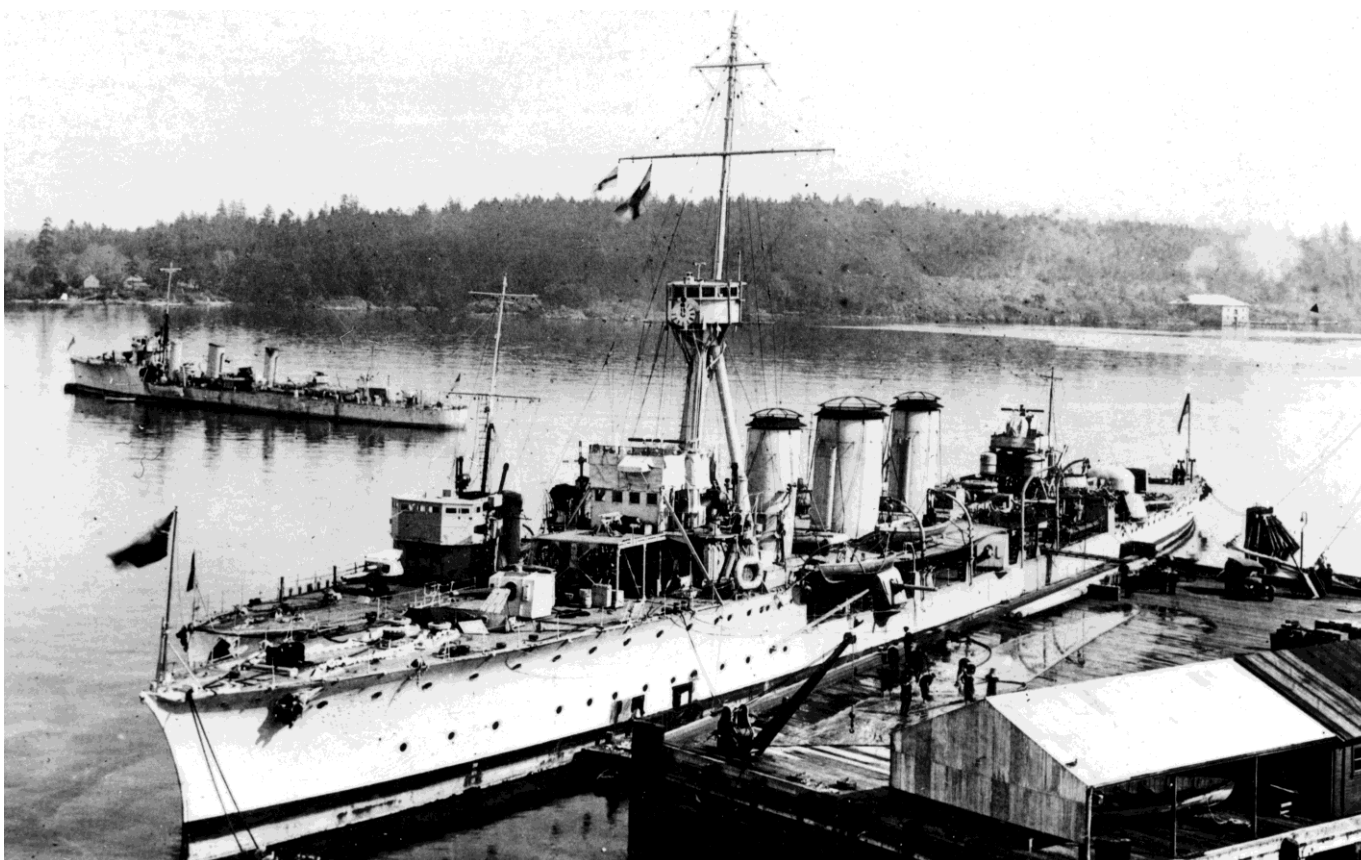


**LONG, SLOW YEARS: THE ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY  
BETWEEN THE WARS, 1919 - 1939**



**New Arrivals -- HMC Ships Aurora, Patrician and Patriot, 1921**

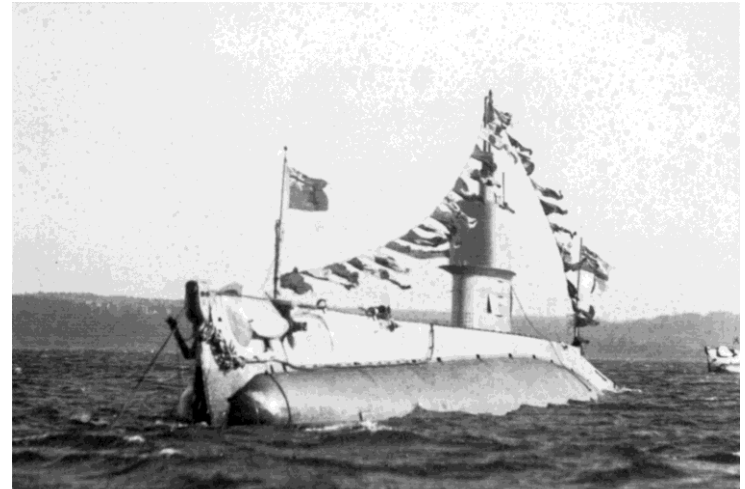
Acquired from Britain in 1920, these three warships had seen service during the First World War. **Aurora**, an Arethusa Class light cruiser, displacing 3,512 tons and carrying a complement of 318, was armed with two 6-inch guns, six 4-inch guns, two 3-inch guns and eight 21-inch torpedo tubes. **Patrician** and **Patriot** each displaced about 1000 tons, were manned by a complement of 82, and armed with three 4-inch guns, one 2-pdr. gun and two 11-inch torpedo tubes. Financial cutbacks caused **Aurora** to be de-commissioned in 1922 and sold for scrap in 1927 but the two destroyers served until 1929. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 115369)

### Bright future, sad destiny, 1918-1921

In the immediate post-war period, the Canadian navy's future -appeared bright although at first there were the inevitable reductions in strength. Personnel numbers were cut, the air service was disbanded and most of the hastily-commissioned patrol vessels were sold off or scrapped, leaving only the rusted-out *Niobe* and *Rainbow* and the two, by now obsolescent, submarines *CC-1* and *CC-2* on strength. In January 1919, however, the visit of Admiral Jellicoe, the former First Sea Lord, or