

my time in the navy

A FIRST-HAND ACCOUNT OF LIFE AT SEA WITH THE PEOPLE WHO PROTECT CANADA'S MARINE SOVEREIGNTY

By Martin Connelly

Day 1

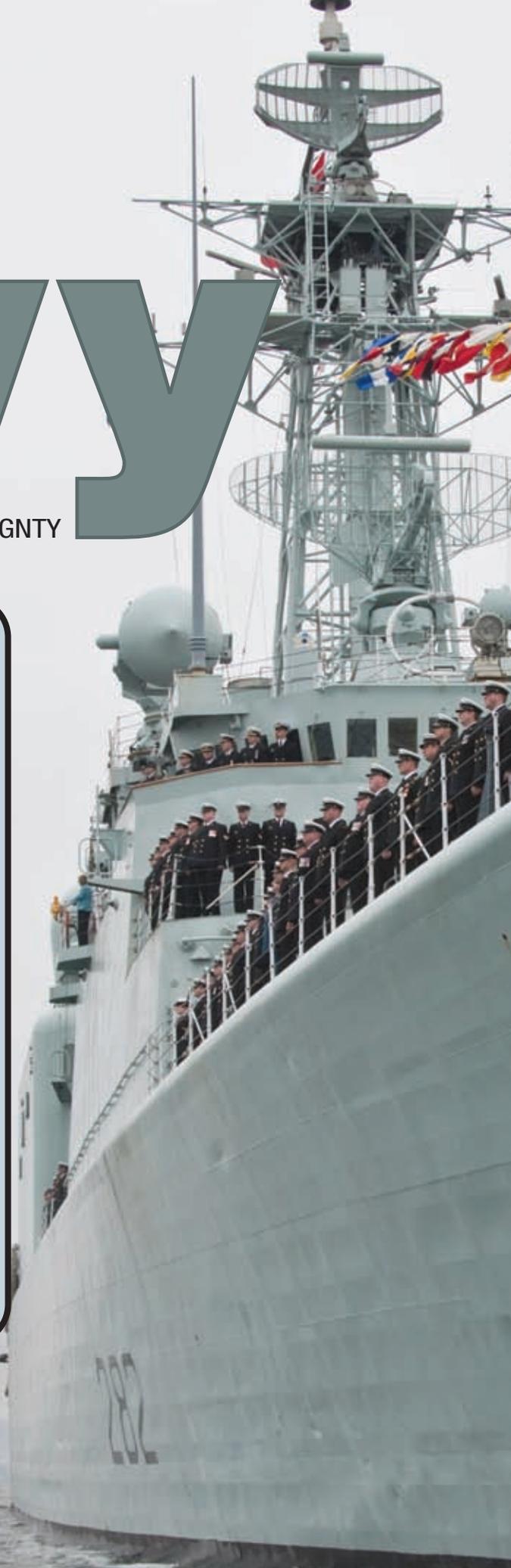
Tuesday, September 14th, 17:00, Halifax Harbour

The water that had looked so smooth from D Pier wasn't, and we skipped over the small chop in a 'rib', a 14' hard-bottomed inflatable boat. "You might want to hold your hats," the coxswain offers dryly.

Suddenly, the HMCS St. John's emerges from the darkness, illuminated in the stark way that naval ships are, like monoliths in a sea of black. At 134.1 metres long, with a beam of 16.4 metres, the St. John's is a Halifax Class Frigate, one of 12 in the Canadian Navy. Frigates like the St. John's carry Canada's Sea King Helicopter (which is being depreciated in favor of the new Cyclone) and each is home to 225 sailors including the flight crew. This particular frigate is going to be my temporary residence for the next 41 hours as the ship runs through training trials on its journey from Halifax, Nova Scotia to its namesake city: St. John's, Newfoundland.

Topside, a man with a red flashlight barks totally unintelligible words to the coxswain. They could have been greetings, or orders, or football scores. I have no idea, but the coxswain understands his meaning and a round orange platform is subsequently lowered down. This is my transport to the deck high above.

The incomprehensible man continues to be incomprehensible (to me), but other people speak English. I give my name to a man with a clipboard, then follow the ship's coxswain down ladders, through dark hallways lit with red lights. I couldn't retrace my steps if I had to. But then, I don't think I'm supposed to wander. I'm here at the Navy's invitation, to get an idea about what life is like on a ship.





Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and His Royal Highness, The Duke of Edinburgh on board HMCS St. John's to review the assembled fleet, which includes 18 foreign ships at anchor from Bedford Basin to the Halifax Harbour. Photo: Jacek Szymanski DNPA

Halifax has been a naval town for 261 years (it was founded as a naval base in 1749), first for the British and then in the last hundred years, for Canada. Spoon-shaped, the Halifax Harbour is big, deep, and defensible; a perfect place to stage a lot of boats in relative safety. The Halifax Port Authority calls it “one of the largest natural harbours in the world.” Its outer harbour is two kilometres wide and eight kilometers long, with a narrow channel leading to a huge inner harbour - Bedford Basin. With a depth of 18 metres (60 feet) at low tide, Halifax also has one of the world’s deepest harbours. Approximately 1,500 ships will dock there this year.

The navy has always brought money into Halifax, but it also often contributed to a boom and bust cycle that was not necessarily good for development. “For much of the age of sail, through the 18th and 19th centuries, it was kind of a feast or famine thing,” says Dan Conlin, curator at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic. “When there was a war the city would be flooded with naval ships and naval contractors, and then in peace time the town would just go to sleep.”



Halifax, eastern home to Canada’s navy, has been a naval town for almost 300 years. Its harbour is one of the deepest in the world: 60 feet at low tide. Photo: Martin Connelly

That started to change with the creation of the Canadian Navy, currently celebrating its centennial year, but the navy as we know it didn’t really emerge until after World War II. “You can thank the Cold War for that,” says Conlin. “The specter of war with the Soviets meant that we needed a large navy, even in peace time...but, also, the way navies operated after World War II was much different from the old days.

Before World War II, people were very proud of the navy, but expected sailors and their families to basically look after themselves.”

After World War II, the Navy started to make accommodations for families, and to make naval service more like a career. The naval community became more settled, more permanent, and that changed the Halifax city dynamic.

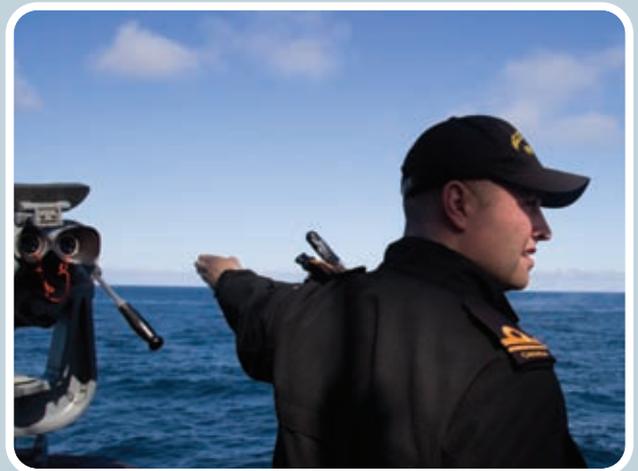
Day 2

Wednesday, 15th, 13:00, East of Cape Breton

En route to Newfoundland, steaming into clear skies. I’m getting a sense of the rhythm ship board life takes on. Crew members work 12 hours a day, split into two shifts, usually an eight and a four. The day officially starts at seven a.m. with “wakey, wakey” (a loud good morning over the ship’s PA system). There are five hot meals a day; exercise equipment is tucked into hallways wherever it will fit. There are also movies to watch or study sessions to attend if you want to move up the certification ladder.

Central to a peaceful mission like this is training - the constant repetition of skills and scenarios so that if, when, something happens, the men and women on this ship will be ready. Already today I’ve witnessed a number of groups training with different weapons, from handguns to a 50 caliber canon (mostly used to fire warning shots, and potentially engage, other vessels). There was a man-overboard drill this morning (the rescue boat hit the water in 4:58 - two seconds faster than fleet standard) and parade drills are scheduled for this afternoon.

I sat in on an attack simulation and the chief weapons officer told me that these days, the two biggest threats to a naval vessel are submarines, which are scary because, well, you can’t see them, and small terrorist vessels with explosives, like the one that hit the USS Cole in 2000, killing 17 and injuring 39 more. That’s what the 50 caliber is for.



Continuous training, such as water rescue drills and pistol practice, ensures that naval personnel are always ready for action. Photos: Martin Connelly

“The personnel and their families live in our communities, they buy homes, they shop... economic impacts are very strong,” says Halifax mayor Peter Kelly. “Not one aspect of our lives is untouched by [the Navy].”

