

For Posterity's Sake
A Royal Canadian Navy Historical Project
The Royal Canadian Navy
1910 - 1960
The Royal Canadian Navy (Reserve)
From the collection of Gordon Arnold (Art) Broster
Courtesy of Cathy Robinson

Roll along Wavy Navy, roll along,
Roll along Wavy Navy, roll along,
If they ask us who we are,
We're the RCNVR,
Roll along Wavy Navy, roll along,

Words of a song heard in ports around the world, they were a rallying point for 80,000 young Canadians who made their country's navy the third largest in the free world.

The achievements of the RCNVR—Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve—and of the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve during the Second World War more than justified a decision taken in 1923 to set aside a sizeable portion of a limited naval budget to create reserve forces.

That decision enabled Canadian naval authorities in 1939 to call up 1,800 trained reserves immediately, and provided for an organization that was to prove invaluable in the recruitment and training of the thousands of young men who sought to serve their country in the Navy.

Similarly today, the Royal Canadian Navy (Reserve), successor to the RCNVR and the RCNR, is designed to produce officers and men trained and ready for any emergency.

The story of Canada's naval reserves really began more than 100 years ago, when a militia act was passed authorizing the formation of a provincial naval corps on the Great Lakes.

The concept of a body of Canadian citizen-sailors made its appearance in June, 1846, when most of the previous military regulations, passed prior to the union of Upper and Lower Canada, were either repealed or consolidated by a new act bringing control of the militia into line with conditions resulting from the creation of the Province of Canada.

The act authorized the Governor to form a "Provincial Naval Corps" and to appoint a commodore who would rank with lieutenant-colonels of the militia.

In 1855, a new militia act was passed authorizing formation of "Volunteer Marine Companies" at Kingston, Cobourg, Toronto, Hamilton, Port Stanley, Dunnville and Oakville. Each company was to consist of a captain, a lieutenant and 50 men, and provision was made for appointment of a commodore to command the whole.

In 1862, provision was made for the formation of "Marine and Naval Companies." While the name had changed, the locations of the seven companies remained the same.

The Volunteer Militia Act of 1863 substituted the phrase "Naval Companies" and provided that "Each Naval Company shall consist of one Captain and such other officers and such number of seamen not exceeding 75 as may be appointed by the Commander-in-Chief." That same year, the Garden Island Naval Company was formed, bringing the number of Naval Companies to eight.

By 1866, five Naval Companies were still in existence. They were located at Garden Island, Toronto, Hamilton, Dunnville and Port Stanley. In March of that year, the Garden Island company was replaced by a newly-formed infantry company, No. 5 Company, 4th "Frontenac" Battalion.

Under the threat of Fenian raids in that same year, the remaining four Naval Companies were called out. They were placed on active service on March 8, 1866, and were relieved from duty on the 26th of the same month. In June, 1866, they were called out again.

The Naval Companies at Hamilton and Port Stanley performed shore duty during this period and did it well. In his 1910 history of the Fenian raids, Captain John A. Macdonald wrote: "Danger hovered everywhere, and the utmost vigilance was necessary to guard every point. The country was overrun with Fenian spies and emissaries, and the arrests of suspicious characters were numerous. Even at home there were traitors who needed watching, as there were some who were ready to give countenance and support to the enemy. Thus the companies who remained at their local headquarters, and the Home Guards who were enrolled for home protection, did remarkably good service along those lines."

In August, 1866, the Toronto Naval Company was disbanded, and the Dunnville Naval Company suffered the same fate in January, 1867. During 1867, the Port Stanley Naval Company was replaced by an infantry company, but this new company was disbanded in September, 1868.

The first Militia and Defence Act of the Dominion was passed in 1868. All authorized volunteer corps existing on October 1, 1868, the effective date of the new act, were permitted to continue in the militia provided they signified their intention to do so by February, 1869.

It appears that the Hamilton Naval Company failed to take advantage of this offer and was accordingly dropped. Thus the last Naval Company of the militia disappeared.

Two Marine Companies were organized in Bonaventure County, P.Q., in February, 1869, but were removed from the active militia list in June, 1874, by a militia general order reducing the strength of the active militia.

A third Marine Company was later organized in Bonaventure County but was disbanded in March, 1874, "having become non-effective."

A Naval Brigade, formed at Halifax during 1868, remained in existence until it became the 2nd Halifax Brigade of Garrison Artillery on December 9, 1870.

