

UNTDA 2023 A Thumbnail Naval Reserve History

Stephen Rybak (NON 64), with input on the later years by Dave Craig (Dis 74), prepared this brief overview of Canada's Naval Reserve as background to a panel on "The Naval Reserve at 100" at the 2023 Centennial Conference in Victoria.

“...Then went down to the great waters,
To the cold and boredom, the laughter and the fight,
Grocer's clerks, they are, and brokers
Turned quartermasters, signalmen and stokers;
Salesmen, soft of tongue, and glib,
With a new cut to their jib;
Yachtsmen, and farmers, garage hands and tailors,
Men from factories and offices and stores, now turned to sailors.”

The Beginnings

- Wednesday, January 31, 1923 - OIC 139 ... “doth hereby authorize the organization and maintenance of a Force not more than 1,000 volunteer officers and men to be called The Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve.” The prefix “Royal” was soon added.
- Half companies were established in Montreal, Hamilton, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Edmonton, Calgary, Halifax, Toronto, Quebec, Saskatoon, St. John, Regina and Charlottetown by September 1923; Vancouver and Prince Rupert added in 1924.
- Quarters were hardly ideal - in an old fire hall, above a laundry, in workshops, a basement, lumber warehouses and a lockable room in a militia armoury. Training was rudimentary with weekly drills and two weeks summer training with the Navy.
- Ratings were paid 25 cents per drill night - many contributed the stipend to a ship's fund. Officers were only paid while on annual training.
- Officers were expected to furnish their own uniforms - “a frock coat, A Mess Dress Jacket, vending Waistcoats (blue and white), a Cocked Hat, Epaulettes, a full-dress belt, boot and shoes necessary for above, and their white uniforms.”
- The RCNVR became known as the “Wavy Navy” due to the three wavy tapes on men's collars and the officer's undulating sleeve rank braid.
- The Royal Canadian Naval Reserve (70 officers and 430 men) also come into being in 1923 for professional sailors by trade unlike the RCNVR men from “civvy street”.
- Captain (later Admiral) Walter Hose is recognized as the creator of the RCNVR in a period of economic recession, war weariness and severe government cutbacks. The Naval Secretary of the time noted:

“If a Dominion is to spend money on a navy, people must be convinced a navy is necessary.

In Canada, a large majority of the people live far from the sea and do not visualize the necessity for safe sea communications.

The first necessity therefore is to educate the people.

The most effective way of educating the people is to bring the Navy to their doors, into the lives of families and friends.

A small navy is of no value as an educative measure as its personnel live in the neighbourhood of naval bases; but a reserve force distributed across Canada would bring the Navy home to a great number of inland people”

- Every half-company had an uneven start, gradually growing out of their very un-naval beginnings and coping with little equipment that consisted of rifles, wooden cutlasses, naval whalers or cutters, naval field pieces and rope and signaling flags. With funding for the Navy essentially frozen, instruction in basic seamanship, gunnery and signaling with plenty of drill and lectures on naval customs and traditions were the norm. Well-off Commanding Officers supplied much of the training gear. Wives mended signal flags. Gradually the units were supplied with more technical gunnery equipment and in 1937 a national wireless telegraphy net was established.
- It took DND until 1930 to publish a revised set of regulations for the terms and conditions of entry, service, promotions, pay, trades, training, compensation, uniforms, kit, discharge, and retirement. There were three trades for ratings - seamen, technical and logistics- and four for Officers - naval, medical, accounting and engineering.
- Between the wars, the RCNVR never reached its full complement of 70 Officers and 930 men. The call of the sea, uniforms, messes, social functions, sports, and the “prize” of two weeks of training at sea served to hold many of the units together, especially during the depression. Innovative work schemes kept some ratings off relief and under the guise of deterring theft, some began to sleep at their Units.
- Not all the Divisions were a huge success - each had its ups and downs - but, thanks to the dedication and persistence of their early leaders, all fulfilled their basic tasks.
- In 1935 Canada’s defence budget was increased for the first time in 15 years for a cautious and selective re-armament. Destroyers and minesweepers were added to the fleet. The RCNVR was re-organized. Half-companies became “Divisions” in 1936 and new units were established in Port Arthur (1937), London (1938) and Kingston and Windsor (1939) to bring the RCNVR up to 18 Divisions and its full authorized strength.
- The Supplementary Reserve, consisting largely of yachtsmen, was attached to the RCNVR in 1937 and a West Coast Fishermen’s Reserve was created.
- With the declaration of war looming, the Wavy Navy was called to active duty along with the RCN’s six destroyers, four minesweepers, a schooner and the 2000 regular force personnel. On September 10, 1939, the RCNVR went to war.
- Walter Hose’s foresight paid off. With a Victoria Division (1940) an organization of 19 recruiting and basic training centres the RCNVR reached far inland, further than the RCN could have ever reached for recruits. Overnight, the Wavy Navy almost doubled the strength of the Navy. By January 1941, more than half of the Navy’s 15,000 personnel were VRs.

