

Was the RCN ever the Third Largest Navy?

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Introduction

At the beginning of the Second World War the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) was very small, with just 309 officers and 2,967 ratings,¹ and only six destroyers, four minesweepers and three auxiliary vessels. During the course of the war it was greatly expanded, to 95,000 officers, ratings and Wrens, and over 400 vessels of all types. It was quite possibly the only navy to end the war with more *vessels* than it had had *officers* when the war began. With the Italian, German and Japanese Navies having surrendered, and the French Navy having been decimated, it is often claimed that the RCN was the third largest navy when the war ended, the two largest being the US Navy (USN) and the Royal Navy (RN). Among those asserting this is Dr. Roger Sarty, on the website of the Canadian War Museum, and Dr. Marc Milner, in *Canada's Navy: The First Century*. On the other hand, Commander Tony German, in *The Sea is at Our Gates*, claims that the RCN was the third largest *Allied* navy, and other reputable sources describe the RCN as the fourth largest navy. Interestingly, the 2002 official history claims only that it was the "largest of the Commonwealth navies next to the RN."²

With the Canadian Navy celebrating its centenary in 2010, it seems an opportune moment to look in some detail at the question of whether or not the RCN was ever the third largest navy and, if so, how long it held that distinction. It is hoped that if the present article does not settle this question it will at least go some way towards answering it.

What to Count ... and When

It might be supposed that determining which navy was the third largest is simply a matter of totting up the number of ships in each one and comparing the sums. Alas, it is not nearly so simple. It turns out that up to four navies may have a claim on the honour of having been the third largest in 1945, depending on the criteria used, so this is where we must begin.

The first point is that only ships in commission should be counted. In the RCN and most other navies, decommissioned ships were by definition unmanned and not operational. Some navies, notably the Japanese, sometimes kept non-operational ships nominally in commission but they are discounted in this article.

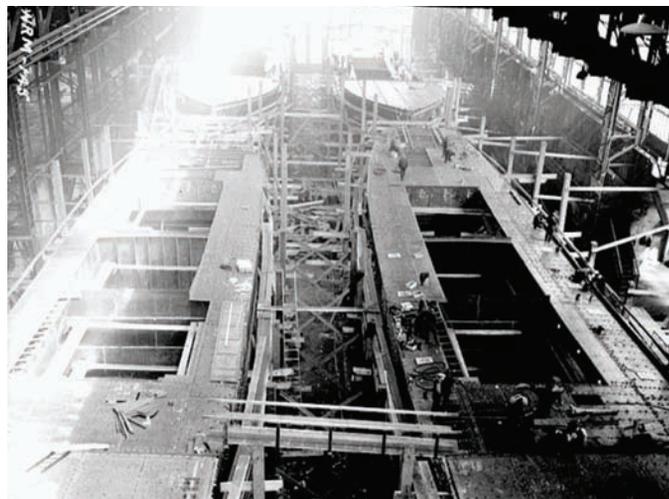


Photo: Library and Archives Canada

Canadian corvettes under construction during the Second World War (1940).

Another key issue is the types of vessels to be compared. The norm among historians comparing Second World War navies is to ignore surface vessels smaller than destroyers, but this would leave most of the RCN's fleet out of the reckoning. The present comparison will encompass all warship types, apart from auxiliaries, armed yachts, coastal craft such as motor torpedo boats (MTBs) and motor launches (MLs), and midget submarines.

Probably the most important criterion is the minimum tonnage. In this comparison, only vessels of 200 tons standard displacement or more are considered. This permits the inclusion of all RCN minesweepers, the smallest of which were the 228-ton *Llewellyn*-class, and is consistent with the inclusion of vessels larger than MTBs and MLs.

Not everyone will agree with these criteria. Some might exclude submarine chasers for example, perhaps thinking them simply too small to count. Soviet submarine chasers were indeed quite small, the biggest of them displacing only 240 tons, but most of the Japanese and all of the French submarine chasers were of over 400 tons, or about two-thirds the size of the RCN's *Bangor*-class minesweepers, most of which were employed as coastal escorts. As this is how the Japanese and French used their submarine chasers, it seems reasonable to count them.

