Milestones in Canadian Naval History

The fleet Canada has today is only the third designed and built for specific tasks in the navy’s 100-year history; the other fleets evolved in less structured ways. For instance, the large Second World War fleet evolved from a handful of destroyers and a modest pre-war plan to acquire a total of 18 destroyers and some specialized anti-submarine warfare (ASW) ships into a force of nearly 100,000 men and women manning and supporting some 470 vessels of various types. Before 1939, there wasn’t really a fleet at all, and the navy struggled through its early years to maintain a few destroyers and smaller vessels while plans for more ships were consistently rejected by politicians.

The first of the three post-war fleets was made up of the war-built ships retained as a contingency force and later upgraded to meet early Cold War ASW requirements. The second fleet was the ASW force built to counter the increasing Cold War Soviet submarine threat and modernized later to keep pace with new technologies. The present fleet, although designed during the Cold War, is well suited to the post-Cold War concept of sea power and active internationalism. But those fleets were not distinct entities. Transitions from one fleet structure to the next took place incrementally over several years. In fact, change became a constant factor as ships were modernized and fleets restructured to meet the ever-changing strategic situation.

Conventional wisdom holds that Canadian fleet planning over the past century has been directed by senior officers schooled in the Royal Navy (and, latterly, the US Navy) determined to acquire a so-called ‘blue water’ fleet modelled in that likeness. However, there is another view of the evolution of the various Canadian fleets which holds that Canadian officers favoured neither a British nor an American model. Rather, they sought a uniquely Canadian model reflecting their years of experience on what they understood the country to need, what they could provide, and what politicians would approve.

The brief chronology that follows is a selection of milestones in the Canadian Navy’s 100-year history and provides a context for the articles in this centennial edition of the Canadian Naval Review. For those who want to read the navy’s history in more detail we suggest they begin with Marc Milner’s Canada’s Navy: The First Century (2nd edition; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010) and Richard H. Gimblett (ed.), The Naval Service of Canada 1910-2010: The Centennial Story (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2009) and then move on to the series of official histories and the wealth of books and journal articles that provide firsthand accounts and analysis of specific events, ships and people.
In July, the steam corvette *Charybdis* was given to Canada by the Royal Navy (RN) with the idea that she could be used to start training for a new naval service. She was deemed unsafe and returned to Britain in 1882.

In response to calls for militia reform, Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier presented *An Act Constituting the Naval Militia of Canada* to Parliament, but the concept was not adopted despite the RN dockyards in Halifax and Esquimalt being transferred to Canadian control. CGS *Canada*, a third-class cruiser, became the flagship of the Fisheries Protection Service of Canada and was used to train cadets and seaman for the future Naval Militia.

Rear-Admiral Sir Charles Kingsmill, a Canadian who served in the Royal Navy, was appointed to establish a Canadian Naval Militia, based upon the Fisheries Protection Service. The first Canadian naval cadets embarked CGS *Canada*.

During the British *Dreadnought* Crisis, Laurier and Kingsmill avoided being forced into commitments to Imperial defence and accepted the loan of two aging cruisers, *Niobe* and *Rainbow*, until new cruisers and destroyers could be built in Canada.

Consensus for a Canadian navy quickly evaporated but Parliament passed the *Naval Service Act* on 4 May 1910 formally establishing the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN). *Niobe* and *Rainbow*, manned by the RN, arrived in Halifax and Esquimalt on 21 October and 7 November 1910 respectively.

The Royal Naval College of Canada (RNCC) was established in Halifax as a step towards creating a national navy. Recruiting of Canadians for the navy proved to be difficult.

Canadian involvement in Imperial defence was fiercely debated in Parliament. The new government, led by Prime Minister Robert Borden, cancelled contracts for new RCN ships and stopped recruiting, opting to pay for three RN battleships instead. Although this plan was quashed in the Senate, the RCN stagnated without a fleet plan.

No. 1 Company Royal Naval Canadian Volunteer Reserve (RNCVR) was formed at Victoria in May 1914, under the oversight of Commander Walter Hose, Captain of *Rainbow*.

At the beginning of the First World War the RCN consisted of two old cruisers, 350 people (plus 250 in the Victoria Naval Reserve) and had no mobilization or expansion plans. The submarines CC-1 and CC-2 were purchased in 1914 from the United States, and the RN sloop *Shearwater* was transferred to the RCN as their tender. The navy conducted coastal patrols on
both coasts, guarding against attack by German cruisers, while politicians adamantly refused to be drawn into Imperial defence and the Allied war effort at sea. Canada’s contribution was the Army Expeditionary Force.