Collectively, the Department of Defense (civilian) and the Canadian Forces (military) are responsible for 13,336 jobs in Halifax. The sheer volume of their economic influence on the city is astounding, in both direct and indirect inputs. As president and CEO of the Greater Halifax Partnership, talking about the Navy is a big part of Paul Kent’s job. “When I make an elevator pitch, I can’t fail to mention that we’re the home of the East Coast Navy. We’re talking billions of dollars a year in economic value, thousands of jobs,” says Kent.

“If you look at someone and say ‘take the Navy away from Halifax, what would happen?’ It’s pretty catastrophic. To contemplate that...wow. If it wasn’t here, what would we do? If Halifax was a book, the Navy would be the watermark.”



June 29, 2010 - Halifax, Nova Scotia: During the International Fleet Review (IFR), Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II inspects the Canadian Navy Guard of Honour onboard Her Majesty’s Canadian Ship (HMCS) St. John’s in Halifax Harbour, Nova Scotia. Photo: Corporal Johanie Maheu, Formation Imaging Services, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Wednesday, 15th, 19:00, northeast of Nova Scotia

I’ve just finished dinner with the captain, the coxswain, and the XO (second in command). The uncommissioned crew (anyone who isn’t an officer) eat in their mess, the commissioned officers eat in theirs, but the captain eats in his own quarters, served by his own steward. At dinner, the officers talked about work, fried food, and - at my request - the role of the Navy.

Ship’s captain Robert Clark speaks volubly about the role of Canada’s Navy, from serving as a taxi for DFO (Department of Fisheries and Oceans) officers, to enforcing the pirate-ridden waters off the coast of Somalia. In today’s world, he says, North America is an island and trade inevitably comes by sea. The role of the Navy is to protect that trade, among other things. Any nation with maritime territories, he says, will have a navy in its waters: it’s own or someone else’s. (That’s a warning that if you don’t defend your waters, you might - for all practical purposes - lose them.)

Leadership, team building, and problem-solving are corporate concepts as much as they are military ones, and I’m told that may be why former military personnel often take up community leadership roles. The XO recounts how he watched a parent try to organize a soccer team, became fed up with the ineptitude, and took over managing the team himself. Capt. Clark adds that service men and women are, at some level, fundamentally interested in the civic good, ‘serving their country’, for lack of a less trite expression. Combine that with the leadership training you get in the military, and you have a corporation whose employees make the time to help in the community.



The rigorous leadership training that comes with military service also benefits the communities in which crew members live. Many of them are active volunteers and community leaders. Photos: Martin Connelly

Speaking by phone, rear admiral David Gardam affirms captain Clark's assertions. Gardam sees the Navy as contributing to society in two main swaths: as defenders of Canadian interests abroad, and as good corporate citizens at home. Creating jobs fosters development in Halifax, but he says the Navy goes well beyond that.

"We're corporate citizens of the city. If you actually looked, day to day, at what we provide the city, the first thing I'd say is all of the little league coaches, the Scout leaders, the minor league hockey coaches... a significant number of those people are serving or have served," he says. "We

provide a huge leadership function to the city, because we're all trained leaders. We're really good corporate citizens in the region, but also across Canada, and the world, that's what we do."

In terms of the Navy's work in foreign waters, security is always a priority, but rear admiral Gardam is clear that in many cases the security is economic. "If you look at counter terrorism, if you look at the war on drugs, we're very busy being the global citizen as well... [Canada] does trade and commerce by sea; [the Navy's] role is to make sure those lines of communication stay open, so that commerce can happen."

The HMCS St. John's entering its namesake harbour. Photos: Martin Connelly





**Tuesday, September 28th,
St. John's, Newfoundland**

Almost two weeks after returning to land, I still can't decide if the Navy is better characterized as peace keeper/security or strong corporate citizen. If I've gained any insight, it's that treating the Navy like a giant corporation, one with 100 years of history and 13,336 employees in the Halifax metro region, works. There's a distinction to be made though. Corporations measure their success in profits, while the Navy measures success in security. After Hurricane Igor wreaked its havoc on Newfoundland, three naval vessels (including the St. John's), two helicopters, and 300 military personnel were on the island within days. They weren't doing PR for their corporation, they were doing their job. | ABM