

Interview with Rear-Admiral Josée Kurtz

At the end of January, *Canadian Naval Review* Editor Dr. Ann Griffiths sat down with Rear-Admiral Josée Kurtz to talk about her new job, challenges facing the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) and plans for 2024. The interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Dr. Ann Griffiths

Belated congratulations on your promotion to Rear-Admiral. I understand that in your current position you wear two hats – Commander Maritime Forces Atlantic (MARLANT) reporting to Commander RCN (CRCN), and the Maritime Component Commander within Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC), reporting to Commander CJOC. How is this working out?

Rear-Admiral Kurtz

Thanks for the congratulations, and it's great to be back on the coast. Yes, I have two major hats, but actually I wear five hats. As Commander Maritime Forces Atlantic, I'm responsible for force generation of the RCN ships, and for afloat training and readiness, the Managed Readiness Program. As the Maritime Component Commander, I have responsibility for ship operations, for Canadian Joint Task Force Atlantic and for joint rescue coordination.

I've only been in my position for a few months so I'm still learning. Luckily, I have a great team that's already established, and staff who are very knowledgeable and experienced to get me through the learning process. The pandemic threw a wrench into much of the RCN's work but we're getting back into the swing of things. My teams are all back in the office after the pandemic, but we've also learned how to be more flexible in terms of work.

AG

I think we all saw Vice-Admiral Angus Topshee's recent podcast on the series of 'challenges' facing today's navy. I'd like to continue on from that. I have a couple of questions on this topic. First, how does the shortage of personnel and unavailability of warships affect the RCN's Tiered Readiness Program? Second, how does MARLANT propose to meet the RCN's various national and international exercise and training requirements given the unavailability of ships? And third, have there been discussions about where the navy needs to prioritize its attention and person-power in the current geo-political climate? What missions stay, what missions go and how do you decide?