1917 U-boats attacked shipping on the East Coast and in response coastal patrols were established under Hose. Twelve Battle-class trawlers were ordered for patrol and ASW duties – the first major building program for the RCN.

CC-1, CC-2 and Shearwater were transferred to the East Coast becoming first RN/RCN ships to use the new Panama Canal, but the submarines were not considered safe for operations in the Atlantic.

1918 RCN Air Service was established on 5 September as the first distinctive Canadian Air Force, based at Baker’s Point (Dartmouth), NS, with assistance of the USN. It was disbanded soon after the war ended in November.

1919 Submarines EH-14 and EH-15 (built in Quincy, MA rather than in Montreal where other submarines of that class were built for other navies) were given to the RCN.

Admiral of the Fleet Viscount John Jellicoe was commissioned to study ‘Dominion’ naval requirements. The Canadian naval staff proposed the creation of a 46-ship navy, over two seven-year building periods (1920-27 and 1927-34) to create a fleet of seven cruisers, 12 destroyers, 18 anti-submarine patrol craft, three submarines and three tenders, all to be manned by 8,500 officers and men. This plan was endorsed by Jellicoe but rejected by the government causing Kingsmill to resign. He was replaced by Hose in 1921.

1920 Niobe and Rainbow were scrapped, and replaced by the RN cruiser Aurora and the destroyers Patrician and Patriot.

1923 Defence cuts were imposed, reflecting the post-war optimism and the era of naval arms control triggered by the Washington Agreement. Aurora and the submarines were paid-off, and operations were limited to training cruises with a small number of port visits in support of foreign policy. RNCC was closed and all officer training was done with the RN. The RCN was reduced to 500 officers and men.

From 1923 to 1931 the RCN consisted of a destroyer and two trawlers on each coast – a force structure reminiscent of the 1904 Naval Militia.

Naval Reserve Divisions were established by Hose in major cities as a way of maintaining a naval presence in Canadian cities. This initiative laid the foundations for naval mobilization in 1939.
1928  *Patrician* and *Patriot* were replaced by *Champlain* (ex-*HMS Torbay*) and *Vancouver* (ex-*HMS Toreador*).

1930  Hose presented a new fleet plan emphasizing the future role of destroyers, rather than cruisers, as the core of the Canadian fleet but the naval budget was systematically reduced from 1930 to 1935, restricting operations and maintenance even further.

1931  *Saguenay* and *Skeena*, the first major warships specifically designed and built (in Britain) for the RCN, were commissioned (22 May and 10 June respectively). They were ordered in 1929 before the financial crisis.

1934  On 1 July, Hose retired and Captain Percy Nelles became Chief of the Naval Staff (CNS) remaining until 1944.

1936  The Canadian Joint Staff recommended that over the next five years the RCN be increased to six modern destroyers and four minesweepers. This assessment was later increased to nine destroyers and eight minesweepers with the necessary infrastructure to defend the two naval ports. Subsequent estimates called for 18 destroyers to provide a full flotilla on each coast.

1937  The RCN bought two destroyers from the RN – *Fraser* (ex-*HMS Crescent*) and *St. Laurent* (ex-*HMS Cygnet*) – to replace *Champlain* and *Vancouver*. Both were paid-off in November 1936.

1938  The naval budget was increased and two more destroyers, *Ottawa* (ex-*HMS Crescent*) and *Restigouche* (ex-*HMS Comet*), were bought from Britain as part of a modest re-armament program. The destroyers began training with the RN’s America and West Indies Squadron. A seventh destroyer, *Assiniboine* (ex-*HMS Kempenfelt*), was purchased in October 1939 as a flotilla leader.

1939  The 1939-40 defence estimates included a further increase in the RCN’s budget. To meet the long-term objective of operating 18 destroyers and to put pay to lingering interest in cruisers the new plan called for the RCN to buy the latest RN *Tribal*-class fleet destroyer which was able to fulfil many of the cruiser’s functions.

The Second World War starts in September. At that time, the RCN consisted of a dozen ships and 1,800 people. Four of the seven destroyers were stationed on the West Coast and were transferred to Halifax in the fall of 1939.

