
CHRONICLE OF THE ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY

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THE EARLY DAYS TO 1918

“Some more non-paying guests:” Joining the Service in 1915

A.H. Wickens of Vancouver was serving on a CPR steamship at Esquimalt in 1915 when many of her crew decided to join the Royal Navy Canadian Volunteer Reserve. He recalls his first hours in service:

We were conducted upstairs to the slop room which was situated at the end of the gymnasium and class rooms. Said the M[aster at] A[rms] to the bloke in charge: “Here you are, Bill, some more non-paying guests.” Said Bill, “Don’t worry, Master, they’ll pay for it,” and we surely did as time rolled by.

We were issued with the following:

- 1 Canvas kit bag
- 1 hammock
- 2 hammock covers
- 1 blanket (white)
- 1 round tin hat box
- 1 wooden ditty box
- 1 length of rope for lashing hammock
- 3 caps, round, 1 of which had a linen or canvas top
- 2 cap covers, linen
- 1 straw hat with carrying bag for tropical use (which became a damn nuisance in transportation)
- 2 suits, underclothes
- 2 flannel shirts
- 2 blue work shirts
- 3 collars,
- 1 cholera belt
- 3 duck suits
- 2 duck suits with collars attached and blue cuffs for tropical use
- 3 blue serge suits (one to be kept for special occasions and Sundays)

- 1 boiler suit (combination overalls)
- 1 dozen clothes straps (short laces used to tie your washing to the forestay)
- 1 overcoat
- 1 sou'wester
- 1 oilskin
- 1 pair rubber sea boots
- 1 heavy woollen sweater, turtle neck, blue
- 1 blue woollen scarf
- 1 winter hat with ear protection
- 1 silk scarf or handkerchief, black
- 2 lanyards (big enough to use as tow ropes)
- 1 tooth brush
- 1 tin pink tooth powder (which we thought was pulverized holy stones dyed pink which took the enamel off our teeth)
- 1 razor (make a good bush knife)
- 1 jack knife with marlin spike attached
- 2 pairs of black boots
- 1 housewife [sewing kit]
- 1 hair brush
- 2 shoe brushes
- 2 stencils (1 for marking dark clothes and the other for marking light clothes)
- 1 white pad & 1 black pad for marking [clothing]
- 1 pair of gaiters
- 2 pair woollen socks

Now down to the armourer's stores. We were issued with:

- 1 .303 Lee Enfield rifle of Boer War vintage
- 1 bandolier
- 1 belt with bayonet with scabbard attached
- 1 water bottle
- 1 haversack

all numbered with the same number on the rifle racks in the drill shed.

All that we needed was a pack horse to complete the deal.¹



"Are we downhearted -- No !!!"

Members of the crew of HMCS **Niobe** pose for a picture after "coaling" ship. When coal was used as fuel, every member of a warship's complement not absolutely required for other duties -- including officers -- participated in the laborious and filthy task of refuelling. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 190758)

“We were all dog-tired:” Cadet life at the Royal Navy College of Canada, 1917

Patrick Brock joined the RCN as a cadet in 1917 and, in later years, remembered his time at the naval college in Halifax:

We began each day at 0615 and “cleaned” into flannels for boat work or gym after a cup of cocoa. At the conclusion of our exercise period we washed, and shaved if necessary, and plunged into a cold bath. I remember the cadet captain standing over us to ensure that we immersed ourselves completely. Breakfast was followed by “defaulters” at 0840 and divisions at 0900, at which time we were inspected by the commander. Studies, interrupted by a break for a glass of milk, commenced shortly after the inspection and continued until 1300.

Work resumed after lunch from 1400 to 1600, when we had milk and biscuits, before taking exercise, usually in boats or on the football field. The order was reversed in winter so that we might exercise in daylight. Supper came at 1900 and was followed at 2000 by an hour of study known as “prep” in Study 8. We were then given five minutes to undress and two minutes to say our prayers while kneeling before the sea chests at the foot of our cots. Then we turned in by order of the cadet captain. We were all dog-tired, and there was little risk at this stage of Satan finding mischief for idle hands.