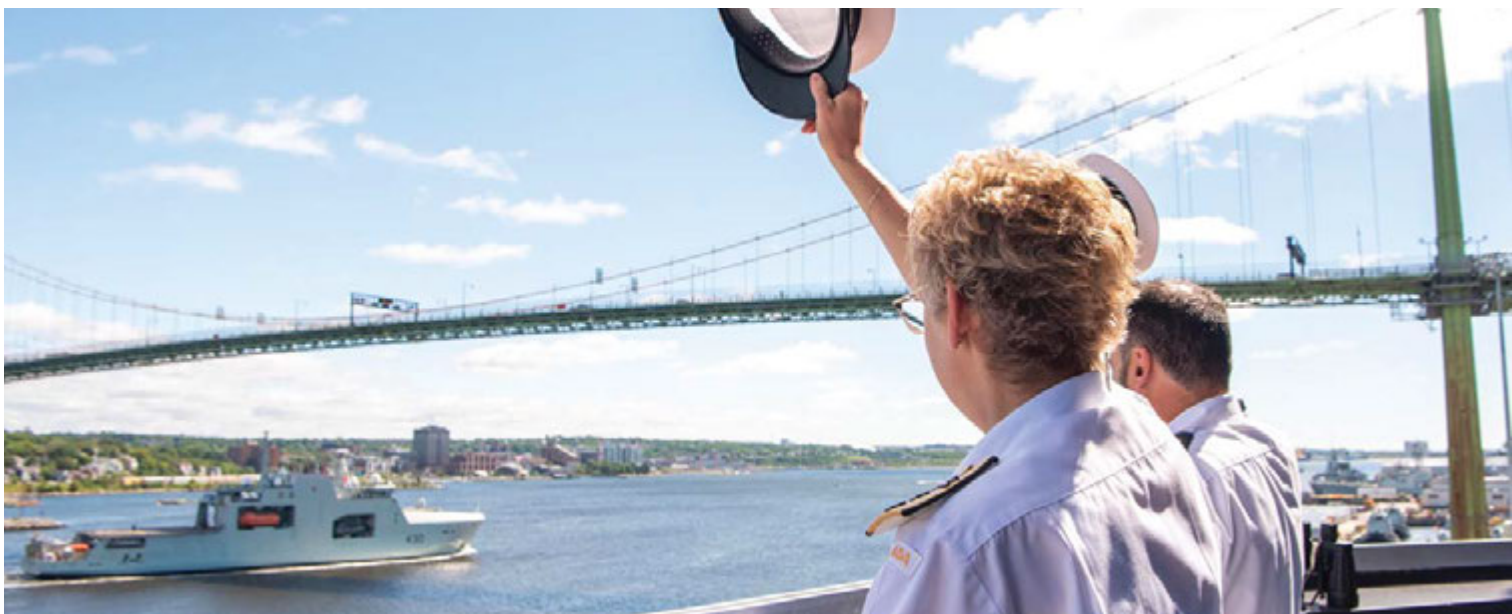
Admiral Kurtz

I'm not sure that Admiral Topshee intended for that video to become public, but it has. And I think the candour is helpful. It's useful for Canadians, and the government, to know the state of affairs of both personnel and ships.

The state of the RCN means that we have to double down on planning. We can't do things the same way we have in the past. This will affect the Managed Readiness Program. We need to make sure that ships are ready as quickly as possible. That means that right now we'll have a focus on maintenance. That's expensive but it keeps the frigates going so that they can accomplish foreign policy taskings.

As you know, the RCN does not make foreign policy decisions – the government does. We don't get to choose which missions we undertake. My job is to implement the decisions that get made. The government will say that it wants to do this, and the Chief of the Defence Staff (with input from the RCN if it involves naval actions) will say

Credit: Mona Ghiz, MARLANT Public Affairs



Rear-Admiral Josée Kurtz waves as HMCS *Harry DeWolf* departs HMC Dockyard Halifax for *Operation Nanook* on 10 August 2023.



Rear-Admiral Kurtz speaks with the family of a sailor during the homecoming ceremony of HMCS *Montreal* in Halifax, 3 October 2023.

we *can* do that, but something else may not be possible if we do that. Concessions may need to be made. One example of this is that the annual visit to West Africa by two RCN Maritime Coastal Defence Vessels (MCDVs) for *Operation Projection-West Africa* will not occur this year as the ships will be participating in exercises with NATO's mine-countermeasure unit. But I should note that this isn't just the case in Canada, all countries/navies have to prioritize their tasks.

AG

RCN plans and operations are faced with two major challenges – money and people. Let's start with money. The government is asking for cuts to the Department of National Defence (DND) (and other departments as well). Have you any comments about this?

Admiral Kurtz

Money is an issue, and always has been – and probably always will be. Right now, we are meeting government priorities, but how long can that last if there are significant budget cuts? We're trying to increase efficiency to conserve funds, but we all know that ships are expensive to build and to operate. What the RCN and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) as a whole need to do is to convince Canadians that the navy (and air force and army) is not a cost, it's an *investment* in security and defence. We need to be able to show people that the navy isn't just a line in the budget but a value to the country.

AG

According to Admiral Topshee, the navy is grappling with significant staffing shortages, with some occupations

experiencing staffing shortages of up to 20%. This is not a new problem – nor is it unique to Canada – but it is beginning to be a major problem. What in your opinion can be done to improve recruitment? How is the Naval Experience Program working out?

Admiral Kurtz

I should start by saying that the RCN is not responsible for recruiting. It's done through the CAF as a whole. It's clear that recruitment numbers are down, particularly for the navy. It's a challenging lifestyle. It means being far away from home sometimes for months. It means being moved possibly from one coast to the other, or to Ottawa. That's hard on families. We're trying to be more flexible, particularly since the pandemic, but you can only be so flexible – we need personnel on ships, they can't do that from home.

But we could do better in terms of recruiting. The RCN has made some of its own public relations material that illustrates the kind of things you can do and experience in the navy – things that you wouldn't be able to do in any other profession. We can emphasize the pay, the benefits, the pension because they are all selling points. But we also hope that people join not necessarily for the money but for the experience and to do something big in their life.

We know that we have some issues in the recruitment process. The process is slow and that needs improvement. I'm sure that the recruitment program personnel would like to hear from people who have gone through the process, and I would encourage young recruits to share their experience.