- At the peak of the war, nearly 96,000 Officers, Wrens and Men wore Navy blue and of those more than 77,000 were proud members of the RCNVR.
- Almost every one of the VRs was introduced to the Navy as they crossed the quarter decks of the Stone Frigates, which were commissioned as HMC Ships in 1941.
- Civilian volunteers were taken on strength, performed part-time evening drills, then, as required, were called to active service for full-time initial training at their Division. After eight weeks basic training and additional trades training, VRs were drafted to the coasts for further training and a fleet posting.
- A lack of accommodations and training equipment plagued Divisions throughout the war. Messing was at times, dreadful — the 125 men of the Montreal Division were fed from a single four-burner stove.
- The RCNVR was thrown into the war totally unprepared - there was no policy, no supply system, constant moves to new quarters, little training equipment, few instructors, no administrative policies.
- Commodore ER Brock, CO Montreal Division, paid for the expenses and pay for his unit for the first months of the war - he never recovered the funds. One CO bought boots at a department store for a draft of volunteers. Another commandeered his firm's bookkeepers to handle Divisional pay and admin duties.
- Gradually order appeared in the chaos — the red tape of routine slowly settled in. In 1941, the first common training syllabus was introduced, and instructors drafted to the Stone Frigates, admin routines were formalized and barracks were constructed for some Divisions.
- With continuing manpower shortages, WRENS were recruited into the Naval Service in 1942, the Navy began to assist Sea Cadet Corps through RCNVR units and in 1943 the first of 23 University Naval Training Divisions units were organized to select and train university students for commissioned rank in the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve.
- The UNTD was tasked to ensure training of future officers developed high qualities of character and leadership. Personal integrity, sound judgement and strength of character were viewed as necessary as the ability to meet exacting standards of technical and professional proficiency.
- The real force of the RCNVR was felt in recruiting. HMCS York alone recruited nearly 17,000 Officers, Wrens and Men during the war. The stop-gap organization created in 1923 grew into a giant, providing the manpower for a fleet of more than 400 ships.
- These ships helped escort nearly 25,000 merchantmen across the Atlantic, on the Murmansk run, to the Caribbean, in the Mediterranean, guarded our coasts, swept the approaches to Normandy, fought in the Channel, raided in the Adriatic, and were in on the kill of 27 submarines. Wherever a ship with a red maple leaf on its funnel was to be found, the majority of men aboard were RCNVR and 44 % of commanding officers wore the Wavy Navy stripes.

