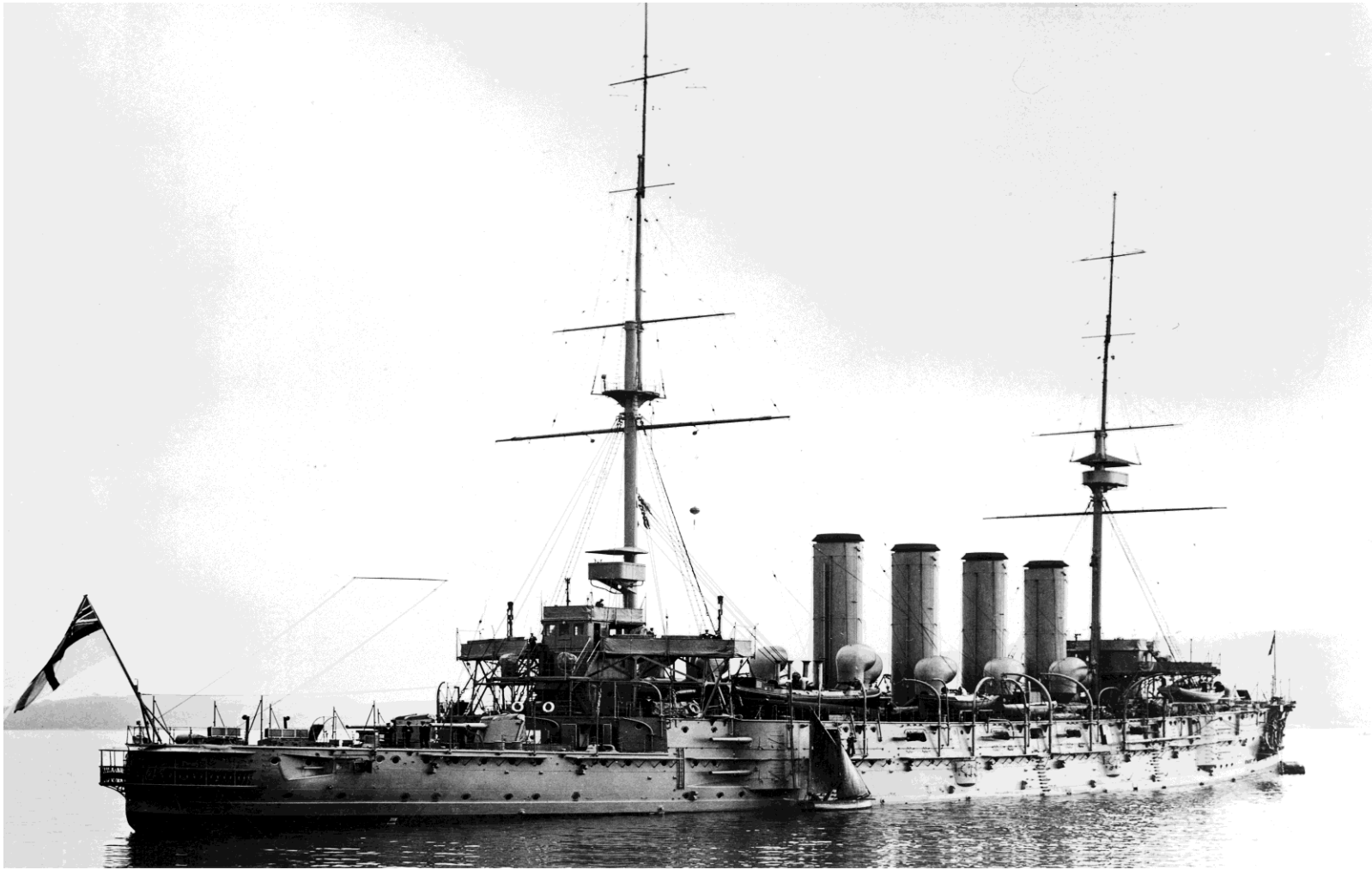
CANADA AND THE SEA: 1600 - 1918



Flagship of the Fleet: The Old "Nobbler"