The case may also be made that amphibious warfare

vessels should be excluded from the tally. Given, however, that the RCN always counted its two 5,700-ton landing ships, *Prince David* and *Prince Henry*, among its major units, it seems obligatory to list them – and then one has to include their foreign counterparts. The auxiliary anti-aircraft cruiser *Prince Robert* is included for the same reason.

The final criterion to be clarified is what date is meant by ‘the end of the war.’ Victory over Japan Day (VJ-Day), 15 August 1945, is generally recognized as the end of the war, although hostilities between Japan and the USSR continued until 2 September. But some sources cite the RCN’s strength on Victory in Europe Day (VE-Day), 8 May, when claiming that it was the third largest navy at the end of the war. To resolve any possible confusion on this score, the relative standing of the RCN on both VE-Day and VJ-Day will be established.

The Royal Canadian Navy

A number of sources disagree concerning how many vessels the RCN had in 1945. The Juno Beach Centre website says the RCN had “450 ships in all, plus many



Photo: John Daniel Mahoney, LAC 3264016

Crew stand on damaged stern of the destroyer HMCS Saguenay. Saguenay’s stern was blown off after her depth charges exploded following a collision with SS Azra south of Cape Race.

smaller auxiliary units.”⁴ Dr. Milner has given the total as “over 400 warships of various types” but Dr. Sarty has put it as “250 seagoing warships.”⁵ *A Nation’s Navy* puts the total at “some 365 warships.”⁶ Dr. Tucker’s 1952 official history states that by VE-Day the RCN had over 375 ships “armed for offensive action against the enemy,” plus more than 500 auxiliaries and “local craft performing miscel-

Table 1. RCN Strength on VE-Day and VJ-Day

Type	In Commission 1 Sept 39- 8 May 45	Lost Before VE-Day	Paid Off Before VE-Day	In Commission On VE-Day	In Commission On VJ-Day
Escort carriers	2	–	1	1	1
Light cruisers	2	–	–	2	2
Aux. AA cruiser	1	–	–	1	1
Destroyers	28	7	1	20	14
Frigates	70	4	1	65	55
Corvettes	123	10	–	113	18
Minesweepers	80	5	–	75	62
Landing ships	2	–	1	1	–
LCI (L)	30	–	30	–	–
Sub-total	338	26	34	278	153
MTBs	21	7	–	14	–
Motor launches	80	–	3	77	20
Armed yachts	16	2	4	10	2
Auxiliaries	52	3	5	44	32
Fishermen’s Reserve boats	61	–	56	5	5
Sub-total	230	12	68	150	59
Total	568	38	102	428	212

laneous harbour duties.”⁷

To confirm whether the RCN was the third largest navy in 1945, it is essential to sort out these figures. Fortunately, a number of references offer detailed information on Canadian warships, including the dates of their commissioning and their decommissioning or loss. Table 1 compiles this information and covers all RCN vessels in commission between 1 September 1939 and VJ-Day, excluding harbour and small craft. It is derived from *The Ships of Canada’s Naval Forces 1910-2002* and other authoritative sources.⁸

A couple of comments on this table are in order. Only vessels commissioned in or manned by the RCN are listed. This means that the eight *Western Isles*-class anti-

submarine trawlers counted in many tallies of RCN ships are excluded. They were built in Canada, named after Canadian islands and operated in Canadian waters under RCN control, but were commissioned in and manned by the RN, so they do not belong on a list of RCN units. Also excluded are the two surrendered German submarines in the RCN’s possession on VJ-Day, as they were in commission only for testing and evaluation. On the other hand, the RN escort carrier HMS *Puncher* has been included, as it was manned by the RCN.

