Was the RCN ever the Third Largest Navy?

Rob Stuart

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, 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.”

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.

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 smaller auxiliary units.” Dr. Milner has given the total as “over 400 warships of various types” but Dr. Sarty has put it as “250 seagoing warships.” A Nation’s Navy puts the total at “some 365 warships.” 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-
laneous harbour duties. 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.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>8 May</th>
<th>15 August</th>
<th>31 December</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>USSR</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carriers</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escort carriers</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battleships</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coastal battleships</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy Cruisers</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light Cruisers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aux AA cruisers</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed merchant cruisers</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destroyers</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frigates and destroyer escorts</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torpedo boats</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corvettes</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submarine chasers</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minesweepers</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minelayers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amphibious vessels</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submarines</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>337</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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,
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 \textit{de facto} disbandment of the Imperial Japanese Navy. It is therefore also the day on which it was supplanted as the fourth largest navy.

\textbf{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.\textsuperscript{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.

\textbf{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

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\caption{Relative Naval Strength on VE-Day, Per Alternate Criteria}
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Criteria & Canada & USSR & Japan & France \\
\hline
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 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}
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.


3. Milner, Canada’s Navy.


10. Ibid., p. 155.