An armoured cruiser, HMCS **Niobe** was commissioned in the RN in 1898 and transferred to the infant Canadian Naval Service in 1910. She displaced 11,000 tons, carried a crew of 677 and was armed with sixteen 6-inch guns, twelve 12-pdr. guns, five 3-pdr. quick-firing guns and two 18-inch torpedo tubes. Despite the British penchant for naming major warships after distinguished admirals or figures from classical mythology, sailors had their own, much less glamorous, nicknames for their vessels and **Niobe** was always "Nobbler" to her crew. **Niobe** served until 1920 when she was sold for scrap. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 177136)

At sea, Sunday, 13 September 1942

The burial service took place on the quarterdeck just before sunset. The sky was overcast with a definite threat of rain but only a moderate sea was running and the wind force was just 3 or about 10 miles per hour. All members of the crew of the destroyer HMCS *Ottawa* not on watch were in attendance in pusser rig, their best dress, although the commanding -officer, Lieutenant Commander Clark Rutherford, RCN, remained on the bridge. The convoy he was escorting, ON 127 out of Lough Foyle in Ireland bound for Halifax, had lost seven merchantmen in the last three days, and though the arrival of air cover from Newfoundland that morning was cause for optimism, the danger was far from over.

The body, sewn up in a hammock, had been carried on a plank by the chief bosun's mate's party to the quarterdeck and placed on the railing, where it now rested, covered by the White Ensign. The man to be buried was a young gunner of the Royal Artillery Marine Regiment from the tanker *Empire Oil*, torpedoed the previous Friday evening. He had been badly wounded by fragments from the blast but his comrades had managed to get him into the lifeboat from which they were picked up by -*Ottawa* a few hours later. When he was lifted on board, Surgeon Lieutenant George Hendry, the destroyer's medical officer, examined him and, discovering that he had suffered 13 wounds, including serious abdominal injuries, ordered him taken immediately to an emergency operating theatre set up in the wardroom. There, assisted by Lieutenant Thomas Pullen, *Ottawa'*s executive officer, and Sick Berth Attendant Alexander MacMillan, Hendry had laboured nearly four hours to save the boy's life. The gunner survived the surgery and there was hope that he would pull through but unfortunately peritonitis set in and the lad had died that Sunday morning.

Lieutenant Pullen conducted the service using the *Divine Service Book for the Armed Forces.* As the assembly stood respectfully at attention with caps off, the executive officer read the prayers attendant on such ceremonies, including the request for preservation "from the dangers of the sea, and the violence of the enemy." Pullen concluded by intoning the committal, beginning with the words "Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live" and ending with "We do now commit his body to the deep." On command, the bosun's party gently tipped up the inboard end of the plank and the body in its hammock shroud slid into the grey Atlantic, while at the same time those gathered on the quarterdeck sang William Whiting's magnificent hymn:

Eternal Father, strong to save
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who biddest the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep;
Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea!

They could not know it but many of those singing that evening on the destroyer's quarterdeck were in greater danger than they realized because a few hours later their vessel would be sunk with great loss of life.[1]

The story of how HMCS *Ottawa* and those who sailed in her came to be in peril on the sea that Sunday in September 1942 is actually the story of the Royal Canadian Navy and it begins nearly three centuries before, in the early days of Canada's recorded history.

Introduction: Canada and the sea to 1867

Although Canada has coasts on both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, -Canadians – the greater part of whom dwell in the interior of the continent – have never been comfortable with their maritime heritage, particularly their naval heritage. This is unfortunate because navies have played an important role in Canadian history. It was naval power that permitted European nations such as Britain and France to wage a series of conflicts in the 17th and 18th centuries for control of the northern part of the American continent. European armies could not campaign overseas without the support of their navies, and in this respect the British navy usually proved superior to its opponents. It was the Royal Navy's command of the sea and its ability to conduct amphibious operations – to project force from sea onto land – that gained success for Britain in its struggle against France for Canada.

