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## CHRONICLE OF THE ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY

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### THE INTERWAR PERIOD

#### **“I’ve seen a Navy die, boys:” The 1920s and 1930s**

*Having served for nearly seven years on board British warships, during which time he cruised around the world, Frank Houghton came back to the RCN as first lieutenant of HMCS Patriot. It was not an auspicious time as Liberal government defence cuts had just reduced the service to a shell:*

I was returning to the RCN at a time when it was at its lowest ebb. I shall always remember the farewell party given to my predecessor, Lieutenant Cuthbert Robert Holland Taylor, which lasted into the early hours, at which time he was carried off the ship on a mattress, partly as a mark of respect to a popular officer and partly for other reasons. It had been a good party indeed, but I can still hear in my mind the last words he managed to articulate before he quietly and appropriately passed out: “I’ve seen a Navy die, boys; I’ve seen a Navy die!”

But by the grace of God it was not quite dead.<sup>1</sup>

*But there were also good times during the long peacetime years. One such was the joint exercise held in the West Indies by the RCN’s four destroyers with units of the British Home Fleet in 1934. By now, Houghton was commanding HMCS Vancouver.*

I shall not easily forget one pitch-dark moonless night in heavy seas, out in the wide Atlantic east of Barbados when the Canadian flotilla was ordered to carry out a dummy torpedo attack on the “enemy” fleet led by the Commander-in-Chief himself. It was to be under full wartime conditions – no navigation lights and strict wireless [radio] silence.

From a position well ahead of the Fleet our four destroyers crashed through the waves at thirty knots, ships pitching madly, mast-high spray flying over their bridge. It was impossible to see more than a few yards ahead of us. *Vancouver* was last ship in line, but we were disposed quarterly to port .. so that the other three Canadians were somewhere off my starboard bow and of course completely invisible. ....

Suddenly a searchlight was switched on dead ahead of *Vancouver*, the sharply-defined, bluish beam aimed directly at our bridge. Luckily for us, the flagship, leading the “enemy” line, had spotted us; we were obviously much nearer our target than we had calculated. In fact, *Vancouver* was actually on a collision course with the huge battleship.

“Hard-a-starboard! Stand by to fire torpedoes!” As we swung round, we “fired” four fish, indicating the moment of firing by shooting off a

Green Verey light. Whether or not, in the circumstances, our torpedoes would have struck home must forever remain a matter of conjecture. I can only remember feeling at the time that I had had quite enough excitement for one night.

**King George VI Presents Colours to the RCN, 1939**

Between the wars, the Canadian navy was basically a training organisation with a small regular component which instructed the reserve components. Reserve divisions were set up in most large Canadian cities, creating a naval presence across the country. In this photograph, dated 30 May 1939, King George VI presents colours to the Victoria Division of the RCN. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA 148552)



### **“As cold as charity in October:” Enlisted men’s life in the interwar period**

*Arthur Hewitt and William Mansfield, who joined the RCN as boy seamen at Esquimalt in 1928, recall their first days in service:*

You know there were no such things as comforts in those days. We lived in *Naden* [shore station at Esquimalt] in great barren barrack-rooms with hammock-bars. They were just great bare rooms, and the Officer of the Watch came around with the Petty Officer of the Watch, and the usual routine. The PO of the Watch always carried a lantern, leading the parade and they had to open all the bloody windows in the place. It was as cold as charity in October or whatever, and so as soon as they’d gone, of course you’d close all the windows. But there was no heat in there anyway. It really was a very uncomfortable business. We sit back and laugh about it now, but in those days we thought it was really pretty doggone grim. We didn’t have any place to sit. The only place you could go and really have any comfort was down in the canteen. ....

I got 50 cents a day and they used to keep back ten dollars a month, say, enough money to go on leave. And the other five dollars your Divisional Chief took, and he doled it out if you wanted to go down town. You were only allowed two afternoons a week. Your leave started at one on Saturday afternoon and finished at a quarter to nine. .... And you had to be in your hammock by nine o’clock. The old Duty PO would come round and check.<sup>2</sup>

### **“You weren’t paid too well:” Life in the Volunteer Reserve**

*R. Houlston enlisted in the RCNVR in Toronto as a boy seaman in 1926 and remembered that,*

when you joined the reserves in those days, you weren’t paid too well. We drilled every Wednesday night and got twenty-five cents a night for the drill, plus two [street] car tickets, one to go and one to come. We put in a lot of extra time because we also had the field-gun crew. The field-gun crew used to travel pretty well all over the province and down to Montreal. We took part in the old Coliseum in Ottawa and had quite a time. ....