I'm not the lead person on the Naval Experience Program (NEP) – that's Admiral Robinson on the West Coast. But I can make a few comments on the program. NEP candidates are enrolled as generalist sailors and choose an occupation later as opposed to part of the enrolment process. The goal of NEP is to give a sense of life in the navy, at sea, and allow candidates the opportunity to explore sea trades as career options before choosing an occupation and making a longer-term career commitment. It's had a slow start, but recruitment takes time. We have 18 people who've joined through the program with 22 more expected. I've talked to some of the people who've joined the program and they all say they're loving it.

AG

The other element of personnel shortages is retention. This is not a problem only in Canada. For example, a British House of Commons report in July 2023 noted that in the last fiscal year more people left the armed forces than joined.¹ I know that recruitment and retention aren't your area of expertise but is there a way to stop the steady leak of personnel leaving the RCN? Is there a way for people

who signed up for the navy (i.e., to be on ships) but who find themselves in an office in Ottawa to be given the chance to move back to the coast and get back onboard ships?

Admiral Kurtz

The navy is certainly seized with the issue of retention, and we always consider our people's preferences for employment and desired geographical area when we develop the annual posting plot. Mobility and deployability are an inherent part of life in the military and, while needs of the service must come first, we do our best to balance individual and family circumstances with positions to be filled on a priority basis.

AG

It's great that a steady stream of Arctic and Offshore Patrol Ships (AOPS) has been handed over to the navy, but I'm still not sure what the plan is for them. Can you tell me what they'll be doing in 2024?

Admiral Kurtz

You have to remember that it takes time to get new ships ready for exercises and operations, particularly for a new class of ships. The ships will start to be more active this year. Right now (January 2024) two of them are at sea. HMCS *Margaret Brooke* is currently serving a six-week deployment with *Op Caribe*, and (the future) HMCS *Max Bernays* is doing cold water trials. *Max Bernays* will move to the West Coast in the spring and will be commissioned on the West Coast. Right now, we're working with personnel from the West Coast so that they can train on and learn how to operate the ship and take over from the East Coast personnel when the ship moves West. *Max Bernays* will participate in the humanitarian assistance/

disaster relief element of RIMPAC 2024, and after that the ship will head North to the Arctic.

In the summer, HMCS *Margaret Brooke* and HMCS *Harry DeWolf* will participate in this year's iteration of *Op Nanook*. These ships are designed to spend time in the North, and they will. They'll continue to undertake sovereignty and surveillance in the North. They'll work with the Canadian Coast Guard, which will also receive two AOPS-like ships in the next few years, but there's a difference between a grey hull and a red hull in the Arctic.

The fourth AOPS, the future HMCS *William Hall*, will be commissioned this spring, and will be at sea conducting trials after that.

AG

Just as a side question, are there plans to send an AOPS to West Africa to participate in *Op Projection-West Africa* in the future?

Admiral Kurtz

There are no firm plans about this. There has been some discussion about sending a ship in the future, but there is no timeline for this. Right now, government priorities are NATO and the Indo-Pacific region. As we discussed earlier, we have to prioritize what we do these days.

AG

Thanks for the information about the AOPS. Can you tell CNR readers anything about what the frigates and submarines will be up to in 2024?

Admiral Kurtz

HMCS *Charlottetown* will deploy on *Op Reassurance* from June until December as Flag Ship for Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 in the Mediterranean. During this



Credit: SI Bryan Underwood, Canadian Armed Forces Imagery Technician

Members from Côte d'Ivoire's Coast Guard and HMCS *Glace Bay* take a photo after a drug interception exercise off the coast of Côte d'Ivoire on 31 January 2023. With the Canadian government's priorities in NATO and the Indo-Pacific region, there are no timelines for when this annual deployment to West Africa will resume.



Credit: Corporal William Gosse, MARPAC Imaging

The third Arctic and Offshore Patrol Vessel, HMCS *Max Bernays*, transits the Panama Canal on 24 March 2024 during its voyage to its new homeport of Esquimalt. It will participate in RIMPAC 2024 before heading to the Arctic.

period, SNMG2 will be under Canadian command. The designated commander, a Commodore, is soon to be officially announced.