As an example of just what "command of the sea" means, consider the siege of Quebec in 1759. This operation involved three separate squadrons with 49 warships (about a quarter of the British fleet), crewed by 14,500 sailors, escorting 134 merchant vessels carrying 11,000 soldiers and marines from ports on both sides of the Atlantic 600 miles up an uncharted river to their objective.[2] The size of this operation is best gauged by the fact that the total population of the French colonies in North America at that time was about 63,000 souls.

In the century that followed, the Royal Navy continued to protect the infant colonies of British North America, particularly against their aggressive neighbour to the south. In the American Revolutionary War of 1775-1783, the RN supported British forces fighting the insurgent colonists and built and manned warships on the Great Lakes. A similar phenomenon occurred during the War of 1812-1814 when Britain not only instituted a blockade of America's Atlantic coast that nearly brought economic ruin to the republic but constructed and manned warships on the inland lakes and rivers, including a ship of the line on Lake Ontario larger than Nelson's famous -*Victory*. The many memorials to British and Canadian victories of the conflict scattered today across Ontario and Quebec bear no mention that these successes were only possible because the Royal -Navy controlled the sea lanes.

Although the threat of invasion from the United States decreased as the 19th century wore on, Britain continued to maintain a naval presence in North America. The squadron on the lakes acted as a marine police force to prevent American adventurers who supported the ill-fated rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada (modern Ontario and Quebec) in 1837-1838 from raiding across the border. During the 19th century, shipbuilding and maritime trade boomed in the Atlantic colonies, impelled by the rich fishing grounds nearby and by the triangle trade between the Maritimes, Britain and the West Indies. The RN maintained a station at Halifax, blessed with one of the largest and most sheltered harbours in the world and, as settlement spread across the continent, established a second base at Esquimalt on the Pacific coast

Jack Tar Ashore
The crew of a British warship on a route march near Esquimalt, BC, between 1900 and 1905. Throughout the British Empire, the RN served as an emergency police force and British warships were often required to send armed parties ashore to quell local disturbances. For this reason, it was necessary that sailors receive basic military instruction, including marching and small-arms training. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA-115388)

By 1867, when the separate colonies of British North America began to confederate into the modern Dominion of Canada, the new nation possessed a sizeable merchant fleet and a maritime tradition, both commercial and fishing, on its Atlantic coast. It might therefore be expected that the establishment of a naval force would be one of the first acts of the -Canadian government but, unfortunately, this was not the case. The greater part of the population of the Dominion lived in the interior and Canadian politicians, catering to voters rather than looking to the future, followed a continental as opposed to a maritime policy – in effect, Canada turned its back on the sea. Ottawa instituted high tariffs to protect industries in central Canada against American competition, and the Atlantic merchant marine gradually withered away, although fishing remained a strong enterprise. As a result the Maritime Provinces entered an economic decline from which they have never fully recovered.

Birth pangs of the Canadian navy: 1867-1914

Periodically, during Canada's first four decades, the question of a naval service was raised, usually in connection with the fisheries as this industry was a major source of employment. There was always concern about American intrusion and in 1870 the government created a Marine Police with six armed

schooners to regulate American fishing vessels but it was disbanded the following year after the British-American Treaty of Washington resolved longstanding disputes over fishing grounds. In 1881, for reasons that are still somewhat obscure, Britain presented the Canadian government with a small and obsolescent steam/sail warship, HMS *Charybdis*, in the hope that it would serve as a training vessel for recruits to the RN and the nucleus of a Canadian navy. On her arrival in Saint John, however, *Charybdis* was found to be so unserviceable that she was quietly returned to Britain in 1882. Disputes with the United States over the fishing provisions of the Treaty of Washington led to the creation of what might be called a proto-naval force – the Fishery Protection Service – in 1886 and this organization grew until by 1906 it had 30 vessels in commission. But the federal government disliked spending a dollar more on defence than absolutely necessary (while at the same time basking in the protection provided by the British fleet) and resolutely resisted all calls for the establishment of a permanent Canadian navy.