- The only Victoria Cross was won by Lt. Hampton Gray, DSC, RCNVR.
- Four RCNVR Minesweeping Officers won their place in history as members of the Rats of Tobruk during the siege of the North African outpost in 1942.
- Back home, the VRs of Unicorn (Saskatoon) took time off from their training to help bring in the bumper wheat crop of labour-short 1944: then they went to sea.
- Just as they welcomed Canadians into the Navy, the Stone Frigates bid sailors farewell and a return to civvy street as demobilization centres until late 1946.
- The conversation to a peace time role for the RCNVR was almost as unsettling as it was to go to war - the Wavy Navy disappeared.
- January 1, 1946, the RCNVR and the RCNR were merged to form the RCN(R). The distinctive Officer's wavy lace was exchanged for the regular force braid. "Roll Along, Wavy Navy, Roll Along" was seldom sung in messes anymore.
- The post-war Navy was not faced with any near-fatal budget cuts as it had in 1923, but its strength dipped to 6800 in 1946 to build up to nearly 20,000 in 1960. The RCN(R) kept pace.
- Ambitious plans called for a reserve of 18,000, but the closest the Naval Reserve got to its complement was in 1955 with 13,132 enrolled - 6080 Active, 4992 Officers on the retired list and 2060 Men and Wrens on the emergency list. WRENS were made part of the Reserve in 1951, four years before they returned to the RCN.
- Victoria's Stone Frigate, commissioned for recruiting only in 1944, became a Reserve Division in 1947. Cabot in St. Johns was commissioned in 1949 and Cariboo in Cornerbrook came on board in 1953.
- Reserves could qualify for almost every RCN trade, even the most technical and "long courses" were offered for Officers and Men to qualify in Gunnery, Torpedo, Anti-Submarine, Communications, Engineering. The trades theory could be mastered during winter drills and crammed practical courses during the summer months.
- Naval Reserve Air Squadrons were established in 1953-54 in Toronto, Kingston, Victoria, Quebec City, and Calgary and tenders established in Kitchener and North Bay.
- COND - Commanding Officer Naval Divisions - became a separate command in Hamilton in 1953. Three years later, 3,767 reservists from the 22 units, air squadrons and tenders took naval training.
- In 1954, Divisions were mobilized to aid civil authorities in the sodden wake of Red River floods and Hurricane Hazel.
- Training was at a relatively high technical level with a two-truck mobile Anti-Submarine Training Units stopping at each Division for two weeks. Air Squadrons were rated at just below the performance of a front-line carrier squadron. The Friday night radio net crackled across the country. Each unit produced a specialist trade.

- Reservists served aboard RCN ships on duty in Korean waters. Nearly all coastal units maintained sea-going tenders as large minesweepers. Every summer 700 UNTD Officer Cadets graced the parade square at Stadacona and later Cornwallis.
- The breast of the post-war wave the RCN(R) rode grew smaller as the prospects for another conventional war grew dimmed. Authorized manpower ceiling were cut. Cariboo closed in 1958: Air Squadrons in Kington, Quebec City and Calgary grounded in 1959.
- The focus of training started to shift as the technical complexity of weapons, electrical, engineering and flying grew. Reserve communicators, small ship handlers, divers, engine men, admin and stores clerks, medical attendants, and bandsmen became a trained back-up cadre to the RCN. The Naval Control of Shipping became an almost exclusive field for the Reserve.
- Another name change came in 1961 when the RCNR superseded the (R).
- The big austerity axe fell in 1964 as the military was reorganized and unified. The RCNR was cut by 30% to 16 Divisions and 15 UNTD units. Malahat and Scotian were given last minute reprieves, but Queen Charlotte, Chatham, Queen, Prevost and Nonsuch, two tenders, eight UNTD units and two remaining air squadrons were paid off. The Naval Reserve was reduced to 2700 all ranks.
- That summer, the first ships to fly the new Canadian Maple Leaf flag in place of the White Ensign were two Reserve/UNTD manned Gate Vessels alongside at Royal Military College.
- COND was closed in 1967 and was moved to Ottawa as the Directorate of Naval Reserves, - an orphan, severed from the command structure of Maritime Command. It took two years to bring the Reserve back into Maritime Command again.
- On February 1, 1968 the RCNR became the Sea Reserve, Canadian Armed Forces, and the UNTD integrated into the Reserve Officer University Training Program. Reservists were the last naval personnel to receive the green uniform of unification.
- As Defence White Papers and Policy ignored the Naval Reserve, it became, in some eyes, an organization in search of a purpose in the last three decades of the cold war. It took a leadership role in the Naval Control of Shipping Organization.
- Training programs stressed the development of a self-sufficient capability to man minor war vessels up to coastal minesweepers to assist Regular Force and civilian agencies in peacetime operational tasks in Canada's three oceans. To be a "Shad" was a badge of honour.
- Most Officers were trained in MARS, Logistics, Administration and NCS; ratings could be in a handful of trades. Opportunities for WRENS - as they were still known - were limited ashore, until the late 1970s when they were eligible to serve at sea.
- Five Gate Vessels, primitive, functional ships, were the primary sea training platforms for teaching ratings and junior officers the basics of seamanship, shipboard firefighting,