HMCS *Montreal* (April-October), HMCS *Vancouver* (July-November) and HMCS *Ottawa* (October 2024-March 2025) will deploy on *Op Horizon* in the Indo-Pacific region. The rest of the frigates will be in various states of readiness, ranging from Docking Work Period to available for domestic and continental taskings.

In terms of the submarines in 2024, HMCS *Windsor* will be operating at sea this year, while HMCS *Corner Brook* ramps up to return to sea. HMC Submarines *Victoria* and *Chicoutimi* are in work periods.

AG

Canada has been at peace for many years. This means that most leaders in the RCN have not experienced warfare. But this longstanding peace seems increasingly tenuous. How prepared are RCN leaders – including yourself – and the full RCN team for war? What is Canada's navy doing to prepare its war-fighting capabilities? Given the extensive nuclear modernization that is now taking place among nuclear weapons possessing states, and the occasional terrifying references to the actual use of nuclear weapons, what steps is the navy taking to ensure that its vessels can sustain themselves in a war environment?

Admiral Kurtz

Yes, it's hard not to feel like global peace is increasingly threatened in several places. But our hope is that we don't go to war. For many years, NATO has had a policy of deterrence – i.e., preventing war by making sure that NATO defences are strong enough that it is not rational to attack. Is that still working, I don't know.

As for fighting a war, we train and train. We all train in high intensity courses with war in mind. And we try to train for all scenarios.

AG

This seems like a good time to mention the events in the Red Sea. There has been recent use of ballistic missiles in an anti-shipping capacity by the Houthis in the Red Sea. As well, China has built up a massive anti-ship ballistic missile capacity. Canada contributed a small number of personnel but did not contribute a ship to the USN-led *Operation Prosperity Guardian* in the Red Sea. What is the RCN doing to prepare its ships to deploy to this type of threat environment?

Admiral Kurtz

The frigates have been/are being updated in terms of their anti-submarine warfare systems. But technology changes quickly and there are limits to what can be put on the frigates. The Canadian Surface Combatants are designed to counter threats from the air so they will enhance the RCN's capability in this when they arrive.

AG

This brings me to a topic that I find frustrating. Many navies from countries – large and small – are developing and adopting uncrewed systems for the air, surface and under-sea environments. And yet we don't hear much from the RCN about this topic. I have a few questions here. Given money and personnel shortages, why isn't the RCN putting more focus on uncrewed systems? Given the increasing use of uncrewed weapons – in Ukraine, in the Red Sea – are Canadian ships able to defend against them? What, if anything, is the RCN learning from the use of uncrewed systems in Ukraine and is it applying the lessons to doctrine and practice? Are the AOPS able to handle uncrewed systems? Will the CSCs have a major focus on them?

Admiral Kurtz

That's a lot of questions. I'm not sure I can answer them. Right now, we have capability for both aerial and under-water uncrewed surveillance. We continue to do research



Credit: Pte Brendan Gamache, Canadian Armed Forces

HMCS *Charlottetown* sails in concert with the Royal Navy aircraft carrier HMS *Prince of Wales* during Exercise Steadfast Defender 24 in the North Sea, 24 February 2024. *Charlottetown* will return to Europe later this year as flagship of Standing NATO Maritime Group 2 in the Mediterranean.

on what systems we need, and to watch what other navies are using. But this is not my area of expertise, so you would be better off asking the person responsible for force development.

AG

In Halifax we've experienced some interesting weather over the past year. It seems that the effects of climate change are already beginning to appear. What is MARLANT doing to address the challenges of climate change, both in terms of RCN contributions to greenhouse gases and ameliorating the results of sea level rise and extreme weather events on the base and ship operations? Will the CSCs be low-emission ships and have 'green' technology?