Work stopped at 1300 on Wednesdays and Saturdays but there was always organized sport. On Saturdays we were allowed to “go ashore,” as we religiously called it, with seventy-five cents pocket money (from our parents’ pockets, issued to us in a ceremony known rather wryly as “payment”) until 2100. We had leave from 1300 on Sundays, and fortunately, most of us found friends who “showed willing” to give us tea or supper.²



Future Admirals, Everyone

Junior officers and midshipmen of HMCS **Niobe** pose for a group portrait. The seven sub-lieutenants can be distinguished from the six “snotties” or midshipmen because they carry swords and wear double-breasted jackets while the midshipmen carry dirks and have a single-breasted jacket with white patches or trim on their collars. A simpler way to distinguish the two is that the sub-lieutenants are seated on chairs while the snotties, a considerably lower species, squat on the deck. After a period of between eighteen months to two years, an aspiring (more likely “perspiring”) midshipman might secure promotion to sub-lieutenant allowing him to wear officer’s uniform, carry a sword and, based on his considerable naval experience, lord it over all snotties. It was a very old, very traditional, and very successful system of junior officer training. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA-126721)

“Dogs of war:” A Canadian midshipman in the Royal Navy, 1916-1917

In early 1913, 15-year-old Frank Houghton from Victoria joined the RCN as an officer cadet. Following graduation from the Royal Naval College of Canada, he was sent to serve as a midshipman in a British battleship and quickly discovered that, as far as the life of a “snotty” or midshipman went, things had not changed much in the Royal Navy since Nelson’s time. After he retired with the rank of rear admiral, Frank Houghton remembered his days in the gunroom, as the midshipmen’s quarters were known, in 1916-1917:

The hierarchy of the Gunroom was of long-standing tradition. The senior sub-lieutenant, if there was more than one, was known as the “Sub of the Mess,” and he was all-powerful. the Sub is monarch of all he surveys, and woe betide any young snottie who occupies his favourite chair, or talks at breakfast or plays the mess gramophone when the Sub wants peace and quiet. To assist him in maintaining this type of discipline, the Sub would usually appoint some or all of the senior snotties as “Dogs of War.” If the Sub became annoyed at some wretched junior, all he had to say was “Dogs of War out Houghton!” or whoever it happened to be. One was then quickly thrown out of the Mess – literally – with a minimum of ceremony. Of course one was allowed to fight back, though I can recollect no case in which the victim won the battle.

Then there are Gunroom traditions that go back well before the days of Nelson. One of these is “Breadcrumbs.” If the Sub and senior snotties happen to be discussing some matter which is not considered fit for the ears of juniors, the Sub gives the order “Breadcrumbs!” Whereupon all warts – as they are usually known – hurriedly jam their fingers in their ears. Sometimes the Sub will address some unsuspecting wart in his normal voice, and if the chap so much as twitches, indicating that he had unstopped an ear, he was for it.

Sometimes the Sub reaches a point where he feels he is thoroughly sick of the sight of all warts, in which case he picks up a fork and lays it on a beam or ledge above his head – in the days of wooden ships it would have been jabbed into a beam. This is “Fork in the Beam.” Immediately all juniors make a concerted dash for the door – nor do they stand on the order of their going. There is inevitably a mass of struggling bodies endeavouring to get through the door and the last one out received the professionally aimed assistance of a senior’s boot.

.....

I can assure you that it was taken in good part. After all, when a new lot joined, the juniors became seniors and it was then their turn. Rough and tough at times, perhaps, but excellent training.³

Houghton also learned that naval discipline was swift but just after he made a witty remark when his captain appeared one morning in civilian dress, complete with a pair of plus fours with a pattern so loud that he “looked remarkably like a walking checker-board.” Unfortunately, the captain overheard Houghton and the young Canadian was ordered to the platform on top of the mast

and there I stayed – and stayed. Fortunately, it was summer, and for once the weather [at Scapa Flow] was remarkably fine and warm. But as the sun sunk behind the low, dark hills of Hoy, I began to feel the pangs of hunger. It was then that some of my sympathetic shipmates came to the rescue. As soon as darkness had completely enveloped the ship – of course there were no lights showing anywhere – I heard the faint protesting squeak of a signal-halyard, the block for which was attached to the Maintop. I leaned over to see what was going on, when lo and behold a package appeared being slowly hoisted to my solitary platform. With trembling hands I released it from the signal halyard and, on opening it found, to my unspeakable joy, a curious but extremely acceptable mess of sandwiches and biscuits and a medicine bottle full of gin and bitters. Life once more became bearable. I was finally released from my perch at ten pm, only to be told that I was damn lucky not to be left there all night.



