

Submarines and the Canadian Navy Today: One Man's View

J. David Perkins

Foreword

This essay by David Perkins was originally published in the Spring/Summer 2000 edition of *Maritime Affairs*. It is reprinted here for two reasons. First the essay is a tribute to David himself. A former submariner who served as a member of the RCN in British submarines and later when Canada bought the three *Oberon*-class submarines he served in them in Halifax until 1979 when he retired as a Chief Petty Officer. He also became Canada's submarine historian and wrote five books and several papers on the colourful and often controversial evolution of the Canadian submarine service, ending with *The Canadian Submarine Service in Review* (St. Catherine's: Vanwell Publishing, 2000). Sadly, David died last year; this was far too early and his input into the on-going process of telling the story of Canada's submarines is missed enormously.

Second, the essay is a good summary of Canadian submarine history and forms an excellent beginning to understanding the complexity of Canada's present submarine program. The only comment one might add to David's analysis is that by the early 1990s the urgency of acquiring replacements for the *Oberons* was considerable because unless new submarines were obtained, the level of training would quickly deteriorate and the ability to operate submarines safely would be lost.

Peter Haydon

That the Canadian Navy has submarines at all is quite remarkable. The story of Canadian submarines is one of deeply entrenched reluctance on the part of government arrayed against the determination of a few senior naval officers and enlightened bureaucrats. To this can be added a certain amount of pressure from allies badgering Canada to give its navy greater operational scope. Only with the acceptance of the concept of a balanced naval force capable



An A-class submarine of the 6th Submarine Squadron (SM6) in 1957.

of conducting a full range of operations upon, above and below the surface has the submarine gained a measure of acceptability.

When it was founded in 1910, it would have been impractical for Canada's navy even to consider operating submarines. Theoretically, possession of submarines would have had a deterrent effect on the aspirations of a belligerent power, but the likelihood of Canada having to face such an adversary was negligible. During WW I, the relative isolation of Canada's coasts served to provide a real measure of protection. In 1914, when a German cruiser squadron was loose in the Pacific, it never ventured within a thousand miles of Canadian waters despite the fact that Canada was the only 'enemy' possession along the entire American Pacific seaboard. The Germans had much more urgent concerns than risking battle damage for little gain. On the East Coast, a few German U-boats did operate off the Halifax approaches, but only for a brief period towards the end of the war. Neither the West Coast ports nor those in the east were ever directly threatened by surface forces against which Canadian submarines could have been deployed effectively.

Nevertheless, for want of other warships, two submarines – CC1 and CC2 – were acquired and commissioned for

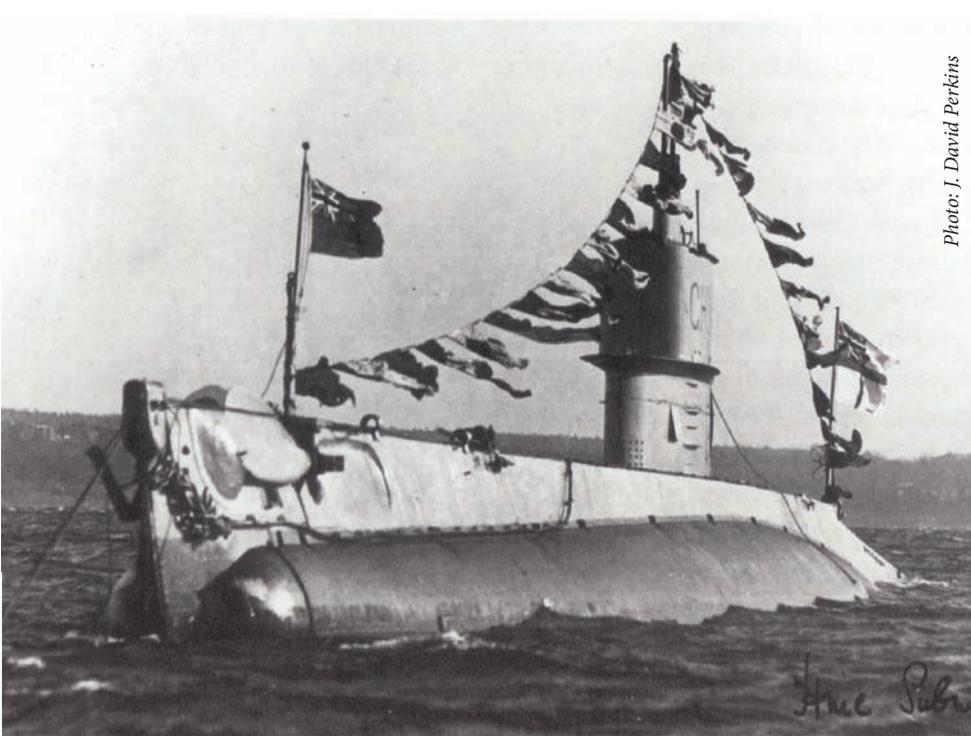


Photo: J. David Perkins

HMC Submarine CH 14 at anchor in the early 1920s.

the defence of the West Coast inshore waters. They took turns patrolling the Juan de Fuca Strait during the crisis of late 1914. Canada's first submarines were manned for the most part by ex-Royal Navy (RN) personnel who were serving on loan or had settled in Canada. Worn out by the rigours of service the two boats were replaced with new submarines of an obsolete design by a gift from the Admiralty in 1919. These, along with most of the navy, were discarded in the retrenchment that followed the signing of the Treaty of Versailles.