navigation, communications and diesel mechanics on the Great Lakes, Atlantic and Pacific seaboard. Almost all formal Reserve training was carried out separately from the regular navy.

- The Naval Reserve celebrated its 50th Anniversary with 16 Divisions and an increased complement to 3500. A steady source of recruits was the Student Summer Training Program. Reservists were given and took the opportunity to support the 1976 Montreal Olympics mainly at the yachting competition in the waters off Kingston; were mainstays in the national touring military Tattoos; and wound up serving in Canadian contingents in the United Nations peacekeeping operations in the Middle East.
- Naval Reserve training specifications were re-written and a successful six-year NR training establishment, HMCS Patriot at Albert Head, put largely home-grown training onto a more professional and naval footing.
- HMCS Nonsuch and Queen were re-commissioned in 1975.
- By the end of the 1980's female members of the NR left the clerical, medical, supply and cookery branches to serve as bridge watch keeping officers, in engine rooms, in operation billets in NATO headquarters and in the highly regarded "communications support". In 1989, the most senior appointment in the NR was held by a female, Commodore Laraine Orthlieb - the first female naval flag officer in the Commonwealth.
- The 1985 Naval Presence in Quebec project involved the movement of NR Headquarters from Halifax to Quebec City and the commissioning of four new Naval Reserve Units in Chicoutimi, Step-Îles, Trois Rivières and Rimouski. A Fleet School was established in Quebec City in 1995 to complete the strategy.
- Inland Divisions developed the capability to take Gate Vessels to sea on winter weekends culminating in joint Canada-US NCS exercises - Operation Spring Thaw - forming a small ship "convoy", escorts creating a wide range of wartime scenario exercises. Canadian NCS personnel were involved in planning, directing, and training British and US-run exercises. NR specialists helped revitalize NATO's Convoy Commander Organization.
- In the late 1980's the NR was given new operational responsibilities - Mine Countermeasures and the Maritime Coastal Defence Organization. Two coastal supply vessels and the new Kingston Class coastal patrol ships were intended to form the nucleus of a sea-going NR component. The Gate Vessels were paid off in 1995-96.
- The initiatives were part of the new "total force concept", giving the NR better defined operational raison d'être with reserve and regular standards complementary and interchangeable and a new set of challenges. Professional Reserve MCDV ship's companies sailed with rules of engagement tailored to the mission beyond traditional coastal waters. Reservists took MCDVs to Europe, Hawaii, and the Caribbean and, for the first time in decades, were the first Naval vessels into the Arctic.
- HMCS Prevost was recommissioned in 1990 and Queen Charlotte in 1994.