Ten years later came the unfortunate incident of HMS Charybdis, the first Canadian-owned warship. An old-type steam corvette which had just finished seven years on the China Station, the Charybdis was turned over to the Canadian government by the British, who did not consider her worth the expense of refit for another commission.

Intended for use in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and for training naval volunteers and boys, she was repaired at the expense of the Canadian Government and sailed to Saint John, N.B., early in 1881. While there she broke loose in a gale and damaged harbour shipping. On another occasion, two Saint John citizens were drowned when a rotten gang plank broke as they were walking on board.

The Government was severely criticized over the Charybdis affair and the British Admiralty was asked to take back its gift. The Minister of Marine and Fisheries said that, during the Atlantic voyage, the ship had proved heavy to handle and would require a larger crew, meaning a greater annual expenditure than had been contemplated. A heavy outlay also would be necessary in order to prepare for training purposes. The Admiralty agreed to take the Charybdis back and, in August, 1882, she was towed to Halifax where she was delivered to the naval authorities there.

From the point of view of Canadian naval development, the Charybdis incident was unfortunate, for it was often afterwards referred to in Canada as a warning to those who advocated any Canadian naval undertaking.

The first really effective naval reserve force in what is now Canada, was the Royal Newfoundland Naval Reserve. Manned by young fishermen from St. John's and the numerous out-ports, this force, an integral part of the Royal Naval Reserve, was raised at the turn of the century. Their drill-ship, HMS Calypso (later renamed HMS Briton), was a familiar sight for many years. Some 1500 R. Nfld. N.R. men served with distinction in HM Ships during the First World War and, in fact, more than 100 of them joined HMCS Niobe when she sailed for war service with the Fourth Cruiser Squadron in 1914. The Royal Newfoundland Naval Reserve, a culmination of the traditional Newfoundland "nursery of seamen" of the days of Queen Elizabeth I, was disbanded in 1920.

In 1909, a memorandum on "Naval Defence considered in connection with the constitution of the Naval Militia of Canada," was prepared by Brigadier-General W.D. Otter, then Chief of the Canadian General Staff.

After tracing the history of naval affairs in Canada, he warned: "Canada can no longer afford to neglect her naval resources. On the one hand, the naval and military power of the United States goes on increasing; on the other, a great portion of the British Fleet lies manacled in home waters. In other words, in the event of war with the United States, Canada will remain without assistance from other parts of the Empire for a period longer than has hitherto been reckoned."

It was not, however, the threat of United States naval might, but that of Germany which turned the tide. Realizing she could not forever rest securely inactive behind the protective power of the Royal Navy, Canada brought the Royal Canadian Navy into being with the Naval Service Act of May 4, 1910.

Provision also was made for a Naval Reserve Force and a Naval Volunteer Force, but it was to be several years before steps were taken to implement this portion of the act.

In 1913, a group of enthusiasts came forward in Victoria, B.C., with the proposal that they form a naval reserve. The group was composed mainly of young men who had seen previous reserve service with the Royal Navy. They wanted to establish a force similar to the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, which had been formed in 1903.

In this the group was encouraged by Commander Walter Hose, RCN, Senior Naval Officer at Esquimalt, who was to have much to do with citizen-sailors in future years and may well be called the "father" of today's naval reserve.

In addition, the enthusiasts had the support of a number of professional and business men in Victoria.

Finally given permission to use the facilities at Esquimalt, the volunteers drilled periodically at the dockyard and several regular force officers and petty officers volunteered to act as instructors.

This small body, which had no official status, no meeting place of its own and no-pay-days, blazed the trail for all the official Canadian naval reserve organizations that were to follow.

In May, 1914, the government established a Naval Volunteer Force under the provisions of the Naval Service Act. The force was to consist of officers and men enrolled as volunteers, but engaging to serve in time of war.

With an authorized strength of 1,200 men, the force was to be organized into 100-man companies within three sub-divisions — the Atlantic sub-division including the area from the Atlantic Coast inland to a line just west of Quebec City; the Lake sub-division extending from there to beyond Brandon, Man., and the Pacific sub-division taking in the whole area farther to the west.

The companies were to be located in the larger cities at first and in a few smaller cities later.

When hostilities began, however, the only naval reserve force actually in existence was the volunteer unit at Victoria. Its members took an important part in the manning of HMCS Rainbow, the submarines CC 1 and CC 2 and their parent ship, the sloop Shearwater, and other vessels at Esquimalt. They also provided some men for the British cruiser Newcastle after her arrival in B.C. waters.