If there was a gun-crew drill or anything like that, that was done in our own time. If you went to the gun drill, you got an extra two car tickets and there was the possibility that you might get an extra drill thrown in with it, but you didn’t get an extra twenty-five cents. .... nearly every thing that we did as far as drills and that sort of thing were concerned, we did it on our own – although when we got our pay every quarter we used to squander it, going to a dance or something like that.

During the summer-time we had the opportunity of going to Halifax, to do training. You were supposed to do two weeks’ training. At that time, if there was a ship in you’d go aboard ship or you’d go to the schools, according to your rating. Most of the trips were done in the old *Festubert* or *Ypres*. In the early thirties, because I wasn’t working at the particular time, I was given the opportunity of going south on a cruise. I picked the *Saguenay*. That’s the time [1934] we manoeuvred with the Home Fleet.



DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE  
NAVAL SERVICE

# MEN WANTED

## FOR THE ROYAL CANADIAN NAVAL VOLUNTEER RESERVE

Volunteers are required for enrolment as seamen, signalmen, telegraphists, buglers, engineers, electricians, ordnance artificers, motor mechanics, accountants and cooks in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve.

**PERIOD OF ENROLMENT**—Three years.

**QUALIFICATIONS**—Candidates must be British subjects over 18 years of age resident in Canada, of good character, physically fit and willing to serve at sea or wherever required in time of emergency, or when undergoing annual training. Candidates must not belong to any other Reserve Force.

**NAVAL TRAINING**—From two to three weeks' Naval training in H.M.C. Ships or Establishments at Halifax or Esquimalt each year. In addition to annual training, at least 30 drills each year, at Company Headquarters near their homes, will be required of Reservists.

**PAY AND ALLOWANCES**—Canadian Naval rates of pay will be paid to men of the Reserve Force whilst undergoing annual training at the Naval bases. A bounty to cover expenses of men attending drills at Company Headquarters will be paid at the rate of 25c. per drill up to a maximum of 30 drills a year. An extra \$5.00 will be paid each year to Reservists on completing 40 or more drills during the year.

**WHERE TO APPLY**—For further information application should be made as follows:—  
Residents of Halifax, The Senior Naval Officer, R.C.N. Barracks, Halifax, N.S.  
or the Officer Commanding the Halifax Half Company, R.C.N.V.R.

Residents of Vancouver, The Senior Naval Officer, R.C.N. Barracks,  
Esquimalt, B.C., or the Officer Commanding the Vancouver Half  
Company, R.C.N.V.R. Bowman Building, 837 Hastings St. East

Residents of any other town of Canada, The Naval Secretary, Department of  
National Defence, Ottawa.

**FOR MORE DETAILED INFORMATION APPLICATION SHOULD BE MADE TO:**

### "MEN WANTED" -- Interwar Recruiting Poster for the RCNVR

The decision to create a Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve in 1923 was an inspired one on the part of Commodore Walter Hose, the Chief of the Naval Staff as it established a force that would provide the cadre for wartime expansion. This pre-war recruiting poster for the RCNVR contains the usual unwarranted optimism and misinformation usually found in such advertisements. Author's collection.

The turnover in the reserves at that time was very small, due to the fact that we were a very close-knit organization.<sup>3</sup>

*Frederick Sherwood, who joined the RCNVR Division in Ottawa as an officer cadet in 1932, had similar experiences:*

In those days in Ottawa, most young men joined something, the Militia or the Naval Reserve. It was one of those things you did. Nobody had any money and this was a way to get a holiday. It was certainly very popular and all the units would have dances from time to time and invite people from other units. The Militia was very strong then, there was no pay for them, but the sailors got 25 cents a night and they turned that over to the unit fund. They would have a plain-clothes dance once a week just with a gramophone and that sort of thing. 1932 was deep in the depression; it was pretty tough going but everybody had a lot of fun and enjoyed it tremendously.

.....

