The Long Reach: The RCN and the Korean War

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Introduction

Although the Korean War has been overlooked as an important watershed in Canadian naval history, the experience proved critical at a number of levels. First, it reminded politicians of the navy’s value and thus gave it a credible *raison d’être* at the political level. Second, the Royal Canadian Navy’s (RCN) operational success in Korea gave it a boost that lifted it out of the doldrums of the late 1940s, and launched it into its legendary ‘Golden Age.’ Finally, the Korean War experience helped solidify what can be dubbed the Canadian naval way of war – a ‘can do’ approach to fulfilling operational commitments based on solid professionalism. This approach had first emerged in the Second World War when the overstretched RCN threw itself into operational commitments at the limit of or beyond its capabilities. Korea marked the first time it had done this in a sustained way during ‘peace time,’ and it arguably set the navy firmly on a course it follows to this day.

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Deployment

The RCN did not get much opportunity to bask in the glow of its remarkable contribution to victory at sea in the Second World War. From a service of 90,000 sailors and hundreds of warships in 1945, the navy was cut back to peace-time proportions, and in March 1950 RCN strength consisted of 9,322 personnel manning an aircraft carrier and two carrier air groups, two cruisers, 11
destroyers and a handful of frigates. This was a great improvement over the tiny pre-WW II RCN, but the service was beset by a number of problems. These problems included a distinct lack of resources and budgetary support, friction about whether the service should ally itself more closely with the Royal Navy (RN) or the US Navy (USN), and tension between professional officers and ex-reservists. And, most crippling, personnel problems caused manpower shortages, low retention rates, and a series of mutinies in 1949. There were many positives but the navy was in rough shape, and there was no apparent relief on the horizon.

News of North Korea’s attack across the 38th Parallel reached Ottawa on a quiet summer weekend in June 1950, when the members of the Cabinet were enjoying leisurely holidays outside the capital. Unlike today, there were no cell phones – indeed there was no private phone service where most Cabinet members were. One dedicated secretary drove miles to ensure that the Secretary of State for External Affairs, Lester B. Pearson, had the news. Pearson’s primary objective became to ensure that the United States reacted to the crisis within the auspices of the then youthful United Nations (UN).

But politicians also understood that Canada would have to provide tangible military support to any UN operation in Korea, even though it meant becoming involved in a part of the world where it had little experience. With the Soviet Union threatening aggression in Europe, the army and the air force were not keen to become embroiled on the other side of the world, but the RCN saw things differently. During the Second World War, the

The RCN took the steps necessary to prepare the ships for emergency service in Korea. But it was only when they received a draft press release from the Department of External Affairs that they knew the three destroyers were to be deployed into the western Pacific on a contingency basis, and if the situation deteriorated further they would head on to Korea. They sailed on 1 July 1950 and after they reached Pearl Harbor on 12 July they were ordered to Korea.

The main concern at naval headquarters over the course of the conflict lay in keeping the commitment to maintain a strength of three destroyers off Korea. In all, eight
of Canada’s 11 destroyers served in Korea over the course of the conflict, and this effort exacted a heavy toll on the navy. Keeping three destroyers on station in the Far East actually required five ships; three in Korean waters and two ‘relief’ ships preparing to go. When the first rotation was getting ready to depart, Pacific Command had to ‘borrow’ personnel from other duties to get the three ships up to war-time establishment, and this policy of robbing Peter to pay Paul to meet war-time complements continued throughout the conflict. The navy, which also had to meet its commitment to NATO, was strained to the limit. The Korean commitment affected virtually all facets of the navy, training was affected, and rotation requirements for Korea forced an 11-month delay in the program to convert destroyers into anti-submarine destroyer escorts. In addition, it meant that adequate trained personnel were not be available to man additional new construction and modernized ships as they become available, and this led to a general shortage of ships. At one point the navy had to ask the RN to provide a plane guard destroyer for Magnificent on a European cruise. In short, the Korean commitment threatened to bankrupt the service.

Despite this, senior officers never flagged in their determination to maintain the commitment. Rear-Admiral Harry DeWolf, Vice-Chief of the Naval Staff for most of the period, made it clear that having the destroyers in Korea was important for political rather than operational reasons. As Peter Haydon has argued, the Korean War enabled the navy to “raise its political profile.” It demonstrated that the RCN had a role in the post-WW II world, one that could bring international prestige to Canada. As well, the ongoing presence of three ships in Korean waters demonstrated Canada’s strong backing of the UN to international audiences, and increased Canada’s clout at the diplomatic bargaining table. In short, there was little that was not attractive from a political point of view. The navy could benefit from that, thus if Korea caused some internal upset, naval leaders were willing to accept that price.