Otherwise, only preliminary steps had been taken towards establishing the reserve on a country-wide basis. In fact, no serious attempt was made during the first year-and-a-half of war to enlist any considerable number of men for naval service. In February, 1916, the Minister of Naval Service offered to obtain recruits in Canada for service in the RN. The Admiralty accepted and the Canadian Government authorized enrolment of 5,000 men in the Overseas Division of the Royal Naval Canadian Volunteer Reserve.

Approximately 1,700 men were enrolled under this scheme and the number probably would have been larger had not the East Coast Patrols later in the war become the primary naval need as far as manning was concerned.

These volunteers served in a number of areas, largely manning trawlers and drifters on anti-submarine patrols. The latter years of the war saw them serving in British home waters, based on HMS Cormorant at Gibraltar and at Sierra Leone, British West Africa.

Canadian warships today wear a maple leaf device on their funnels, but it was on British naval vessels serving out of British West Africa that the device was first seen — placed there by the Canadian volunteers, anxious that all should know the origin of the ships' companies.

The contribution by naval reservists to the huge expansion of Canada's naval force during the Second World War was foreshadowed by the RNCVR contribution of the First World War.

In round numbers, the total strength of the RCN at the end of July, 1914, did not exceed 350 officers and men, while the RNCVR was composed of about 250 officers and men, all of them in the Victoria company. By the end of the war, there had been a total enrolment of 9,600 as follows:

RCN	—	1,000
RN and RNR	—	600
RNCVR		
Atlantic Sub-division		4,300
Pacific Sub-division		2,000
Overseas Division		1,700
Total	—	9,600

Deaths from all causes totalled 150.

In addition to the above enrolment, a large but unknown number of Canadians enlisted and served in the RN.

In line with post-war demobilization, the RNCVR was disbanded on June 15, 1920.

The naval reserve of today had its beginning in the 1920's. The funds made available to the RCN in 1923 were scarcely sufficient to keep one warship in operation and Walter Hose (then Director of Naval Service, with the rank of Commodore) decided the money could be better used in organizing the naval reserve.

The Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve was officially established on January 31, 1923, with an authorized complement of 70 officers and 930 men. The prefix "Royal" was soon afterwards added to the title.

At about the same time the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve was established, with an authorized complement of 70 officers and 430 men.

The RCNVR enlisted civilians who did not follow a sea-faring career; the RCNR consisted of men who possessed a professional knowledge of ships and the sea.

The quarters for the first RCNVR divisions could hardly be called ideal. One division was located in an old firehall, another in rooms over a laundry and others in workshops, basements and warehouses.

The RCNVR was originally organized into companies or half-companies, in each of the following cities: Calgary, Charlottetown, Edmonton, Halifax, Hamilton, Montreal, Ottawa, Quebec, Regina, Saint John, Saskatoon, Toronto, Vancouver and Winnipeg. Montreal had two companies, one French-speaking and the other English-speaking. By September, 1939, units were also in existence in Kingston, London, Port Arthur and Prince Rupert.

During the later 1930's, as additional warships were acquired, the complements of both the RCN and RCNVR were increased.

During this period personnel of the RCNVR and the RCNR were earmarked for various duties which they would be required to assume at the outbreak of war.

In 1937, two more types of reserves came into being. One was the Supplementary Reserve, a part of the RCNVR. The other was the Fishermen's Reserve, which was established as a separate section of the RCNR. The Supplementary Reserve consisted largely of yachtsmen. The Fishermen's Reserve, as its name implies, was made up of fishermen and was confined to the West Coast.

On September 1, 1939, the reserves were placed on active service and, on September 10, Canada declared war. There were at this time approximately 2,000 officers and men in the regular force and another 2,000 in the two reserves. Thereafter, most of these who enlisted in the navy were enrolled as "VRs". The estimate of September, 1939, for a strength of 5,000 was periodically raised until, by July, 1940, an overall figure of more than 15,000 was laid down.

February of that year saw the strength of the RCNVR exceed that of the regular force for the first time and in January, 1941, when the navy consisted of roughly 15,000 persons, about 8,000 of them were volunteer reservists.

In all, approximately 100,000 Canadians were enrolled in the Canadian navy during the Second World War. The greatest number borne at any one time was on January, 1945, when more than 87,000 officers and men were serving. Of this total, approximately 78,000 belonged to the RCNVR, 5,300 to the RCNR and 4,384 to the RCN.

