

Non-Commissioned Members and the RCN

Interview with CPO1 Alena Mondelli

On 23 November 2022, *Canadian Naval Review* sat down with Chief Petty Officer 1st Class (CPO1) Alena Mondelli to talk about the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) and its Non-Commissioned Members (NCMs). CPO1 Mondelli is currently Maritime Forces Atlantic Formation Chief Petty Officer. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

CNR. Thank you for meeting with me. Let's start with a question about your experience. Why did you join the Canadian Armed Forces as an NCM?

CPO1 Mondelli

At the time I joined up (in 1991), I had no concept of military rank structure and that there even was one, let alone know the difference between an officer and an NCM. I only wanted to join. I was 18 and had just graduated from high school with a grade 12 general diploma. If I had graduated with an advanced diploma, I would have had the courses necessary for college or university. When I began my recruiting process in August 1991, one of the elements of the recruitment process I had to complete was the Canadian Forces Aptitude Test (CFAT). Based on my CFAT scores, I was offered about seven or eight different occupations. It was explained to me that they were the only ones I had an aptitude for, and I had to choose my top three. Naval Radio Operator was my #1 choice and was the occupation I was selected for when I enrolled on 1 November 1991.

CNR. Have there been officers who have tried to influence you to make the change to become an officer?

CPO1 Mondelli

The first time I was asked if I would consider becoming an officer was when I was a Leading Seaman (now called Sailor 1st Class) onboard HMCS *Thunder*. I was the Leading Seaman of Telecommunications (LSTEL) for the small vessel. The small crew meant my primary role was to be a leader and sailor with communications sometimes being my tertiary role. My Commanding Officer at the time convinced me that I needed to be an officer. When I agreed, he contacted the Base Personnel Selection Officer (BPSO) on my behalf, and we were very quickly told 'no' as I didn't have an undergraduate degree. My only option was to pursue education on my own time and try again later.

Between the rank of Petty Officer 2nd Class (PO2) and



Official portrait of CPO1 Alena Mondelli, taken 2 July 2021.

up to my first posting as a Chief Petty Officer 1st Class (CPO1), several of my Commanding Officers and senior officers around me did their best to try and convince me to commission. In 2008, after receiving my MA in Leadership through Royal Roads University, I began looking at two specific officer occupations: Personnel Selection Officer; and Training and Development Officer. I took time to really reflect on my decision and I ultimately chose to stay an NCM. At that time I had completed almost 17 years of service and I looked at my remaining time left to serve and compared that to how I would be able to contribute to the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). Ultimately, I decided that as an officer I could have possibly made it to the rank of Lieutenant-Commander – maybe. As an NCM, I knew I wanted to be a CPO1. I also knew, through experience

watching the CPO1/Chief Warrant Officers (CWOs) around me, that the sphere of influence of a CPO1 to initiate change within the RCN and CAF is far greater than that of a Lieutenant (N) or Lieutenant-Commander. I made my choice and decided to remain an NCM.

CNR. You've been in the RCN for a while now, have the thought processes and the institutional processes to become an NCM changed since you joined?

CPO1 Mondelli

I would say that, although the process to recruit an NCM is the same as when I first joined, the role – especially of the senior NCMs – and definition of what an NCM is have evolved. In today's CAF, NCMs share leadership responsibilities and are required to master skills and gain knowledge of the theory of conflict along with the technical knowledge of their occupation. NCMs are now considered professionals within the Profession of Arms. In previous decades, the role of decision-maker was held by the professionals, or officers, and the applied technical role was held by the NCMs.

Today, the requirements to become an NCM are pretty much the same as 30 years ago. Most NCM occupations require applicants to have a grade 12 diploma and there are still several that only require grade 10. The difference between when I joined and now is that when I joined only officers were considered professionals because of their education and experience. The situation resembled what Samuel P. Huntington described in his book *The Soldier and the State* published in 1957.¹ In 2003, with the publication of *Leadership in the CF: Duty with Honour*, that view evolved as NCMs were officially defined as also being professionals.²

I remember attending a financial lecture during my first few months in Esquimalt as a young sailor, and the CPO1 who gave the lecture told us all how he only had a grade 7 education and was given the option of either joining the military or going to jail. I remember wondering to myself at the time: 'how could this person function in life with only grade 7? And, he's a senior rank.' I didn't realize it until later, but that Chief was a lesson about personal and professional development.