Admiral Kurtz

There's a lot of study and discussion about reducing emissions in the civilian maritime sector – shipping and cruise ships, for example. We want to be good custodians of the environment, but navies operate in more challenging conditions and for different purposes than civilian ships. Warships need power to be able to operate in all conditions. However, if you have a mixed fleet that gives you the option of using certain ships that are more 'green' than others if the circumstances allow for it. As a privileged resident on the Halifax waterfront and user of the oceans and waterways, MARLANT is aware of its role in safeguarding the environment in the RCN's day-to-day activities and future projects. This can mean always navigating with prudence in order to minimize the effect of our presence on the coastline, selecting the most economic and lower emissions propulsion mode to meet operational requirements, and ensuring that future infrastructure is built to contemporary standards to contribute to slowing the trend of climate change.

We can't see into the future, so when you build a ship that will likely last for decades, you can only put into the ship the technology of today. Therefore, my answer would be

that our ships are meeting the environmental realities of the day. The CSCs will be as green as they can be. And over the course of their lives, the CSCs may evolve as green technology evolves.

AG

Here's a painful topic. Statistics Canada reported that sexual harassment has actually *increased* in recent years in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) rather than decreased.



Credit: Canadian Armed Forces photo

Sailors aboard HMCS *Margaret Brooke* use the ship's 25mm cannon to sink a 'target of interest' during *Operation Caribe* on 5 February 2024 in the Caribbean Sea. *Margaret Brooke* and *Harry DeWolf* are expected to participate in *Operation Nanook* in the summer.



The Northern Lights shine over HMCS *Charlottedown* during Exercise Steadfast Defender 24 in the North Sea, 3 March 2024.

What is your take on this? Is this because more people are feeling able to report harassment, or because the programs aren't working, or because of pushback? All of the above?

Admiral Kurtz

I'd say all of the above. But I want to point out that the statistics don't give the full picture. We don't know if the reports are related to historic incidents or from recent incidents. By that I mean, it could be that there are more reports of incidents that happened some time ago because people feel more able to report the incidents, and there is a framework through which to do so. So, the increased number may not mean that there are more incidents of harassment now – just that there are more reports, but the harassment may have happened some time ago. If the numbers represent historic cases, then we'll see the numbers go down as these cases clear the process.

It's a bit discouraging to hear the numbers, but we can't start doing something about a problem until we (a) know it exists and (b) have information about what and where and why it happens. Once we know that, we can start to address it. The problem was never going to be solved overnight. What I think is important is that we need leadership to make sure the problem is taken seriously. We need personnel and processes to address complaints. Most of all we need to ensure that victims are heard but that due process is followed.

AG

I have a related follow-up question. I've talked to people serving in the navy and the topic that repeatedly came up surprised me. As a woman, I'm not sure what's up with this, but the reaction of (some) men to the provision of tampons in the men's washrooms is surprisingly strong – and uniformly negative. Do you have any comment on this?

Admiral Kurtz

I have to note that this is a government, not CAF, policy so all federal government departments are obliged to follow the directive on this. It's part of a process of cultural change, and that's always difficult for some people. The initial reaction has been negative, but people often react negatively to change. My hope is that the initial reaction will quickly change to acceptance – after all, what difference does it make in the greater scheme of things to have tampons in the washroom? Leadership will play a key role in this by helping to minimize the negativity so we can all move on.

AG

The world seems to be slipping into a darker and much less cooperative, law-respecting place. And from a Canadian perspective, the news about the RCN is increasingly dire. Can we end with something positive from you for CNR readers to cling to? In other words, can you give us some positive thoughts about the RCN?

Admiral Kurtz

Yes, things look dire, but there are positive elements. We are working hard to get the message out to Canadians about the value of navies, and the experience belonging to the navy provides. The RCN is evolving, and we have to see the positive elements of this. We have the new AOPS, and we'll soon be building new warships. But the most positive thing I see is the people. We have great people, and every time I chat with serving members, I feel their energy and enthusiasm.

AG

Thank you so much for taking the time to have a chat. It was a pleasure to meet you. 🍷

Notes

1. Esme Kirk-Wade and Zoe Mansfield, "UK Defence Personnel Statistics," House of Commons Library, 18 July 2023.