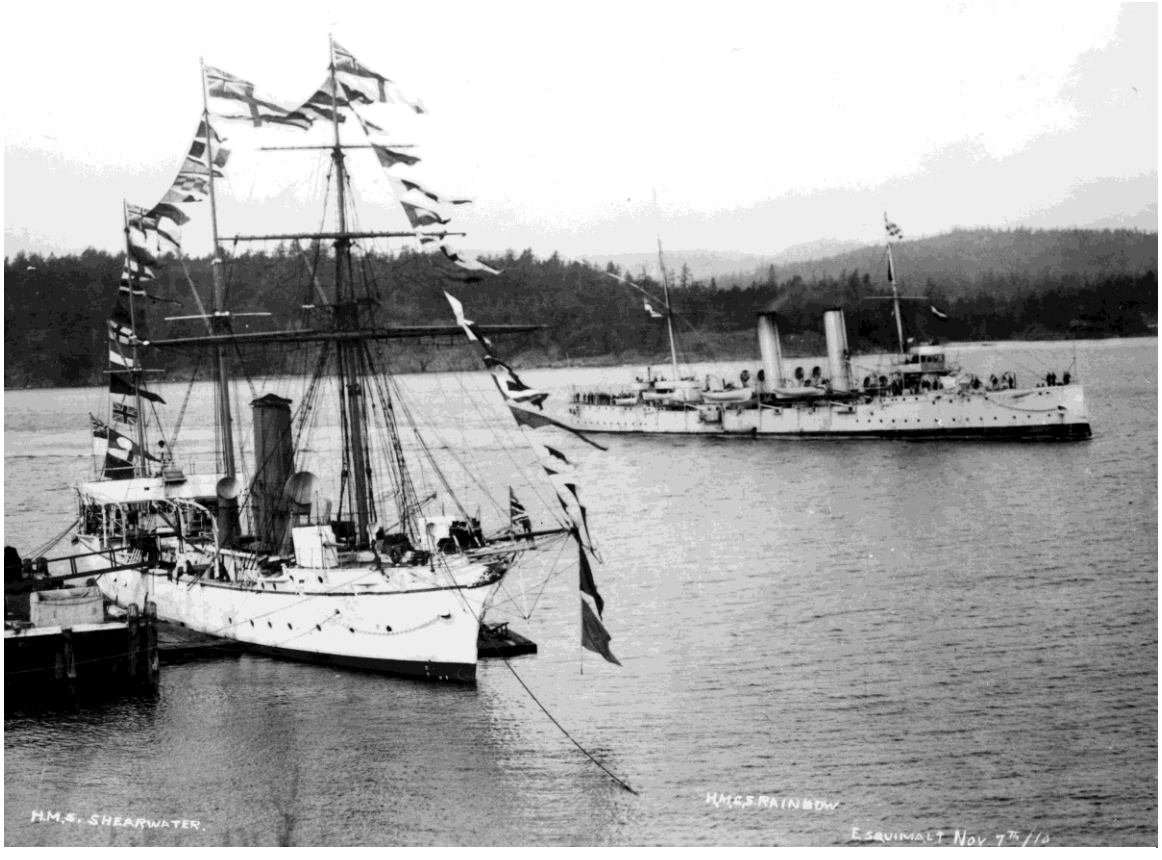
Admiral Sir Charles Kingsmill (1855-1935)
Canadian-born, Kingsmill joined the RN in 1869 and rose to the rank of rear admiral. He retired in 1908 to take command of the Canadian Maritime Service and later, the Canadian Naval Service. He commanded the RCN during the First World War and retired in 1921 with the rank of admiral. (Author's collection)

In the first decade of the 20th century, the comfortable assumptions on which this policy was based disappeared when Britain made a major change in its defence strategy. Germany had begun to construct a large and modern battle fleet, and faced with this challenge, Britain started to concentrate her warships in home waters. Since the RN also guaranteed the safety of the empire, British politicians encouraged the self-governing Dominions of Australia, Canada and New Zealand to strengthen their own naval forces or to make financial contributions toward the construction of British warships, and as part of this shift in policy, the RN dockyards at Halifax and Esquimalt were turned over to Canada and the last British garrisons departed in 1905. At a series of colonial conferences held between 1887 and 1907, however, Canadian politicians rebuffed British requests for Canada to increase its defence spending or to make contributions to imperial defence.