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During WW I a number of Canadian officers, including some who trained in the CC-boats, served in and even commanded RN submarines overseas. Canadians, though small in number, were the only other national group to serve in RN submarines. A Canadian was the first Volunteer Reservist (VR) ever to serve in RN submarines and the only one to last out the war. Another was the first VR ever to command an RN boat and, with a shuffling of the cards, became the first of only six Royal Naval Reserves (RNRs) to command one. This officer also won a coveted DSO for his service in submarines. An RCN officer was the first midshipman ever to serve in RN submarines. He was also one of the very few RCN officers to command an operational RN warship in that war and his was the only submarine to be sunk by aerial bombing at sea, albeit at the hands of an ally.

Throughout the course of WW I a large number of submarines were built in Canada for allied navies including

10 for the RN and eight for the Italian Navy while a total of 17 prefabricated submarine building kits were assembled for the Imperial Russian Navy. Eleven of these were completed in Russian shipyards and entered service with the Imperial or, as it became, the Soviet Navy. With the advent of the Bolshevik revolution, six of the Russian kits lying in storage in Vancouver were acquired by the United States, assembled and commissioned in the USN.

The same strategic situation held true in WW II. Neither coast was ever seriously threatened by hostile surface forces although U-boat attacks in Canadian and Newfoundland waters were fairly frequent.

Considering the state of the country's economy and industrial capacity, Canada had much more to gain in building and operating surface vessels than submarines. There was a strong case to be made for having submarines for anti-submarine training, but this was not appreciated until WW II was well under way.

In the period between the end of WW I and Hitler's rise to power, it was the stated British opinion that U-boats would never again become a significant force in a future German war. Only when Hitler repudiated the terms of the Treaty of Versailles and German rearmament began in earnest was this fallacy exposed. Because of this, and the slow pace of naval weapons development between the wars, the RN was ill-prepared for the U-boat onslaught that Nazi Germany unleashed during the first three years of WW II.

To help redress the balance, Canada undertook the building and manning of a fleet of anti-submarine (A/S) escorts: the famous or infamous, depending on your experiences, corvettes. When these ships began entering service, it was quickly realized that there was a real need for submarines with which to train them. The RCN had no way of providing these and Canada prevailed on the Admiralty for assistance. Ultimately, training submarines were provided by the RN through various means, including 'lend-lease.' These operated from Halifax, Pictou, St. John's, Digby and Bermuda throughout most of the war.

Once again Canadian officers were afforded an opportunity to serve in British submarines on an equal footing with their British and Commonwealth counterparts. Twenty-six RCNVR officer volunteers were accepted for training in submarines. Three of these volunteers rose to commands of their own and two were decorated for their service in submarines, one of them twice. Three more



The three Canadian *Oberon*-class submarines.

RNCVR volunteers were chosen for the Special Services where two were pioneers in the Chariots, or ‘human torpedoes.’ The third served in the *X-craft* mini-submarines.

As the allies turned their attentions to the Pacific at the end of the European war, the RCN was preparing to man and operate a flotilla of four Canadian-based British submarines in order to facilitate the training of Canadian anti-submarine warfare (ASW) forces. The sudden capitulation of Japan following the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki terminated this project before it could be brought to fruition.

With the creation of NATO in the late 1940s and the intensification of the Cold War during the 1950s, the Canadian Navy assumed an increasing responsibility for the deployment of ASW assets as its contribution to the NATO partnership. However, during the war ASW had been made a specialty of the naval reserves. But once the reserve had been returned to a peacetime footing, the navy found itself having to scramble for ASW expertise as well as for suitable ships.

Along with the acceleration of ASW training that began in the early 1950s came a new requirement for seagoing training submarines. These were needed to provide services for RCN ships, carrier-borne ASW aircraft and the long-range patrol aircraft of the RCAF. It was the story of WW II all over again – the RCN had none. Surplus submarines were available but for a variety of reasons the Canadian government steadfastly refused to consider their acquisition. Fortunately, Britain, and to a lesser extent the United States, was able to provide training submarine services to the RCN on a part-time loan or rental basis for over 20 years. This arrangement was formalized with

Britain in 1955 with the creation of the 6th Submarine Squadron (SM6) and the permanent stationing of two or three submarines at Halifax. As a condition of the deal, Canada offset the manning requirements of the two RN boats with Canadian personnel who served aboard British submarines both in Canada and abroad. Not until the mid-1960s did Canada begin acquiring submarines of its own.