The reference to the 30 Landing Craft Infantry (Large) (LCI (L)) may require a word of explanation. These were US-owned vessels of 380 tons, loaned to and manned by

Table 2. Ships in Commission, 1945

	8 May				15 August				31 December		
	USSR	Japan	Canada	France	USSR	Japan	France	Canada	Sweden	Australia	Canada
Carriers	–	–	–	1	–	–	1	–	–	–	–
Escort carriers	–	–	1	1	–	–	1	1	–	–	1
Battleships	3	1	–	2	3	–	2	–	–	–	–
Coastal battleships	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	7	–	–
Heavy Cruisers	6	3	–	3	6	–	3	–	–	2	–
Light Cruisers	3	4	2	6	3	3	6	2	2	2	2
Aux AA cruisers	–	–	1	–	–	–	–	1	–	–	–
Armed merchant cruisers	–	–	–	1	–	–	1	–	–	–	–
Destroyers	52	18	20	13	52	17	13	14	27	8	11
Frigates and destroyer escorts	–	22	65	12	10	18	12	55	–	8	15
Torpedo boats	–	3	–	5	–	2	5	–	–	–	–
Corvettes	19	114	113	27	19	94	27	18	–	47	8
Submarine chasers	17	27	–	30	17	17	30	–	–	–	–
Minesweepers	62	11	75	36	98	5	36	62	14	–	16
Minelayers	2	17	–	–	2	15	–	–	2	–	–
Amphibious vessels	–	26	1	–	30	19	–	–	–	3	–
Submarines	173	50	–	22	175	56	22	–	26	–	–
Total	337	296	278	159	415	246	159	153	78	70	53



Photo: Library and Archives Canada



Landing craft filled with soldiers disembark from HMCS *Prince David* off Bernières-sur-Mer, France, 6 June 1944.

the RCN for the Normandy invasion. The RCN received the first of them in December 1943 but retained none of them beyond the following September.⁹

The Fishermen's Naval Reserve, which is usually referred to simply as the Fishermen's Reserve, was an auxiliary force of volunteers who carried out inshore patrols of the West Coast. Usually they simply operated their own fishing boats but some manned boats seized from interned Japanese-Canadians. It was a navy within a navy, but by the end of 1944 it had ceased to exist, except that five boats formerly serving with it were retained for a time.¹⁰

The detailed sources on which Table 1 is based are generally in agreement, but there are a few discrepancies with respect to damaged ships. The destroyer *Saguenay*, for example, lost her stern in 1942. The stern was sealed off rather than replaced, and *Saguenay* spent the rest of the war as a training ship at Cornwallis. Most sources show her as still being in commission on VE-Day but because the 2007 volume of the official history lists her as a total constructive loss as of 1942, she is listed under the 'lost' column in Table 1. There are also discrepancies in the case of some auxiliary vessels and Fishermen's Reserve boats, but they are not large. If there are any errors or omissions in Table 1, they are not likely to be significant.

Table 1 makes it clear that, excluding harbour and small craft, 568 vessels served in the wartime RCN up to VE-Day, but no more than 428 were still in commission on that day. In terms of the types of vessels which will form the basis of our comparison of the RCN with other navies, a total of 278 were in service on VE-Day.

Well before VE-Day it was decided that the Canadian naval contribution to the final operations against Japan would be limited in size. Apart from its light cruisers and any light fleet carriers it might acquire, the RCN was to deploy to the Pacific theatre only its newest destroyers, 36 of its 65 frigates, and eight of its 113 corvettes.¹¹ Decommissioning of vessels not earmarked for the Pacific war began almost immediately after VE-Day. A total of 125 vessels were paid off by VJ-Day, an average of more than one a day, which brought the RCN down to 153 vessels. The Japanese surrender prompted another wave of decommissioning, and there were just 53 vessels left by the end of 1945. By the end of 1946, the RCN had fewer vessels in commission than at the start of the war.¹²