The climate of opinion began to change in 1908 following the passage of legislation in Germany to create a battle fleet to match the Royal Navy's home fleet. The response throughout the empire verged on panic – even the Canadian government, which had always disliked paying for its own defence, was forced by public opinion in English Canada to change course and seriously contemplate the creation of a navy. French Canada, always concerned about entanglement in imperial military adventures, opposed such a service but Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier was skilful enough to get unanimous approval in the House of Commons for the expenditure necessary to establish a Canadian navy "with the view that the naval supremacy of Britain is essential to the security of commerce, the safety of the empire and the peace of the world."[3]

On 10 May 1910 an act was passed in the House of Commons creating the Canadian Naval Service. This new entity was placed under the direction of Rear Admiral Charles Kingsmill, a Canadian-born officer who had retired from the RN two years earlier to serve as the Director of the Marine Service, which supervised the hydrographic, navigation and fishery protection functions of the government. The act stated that Canada might acquire 11 warships, five cruisers and six destroyers, which, if possible, would be built in the country. It also provided for the establishment of a naval college to train officers, but until it was ready, Britain promised to provide two old cruisers to serve as training vessels and to loan officers and ratings (enlisted sailors) to act as instructors.

There was much excitement when these two warships, *Niobe* and *Rainbow*, arrived in Canada in the autumn of 1910, crewed by 600 officers and sailors. The newly-christened His Majesty's Canadian Ship *Niobe* displaced 11,000 tons and was armed with sixteen 6-inch guns while the smaller HMCS *Rainbow* displaced 3,600 tons and mounted two 6-inch guns and six 4.7-inch guns. *Niobe* went to Halifax and *Rainbow* to Esquimalt. At the same time, the Royal Naval College of Canada opened in Halifax to educate officer cadets and the first recruiting posters, advertising "Great Attractions" in the Canadian Naval Service for "Strong, healthy, well educated men and boys" of "Good Character," were posted across Canada.[4]



The "West Coast Fleet:" HMCS Rainbow, November 1910

A protected cruiser, **Rainbow** was commissioned in the RN in 1893 and transferred to the Canadian Naval Service in 1910. This photograph shows her entering the naval base at Esquimalt, BC, on 7 November 1910 and passing by HMS **Shearwater** which has "dressed overall" for the occasion by displaying flags from her stem to stern. **Rainbow** displaced 3,600 tons, carried a complement of 273, and was armed with two 6-inch guns, six 4-inch guns, eight 6-pdr. guns and four 14-inch torpedo tubes. **Rainbow** served in the RCN until 1920 when she was sold for scrap. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 115365)

The future looked good but, unfortunately, this promising start was soon blighted. *Niobe*, the flagship of Canada's infant fleet, ran aground off Cape Sable in July 1911 and was so badly damaged that she had to spend sixteen months in dock. Still worse was the defeat of Laurier's Liberals in the election of September 1911 because Robert Borden's incoming Conservatives placed the Naval Service in "suspended animation" while it worked out its own defence policies. Laurier's ambitious ship acquisition programme was cut in favour of providing funds to Britain to construct three battleships, but this bill failed to pass the Liberal-dominated senate (despite "closure" being used for the first time in the history of Canadian politics) and Borden was stymied. Morale plummeted in the new service (in 1912-1913, the figures for desertion surpassed those for recruiting) -although, somewhat ironically, at about the same time it was given permission to assume the title of "Royal Canadian Navy." Naval matters in Canada were at a standstill.

ACKNOWLEDGEMNTS: Author: Donald E. Graves
Publisher: Robin Brass Studio, Toronto, 2002
ISBN: 1-896941-32-X

Canada's Naval Memorial Trust wishes to acknowledge and thank Donald Graves and Robin Brass for their co-operation with making this possible as well as Vice Admiral Hugh MacNeil (Retd.) and Mrs Jenson who gave their support.

Adapted for the web by Richard Wood, Webmaster Canada's Naval Memorial