

The Korean War (1950-1954)

After five years of post-World War tension along the 38th parallel separating North and South Korea, war broke out on 25 June 1950 when troops of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) invaded the Republic of Korea (South Korea). The same day, the United Nations (UN) Security Council adopted a resolution calling on North Korea to cease all hostile action against South Korea and to withdraw north of the 38th parallel. The resolution further called on UN member states to assist in the execution of the resolution and to withhold aid to North Korea. U.S. President Harry Truman appointed General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of Allied forces in Japan, to block the occupation of the South Korean capital, Seoul, until U.S. citizens could be evacuated.

On 27 June it was clear that North Korea had ignored the 25 June resolution. The Security Council adopted a further resolution that declared North Korea's actions to be a breach of the peace and authorised member states to give military assistance to South Korea in repelling the North Korean attack and restoring the security of the Korean Peninsula. United States naval and air forces were ordered by President Truman to go to the immediate assistance of South Korea.

The Canadian Minister of Defence advised Parliament on 27 June that if the Korean situation worsened, the planned deployment of RCN Pacific Destroyer Division to Europe would be cancelled. In anticipation of the RCN's possible deployment to Korea, three Pacific Division destroyers began war readiness preparations. The next day, Secretary of State for External Affairs Lester Pearson declared in the House that Canada was prepared to assist UN forces in Korea. Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent stated on 30 June that Canada did not wish to make war on any nation, and would only become engaged against North Korea in fulfillment its UN obligations. In that event, the government was prepared to send three Pacific Division destroyers in support of UN forces in Korean waters.

The fact that Korea is a peninsula offered unusual scope for naval support. In providing that support a total of eight ships of the Royal Canadian Navy joined their United Nations and Republic of Korea navy colleagues performing a great variety of tasks. They maintained a continuous blockade of the enemy coast, prevented amphibious landings by the enemy, screened carriers from the threat of submarine and aerial attack, and supported the United Nations land forces by bombardment of enemy-held coastal areas. In addition, they protected the friendly islands and brought aid and comfort to the sick and needy of South Korea's isolated fishing villages.

The destruction of the North Korea air force and her small gun-boat navy in the early stages of the war virtually eliminated the danger of enemy attacks on United Nations' ships. There remained, however, the danger of enemy mines and gun-fire from shore batteries as well as the hazards contributed by the geography and climate of the area.

On July 5, 1950, only 11 days after the outbreak of hostilities, HMC Ships *Cayuga*, *Athabaskan* and *Sioux* sailed out of Esquimalt under the command of Captain J.V. Brock. On July 30, local time, the three Canadian destroyers entered Sasebo Harbour, Japan, ready to join in the battle for the Pusan bridgehead in Korea. Before the end of the war in 1953, five other Canadian ships would also serve with the Canadian Destroyer Division, Far East, in the Korean campaign— HMC Ships *Nootka*, *Iroquois*, *Huron*, *Haida* and *Crusader*.

Since the Canadian naval force in Korea consisted of destroyers only, it was usually necessary to operate them as separate units. It was not often, therefore, that the Canadian ships served side by side in Korean waters. They were assigned primarily to the British command on the west coast blockade, but also took their turns serving in east coast operations.

Upon arrival the Canadian destroyers were employed in escort and patrol duties – the most urgent immediate need being the rapid movement of troops to the besieged Pusan bridgehead. In August they moved to the west coast of Korea where they also took part in the bombardment of enemy positions and assisted South Korean *troop* landings on North Korean islands. All three ships operated together for the first time in September 1950 in support of the Inchon landings. The Canadians, assisted by a few light South Korean vessels, formed a task group assigned to protect a flank of the invasion force. These duties were carried out without encountering any enemy opposition.

Following the Inchon landings and United Nations successes in the fall of 1950, it appeared that the war would soon be over. Then, the Chinese intervened in the conflict and the situation was reversed. In December orders were given to evacuate Chinnampo, the port of Pyongyang, and to prepare for a withdrawal from Inchon.

Captain Brock's Task Element, the strongest naval force available in the area with six destroyers – the three Canadian ships, two Australian and one American – was assigned to protect the withdrawal fleet. The military situation was serious. There was danger that the enemy might attack the port. Therefore, the destroyers were ordered to enter the harbour and be prepared to supply gun-fire support.

Upon receipt of an emergency message from Chinnampo late on December 4, 1950, Captain Brock ordered the six destroyers to undertake the night passage up the Taedong River to the port situated some 32 kilometres up-river. It was a hazardous undertaking. The channel was narrow and shallow and the North Koreans had seeded it with mines. Two ships ran aground and were forced to turn back for repairs. The remaining four *destroyers*, under the lead of *Cayuga*, proceeded slowly and cautiously up the channel in an especially nerve-wracking journey in the dark and at low tide. After completing the dangerous operation, the force stood guard against enemy attack which fortunately did not come.

When the troops were safely evacuated the destroyers carried out a bombardment of the port to destroy railway lines, dock installations and huge stocks of strategic materials which had to be left behind. By the next day, December 6, 1950, all ships were clear of the channel and Captain Brock could report his mission successfully completed.