CNR. I know it'll be different for differing divisions within the NCM ranks, but in general terms what kind of education and training do NCMs receive?

CPO1 Mondelli

All NCMs start their career with their initial socialization of becoming a military member with Basic Recruit Training (BRT). Upon successful completion of basic training, they're then sent to their various elements and bases to conduct their initial occupational training. As



HMCS Thunder, a Bay-class minesweeper, sails off the British Columbia coast in this undated photo. CPO1 Mondelli served as the ship's Leading Seaman of Telecommunications.

they progress through their occupations, they are then provided more training in order to become functional at each level. Technical occupations will mostly likely have several years of formal post-secondary education and training at the front end of the technical/mechanical career path, while operator occupations will only have several months of training within their respective occupation schoolhouse.

As NCMs progress throughout their careers, they're also provided a Professional Military Education (PME) that is interwoven throughout the leadership courses offered between developmental periods (DP) 2 through 5. These include the Primary Leadership Qualification (PLQ), the Intermediate Leadership Programme (ILP), Advanced Leadership Programme (ALP), Senior Leadership Programme (SLP), and Senior Appointment Programme (SAP). There are several other education programmes offered by the CAF for succession managed NCMs³ including the Osside Institute Professional Education Program (OIPEP) at CMR Saint Jean, and the Non-Commissioned Member Executive Professional Development Programme (NEPDP) at RMC Kingston. At the end, the OIPEP provides PO1/WOs with a certificate in International Studies, and NEPDP provides CPO1/CWOs with a certificate in either General Military Studies or Advanced Military Studies depending on the level of PME they've completed prior to the programme.

CNR. Has this education and training evolved over the years? How?

CPO1 Mondelli

Training has evolved to meet up with the complexities of the systems and overall battlespace NCMs must be



An undated photo of Hatley Castle at Royal Roads University, from which CPO1 Mondelli received an MA in Leadership.

effective with and within. The same can be said for education. In order for NCMs to be institutionally proficient, relevant and effective within the scope of their influence at their leadership level, their intellectual, analytical and reasoning skills must also be further developed. This is why CAF-provided OIPEP and NEPDP opportunities exist. Should an NCM want to take advantage of self-development opportunities on their own, there exists an educational expense reimbursement programme providing funding to CAF members upon successful completion of their course or programme.

CNR. Why do you think it's important for NCMs to pursue their education during their careers?

CPO1 Mondelli

Education provides an added layer of knowledge, reasoning and critical thinking that can further enhance the 'leadership toolbox' of NCMs, especially as they progress to the higher ranks and become leadership team partners. In those leadership relationships, NCMs are an essential element in providing advice to their leadership partners, as well as influencing those higher and lower in rank than them within their spheres of influence. At the end of the day, professional development and academic advancement of NCMs provide important value to the CAF, as those elements bring the fresh ideas, critical thinking and deeper outlooks required by modern and effective professional armed forces.

CNR. Are there barriers for sailors to pursue education/training while they are in the service? What are they?

CPO1 Mondelli

There is the barrier of time. The Distance Learning (DL) portions of the ILP/ALP/SLP/SAP series is time consuming, despite the mandated one day a week they're required to work from home over the duration of the DL. Other than PME, OIPEP and NEPDP, all other self-pursued education is done outside of working hours – in other words, on their own time. This will also have an impact on work-life balance.

There is also the barrier of resources. The Defence Learning Network, although evolving, hasn't always been user friendly and sometimes is very difficult for personnel to navigate through. Connectivity while deployed, even when home, can also be a barrier as not everyone will have access to DWAN resources, etc.

CNR. Tell me about deployments. How often would NCMs be deployed? And how would this affect their lives?

CPO1 Mondelli

This is a subjective question, and a sailor will give you a different answer than a soldier or aviator. For the RCN, whenever a ship is at sea, it is technically conducting naval operations even if it isn't a named operation or deployment. This affects the lives of crew members as it then has an impact on work-life balance. When sailors are home, they want to spend time with their families or recharging. They don't necessarily want to spend their time on the external pursuit of education outside of provided PME.

CNR. Obviously recruitment and retention are key issues being faced right now in the Canadian Armed Forces as a

whole and the RCN specifically. How will issues of recruitment and retention affect training and education of NCMs?