The Soviet Navy

Just as the importance of the Eastern Front may be underestimated in the West at times, the sheer size of the wartime Soviet Navy is often overlooked. In May 1945 it had three battleships, nine cruisers, 53 destroyers and flotilla leaders, and 173 submarines, plus escorts and mine warfare vessels. As shown in Table 2, the Soviet Navy totalled 337 units.¹³

It is clear from these figures that the Soviet Navy had about 60 more vessels than the RCN on VE-Day. And as 1945 advanced, the Soviet fleet grew. Ships under construction were completed, captured vessels were put in service and numerous ships were acquired from Allied countries – including 10 *Lake*-class minesweepers from Canada. It is clear that the Soviet Navy, and not the RCN, was the third largest navy on VE-Day in numbers of ships. After VJ-Day, with the demise of the Japanese fleet, it was also third in terms of total tonnage, aircraft and personnel, as is shown in Table 3.

Nihon Kaigan

In 1941 the Nihon Kaigan, the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN), was easily the third largest navy, but it was on its last legs by VE-Day. It still had about 300 units, but had only eight operational surface combatants larger than destroyers. Furthermore, there was almost no fuel, and there were no aircraft or trained aircrew for its remaining carriers, which were for all practical purposes decommissioned. Nevertheless, on VE-Day it still had about 20 more units in commission than did the RCN. Under incessant Allied attack throughout the spring and summer of 1945,



Table 3. Relative Naval Strength on VE-Day, Per Alternate Criteria

	Criteria	Canada	USSR	Japan	France
	Surface ships of over 200 tons plus all submarines (i.e., the criteria used for Table 2)	278	337	296	159
1	Surface ships of over 200 tons (i.e., disregarding submarines)	278	164	246	137
2	Destroyers and larger surface combatants, plus all submarines	24	237	76	49
3	Surface ships of over 500 tons, plus submarines of over 500 tons	264	222	251	87
4	Surface ships of over 500 tons, plus all submarines	264	292	260	93
5	Surface ships of over 200 tons, plus all MTBs, MLs and submarines	369	c. 900	c. 500	c. 185
	Total tonnage of all surface ships over 200 tons and all submarines	323,500	381,600	401,500	272,350
	Aircraft	None	2,800	7,300	c. 130
	Personnel	95,000	266,000	1,700,000	78,200

the IJN was smaller still by VJ-Day, but the RCN shrank even faster, due to its frenetic demobilization, and by then had some 90 fewer ships than the IJN.

The formal Japanese surrender did not take place until 2 September and hostilities with the USSR continued until then, but VJ-Day is generally taken as the date of the *de facto* disbandment of the Imperial Japanese Navy. It is therefore also the day on which it was supplanted as the fourth largest navy.

La Marine Nationale

In 1939 France had one of the world's great navies, but it suffered crippling losses during the course of the war. The defeat of the French Army and the armistice with the Axis powers in June 1940 prompted the Royal Navy to destroy a number of French ships the following month, lest they fall into German or Italian hands, and the French themselves scuttled 80 ships at Toulon in November 1942.¹⁴ Others were lost during the Allied occupations of Syria, Madagascar and North Africa, and some were lost during encounters between Vichy and Free French forces.

On VE-Day the French Navy was smaller than the RCN,

but while the RCN shrank during the summer the French Navy did not. By 15 August the French Navy had six more ships than the RCN, if the figures in Table 2 are accurate. The author concedes that the margin of error in his figures may be greater than six, but the RCN paid off 10 more ships during the rest of August, and at least another 30 by the end of October. If the French Navy was not larger than the RCN on VJ-Day, it certainly became so very soon thereafter.

Conclusion

As discussed above and shown in Tables 2 and 3, the Soviet Navy was the third largest navy on both VE-Day and VJ-Day, by any reasonable choice of criteria. It was certainly larger than the RCN. Indeed, by VJ-Day its 175 submarines by themselves outnumbered the 153 ships of the RCN.