This number did not include 5,300 women in the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service, an auxiliary force which in later years was to become an integral part of both the regular force and the reserve. The WRCNS was officially established on July 31, 1942.

The special roles of the Royal Canadian Sea Cadets and of the University Naval Training Divisions deserve mention. The sea cadets, sponsored by the Navy League of Canada, had been in existence since 1917, but the navy did not begin assisting their training and administration with the Navy League until 1941. The RCSC had 23 corps in June, 1941, and by the end of the war there were 92 with a total enrolment of about 15,000. Sea Cadets provided a large pool of young men well started on their naval training.

The UNTD's were organized in 1943 at 15 universities and five hundred and fifty-four officers and men of the UNTD went on active service during the remainder of hostilities.

The large numbers of naval volunteers took care of the growth of the Canadian naval fleet. From six destroyers in 1939, the navy expanded to a fleet of approximately 400 fighting ships. In the North Atlantic alone Canadian ships escorted more than 25,000 (cargo-laden) merchant ships from North American to United Kingdom ports.

By 1944, Canadian warships were carrying the major burden of North Atlantic convoy duty and most of the officers and men who manned these ships were members of the reserves.

Officers and men of the reserves also served in the Mediterranean, on the Murmansk convoy routes, in the English Channel, the Caribbean and in the Pacific.

The only Canadian naval Victoria Cross of the war was won by a naval reservist. He was Lieutenant Robert Hampton Gray, DSC, RCNVR, serving in the RN aircraft carrier Formidable. At the cost of his own life, he sank a Japanese destroyer by crashing his damaged aircraft into the ship.

When the war ended, a number of reservists continued their naval service. Some transferred to the regular force, others served in the interim force. But the large majority returned to "civvy street", taking up where they left off when they joined the navy. On January 1, 1946, the RCNR and RCNVR were combined to become the Royal Canadian Navy (Reserve).

The divisions were re-established on a peacetime basis and many war veterans resumed their association with the Navy as members of the RCN(R).

In 1949, the training program underwent considerable change. Besides providing general training, specified divisions were made responsible for specialized training in such subjects as gunnery, communications, torpedo anti-submarine and navigation direction.

The increasing world tension that followed the brief respite of the early postwar years brought an expansion of the Armed Forces, and again the call went out to the reserves. Officers and men were enrolled for limited lengths of full-time service with the opportunity of transferring to the regular force. Many stayed in the service.

In the midst of this rebuilding and transition period, the United Nations took action in Korea against North Korean aggression and again reservists were sailing in RCN ships in a theatre of war.

As the Korean situation gradually eased from an all-out war to a police action, the strength of the regular force began to near its authorized ceiling. The complement had been filled by a mixture of new entries through direct recruiting and by transfers from the reserve.

In April, 1953, a major step was taken toward building the RCN(R) into an organization which could produce officers and men who would be trained and ready if another emergency arose.

That step was the establishment of a new command known as Commanding Officer Naval Divisions, with headquarters at Hamilton, Ont. Prior to this, the reserve force had been administered from Naval Headquarters in Ottawa by the Director of Naval Reserves.

A training centre for new entry reserves was established at the new headquarters, to provide training ashore and afloat during the summer months. The headquarters and Great Lakes Training Centre are located on Hamilton Bay, with excellent berthing facilities under the ship name of HMCS Patriot.

Ships up to the size of anti-submarine frigates are now assigned to the command during the summer and carry out training cruises on the Great Lakes.

The WRCNS returned to the scene in 1951, this time as an integral part of the RCN(R), its members receiving the same rates of pay and governed by the same rules and regulations as the men. On January 26, 1955, the Cabinet approved the entry of Wrens as members of the RCN regular force.

In 1958, the complement of the RCN(R) was set at 900 officers and 3,700 men and wrens.

Today there are 21 naval divisions located in major population centres from the Atlantic to the Pacific. All provinces are represented. Regular force staffs maintain the divisions' buildings and provide the necessary daily administration.

The Commanding Officer Naval Divisions at the Hamilton headquarters is Commodore E.W. Finch-Noyes, CD, RCN. At COND, a staff of regular force officers and men co-ordinates the training of reserve personnel and the maintenance of all naval reserve establishments. The command is responsible to Naval Headquarters in Ottawa for carrying out policies and orders affecting Canada's naval reserves.

Today, as in the past, the officers and men of the Royal Canadian Navy (Reserve) stand ready to serve Canada when and where they are needed.