1939-45  Coastal patrols and convoys were started as soon as war was declared with the first convoy to Britain (HX-1), escorted by *Saguenay* and *St. Laurent*, sailing on 16 September. In April 1940 four RCN destroyers started operating in European waters. Coastal patrol and...
escort requirements were then undertaken by requisitioned vessels and by six American Town-class destroyers (later increased to eight) provided by the US Navy under the ‘Lend Lease’ agreement. Two Canadian Tribal were laid down in Britain in early 1940 and orders for two more made a year later. A further four Tribal were built in Canada later. In 1940, to meet requirements for patrol vessels, escorts and mine countermeasures vessels Canadian shipyards started to build small warships. Between August 1940 and October 1944 Canadian shipyards launched over 100 corvettes, some 60 frigates and more than 60 minesweepers. In March 1943, the Canadian Northwest Atlantic Command was set up, covering the area north of New York City and west of the 47th meridian. Rear-Admiral L.W. Murray was responsible for convoys in this area – the only Canadian officer to command a theatre of war.

By the summer of 1943, Allied fortunes had improved considerably. An assault on northwest Europe in 1944 was a certainty, leaving only the defeat of Japan to be undertaken. One of the decisions of the August 1943 Quebec conference was that the RCN would operate capital ships (carriers and cruisers) and carry a greater share of the Allied naval war effort. From late 1943, the number of major warships manned by Canadians increased with the four new Tribal-class fleet destroyers, nine other destroyers (some to replaces war losses), two cruisers (Uganda – later re-named Quebec – and Ontario) and two aircraft carriers (Nabob and Puncher). The RCN also manned landing craft and fast patrol boats.

By the end of the war in 1945, the RCN had expanded to a force of nearly 100,000 men and women manning and supporting ships of all types except battleships. The primary effort was in the Battle of the Atlantic in which the navy sank or shared in sinking 33 enemy submarines at a cost of 24 warships lost and 2,024 casualties.

At the end of the war, an ‘interim’ fleet of two carriers, two cruisers and 12 fleet destroyers to be manned by 10,000 men was announced, but the RCN was never able to man all the ships. As a result, emphasis was placed on the seven Tribal-class destroyers and the aircraft carrier (Warrior initially and then Magnificent after March 1948), two cruisers were also maintained as training ships.

Vice-Admiral G.C. Jones, who had replaced Nelles as CNS in 1944, died suddenly. Vice-Admiral Reid became the interim CNS until relieved by Vice-Admiral Harold Grant in mid-1947. Under Grant’s leadership the RCN was able to regain its political support and start the process of becoming a major ASW force within NATO.

An important piece of early Cold War planning was the creation of a North American continental
defence organization. The naval part of the new security system focused on two tasks: countering any Soviet military diversionary lodgements in the Arctic; and ASW operations against Soviet submarines attempting to prevent the re-supply of Europe. At first, Canada did not have enough ships to do more than provide a token contribution. The need to carry a greater share of the collective defence burden was recognized politically, but remained unfunded until 1950.

By mid-1947, the navy had changed the fleet plan and focused on building a modern ASW fleet, but it had neither the manpower nor the money to do this completely. That autumn the naval staff produced a three-part modernization program acknowledging the prevailing fiscal constraints and integrating longer-term requirements for new ships with the immediate requirement to modernize the Tribal-class destroyers. The ‘ABC’ plan, as it became known, was accepted by the Minister, Brooke Claxton, who convinced Cabinet to authorize a modest re-armament that included three new St. Laurent-class destroyer escorts.

1949 The onset of the Cold War led to the creation of the North Atlantic Organization (NATO) and the beginning of collective defence planning under a concept that would largely determine the RCN’s force structure for the next 40 years.

1950 The Korean War broke out in June. Three destroyers sailed for Korea in July. Maintaining the Korean commitment until 1955 required eight destroyers working in a cycle of operations, transit to and from Korea, and much-needed overhaul. During those overhauls all the destroyers were extensively modernized to re-equip them for both ASW and general-purpose operations as part of NATO. The Korean War triggered a major naval re-armament, increasing the number of St. Laurent-class escorts under construction to 14, modernizing the destroyers Crescent and Crusader and 21 ASW frigates, and raising the manpower ceiling to provide enough people to bring the fleet up to wartime strength.