A lot of the chaps were pretty well trained, and they had a nice thing in the RCNVR in those days. If you could get the time off, there were two destroyers on the West Coast, two destroyers on the East Coast, and they used to go south for about four months each year. If you were lucky and you could get time off from your job – if you were lucky enough to have a job – you could do four months at sea on one of these cruises, which I was fortunate enough to do in early 1936. .... I got a Watch-keeping Certificate in that time and that stood me in good stead later. Then I had used up all my holidays, so I didn't get any the next year.<sup>4</sup>

### **“Here, who’s going to take this?” Naval Service Headquarters, 1939**

*During the interwar period, the headquarters of the RCN was a modest establishment in Ottawa. Sub-Lieutenant Herbert Little, RCNVR, who joined NSHQ as an intelligence officer in 1939, remembers that it*

was located on the third and fourth floors of the red brick Robinson Building, on the south side of Queen Street, between Elgin and Metcalfe. Whether by design or not, there was ample camouflage in the form of a delicatessen on the ground floor, a Department of Agriculture section specializing in swine on the second and the Department of Transport Radio-License section on top.

The principal naval room faced Queen Street. It was small and unbelievably crowded. In the west corner was the desk of Rear-Admiral P.W. Nelles, Chief of Naval Staff, where I can picture him sitting with his back to the window surveying his unlikely ship’s company. To his right was a ponderous safe which only his secretary, Miss Hetty Evans, appeared capable of opening. What grand secrets it contained, I never found out, but I do know she kept the Admiral’s tea caddy and biscuits there, secure from all predators. In the east corner was the desk of Commander F.L. Houghton, Staff Officer Plans. When he looked up he would see a plain wooden table at which half a dozen people could sit and write or read. There was often a scramble for a place and more than once I simply sat on the floor in the corridor with my books.

Just inside the doorway was a wicket from the next room where Lieutenant Commander Barry German and Chief Yeoman Wiseman were in charge of signals. I can still see the basic distribution system; an arm would appear through the wicket with a message form and a voice would call out, “Here, who’s going to take this?”<sup>5</sup>



#### **Piped on Board, Rear Admiral Percy W. Nelles (1892-1951)**

Seen here coming on board the destroyer, HMCS **Restigouche** (known unofficially as “Rusty Guts”), Rear Admiral Percy Nelles served as the chief of the naval staff, or commander of the RCN, from 1934 to 1944. He was a conscientious and hard working man but his admiration of the Royal Navy and his inability to assimilate rapidly-evolving technology caused him to be less effective in that position than he should have been. He was manoeuvred out of his position after it became clear in 1943 that Canadian ASW escorts were poorly equipped in comparison to their British counterparts. (Courtesy, Directorate of History and Heritage, DND, DHH 0-1785)

*The newly-promoted Commander Frank Houghton, RCN, joined NSHQ in July 1939, as active preparations were being made for war. He recalls one of his innovations:*

One of my “inventions” was a method of gaining and retaining some sort of order in the hundreds of signals sent and received every day. I obtained a 4 x 8 plywood panel and drove nails through it from the back, upon which we impaled the signal forms according to subject. This simple if not exactly ingenious solution was successful as far as it went; but owing to the restricted space in which we worked the sharp nails were an ever-present menace, and indeed my esteemed colleague, Commander Eric Brand, RN, ... managed to tear a large rip in his best trousers just as the Admiral arrived to see how we were faring.<sup>6</sup>

*Houghton’s victim, Eric Brand, remembered the activities at NSHQ in the weeks immediately before war broke out:*

In May 1939 my appointment on loan to the Royal Canadian Navy at Ottawa was announced. .... On 5 June 1939 I proceeded for three weeks of wandering round the Admiralty, to find out as much as I could which might be of interest to me in Canada. I bought a small black notebook at Woolworths in which to jot down the information. My little black notebook was to prove valuable!

..... after seeing my predecessor off on a hot July morning, I returned to my office ... and found Frankie Houghton sitting at his desk, alongside mine. So far I had found no vestige of any “Plans” and neither had my Staff Officer. I said we had better get busy and make some because, in my view, time was short. To which he replied, “The Navy has little money for such things.” I retorted: “You make paper in Canada, don’t you? So let’s have some of that, at least.” .....

