supplement 2 in the November issue of *The Torch*.

The Halifax Harbour Explosion

Panels and artifacts in Gallery 2 depict the devastation caused by the Halifax Harbour Explosion which occurred on December 6th, 1917, when the French ammunition ship SS *Mont Blanc*, fully loaded with explosives, collided with the Norwegian ship, SS *Imo*, caught fire and

exploded killing some 1,600 people and injuring over 9,000 more. All buildings and structures within 2 square kilometers of the explosion along the adjacent shore were destroyed.

HMCS *Niobe*, which was moored 700 yards from the *Mont Blanc*, was the first ship to give the alarm after the collision. A ship's whaler pulled to the scene and tried to pass a line to the *Mont Blanc*. The ship exploded and the only survivor of the crew of seven, Able Seaman William Becker, was rescued alive on the Dartmouth shore where he had swum. He was awarded the Albert Medal for gallantry in saving life at sea.



Gallery 2. Albert Medal of AB Becker. CWM 19890161-001

National Defence Navy Centennial Web Site

An excellent source of information about this event can be found at:

www.navy.forces.gc.ca/centennial

FCWM Naval Fact Sheets

More in-depth coverage of some topics mentioned in this Supplement can be found in the following Fact Sheet produced by the Friends of the Canadian War Museum:

HMCS *Niobe*: The Birth of a Navy

This Fact Sheet can be viewed on our web site:

www.friends-amis.org

Additional navy-related fact sheets are in preparation and will be announced in future Naval Supplements.

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