From November 20, 1950, to early January 1951, a period when the United Nations land forces suffered serious reverses, the Canadian ships remained on almost continuous duty on the west coast. In addition to carrier screen duty, they *escorted* shipping, carried out blockade patrols and provided anti-aircraft protection and general support for the forces evacuating Inchon. On December 22, HMCS *Athabaskan* was relieved for repairs and general maintenance. *Sioux* returned to Sasebo on January 2 to prepare for her return to Canada. She was replaced by HMCS *Nootka*. *Cayuga*, after setting a Commonwealth record by completing 50 days on patrol, joined the others in Sasebo on January 8.

In mid-January 1951, the Canadian destroyers came under enemy fire for the first time in the Korean conflict when they joined in a UN bombardment of the port of Inchon then in enemy hands. As HMC Ships *Cayuga* and *Nootka* were leaving Inchon harbour on January 25, the enemy opened fire upon them. Fortunately, the enemy gunnery was inaccurate. The ships then reversed course and silenced the shore batteries with their 4-inch guns. *Cayuga* again came under fire in a return to Inchon two days later, but once again escaped injuries as she carried out the bombardment.

Except for *these* clashes, the first months of 1951 were relatively quiet for the Canadian ships. Much time was spent on carrier screening. This was arduous, but generally uneventful work. The destroyers were there to guard against air and submarine attacks and the crews had ever to be vigilant.

A number of changes of Canadian ships occurred during the spring and summer of 1951. In March HMCS *Cayuga* returned to Canada, replaced by HMCS *Huron*. In May HMCS *Sioux* returned to the theatre to relieve *Athabaskan*. In July and August *Nootka* and *Huron* departed for Canada and *Cayuga* and *Athabaskan* returned for a second tour of duty. The period of land offensive and counter-offensive, from April to June 1951, was also a busy one for the Canadian ships as they began to operate more frequently on the east coast and in blockade patrols. Patrol routine usually included bombarding railways, roads, gun emplacements and numerous other targets.

On the west *coast*, protecting the strategically valuable islands became an important part of the duties of those task units. On the east coast, Wonsan harbour became the pivotal point of naval operations.

During the later months of 1951, while truce negotiations were intermittently carried out, the naval and air forces *saw* an increase in action in the face of enemy attacks on the islands. The difficulty of island defence was illustrated by the fall of Taehwa. This island, lying deep in the Yalu Gulf less than two kilometres from two small Communist-held islands, was defended by two US Army officers and a small force of Korea guerrillas. For several months the Canadian destroyers had helped supply and guard the island. Then, on the night of November 30, 1951, a flotilla of small wooden junks and rubber boats drifted across to the northern beaches. The Canadian destroyers with their sophisticated radar were not on duty in

the area that night. By the time the boats were spotted it was already too late. The well-armed Communist troops quickly overran the guerrilla defences.

At the beginning of 1952 the outlook in Korea was dismal as the truce talks bogged down. Naval operations, however, continued as usual throughout the year. Canadian destroyers were engaged primarily in island defence *work*, carrier screening and inshore patrols. On the west coast, the Haeju area in particular, became the scene of considerable Canadian naval activity. Extending from the eastern edge of the bay of Haeju-man to the island of Kirin, the area is a confused mass of islands and heavily indented peninsulas. For the *Nootka* (which had returned to the theatre to relieve *Sioux* in February), this area was to be the scene of a particularly busy period. Operating in the approaches to Haeju, in the latter half of July and the first days of August, *Nootka* landed intelligence parties daily, and on seven occasions came under enemy shell-fire. Fortunately no casualties resulted.

It was in October 1952 that the Royal Canadian Navy suffered its first and only battle casualties of the war. While on an east coast patrol HMCS *Iroquois* received a direct hit from a shore battery. Three men were killed and ten were wounded.

In November 1952 *Nootka* and *Iroquois* left for Canada; *Athabaskan* returned to the theatre for a third tour, and HMCS *Haida* arrived for her first. *Haida* was the eighth Canadian destroyer to operate in Korean waters. On the east coast, where the rugged terrain forced the railroads to skirt the shore in many places, enemy trains became a favourite target for naval guns. When a "Trainbusters' Club" was formed in mid-1952, the Canadian ships willingly participated. HMCS *Crusader* distinguished herself with a record four trains to her credit. Altogether, Canadian ships accounted for eight of the 28 trains destroyed – an amount out of proportion to the number of Canadian ships and their length of service in the area.

Christmas 1952, all three Canadian ships together in harbour for the first time since the beginning of hostilities. Unfortunately, before the year was over, they were once more back on patrol enduring the hazards of enemy shore batteries, the dangers of inshore navigation and the vicious unpleasantness of winter weather on the Yellow Sea.

During the last six months of the war, it was "business as usual" for the Canadian destroyers. They were engaged in the familiar carrier screening and inshore patrols on the west coast, and in the more dangerous and exciting east coast missions.

Following the signing of the Armistice on July 27, 1953, the UN naval forces remained in the theatre to evacuate *the* islands to be returned to North Korea and to carry out routine operational patrols. The last Canadian destroyer left the Korean theatre in September 1955.

The Royal Canadian Navy's contribution to the United Nations effort in Korea was considerable. With a total of only nine destroyers, the RCN maintained a force of three destroyers in the theatre throughout the campaign. By the time the Armistice was signed, 3,621 officers and men of the RCN had served in Korea.

Source: <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/history/koreawar/valour/airnaval#naval>