1953 NATO adopted a nuclear response strategy after the Soviet detonation of a hydrogen bomb. The RCN struggled to modernize the fleet in the face of a series of new challenges including: (1) the marriage of the modern submarine and the missile; (2) NATO’s growing demands for convoy escorts; (3) growing national and bilateral demands for escorts to support the new ocean surveillance system (SOSUS); and (4) the development of the ASW helicopter.

1954 Approval was given for Canada to lease three fully-manned, ‘A’-class submarines and base them in Halifax for ASW training. As part of the deal, 190 Canadian officers and men were sent to England for submarine duty. This arrangement (which became the 6th Submarine Division) lasted until the early 1960s when it became obvious that the navy needed to own its own submarines.

1955 St. Laurent, the first of the new destroyer escorts, was commissioned (29 October). Over the next 10 years she would be followed by 19 other ships.
of that basic design. The last two ships of the St. Laurent-class design (Annapolis and Nipigon) were built as DDHs and commissioned in 1964.

1957 Magnificent was replaced by Bonaventure (ex-HMS Powerful) which had been modernized with a steam catapult, angled deck and mirror landing aid system. Armed with US Navy ASW aircraft and fighters, she became the nucleus of an ASW task group assigned to NATO.

1959 Approval was given for a major fleet modernization which saw the seven St. Laurent-class destroyers rebuilt to carry a medium ASW helicopter (the Sea King), and the building of underway logistic support ships (Provider commissioned in 1963, followed by Protecteur and Preserver in 1969 and 1970). Nuclear-powered submarines were considered but were deemed too expensive and a general-purpose frigate was proposed but cancelled in 1963.

1961 Grilse (ex-USS Burrfish) was loaned to Canada to provide ASW training for the West Coast ships and aircraft. She was replaced by Rainbow (ex-USS Argonaut) in December 1968 which remained on the West Coast until paid-off in 1974.

1962 Assiniboine was re-commissioned as the first DDH in June and began trials with Sea King ASW helicopters. The remaining six St. Laurent-class DDHs followed at regular intervals.

The Cuban Missile Crisis erupted in October. RCN and RCAF ships and aircraft conducted sustained operations against Soviet submarines in North American waters for 21 days.

1964 The Paul Hellyer reforms began. These included 'unification' and the loss of the traditional naval identity as well as a significant reduction in the RCN’s escort commitment to NATO. In December a new fleet modernization was announced that included the building of four new ASW destroyers initially known as ‘repeat Nipigons’ but later called the DDH-280 (Iroquois-class) and two AORs.

1965 Ojibwa was commissioned (23 September) which was the first step in creating a Canadian submarine capability on the East Coast. She was followed by Onondaga (1966) and Okanagan (1967).

1966 In July Admiral William M. Landymore, Commander of Maritime Command (as the navy was called under unification) resigned in protest over the Hellyer reforms and the loss of naval identity.

1967 NATO created the Standing Naval Force Atlantic (SNFL) which became a priority function of the Canadian Navy.

1968 Bras D’Or was commissioned as an experimental ASW hydrofoil but the trials were abandoned in 1972 before the tactical trials were complete. Terra Nova was re-commissioned in May as the first of the four improved Restigouche-class ASW destroyers fitted with ASROC and VDS.

1969-73 The Pierre Trudeau government naval rationalization heralded the end of the Canadian aircraft carrier era (Bonaventure was paid-off in March 1970) and the start of the long process that eventually led to the building of the Canadian Patrol Frigates.

1977 A fleet structure of 24 destroyers was approved by Cabinet in December and authority was given to begin building the Canadian Patrol Frigates (CPFs).
1979-84 Delays in the ship replacement program meant that the aging St. Laurent- and Restigouche-class destroyers had to remain in service longer than originally planned. To keep them reasonably effective they were given another modernization and life extension (DELEX) that included a simple Link 11 automated data processing system, ADLIPS. NATO expressed concern over the general decline in fleet ASW capability. Beginning in February 1981, the three Oberon-class submarines were also given extensive mid-life modernizations (SOUP) to upgrade their tactical ASW capabilities and were assigned to NATO as a partial offset to the decline in surface ship capability.

1981-82 Dockyard modernization was commenced. This was needed to prepare the fleet infrastructure for the CPFs and the modernized DDH-280s. Training programs were re-focused on the systems and operating concepts of the new ships.

The first phase of the CPF contract (design definition) was signed (August).