senior -officer of the Royal Navy, to Canada on a mission to co-ordinate imperial naval defence, gave hope that the RCN might soon acquire large modern warships. At the request of the Canadian government, Jellicoe drafted four "off the shelf" plans for a navy ranging from one costing £1 million that called for a coast defence force consisting of 8 submarines, 4 destroyers, 8 sub-chasers and 4 minesweepers up to a grandiose plan with a price tag of £5 million that proposed the creation of a fleet of 2 battle cruisers, 7 light cruisers, 13 -destroyers, 16 submarines, 4 aircraft carriers and many smaller vessels.

Jellicoe stressed that most of these ships could be obtained cheaply from the Royal Navy, which was cutting back its wartime fleet, but Prime Minister Robert Borden's government balked at the price tag. One historian has called Jellicoe "a used warship salesman" but he was at least instrumental in arranging for the RN to sell Canada a light cruiser, *Aurora*, two destroyers, *Patrician* and *Patriot*, and two submarines, *CH-14* and *CH-15*, at bargain basement prices.<sup>1</sup> These vessels arrived in 1919-1920 and *Niobe*, *Rainbow* and the two wartime submarines went to the scrapyard. With five modern warships and a number of smaller vessels in commission, 1,000 officers and sailors on strength, and the Royal Navy College of Canada re-established at Esquimalt to train future leaders, the RCN appeared to be, at long last, on a firm footing.