So, in those early day of August, we pushed along with the plans. .... Having pencilled the plans for the defended ports I took them to “Cuth” Taylor, the Director of Personnel, to show him what people they would require. He looked them over and grunted, “And where the hell do you think I am going to get all this lot?” I said, “I have doubled as many duties as I possibly can, but I have a hunch that, if a war starts, a lot of damn good Canadians will want to join the Navy.” To which he replied, “Well, I hope you’re bloody well right.” I was! .....

On the 23rd [of August 1939], Admiral Nelles arrived back in the office, and I finally met him. I found him a wonderful officer to work under; he never fussed about details. If he agreed with one’s proposals, he would wave his handkerchief and say, “That sounds sane to me, chappie. Go to it!” .....

By that evening, the CNS [Nelles] had been -informed of the situation and the way things -appeared to be going. He immediately called a meeting of the whole Naval Staff – in my big office – to try to frame some emergency estimates for greatly increasing the size of the Canadian Navy. It was agreed that we should be prepared to build fifty “whale catchers” – corvettes – and twenty minesweepers of a type known as “Bangors,” which the RN were building. Since nobody had the slightest idea of the cost of these ships and their equipment, some basic price I had jotted down at the Admiralty in my little black Woolworth notebook came in very handy.<sup>7</sup>

#### **“Four hours notice for steam:” Preparing for war, August 1939**

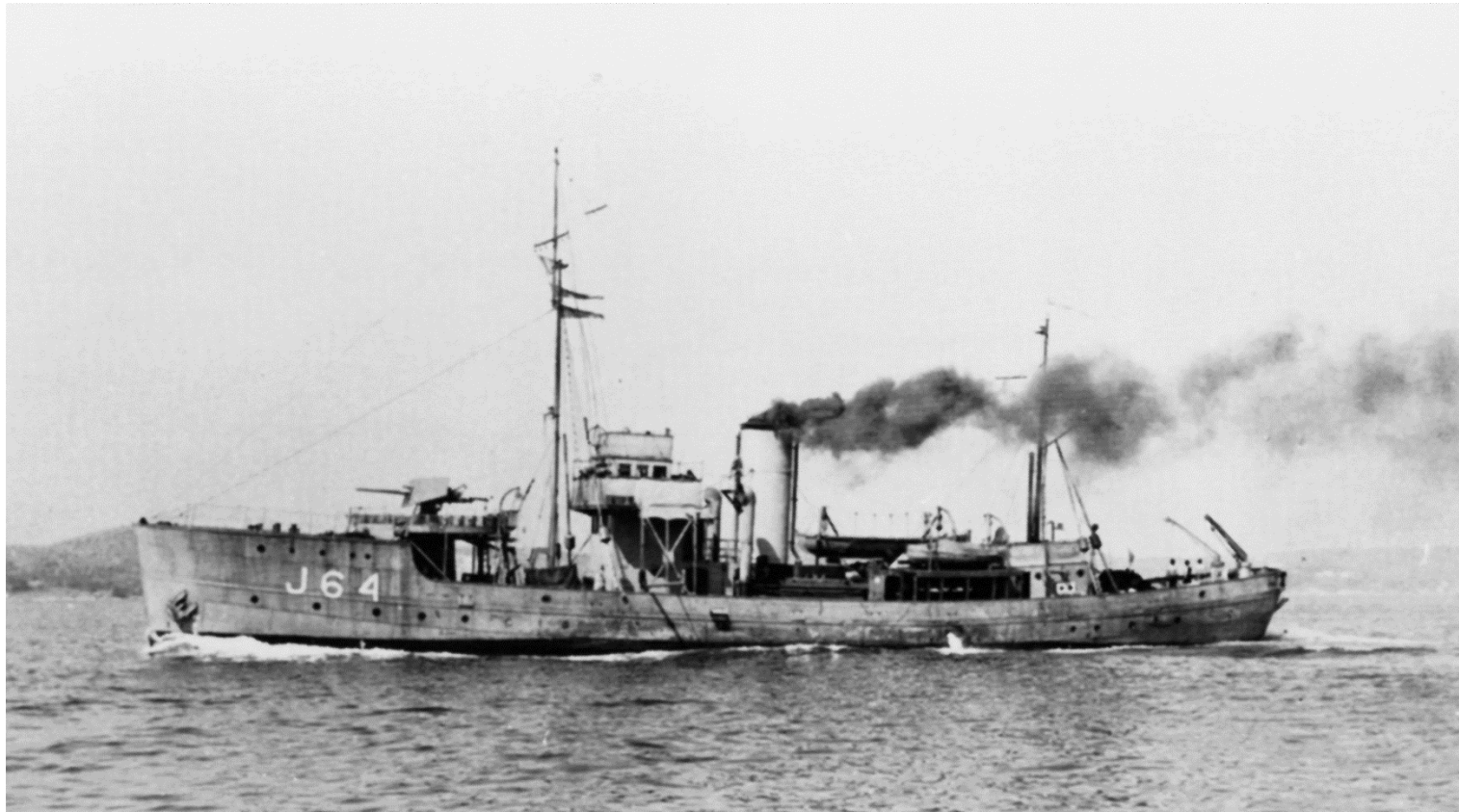
*Commander Wallace B. Creery, RCN, captain of HMCS Fraser, recalled how war came to the Pacific Division:*