The early 1980s saw the beginning of a bleak period of constant defence budget cuts that delayed the CPF project and, for a while, restricted fleet operations. For financial reasons it was decided not to re-arm the four Mackenzie-class as general-purpose destroyers, which reduced the fleet’s operational effectiveness even further. At much the same time, Soviet naval capability was increasing in both the Atlantic and Pacific with increased Soviet submarine activity off the Eastern Seaboard and along the Pacific northwest coast. Later, this led to a NATO restructuring and a political awakening in Canada over the deteriorating world situation.

1984 The Tribal-class upgrade and modernization program (TRUMP) was announced (January). Algonquin, the lead ship in the program, was taken in hand by the shipyard on 26 October 1987.

The Atlantic fleet re-organized into a formal ASW task group for NATO Exercise Teamwork setting in motion a series of actions that led to the establishment of ASW task groups on both coasts.

1985 The task group concept was further refined during NATO Exercise Ocean Safari. The official announcements of the fleet re-structuring were made in July 1986 and January 1987.

1987-9 The navy briefly looked at nuclear-powered submarines (SSNs) in response to political concerns over the Arctic. The SSN program would have replaced eight destroyers (Batch III of the surface ship replacement program) but when the submarines were cancelled for fiscal reasons the destroyers were not put back into the ship replacement program, capping the fleet at 16 destroyers/frigates.

1987 Approval for CPF Batch II was given. The Maritime Coastal Defence Organization as a Naval Reserve primary mission was established.

Fleet re-structuring commenced with Gatineau transferring to the East Coast (April) and Huron and four Sea King helicopters going to the West Coast (July). The West Coast task group deployed on exercises with the USN in January 1988.

1988 Moresby and Anticosti were acquired as the beginning of a program to re-develop Canada’s mine countermeasures capability. The ships would be manned primarily by members of the Naval Reserve. A plan to build 12 Maritime Coast Defence Vessels (MCDVs) in Canada was announced.

Assiniboine was paid-off to provide people for the CPFs and because after 36 years it was no longer cost-effective to keep her in service. She was followed by Saguenay in August 1990. The remaining 14 St. Laurent-class variants were paid-off between May 1992 and July 1998 as crews for the CPFs were needed.
1989  The Cold War ended with the tearing down of the Berlin Wall.

*Annapolis* sailed for the West Coast (August) and *Terra Nova* went to the East Coast arriving in December, providing the West Coast task group with a second helicopter-capable destroyer.

1990  A task group comprising, *Athabaskan*, *Terra Nova* and *Protecteur* sailed for the Persian Gulf on 24 August after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait for *Operation Friction* after extensive re-equipping (largely using weapons and systems being held for the CPFs) and training for a multi-threat mission with low emphasis on ASW. After some 240 days of conducting support operations, the task group left the Gulf on 12 March 1991 and returned to Halifax on 7 April.

2001-03  After the attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in September 2001, the navy embarked on *Operation Apollo*, the most intense overseas deployment since the Second World War. Initially it supported Allied *Operation Enduring Freedom* covering the invasion of Afghanistan from the sea and the removal of the Taliban. The Canadian Task Group, designated CTF 150 and 151, conducted maritime interception operations in the Arabian Sea until December 2003.

2002  The navy returned to the Arctic, taking part in 2002, 2004, 2006 and every year thereafter in *Operation Nanook*, a series of joint operations, which saw frigates and MCDVs, as well as *Corner Brook* in 2007, in the Northwest Passage and visit many isolated communities in Nunavut.

2004  At the end of *Operation Apollo*, the navy continued to support operations in the Arabian Sea through *Operation Altair*. This included deploying a single frigate with a US carrier force for six months in 2004, 2005 and 2007.

2005  The Standing NATO Maritime Group 1 (SNMG1) replaced the Standing Naval Force Atlantic (SNFL). Commodore Denis Rouleau (Canadian Navy) was the first commander of the new force.

2008  In 2008 Canada sent a task group and a Canadian commander, as CTF 150, into the Arabian Gulf for three months. Since then Canada has maintained a frigate with SNMG1 to support *Operation Altair* and to conduct counter-piracy operations off the horn of Africa.

2010  *Athabaskan* and *Halifax* deployed to Haiti to provide humanitarian support following a devastating earthquake.

1992  *Halifax*, the first of the 12 City-class frigates, began trials. The complete class was commissioned over the next four years ending with *Ottawa* on 31 May 1996.

1998  The purchase of the four British Upholder-class submarines was announced. They would be extensively modernized in both Britain and Canada and put into service as the Victoria-class.