Devastation in Halifax following the Explosion in 1917

Damage to the naval dockyard caused by the Halifax explosion in December 1917, the largest manmade explosion prior to the advent of nuclear weapons. More than 2000 persons lost their lives and great parts of the city were smashed nearly flat. Author's collection.

“We watched her burning, spellbound:” The Halifax Explosion, 1917

Cadet Patrick Brock was at the naval college and remembers the great disaster:

It was Thursday morning 6 December 1917. Our term-end examinations were due to start, and -after breakfast most of us were in Study 8 doing some last-minute cramming. At about quarter to nine one of the cadets noticed a ship on fire in the harbour and we left our books to look.

It was the French freighter SS *Mont Blanc*. Unhappily she was carrying a deck load of inflammable benzene above her cargo of TNT and picric acid. When this caught fire it provided the detonator for disaster.

We watched her burning, spellbound. Then the warning gong sounded for us to square ourselves off for divisions, and we “new kids” retired to our gunroom on the landward side of the college. Three minutes later the *Mont Blanc* blew up.

The explosion was the greatest man-made explosion on earth to that date. Many supposed that there had, in fact, been two explosions, because the first effect was felt through the earth rather than the air. People at a distance ran to their windows only to be caught up in a blizzard of flying glass. The outside walls of the college stood up, but the partition walls were badly damaged. One cadet was driven through the gunroom window while the rest of us staggered through a shower of plaster and rubble to the green outside. We cowered there with rivets and pieces of iron plate falling all around us. Later we saw that a large piece of boiler plate had come through the roof of Study 8, where we would have otherwise been. A gigantic cloud of smoke, visible for miles, rose over the harbour. Buildings were devastated for fifteen hundred yards around the explosion and there were many fires.

Although we juniors escaped for the most part with minor cuts, the senior terms and the officers who were on the harbour side of the college received many serious injuries. Commander Nixon and several others were badly cut, while two -cadets each lost the sight of one eye. Chief Petty Officer King was taken to a mortuary, where he remained for two days before he could demonstrate that he was still alive. When the injured had received what treatment was available, the rest of us began to recover our gear. However, at this stage we were warned that a magazine just north of us might explode and that we should evacuate the area. Many of us fetched up on Citadel Hill, a vantage point from which we could survey the scene below. Most of the ships and craft in the harbour seemed to be under way, while visibility northward was obscured by smoke and flame.⁴

Leading Seaman Wickens was on HMCS Niobe in Halifax harbour that fateful day:

I was lucky enough to escape with cuts and bruises [but] almost lost my eyes. The *Niobe* was badly damaged and was almost tore away from her moorings. There were quite a number of ratings aboard the *Niobe* when the blow came, many of these had families ashore. They were about to make a break for it when some officer heavy on tradition, yelled through a megaphone for "All Hands to stand fast. Keep cool and everything will be all right. There's no immediate danger. Remember the *Birkenhead*!"* So someone yells back at him "To hell with you and the *Birkenhead*, we got wives and kids ashore!" There was a general stampede for the gangplank which was somewhat out of kilter.

It was a good thing those ratings took the law into their own hands, they did a lot of good saving lives and putting out fires, after which they were commended for their bravery and in helping the civic authorities who at the time did not know that they broke ship and had a charge of mass mutiny hanging over their heads but said charge was dropped.⁵



Canada's Anti-Submarine Escort Force, 1918

Constructed in Canada, these wooden-hulled "drifters," or small fishing vessels, were used as escort and patrol vessels on the Atlantic coast during the First World War. Displacing only 99 tons and armed with a single 6-pdr. gun, they would have been no match for the large German U-boats that began to operate in the north-western Atlantic in the last year of the First World War. (Courtesy, Directorate of History and Heritage, CN 3201)

"Anything that could float:" The East Coast Patrol in the First World War

Matters of discipline were more casual in "Harry Tate's Navy," as its personnel called Commander Walter Hose's East Coast Patrol after the popular -music hall entertainer of the time.