CPO1 Mondelli

I personally can't say much on this question other than provide my opinion. Currently the various Commands, and specifically Chief Military Personnel, are looking at ways of removing barriers for both recruitment and retention, including the RCN. How this will affect both training and education is yet to be seen. I am looking forward, though, to discussions on both topics, especially on retention as for many years the focus has only been on recruitment.

CNR. Technology has certainly changed significantly over the past 20 years. I would imagine that some of the changes to NCM education and training would relate to evolving technology. I'm thinking specifically about unmanned/uncrewed systems and Artificial Intelligence. Will this affect NCM training and education?

CPO1 Mondelli

This will absolutely affect NCM training and specifically what NCMs will be trained in. I know this has already started with uncrewed systems we currently use. I feel the larger piece at play here is how technological changes have forced us to look at our current occupations themselves to determine if the tasks and jobs that define the occupation are still relevant. For the RCN, this can be seen with the recent decision to eliminate the Steward occupation. As well, there is an occupational analysis being conducted in which naval managed combat-focused occupations are being reviewed and potentially restructured to meet the forces' future needs. If a new occupation is created, training and education for that new occupation will also need to be created.

CNR. The rank titles were changed a few years ago to make them more gender neutral. How did this come about, and how has the transition gone?



Credit: Cpl Hugo Montpetit,
Canadian Forces Combat
Camera

Members from Fleet Diving Unit (Pacific) and HMCS *Brandon* deploy REMUS 100 uncrewed underwater vehicle as part of Exercise Arctic Edge 22 in Juneau, Alaska, on 4 March 2022. NCM training on these and other new technologies is becoming more important.



A pair of Sailors 1st Class inspect diving equipment during Exercise Cougar Gauntlet, May 2022, somewhere along the Canadian Pacific coast.

CPO1 Mondelli

Approximately 18,000 personnel responded to an RCN survey asking to choose new English rank designations for its junior ranks. The Commander RCN and the RCN Command Chief Petty Officer at the time listened to the voices of the Master Seaman and Below ranks. This resulted in the more gender-neutral terms currently used – i.e., from Ordinary Seaman, Able Seaman, Leading Seaman and Master Seaman to Sailor 3rd Class, Sailor 2nd Class, Sailor 1st Class and Master Sailor. To determine how the transition has gone, it's best to ask those affected. I do know that there are those not within the junior ranks who have different opinions on the subject. Regardless, a decision was made, and we follow our orders. For my part, I welcome the change. The old rank titles represent a time that no longer reflects our current RCN demographic. For me, it was the reason why I could never really identify with them. The change of titles is a perfect example of policy evolution we need to see in the RCN and CAF.

CNR. As the RCN tries to adapt to demographic changes in society and to technology, will this have an impact on the identity and cohesion of the navy?

CPO1 Mondelli

This is a deep question and could be the subject of an entire research thesis. These changes will have an impact if those currently within the RCN do not embrace the change happening around them. If current RCN members can't let go of the past, the old ways of doing things

that are no longer relevant, safe, or culturally acceptable, then they become part of the problem. When those who want the change are met with these resisters, there will be a clash. This can have an impact on productivity, innovation and overall morale.

CNR. Anything else?

CPO1 Mondelli

One thing I would like to see is combined officer and NCM Professional Military Education starting at the DP 3 level with a focus on transformational, values-based leadership. So much of what we do and learn is done in rank silos. We don't fully understand how to be effective leadership team partners because we don't learn key leadership pieces together.

CNR. Thank you very much for taking the time to sit down with me and share your expertise. I really appreciate it.⁴ 🇨🇦

Notes

1. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).
2. Department of National Defence, Canadian Forces Leadership Institute, *Duty with Honour: The Profession of Arms in Canada*, Government of Canada, Ottawa, 2003/2009.
3. For clarification, CPO1 Mondelli later provided the following explanation: "Starting at the beginning of DP3, most elements have some form of succession planning programme where succession planning is a subset of career management that is intended to establish a talent pool of future leaders with the potential to succeed to higher, institutional, leadership roles."
4. If you want to learn more, see CPO1 Mondelli, "Non-Commissioned Members as Transformational Leaders: Socialization of a Corps," *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Autumn 2018), pp. 26-32.