

“Ready, Aye, Ready!”

With its creation in 1910, the Royal Canadian Navy was modeled on the Royal Navy and much of its early history reflects the ties to Britain. British Naval stations had existed in Halifax and Esquimalt long before that, and naval activity was formative in our national history throughout the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Canada’s navy grew to become a major factor in World War II, particularly valued for vital escort duty in the six-year Battle of the Atlantic. Many who fought in the Atlantic and in other stations were volunteer reserves. Unification in the 1960’s brought challenges to the traditions and customs of our maritime force personnel that for some were insurmountable, and several high-ranking officers resigned. One of the old “toasts of the day” had humorously cynical language: “To a bloody war or a sickly season!” For some, the process of unification fulfilled that toast, and with sailors dropping over the side, other personnel rose through the ranks quickly.



Ronald E. Harrison

Today, our naval forces are moving beyond those issues, reflecting a new generation of leadership. Training, technology, expectations and specialization have influenced maritime forces as much as every other area of Canadian life.

From robotics to sophisticated weapons systems, the navy needs personnel who can handle advanced computerized systems that evolve almost weekly. They work more closely than ever before with our American neighbours, and there is a growing realization that the Pacific Ocean should be dominating our strategic defence interest, after generations of concentration on the Atlantic, and the post-war anti-submarine warfare specialization. Added to this is a growing Canadian concern for our sovereignty over northern waters, given the increase in shipping traffic and accessibility to natural resources due to global warming. With worldwide vigilance concerning security against terrorism, other pieces of the naval defence equation include the Great Lakes and our three coastlines.

Like an army in the field, every ship at sea requires a significant number of personnel to support that assignment. Logistics and supply, back-up personnel and equipment, communications, intelligence, aerial surveillance, and resources for upholding the morale of our sailors lies behind every ship deployed. The inability of many in our country to appreciate the

integral role the Sea King helicopter plays with the parent ship as a fighting unit is well-known, but the need for 21st century helicopters for our ships is being addressed. An unseen but real concern is how thinly naval forces are supported. Ships placed in harm’s way to meet international commitments are serving long and arduous assignments far from home. These costly deployments depend on state-of-the-art equipment and highly-trained personnel, and with security demands closer to our own waters as well as these responsibilities overseas, resources are stretched to dangerous limits.

While this appears to be shifting favourably, some critics are skeptical about whether defence increases are sufficient for the growing need. A positive change has been a growing role for the naval reserve, and this is coupled with an increasing awareness of our reserve divisions across the country by the wider public.

As a nation, Canada has shown a sporadic interest only in its military. Governments cannot be singled out for this malaise, for they mirror the interests and concerns of their constituencies. I spoke with a veteran recently returned from the 60th anniversary of the Canadian role in liberating Holland. “The Dutch,” he said, “show more gratitude than we ever have seen in our own country.” The Naval Officers Association of Canada, with other

naval and military-related organizations such as the Navy League of Canada, provides scholarships and bursaries, support for heritage projects that share the naval and military story with the wider public through education, support and education for youth, particularly through sea cadet corps, and tries in small ways to support our serving personnel in letting them know they are appreciated and valued.

Traditionally, the navy has been called the “senior service” and the “silent service.” We hope to help change the latter by supporting educational opportunities on naval matters and helping Canadians gain knowledge and respect for the history, heritage, and goals of our navy: past, present and future. One initiative over the last few years has been a Canada-wide appeal to former serving personnel or their families to uncover the “hidden history” artifacts, memoirs, letters, journals and out-of-print service manuals that might be covered with dust in basements or attics. Artifacts might include medals and decorations, ships’ fixtures, uniforms, badges, cap tallies, ship models, photographs, and those items liberated from the enemy during wartime.

Our hope is that the several naval or CF museums and collections across the country might receive gifts of this irreplaceable memorabilia to assist them in preserving our heritage and sharing it with the public and researchers. Often, veterans are surprised to discover that someone might be interested in their memories of conflicts and experiences long-forgotten by the public.

So as one Canadian proud to have received the Queen’s commission, but now employed in a very different line of endeavour, I commend the articles in this current edition to your attention. The naval forces of Canada have gone through many changes, setbacks and challenges; but they have always responded when needed for service with the old affirmation, “Ready, Aye, Ready!” **FL**

Ronald E. Harrison served as President and National Director of Naval Officers Association of BC from 1999 to 2001, followed by two years as a Trustee of the Naval Officers Association of Canada (NOAC) Endowment Fund. In 2003 he was elected Vice-President of NOAC, and appointed Hidden History Project Director. He has just been elected as President.