

Canadian Naval Operations in World War I (1914-18)

Establishment of the Royal Canadian Navy

The Canadian Navy came into being on 4 May 1910, when the Naval Service Act of Canada received royal assent, and officially became the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) on 29 August 1911. The Act established a Naval College of Canada to train officers in naval science and leadership, and the RCN's first ships, HMCS *Rainbow* and HMCS *Niobe*, former Royal Navy (RN) cruisers, were commissioned for training officers and sailors. The government planned a Canadian naval fleet of five cruisers and six torpedo boat destroyers, to be built in Canada.

Intense Parliamentary debate surrounded the establishment of the RCN. The Liberal government of Sir Wilfrid Laurier favoured a Canadian navy, built and manned by Canadians. The opposition Conservatives under Robert Borden opposed the establishment of a Canadian navy, favouring instead Canada's financial support of the Royal Navy, which would in turn provide for Canada's naval defence. Sixteen months after the establishment of the Canadian Navy, the federal election of 21 September 1911 was won by the Conservatives who had vowed, if elected, to repeal the Naval Service Act. As debate on the "naval question" continued into 1913, reductions in naval funding forced the RCN to lay up *Rainbow* and *Niobe*, and although the Naval Service Act was not repealed, plans for the all-Canadian naval fleet were cancelled.

War in Europe

Great Britain's declaration of war on Germany on 4 August 1914 brought Canada, a dominion of the British Empire, into the war as well. The British Admiralty foresaw at that time that a Canadian naval fleet could not be built rapidly enough for Canada to assume its own naval defence. Britain therefore called on Canada to contribute troops to the land war in Europe, leaving to the Royal Navy the defence of shipping in Canadian waters and in the North Atlantic.

Canadians responded to the call for troops. Regular and reserve naval officers and sailors in Canada reported for active duty in both the RCN and RN, but the RCN would face manpower shortages throughout the war.

War in the Pacific

In July 1914, Mexico was involved in civil war, and two German warships were engaged as members of a multinational naval force in protecting foreign nationals in Mexico. When war was declared, it was essential that the movements of these German ships be known. The RCN training ship HMCS *Rainbow*, under command of the Admiralty, was sent south from Esquimalt, British Columbia, to seek out the German ships on the United States west coast, and to escort two lightly-armed RN ships back to Canadian waters. This mission marked the first occasion on which a RCN ship was sent to sea as a belligerent. *Rainbow* failed to locate the German ships, however, and the RN ships returned north independently.

Meanwhile, the German Vice-Admiral Graf Maximilian von Spee brought his East Asiatic Squadron across the Pacific from the China coast to engage in commerce raiding on the west coast of South America. The German ships that had been operating off the Mexican coast joined von Spee's squadron off Chile. With the departure of these two ships to South America, the German threat to west coast Canadian shipping was removed.

On 1 November 1914, the German squadron met a Royal Navy squadron led by Rear-Admiral Sir Christopher Cradock, commander of the RN's North America and West Indies Station. In the ensuing naval battle off Coronel, Chile, Cradock's flagship HMS *Good Hope* was sunk. Along with Cradock and 900 other men of the Royal Navy, four young Canadian midshipmen also died. The four—William Palmer and Arthur Silver, of Halifax NS, John Hatheway of Fredericton NB, and Malcolm Cann of Yarmouth NS—were members of the Canadian Naval College's first graduating class, and were the first ever RCN casualties.

On 8 December 1914, von Spee's squadron again met the RN off the Falkland Islands, and all but one of the German ships were sunk. The *Dresden* escaped back into the Pacific, where, after eluding RN ships for several months, she was sunk on 14 March 1915.

With *Dresden*'s destruction, the naval threat on the west coast of the Americas ended. Rumours of German ships in northern waters persisted well into the war, however. The naval defence of Canada's west coast was conducted by British, Japanese, and Canadian ships. A flotilla of Canadian auxiliary vessels and the training ship HMCS *Rainbow* patrolled the British Columbia coast from the Strait of Juan de Fuca to Prince Rupert, and before being retired at the end of 1916, HMCS *Rainbow* made three extended patrols as far south as Panama without encountering the enemy.

Canadian Submarines

With the start of war, residents of Canada's British Columbia coast felt threatened by possible German naval attacks. On 4 August 1914, two submarines, newly completed by an American shipyard in Seattle and destined for the Chilean navy, were purchased by the Province of British Columbia to aid in the naval defence of the west coast. The purchase caught Naval Service Headquarters by surprise, but they quickly agreed to the addition to the RCN fleet on 7 August, and the submarines, *CC1* and *CC2*, were immediately placed under the operational control of the Admiralty. For the next three years, the submarines patrolled the coastal waters of British Columbia, although the threat of attack had disappeared in March 1915 with the sinking of *Dresden*.