Towards the end of August 1939 four destroyers, -Ottawa, Restigouche, Fraser and St. Laurent, under Captain G.C. Jones as Captain (D) in Ottawa, went to Vancouver for the opening of the Pacific National -Exhibition. Because the situation was critical, with every indication that war was imminent, we were kept at four hours notice for steam and shore leave was curtailed.

At 1300 on 31 August, Captain (D) sent for the COs of *Fraser*, myself ... and *St Laurent*, Lieutenant Commander A.M. “Boomer” Hope, and

showed us a secret signal from Naval Service Headquarters, instructing *Fraser* and *St Laurent* to proceed to Halifax at high speed, calling only at San Pedro, Balboa and Kingston, Jamaica for fuel. The trip between San Pedro and Balboa was to be done at the best speed possible, having regard to fuel and endurance, and the rest of the trip at 25 knots.

Although the ships were at four hours notice, we left harbour within two hours after receipt of the signal. *Fraser* arrived in Halifax 14 days and 34 minutes later. *St Laurent* took some eight hours longer, as I had routed her through a different channel between the West Indies Islands. We did the three thousand miles between San Pedro and Balboa at an average speed of eighteen knots, a notable achievement for that class of ship. The whole voyage established a record and it is greatly to the credit of the ships' engineers that they arrived in Halifax, refuelled and were immediately available for service.<sup>8</sup>



#### Little Ships -- The Minesweeper HMCS Comox

The RCN was very much a "small ship" navy and some ships were smaller than others. Although the escorts that fought the Battle of the Atlantic and the dashing fleet destroyers of the later war years have attracted most of the attention, there were many utilitarian little vessels that played an essential but often overlooked role. Among them were the four Fundy Class minesweepers (**Comox**, **Fundy**, **Gaspé** and **Nootka**) built in Canada in the late 1930s -- the largest naval vessels constructed in the country up to that time. Based on the British Basset Class, these vessels displaced 460 tons, had a top speed of 12 knots, were manned by a crew of 38 and armed with one 12-pdr. gun. They spent much of the war serving in the Halifax Local Defence Force, unglamorous but very essential service. (Courtesy, National Archives of Canada, PA-105183)

***“The telephone rang, and a voice from Ottawa said:” The RCNVR goes to war***

*Jack Anderson, a native of Toronto, was a member of the RCNVR Supplementary Reserve, which provided preliminary training for young men who might wish to obtain officers’ commission in time of war. He recalls how war came to his Reserve Division:*

Starting in July, 1939, the supplementary reserve officers in the Toronto Division were required to stand duty officer at night, usually being the only one there to answer the telephone or anything that might turn up. I happened to be the Duty Officer the night of the 26th of August, 1939. The telephone rang, and a voice from Ottawa said, “Commander Taylor, Director of Naval Reserves speaking; I’d like to speak to your Captain.” I said, “Sir, he’s over at the Exhibition Grounds, at the Tattoo. The Divisions are putting on the usual twelve-pounder gun drill over the jumps.” He said, “Get hold of him, and have him call me.”

We had no car, and we were about a mile or two from the grandstand, but I managed to phone over to the -Exhibition Grounds and found somebody who went and informed Lieutenant Commander Shedden that he was wanted. So he came back about ten o’clock and called - Ottawa, and said, “Yes, sir; yes, sir,” and then hung up the -receiver, turned around and said, “Well, that’s it. We’re -mobilized. We’re all on active service.”<sup>9</sup>

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