One can argue that the RCN, rather than the IJN, was the fourth largest navy on VE-Day. If submarine chasers or landing ships were to be excluded from consideration, which would not be an entirely unreasonable thing to do, then the RCN would be marginally larger than the IJN, but it would be just as reasonable to include MTBs and

MLs, in which case the VE-Day tally for the IJN would be larger than the RCN's by about 130 units. Furthermore, since Canadian warships were decommissioned after VE-Day faster than Japanese ships were sunk, the RCN would have become smaller than the IJN at some point before VJ-Day even if submarine chasers and landing ships were disregarded.

It is possible that the RCN was somewhat larger than the French Navy on VJ-Day, if the author's count is slightly out or if one chooses different criteria. In this case too, however, the RCN would have been the fourth largest navy only very briefly, perhaps for less than two weeks, given that it paid off 10 ships between 15 and 31 August, and certainly not beyond the end of October, by which time it had paid off at least another 30 ships. It continued to shrink over the next months and by the end of 1945 ranked below such moderately sized navies as those of Sweden and Australia.

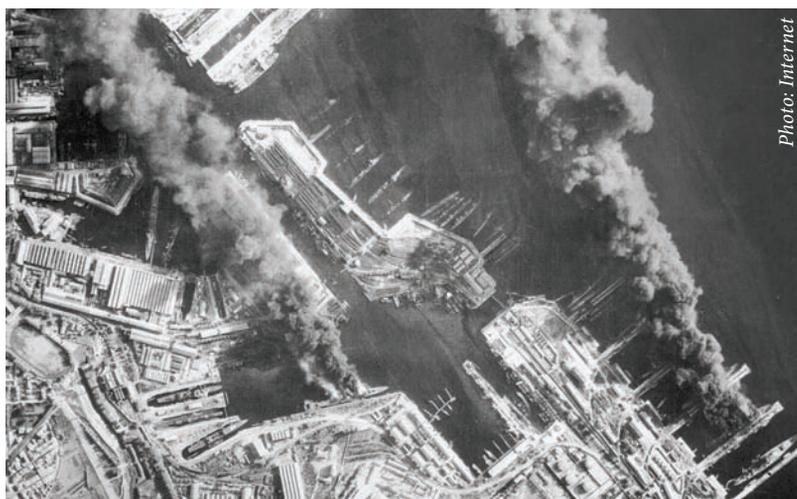


Photo: Internet

French fleet alongside and aflame in Toulon Harbour after being scuttled by her own crews, 28 November 1942.

During the Canadian Navy's centennial year many a sailor will toast its Second World War record. They can salute with justifiable pride the RCN's role in the Battle of the Atlantic, its support of the Normandy invasion and its other contributions to victory. They can certainly say that the RCN grew from 3,300 men and 13 ships to 95,000 men and women and 428 ships. They can also claim that in 1945 the RCN may have briefly ranked as the fourth largest navy, if they make certain qualifications and explanations. But that would make for a long toast. Perhaps they should just say that the RCN had one of the largest fleets in the world. That is remarkable enough. 🍷

Notes

1. W.A.B. Douglas, Roger Sarty and Michael Whitby, *No Higher Purpose: The Official Operational History of the Royal Canadian Navy in the Second World War, 1939-1943, Volume II, Part 1* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing, 2002), p. 30.
2. Roger Sarty, "The Royal Canadian Navy and the Battle of the Atlantic,

1939-1945." *Dispatches: Backgrounders in Canadian Military History*, Canadian War Museum, available at www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/explore/military-history/dispatches/the-royal-canadian-navy-and-the-battle-of-the-atlantic-1939-1945; Marc Milner, *Canada's Navy: The First Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 157; Commander Tony German, *The Sea is at Our Gates: The History of the Canadian Navy* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990), p. 71; "History of Naden at CFB Esquimalt," CFB Esquimalt Naval and Military Museum, available at www.navalandmilitarymuseum.org/info_pages/history/naden.html; "Canada in WWII: The Ships," Juno Beach Centre, available at www.juno-beach.org/e/4/can-tac-shp-e.htm; Douglas, Sarty and Whitby, *No Higher Purpose*, p. 29.