In June 1917 submarines *CC1* and *CC2*, in the company of their tender HMCS *Shearwater*, departed Esquimalt and made their way to Halifax via the Panama Canal, the first British Empire warships to transit the canal. They arrived in Halifax on 14 October 1917, where they were judged unfit for their intended transit of the Atlantic to join Royal Navy operations in the Mediterranean. *CC1* and *CC2* remained inactive in Halifax until they were paid off and sold for scrap in 1920.

War in the Atlantic

The RCN training ship HMCS *Niobe* was still laid up at Halifax when Canada entered war. *Niobe* was quickly reactivated and by the first of September 1914 was ready for sea. Her role was to be the naval defence of shipping in Canadian waters. *Niobe*'s first assignment, in September 1914, was to escort a Canadian troopship from Halifax to Bermuda and back. Boiler problems prevented her sailing again as a troopship escort to Europe, and *Niobe* was sent instead in late October on her first operational patrol to the Strait of Belle Isle, where a German warship was reportedly operating. The suspected warship was not discovered, and *Niobe* returned to Halifax.

Niobe then joined a Royal Navy squadron blockading New York harbour where nearly thirty German merchant vessels had been bottled up since the start of the war. United States neutrality laws prohibited vessels belonging to belligerents from being outfitted for war in U.S. waters, and the blockading squadron, including *Niobe*, patrolled offshore to prevent the German ships' escaping to international waters. After nine months of active duty off New York, HMCS *Niobe* returned to Halifax on 17 July 1915 in need of a complete refit. Her poor condition precluded restoration, however, and *Niobe* was paid off on 6 September 1915. She served as a depot ship in Halifax until being decommissioned in 1920.

The U-Boat threat

In 1915, the German naval threat was principally in European waters, where surface ships and submarines attacked British shipping. The Admiralty ordered 550 fast motor launches to be built in the U.S. and assembled in Canada for the RN's coastal defence fleet. In Canada, coast watchers and small auxiliary craft were organised for anti-submarine protection, but in 1915 there appeared to be little threat from enemy submarines in the western Atlantic.

In mid-1916, however, German submarines began frequenting the east coast of North America, and in October 1916, began to attack and sink ships. In response, the RCN ordered the construction of twelve

antisubmarine vessels. Canadian government vessels and five private yachts were also integrated into the RCN antisubmarine service.

Germany announced it would begin unrestricted submarine warfare on 1 February 1917. After the United States entered the war on 6 April 1917, U.S. Navy ships joined the antisubmarine defence off Canada's east coast. From that time until the end of the war in November 1918, the small ship antisubmarine fleet would grow from fifty in the spring of 1917 to over one hundred by October 1918.

Convoys

In the summer of 1917, the use of convoys was initiated on the transatlantic shipping routes. Convoy operations required a complex system of shipping controls. A Canadian naval intelligence service, integrated with that of the Royal navy, already existed, and in 1915 a Canadian marine wireless station had been built in southwest Nova Scotia to augment the chain of Royal Navy stations already on the east coast. Convoy operations now required an examination service to inspect incoming merchant vessels, and a system to control the movements of inbound and outbound ships, and to make up the convoys and instruct the masters of the convoyed merchant ships.

The first convoy departed Halifax for Europe on 10 July 1917, and for the remainder of the war, convoys sailed to Europe and the Mediterranean from the Canadian ports of Halifax and Sydney NS, and the U.S. ports of New York and Hampton Roads VA.

Canadian Antisubmarine Fleet

The enemy threat to shipping on the North American east coast continued in 1918 as German submarines intensified their attacks on cargo vessels and fishing boats in Canadian waters. In response, the antisubmarine small ship flotilla was increased by the construction of naval trawlers and drifters. In the spring of 1918, the flotilla numbered fifty vessels; by summer, 112 vessels, and by October 1918, 116 ships were on patrol— 29 RCN, 87 RN.

Royal Canadian Naval Air Service

The Royal Canadian Naval Air Service was established on 5 September 1918. It was tasked with providing air escort to inbound and outbound convoys in the approaches to Halifax and Sydney. Air bases were quickly established at Halifax and Sydney, and each base was initially assigned four single-engine Curtis flying boats. Under the leadership of Royal Air Force officers, the Naval Air Service began training exercises in October 1918, and was so engaged a month later when the war ended.

Aftermath

With the end of the war in November 1918, the question again arose whether Canada should support a single force (the RN) for naval defence of the Empire, or should maintain and strengthen its own national navy, the RCN. The war had shown that the Admiralty could not provide the imperial naval defence umbrella it had promised at the war's start. The "naval question" seemed finally to be answered when Robert Borden's Conservative government declared its support for an independent Royal Canadian Navy that would in future wars act in concert with the RN and the navies of other Dominions.