**Ships and Logistics**

Sailors perform their duties more effectively with modern ships and equipment, and in 1950 for perhaps the first time in its history the RCN went to war with ships the equal of, and in some cases superior, to its allies. Cayuga and Athabaskan, which combined to do five tours,
were the two newest destroyers in the fleet, commissioned in 1947 and 1948 respectively. Although they were based on a pre-WW II design, they had been upgraded considerably during construction, and they emerged as excellent ships with effective general purpose armament, and superior radar and fire control equipment. The British built Tribal-class Haida and Huron had seen much hard steaming in the latter part of the Second World War but their armament had also been modernized extensively. Sioux, a Fleet ‘V,’ was also a grizzled war veteran but she, too, had been extensively modified, and to the joy of her crew, was the first RCN destroyer with improved habitability systems, including cafeteria messing and bunks in place of traditional hammocks. Although they had joined the fleet in the early post-war period, the Canadian-built Tribal-class Nootka and the Crescent-class Crusader had not been modernized to the same extent as the other destroyers.

**Although the ships were stars in terms of navigation, logistical support was another story.**

Navigation posed a significant challenge off Korea, particularly along the west coast, which featured a wide coastal plain, shallow sea bed, numerous islands, fast tidal currents, and shifting shoals and sand banks. Canadian ships had a distinct advantage over other allied destroyers because they were fitted with high definition navigational radar, which was accurate enough even to detect mud flats from as close as 200 yards. No other UN navy had radar nearly as sophisticated and it became so valuable that Canadian crews were often had to beg and borrow. With no afloat logistics capability of their own, limited strategic air lift available from the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), and no bases in-theatre, they had to scrounge materiel from American and British sources. This was not necessarily a problem as arrangements existed between the RCN and USN for common logistical support, and any stores that could be spared were provided to the destroyers. Despite this, it was often still difficult to obtain purely naval stores from navies which were understandably reluctant to part with equipment or spares they might soon need themselves. It was some time before a small RCN supply depot was established in-theatre, but even then the navy had to operate at the end of a long, undependable supply line.

**The Operational Legacy**

When the Canadian destroyers arrived in-theatre, in the words of the navy’s official history on Korea, “Each ship individually joined TG 96.5 under Rear Admiral Hartman, USN for service with TE 96.50 (Captain Jay) and TE 96.53 (Rear Admiral Andrews, RN).” Amongst this confusing nomenclature delineating task groups (TG) and smaller task elements (TE), was the critical designator ‘individually,’ which meant that the Canadian ships would be deployed piecemeal under American or British UN commanders rather than as a distinct unit. This echoed the pattern of RCN deployments during WW II and, although the strategy may have simplified command and control from a UN perspective, it detracted from the sense of a Canadian ‘national’ contribution and limited the coalition experience that could be gained by Canadian officers.

Nevertheless, a ‘Canadian’ way of war still shone through. Naval personnel were assigned a wide range of operational tasks in Korea, but the nature of many of them suited the ‘can do’ ethos of the RCN. The carrier task group screening that occupied much of their time proved boring and mundane, but inshore operations such as interdiction, blockade enforcement and support to forces ashore provided plenty of opportunity for destroyer captains to display initiative, imagination and resourcefulness. The effectiveness of Canadian ships on these missions routinely earned praise from UN commanders. It was bombardment operations, however, that proved the main occupation of Canadian ships in Korea, and they went at it with characteristic enthusiasm, pushing closely inshore and never missing an opportunity to smother targets with sustained, accurate fire.

The USN conducted bombardment with similar gusto. The British, however, were more restrained. As the war continued, the British, suffering from a desperate financial crunch and wanting to display a less aggressive posture in the region, became more cautious, to the point that one Canadian commander reported a “go-easy” policy among RN commanders in the area. The difference in attitudes between the RCN’s two main allies was also noticed by a Canadian flag officer visiting from Ottawa. The British commander, he observed, “is of the opin-
Long fighting tradition and train busting, which received plenty of media attention back home, boosted the navy’s reputation both in Canada and amongst its allies, and increased morale within the service itself. It was probably the greatest positive in what was, for the RCN, virtually a war of positives.

Indeed, Crusader piled up the highest score in the legendary “Train Busters Club.”

Conclusion

If Canadian ships knocked a number of trains off the rails, the Korean experience as a whole can be said to have put the RCN back on the tracks. The navy had been in danger of losing its way in the immediate post-WW II years, and was suffering diminishing public and political support. Naval historians almost universally agree it was indeed a sickly season. The Korean War helped to turn things around, demonstrating that the navy had a valuable role to play in the post-war world, one at which it could excel. This increased the navy’s value to the country, and forged a foundation of operational professionalism within the navy itself that would serve it well when it confronted the challenges of the Cold War.

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Notes