- A new Maritime Coastal Defence Organization tasking evolved into Harbour Protection and Port Defence roles, making an important contribution to the seaward defence of Canada. The roles increased the ability of the Naval Reserve to support civil authorities, such as security for another Olympic Games in Vancouver.
- Basic training and classification training became more systematized and comparable with the training offered to the regular forces. The Naval Reserve was on its way to being accepted as an equal partner at sea and became the most-cost effective reserve in Canada.
- The mid-90's saw the completion of the MCDV's and the challenge of the Naval Reserve to man these vessels. As part of this effort, the complement of the NR was increased to 5200 to provide sufficient personnel for this task.
- The 12 MCDVs have been deployed to West Africa, Europe, the Arctic, Caribbean and Central America. Reserve crews were supplemented by regular force specialists in the engine rooms and electronics departments. Portable, containerized mission payloads bolster limited mine countermeasure capabilities.
- As an equal partner with increased roles, the Naval Reserve was established as a separate Formation, reporting directly to the Commander, RCN. As part of "One Navy", the reference to RCN(R) was eliminated.
- With the manning of the MCDV's, the number of full-time reserve billets were increased substantially, and many reservists opted for renewing contracts rather than return to part-time service. These "permashads" (as they were known) resulted in a loss of connection to the Naval Reserve Divisions and an increase in transfers to the Regular Force.
- By the early 2000's, exclusive manning of the MCDV's by Naval Reservists (especially in the engineering trades) was becoming increasingly problematic. Increased number of full-time billets and retention in the fleet meant that fewer reservists were available for filling senior positions in the NRD's. Command succession became increasingly challenging, especially at smaller NRD's.
- In 2010, coincident with the centennial of the RCN, several decisions were made to increase the effectiveness of the Navy and eliminate duplication of effort. The Navy was reorganized along functional responsibilities. The West Coast became responsible for training sailors and the East Coast assumed responsibility for all operational deployments.
- As part of the changes, Naval Reservists were now employed on any ship in the fleet (except for submarines). Reserve training was fully integrated into the Regular Force courses.
- In 2012, the Naval Reserve ceased to be a separate Formation and now reported to the Commander Maritime Forces Pacific. The Deputy Commander of the Naval Reserve ceased to be a Regular Force position and now became a full-time Naval Reservist.
- By 2015, recruitment and personnel shortages in all trades were a major issue for the RCN. Naval Reserve Divisions were recognized as the Navy's local public arm to recruit and retain sailors to meet authorized establishments across 33 careers and more than 100 jobs. The modernized NRDs are fully integrated into the RCN as respected partners.

- The Mission - it looks a lot like that given to the RCNVR 100 years ago - train sailors and teams to augment the fleet ashore and afloat; support domestic security and aid civil authorities; and maintain a broad naval presence across Canada.

Volunteers for sea service ... Citizen Sailors ... Bringing the Navy to your home ...
A century of success.

Thank you

Stephen's suggested reading list

PSST... Hey, Sailor! Lookin' for a good read?

They can't transport you to the bounding main for swashes and buckles, but they are a window into in OUR naval history. Get ready to come out of the Shadows in 2023 and celebrate.

Here's some interesting reads.

Heart of Oak, JA Foster, Meutheun, 1985

Volunteers for Sea Service, Crd. Fraser McKee, 1973 (a 50th anniversary publication)

The Corvette Years, Edward O'Connor, Cordillera, 1995

RCN in Retrospect, JA Boutilier, ed., UBC, 1982

Saints, Devils and Ordinary Seamen, L. Wm Puglsey, Collins, 1946

The Corvette Navy, JB Lamb, Macmillian, 1977

UNTidy Tales, CDR RJ Williamson, 1993, E-version free at <https://unttd.org/untidy-tales-2/>

Citizen Sailors, Chronicles of Canada's Naval Reserves, 1910-2010, R. Gimblett and M Hadley, eds., Dundurn, 2010 Discount of 20% available at <https://unttd.org/wp-content/uploads/CentennialEvents.pdf>

The Seabound Coast, the Official History of the Canadian Navy, 1867-1939, Vol 1; W Johnson, W Rowling, R Gimblett, J MacFarlane, eds.; Dundurn, 2010 - a Google book

In Quest of a Canadian Naval Identity, Cdr. R Williamson, 1993, anglefire.com

The Whole Story of a Half-Company, the Navy on PEI in the 20s and 30s;
sailstrait.wordpress.com

[A Chronological Listing of the Establishment of Canada's Naval Reserve Divisions, Stephen Rybak, 2011](#)

And do not forget to search online - try "RCVNR" and the "cities" of the half-companies. You may find yourself in the Naval Museum of Manitoba and the Chippewa story.