It has long been recognized in naval circles that Canada, with the longest coastline of any country and responsibility for a vast area of accessible offshore territory and its attendant resources, can ill afford to ignore the underwater dimension. Modern conventional submarines make ideal maritime surveillance platforms. One submarine on station can monitor an enormous area continuously for weeks at a time without betraying its presence. To provide the same level of coverage with a combination of bottom sensors, ships and aircraft would be prohibitively expensive and patently obvious. As well, by this juncture the submarine had become a very capable ASW platform in its own right. Nevertheless, Conservative and Liberal governments alike rebuked repeated efforts to equip the Canadian Navy with submarines. Even when submarines were eventually acquired, quality, combat capability and numbers were all sacrificed in the name of politics, unrealistic fiscal restraints and lowered expectations.

As the Cold War intensified, the Canadian Navy at various times identified a need for either a combination of six nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) and three conventional (non-nuclear) attack submarines (SSKs) or a total of 12 to 16 SSKs. These were to be deployed primarily as operational units although training was still considered to be an important secondary role. Ultimately, a plan to

buy three SSKs offshore and to build a further six to nine in Canada was established. As a stopgap, one obsolescent ex-USN fleet boat was acquired on a five-year lease for the West Coast. In the end only three British-built *Oberons* were procured to replace the boats of SM6 while the West Coast lost its submarine altogether.

For their first 15 years in service the *Oberons* were relegated exclusively to a training role on the East Coast. The Canadian defence establishment, it seemed, wanted nothing to do with operational submarines. The big shift occurred in the early 1980s when, to help fill in for an aging ASW fleet, these boats were rearmed, brought up to an operational state and given meaningful operational employment. By then, however, they were long past their prime.

When the time came to consider replacing the *Oberons*, a modest requirement of between four and 12 SSKs was identified. This plan was swept aside by the 1987 White Paper on Defence which called for the construction of 12 SSNs in Canada. Within two years this ambitious scheme had evaporated without ever reaching Cabinet. So too had the Cold War. When the dust settled, the Canadian Navy was left with its three obsolescent *Oberons* and little hope for the future.

After 12 years of uncertainty and a trail of abandoned submarine replacement schemes the government announced in 1998 that a lease-to-purchase deal had been made with Britain for four redundant *Vickers*, Type-2400 patrol submarines. In a survey of suitable submarine designs conducted in 1986 as part of the conventional submarine acquisition program, these boats had been rated second behind a German contender in an international field of seven designs. The '*Vickers*' boats, or the *Upholder*-class as they had become, were considered to be lacking in diving capability, generator capacity, weapons-carrying capacity and patrol endurance. However, the price was right and the 30-year-old *Oberons* were getting perilously close to reaching the end of their hull life.

In the Canadian Navy these submarines have become the *Victoria*-class. The first change that occurred with the assumption of Canadian ownership was the removal of the *Harpoon* surface-to-surface missile (SSM) capability along with the somewhat dated fire control system. At the same time it was announced that the *Victorias* would be fully operational units of the fleet. This was followed by the removal of the state-of-the-art electronic countermeasures (ECM) suite. The fire control and ECM will be replaced by 20 year-old refurbished equipment recovered from the obsolescent O-boats. This will give the *Victorias* a limited combat capability. Just what the Canadian government means by 'operational' seems to be very different



Photo: J. David Perkins

An *Oberon*-class Control Room.



Photo: Peter Haydon

The Control Room of HMCS *Windsor*.

from what the phrase implies in other NATO navies. All front-line SSKs in NATO are armed with SSMs in addition to modern multi-purpose heavyweight torpedoes.

One would like to think that the Canadian Navy today possesses combat-capable operational submarines because of a genuine conviction on the part of government that they are a necessary component of a modern, balanced and effective Canadian fleet. However, the record of Canadian governments, past and present, reveals a less than reassuring state of affairs. From the public perspective it appears that the navy has submarines at all only because of pressure from within DND and because it was politically expedient for the government of the day to be seen to be cooperating with its allies. This was as true in 1964 when the *Oberons* were purchased as it was in 1998 when the *Victorias* were acquired. No Canadian government, and most certainly no Prime Minister, has ever admitted publicly that submarines are a legitimate component of Canada's maritime forces. Consequently, Canada's Submarine Service is destined by longstanding political tradition to occupy a somewhat tenuous position in the eyes and minds of its masters. 🍷