As usual, however, just when things were looking good for the Canadian navy, disaster struck. In 1921, the Liberal government of Mackenzie King came to power and, responding to the prevalent distaste for war and the military – and the attendant expenditures for defence – began a rigorous programme of cost cutting that came close to scuttling the RCN. The navy's already small budget was slashed 40 per cent, the *Aurora* and the two submarines were decommissioned, the Royal Naval College of Canada was closed, personnel strength was cut by half, and the navy reduced to the two destroyers, *Patrician* and *Patriot*, two trawlers and a very rudimentary dock-yard organization on each coast. It might have been worse – at one point in December 1920, the Minister of the Naval Service, C.C. Ballantyne, became so disgusted with his cabinet colleagues' reluctance to spend money on the RCN that he issued instructions that more or less shut it down, embarrassing them into providing enough funds to keep it alive, but just barely. Money was so tight in the early 1920s that the captains of the two destroyers were ordered not to operate their generators when in port, forcing their crews to use stinking oil lamps to light the interior of their ships.



**HMC Submarine CH 14**

For a brief period in 1920 there were almost as many submarines (four) in the RCN as there were surface vessels. **CH 14** and **CH 15** were British H Class boats taken over by Canada in 1919 but post-war cutbacks caused them to be sold for scrap. Displacing 363 tons, **CH 14** was manned by 22 officers and men and armed with four 18-inch torpedo tubes. (Author's collection)

### A training organization, 1922-1934

One positive event in this general tale of woe was the appointment in 1921 of Commodore Walter Hose as Director (or senior officer) of the Naval Service to replace Kingsmill. Hose was a good choice as he understood the political and financial realities that affected naval matters in Canada – the government was tight-fisted and its attention was firmly fixed on central Canada, which had the largest number of voters. Hose also knew that the Canadian government, disdainful of the military and interested in industrial policies aimed at central, not maritime Canada, would never support, either



**Walter Hose (1875-1965)**

Shown here as a commander in 1914, Walter Hose served in the RN for 21 years before transferring to the Canadian service in 1912 as captain of the light cruiser, HMCS **Rainbow**. During the First World War, he commanded the east coast escort fleet and, in 1921, became the director of the naval service. Hose preserved the Canadian navy in the face of cost-cutting politicians and his decision to found a naval reserve force in 1923 was to pay excellent dividends between 1939 and 1945. (National Archives of Canada, PA 141880)

financially or in any other way, even the most basic naval force, which he estimated as being six destroyers on each coast. To guarantee the survival of the navy, Hose therefore transformed it into a reserve-based organization because he realized that, although the government regarded the RCN with indifference, there was actually considerable enthusiasm in Canada for a naval service. The problem was how to mobilize this enthusiasm and raise the navy's profile among Canadians living far from the sea – in short, how “to bring the Navy to their doors, into the lives of families and friends.”<sup>2</sup>

Hose's solution was to transform the Canadian navy into a training organization. The small regular component, the RCN itself, which consisted of only 400 officers and men, would serve as the instruction cadre for the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve, drawn from those who made their living in the merchant marine or fishing fleets, and the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve, a force of about 1,000 officers and men, organized in companies of 100 and half-companies of 50 in most major cities. The creation of the RCNVR was an inspired move as it established a small but visible naval presence across Canada, while all three components of the Canadian navy constituted a foundation that could be expanded in time of war.

Throughout the 1920s the RCN kept the two obsolescent destroyers, *Patrician* and *Patriot*, in commission, along with four trawlers, and each summer Reserve and Volunteer Reserve personnel would participate in training cruises that maintained and polished their skills. Since the naval college had been closed, officer cadets for the RCN were trained by the Royal Navy, spending part of their time in classes and part at sea, and Britain also provided advanced instruction for enlisted personnel in the technical trades. Members of the permanent force could expect to spend part of their time with the Royal Navy, part on board Canadian warships, and the rest instructing the two reserve forces.

The RCNVR proved to be a popular institution and most companies soon had waiting lists for new entrants. These companies, later renamed “divisions,” held 30 evening drills a year at their headquarters and participated in two weeks of training each summer at either Halifax or Esquimalt. Ratings were paid 25 cents per drill and received the full pay of their equivalent RCN rank during their two-week training period. Reserve -officers did not receive pay for the drills but did get it for summer training, although most donated it back to their respective divisions. At a time when Canada's connection to Britain was much closer than it is today and the Royal Navy's reputation was at its peak, the local RCNVR division was sure to be part of any civic function and some divisions

raised bands which further enhanced their popularity. The Volunteer Reserve also functioned as a social club, particularly during the depression when funds were limited and entertainment at a premium. The end result was exactly what Hose had hoped for – the navy had a presence across Canada.