Leading Seaman Wickens remembered that

anything that could float or turn a wheel had a gun mounted on it. There were the flat bottom drifters CDs* destined for overseas service, some which reached England and some which reached Davey Jones. Now there raised an incident in 1918. There were a shortage of Captains so some fishing captains were recruited up and down the coast, old shell backs I assure you, the outcome was, when they saw what they had to skipper, they immediately handed in their resignations & departed for their various homes, saying "they would sooner take chances in their bald headed schooners than those floatin' coffins."

Lieutenant W. McLaurin, RNCVR, recalled that Captain Pascoe, the Royal Navy officer in charge of ship repair at Halifax was “a gruff old fellow” but also had a “humane side in his make up:”

Captain Pascoe, R.N. made his headquarters and residence aboard HMCS *Hochelaga*. For us this meant having every button [buttoned] on duty with no deviation from rules contained in the so-called Naval Bible, *King’s Rules and Regulations*. During this period prohibition was in force in Halifax and deliveries of evil spirits came via the underground route, the beer in bottles from the Dartmouth Brewery being packed in barrels stencilled on the outside SUGAR.

One of those barrels was waiting until Captain Pascoe went ashore before being unpacked. The following morning [there] was a sigh of relief when Captain Pascoe walked down the gangway. Immediately Lieut. T. Dutton and the Chief Steward went into action. Apparently the old man [forgot] something and backtracked and caught them red handed. In a loud voice he said: “What is this?” Tommy Dutton was equal to the occasion and answered “Sugar, sir.” Then the old man whispered, “Don’t forget to send some sugar to my cabin.”

Sometime later he said to Lieut. Dutton: “Don’t you think it is time to get some more sugar.”⁶

“For Heaven’s sake can nothing be done:” U-boats off Nova Scotia, 1918

In August 1918, the German submarine U-156 sank a number of fishing vessels off the coast of Nova Scotia, inciting a near-panic ashore. The U-boat captured and employed a fishing trawler, the Triumph, as a privateer and she sank a number of unsuspecting victims, including the schooner Francis J. O’Hara, as her captain relates:

The Beam Trawler approached us under full steam. I could see that it was the Trawler *Triumph* of Halifax as we had fished alongside of him on our last trip and I knew the captain of her quite well. I did not distrust anything ... until they got within 150 yards of us when they stopped their vessel and the captain, through a megaphone ordered us to heave our vessel to. I thought the captain was joking with us ... and the first thing we knew, four shots were fired across our bow from rifles. [The *Triumph*] came up alongside of us and I then saw that she was manned by a German crew and had a German flag at her masthead. The captain ordered me to come aboard of his vessel with our papers [and he gave] me quite a calling down for not stopping my vessel sooner, and said that if we expected him to do the right thing, we would have to do the right thing by him. He then ordered three of his men to come in the dory with me and they brought a bomb along. The bomb was a small round thing and they had it in a bag and hung it under the stern with a line ... After touching off the fuse, [they] returned to the Beam Trawler. The bomb exploded shortly after ... and the vessel went down stern first.⁷

The success of U-156 caused a panic among civilians, who were convinced that the enemy was being guided by German sympathizers on shore. One angry Nova Scotia woman complained to the authorities:

The Men of Lunenburg are in Khaki, the dough-heads and pro-Germans are left ... So it is up to the women and children to be on the look out ... For Heaven’s sake can nothing be done; are these devils to be allowed to carry on this work in aid of Germany and enjoy some protection and liberty as loyal British subjects? I tell you, men, if you don’t take notice, we sisters, mothers, etc., who have given all will do something to those traitors, in that case I suppose the “Law” would protect the Hun and traitor, and hang its own countrymen. Send a man who is not afraid and don’t herald it about as was done a few weeks ago when a detective was sent here and the traitors given every chance to keep “Mum.”⁸

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