3. Milner, *Canada's Navy*.
4. "Canada in WWII: The Ships," Juno Beach Centre.
5. Milner, *Canada's Navy*; Roger Sarty, *The Battle of the Atlantic: The Royal Canadian Navy's Greatest Campaign 1939-1945* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2001), p. 2.
6. Michael L. Hadley, Rob Huebert and Fred W. Crickard (eds), *A Nation's Navy: In Quest of Canadian Naval Identity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), p. 4.
7. G.N. Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada: Its Official History, Volume II, Activities on Shore During the Second World War* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1952), p. 21 and Appendix I.
8. See, for example, Ken Macpherson and Ron Barrie, *The Ships of Canada's Naval Forces 1910-2002* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing, 2002); Ken Macpherson and John Burgess, *The Ships of Canada's Naval Forces 1910-1993* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing, 1994); Charles D. Maginley and Bernard Collin, *The Ships of Canada's Marine Services* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing, 2001); Ken Macpherson, *Mine-sweepers of the Royal Canadian Navy 1938-1945* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing, 1990); K.R. Macpherson, *Canada's Fighting Ships* (Toronto: Samuel Stevens, Hakkert and Company, 1975). Information on the Fishermen's Reserve was also obtained from Jerry Proc's website Radio Communications and Signals Intelligence in the Canadian Navy, available at http://jproc.ca/rrp/fishermans_reserve.html, which quotes the May-June 1960 edition of *The Crownsnest* and David Freeman's *Canadian Warship Names* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing, 2000).
9. Macpherson and Burgess, *The Ships of Canada's Naval Forces 1910-1993*, p. 143.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
11. W.A.B. Douglas, Roger Sarty and Michael Whitby, *A Blue Water Navy: The Official Operational History of the Royal Canadian Navy in the Second World War, 1939-1945, Volume II Part 2* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 524-5.
12. Macpherson and Barrie, *The Ships of Canada's Naval Forces 1910-2002*, p. 235.
13. The sources for Tables 2 and 3 are those listed in note 8, plus *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships 1922-1946* (London: Conway Maritime Press, 1980); Hansgeorg Jentschura, Dieter Jung and Peter Mickel, *Warships of the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1869-1945* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1977); Anthony J. Watts and Brian G. Gordon, *The Imperial Japanese Navy* (London: Macdonald, 1971); Jean Labayle Couhat, *French Warships of World War II* (London: Ian Allan, 1971); Norman Polmar and Jurrien Noot, *Submarines of the Russian and Soviet Navies 1718-1990* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1991); Jurgen Rohwer and Mikhail S. Monakov, *Stalin's Ocean-Going Fleet: Soviet Naval Strategy and Shipbuilding Programmes 1935-1953* (London: Frank Cass, 2001); John Ellis, *World War II: A Statistical Survey* (New York: Facts on File, 1993), Table 9; James F. Dunnigan and Albert A. Nofi, *Victory at Sea: World War II in the Pacific* (New York: Quill, 1995), p. 245; I.C.B. Dear (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 967; and Wikipedia entries "Imperial Japanese Navy of World War II" and "Histoire de la marine française"; J.H. Straczek, "RAN in the Second World War" and "Ship Histories - Royal Australian Navy" at www.navy.gov.au; Frédéric Rolland, "Organisation FAF 1945," available at <http://batfredland.free.fr/340Squadron.htm>; Kent G. Budge, "The Pacific War Online Encyclopedia," available at <http://pwencycl.kgbudge.com>; "Combined Fleet," available at <http://www.combinedfleet.com>. The figures for corvettes include comparable vessels employed as escorts. The Soviet personnel figure represents peak wartime strength rather than strength on VE-Day. The Japanese personnel figure is for July 1945.
14. Dear (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to World War II*, p. 317.

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