By the late 1920s, *Patrician* and *Patriot* were worn out and it is an indication of Hose's skill in dealing with politicians and bureaucrats that he actually convinced the government to pay for the construction in British shipyards of two modern replacement vessels. Ordered in 1929, HMC Ships *Saguenay* and *Skeena* were built according to Canadian specifications and incorporated so many innovations – reinforced hulls for operations in ice fields, improved heating for cold weather, improved ventilation for hot weather, and larger bridges – that British dockyard workers christened them the “Rolls-Royce destroyers.”<sup>3</sup> Until they were ready, the RN helped out by loaning two veteran destroyers, commissioned as HMC Ships *Champlain* and *Vancouver*. When *Saguenay* and *Skeena* arrived in Canada in the early summer of 1931, it was a proud moment for the RCN.

But neither Hose nor the navy could afford to relax. The worldwide depression, which began in 1929 and deepened in the 1930s, led to severe cuts in even the tiny Canadian defence budget. In 1933, the Chief of the General Staff, Major General A.G.L. McNaughton (the senior military officer in the country), faced with a government demand for a massive reduction in expenditure, proposed scrapping the RCN and instead using aircraft to provide coastal protection. Again, it is proof of Hose's good standing with the politicians that this proposal went nowhere and the Canadian navy weathered yet another storm. When Hose retired as Director of the Naval Service in 1934, he could take satisfaction that the tiny RCN, which now possessed eight vessels and about 2,000 officers and men in all three of its components, had survived Canadian politicians and bureaucrats who steadfastly ignored their nation's most basic defence needs. This was fortunate because, in both Asia and Europe, war clouds were gathering on the horizon.

### **The road to war: 1931-1938**

In 1931 a militant Japan invaded Manchuria and set off the first of a series of international crises that would ultimately lead to the Second World War. By 1937, Japan's aggression in Asia had broadened into outright war with China, while in Europe Mussolini's Fascist Italy was on the march and had attacked the east African nation of Ethiopia. The League of Nations, the international body created in 1919 to prevent such aggression, proved powerless as none of the major democratic powers, weary from the First World War and suffering severe economic depressions, were willing to take up arms to assist the victim nations. Even worse, the United States, the most powerful democracy, had refused to join the League but had pursued an isolationist policy since 1919, hoping to keep out of foreign entanglements and wars.

The most dangerous enemy, however, was neither Japan nor Italy; it was Germany. Although that nation had been disarmed in 1919, the coming of Adolf Hitler's Nazi party to power in early 1933 signalled a programme of re-armament that included the creation of a substantial naval force. Throughout the 1930s, crisis followed international crisis as these three nations, who would later enter into a formal alliance known as the Axis, continued a policy of territorial expansion. The western powers, led by Britain and France, reluctant to use force, instead followed a disastrous policy of appeasement that only encouraged further aggression.

The gathering storm in Europe did not go unmarked in Canada. Hose's replacement as Chief of the Naval Staff (CNS) was a Canadian, Commodore Percy Nelles. Nelles had first gone to sea as a cadet in a Fishery Protection Service vessel before the First World War and had briefly commanded a British light cruiser in the 1920s. His strength lay in administration and throughout most of his career he proved very adept at manoeuvring through Ottawa's shark-infested corridors of power. Nelles was an admirer of the Royal Navy and all things British, not surprising given his background, and his overwhelming ambition was to build up the strength of the RCN's surface fleet so that it could function as an effective sub-unit of the British fleet.

Although far from the crisis centres in Africa, Asia and Europe, the Canadian government reluctantly initiated a modest programme of rearmament

in the late 1930s. The RCN's budget doubled between 1936 and 1937 and by 1939 it was 360 per cent greater than it had been in 1935. Most of the additional funds went toward the acquisition of new ships. The Royal Navy, -encouraged by the Canadian government's tardy interest in naval affairs, made available at a fraction of their cost, four destroyers similar to *Saguenay* and *Skeena*. They were commissioned in 1937 and 1938 as HMC Ships *Fraser*, *Ottawa*, *Restigouche* and *St. Laurent* and the obsolescent *Champlain* and *Vancouver* were paid off. These six vessels were augmented by the building of four minesweepers in Canada. For the first time, the RCN possessed a force of modern warships, although only half the basic number naval staff estimated were needed to defend both coasts.

#### **Plans and preparations for a new war**

As the new destroyers entered service, they were assigned to either Halifax or Esquimalt. Although the Canadian government emphasized the RCN's independence from the Royal Navy, it actually functioned as an integral part of that service's America and West Indies squadron and the high point of its annual training cycle was the holding of joint exercises with the RN, usually in the Caribbean. The emphasis in these exercises was on surface ship action as, despite its experience in the First World War, the Admiralty regarded surface raiders, not submarines, as the primary danger in a future conflict. Of particular concern were the German "pocket battleships," miniature battleships armed with heavy guns that could evade almost any warship powerful enough to sink them and sink almost any warship fast enough to catch them. Destroyers, fast and armed with torpedoes, were regarded as one effective counter to this threat, and in their training the Canadian destroyers practised high-speed torpedo attacks on large surface vessels.



#### **German Heavy Cruiser Prinz Eugen**

At the beginning of the Second World War, the English-speaking navies considered the threat from submarines to be far less than that posed by German surface ships such as the heavy cruiser, **Prinz Eugen**, with its main armament of eight 8-inch guns. The RCN's six destroyers were trained in high speed torpedo attacks against such opponents but, in the end, it was the U-boat that posed the most dangerous threat. (Courtesy, Werner Hirschmann)

This preference for surface, as opposed to anti-submarine warfare, was widespread throughout the British navy and its Dominion counterparts in the 1930s. It was firmly believed that a combination of the convoy system, new equipment and weaponry, aircraft, and international conventions on naval

warfare had effectively eliminated the submarine as a threat in any future war. In the event of such a conflict, the Admiralty planned to immediately institute the convoy system throughout the British Commonwealth using the Naval Control Service which supervised merchant shipping sailing from any British port. In the hunt for submarines, surface ships would be assisted by greater numbers of aircraft, immeasurably improved since 1918 and now capable of carrying small depth charges. More importantly, in the eyes of most naval officers, was the introduction of the active sonar device, ASDIC,\* which was a sound transmitter mounted in a dome attached to a warship's hull which emitted a high-frequency sound impulse (a "ping") through the water. If there was a solid object within its range, an echo ("ping-gehh") was returned. A trained ASDIC operator could obtain the location of a submarine and its bearing from his ship and, with this information, a warship could "run down" on the submarine and destroy it using depth charges. The Admiralty believed that ASDIC was 80 per cent effective at locating submarines and naval officers interested in ASW – and there were not many in the late 1930s – regarded it as almost infallible.

Finally, the leading naval powers had sought diplomatic means to limit both naval construction and warfare and the result had been a number of international conventions which affected submarine operations. The most important of these was the London Naval Treaty of 1930 signed by Britain, France, Italy, Japan and the United States, and later by Germany and the Soviet Union, which stipulated that submarines must conform to international maritime law. In particular, they were not to

sink or render incapable of navigation a merchant vessel without having first placed passengers, crew and ship's papers in a place of safety. For this purpose the ship's boats are not regarded as a place of safety unless the safety of the passengers and crew is assured, in the existing sea and weather conditions, by proximity of land or another vessel which is in a position to take them on board.<sup>4</sup>

The Royal Navy and its Dominion equivalents were confident that these measures had effectively neutralized the submarine and there would be no repetition of the losses of the First World War. As Commodore Nelles put it in 1937:

If international law is complied with, submarine attack should not prove serious. If unrestricted warfare is again resorted to, the means of combatting submarines are considered so advanced that by employing a system of convoy and utilizing Air Forces, losses of submarines would be very heavy and might compel the enemy to give up this form of attack.<sup>5</sup>

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