

# The RCN and RAN: Navigating Different Paths

**Vice-Admiral Angus Topshee, Commander RCN**

In January 1993, I had the privilege of being selected as one of three Royal Military College of Canada cadets sent on exchange to the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA) in Canberra. Through a fortuitous combination of circumstances, in the next seven months I visited every state and territory of Australia except Tasmania (I promise I will get there someday!), including just about all major cities and military bases. Given the tremendous quality of the professors, staff and students at ADFA, I could not imagine a better immersion into Australia's strategic situation and it confirmed my belief that the best way to *begin* to understand a country is to live there. Thirty years, and many subsequent visits to Australia (and interactions with Australians) later, my initial impression that our countries are very much alike and yet also surprisingly different remains true. In this short piece, I hope to elaborate on how this has influenced our respective navies as we address today's security challenges.

We share the same lineage from the Royal Navy and the similarities in how our navies are organized, our occupations are structured and our ships are fought are such that sailors can (and have) transfer(ed) almost seamlessly from one to the other. As a result, there is an easy camaraderie when sailors from the Australian and Canadian navies interact which mirrors the close and friendly relationship between our countries. We are also faced with the same human resource challenges. Personnel shortages and a healthy labour market mean that each of our navies is faced with the difficult task of competing for talent in our countries.

I have always been historically minded as I find it helpful to examine past circumstances to understand why and how the decisions of the day were made. Looking back across our respective histories, it strikes me that, in the absence of a direct strategic threat to our homelands, we follow similar paths and build similar navies. Our navies were both created just before the outbreak of the First World War, and our first decades of existence were characterized by questions around the degree of independence desired from the United Kingdom and the Royal Navy, as well as the willingness of our governments to pay for robust, independent naval forces.

The Second World War led to the first significant deviation as the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) grew much larger than the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). Our circumstances show that we both made logical and appropriate choices. Both navies had ships serve in all theatres



Credit: Mona Ghiz, MARLANT Public Affairs

*Vice-Admiral Angus Topshee stands in front of the Arctic and Offshore Patrol Vessel HMCS Margaret Brooke during the Change of Command ceremony in Halifax where he assumed leadership of the Royal Canadian Navy on 30 May 2022.*

of war, but came to focus their naval efforts in different ways. With the bulk of the Canadian war effort in Europe, the RCN built a very large fleet of corvettes, frigates and destroyers to protect the supply line across the Atlantic and support amphibious operations in the Mediterranean and English Channel. The RAN built a smaller but still quite powerful navy that was optimized for meeting the challenge of the Imperial Japanese Navy by defending its home waters and taking the fight to Japan once the tide was turned.

Following the Second World War, our navies again took broadly similar paths in meeting the challenges of Korea and then the Cold War. In essence, we both sought to have the right mix of capabilities to support the United States should war break out with the Soviet Union, while also wanting a navy that was able to promote national interests abroad. The similarities in our fleet mix and operations generally held true through the immediate post-Cold War era as we both built fleets centred on frigates, modernized



A computer-generated graphic of the Canadian Surface Combatant as posted by Royal Canadian Navy social media on 23 June 2022.

destroyers and submarines, and focused on integrating seamlessly with the US Navy.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the RAN and RCN are again following different paths as our countries adapt to the renewal of strategic competition. The need to meet the challenge of China means that this time it is the RAN which is building a bigger force. When one considers deep Australian memories of the bombing of Darwin and the real threat of invasion from Japan in the Second World War, as well as Australia's geographic isolation, it makes sense that the RAN is building a fleet designed to ensure that it has the capabilities and the capacity to defend itself and protect Australia's interests in the absence of immediate help from allies.

Today's Canadian strategic situation is different. Because of our uniquely favourable geography, the only invasion threat we have faced was from our neighbour to the south, something that thankfully has not been an issue for more than 150 years. Because the fighting happened out at sea and long ago, few Canadians know that the Second World War did come to Canadian shores with more than 20 ships sunk within the Gulf of St. Lawrence and dozens more in Canadian waters. This history shapes the navy that Canada is building today – one that is designed to ensure sovereignty and security in all three of our oceans, meet NATO commitments and promote Canadian values and interests abroad.

With three of the six *Harry DeWolf*-class of Arctic and Offshore Patrol Vessels delivered and the remainder to be accepted by the end of 2025, the RCN now has the capacity to operate throughout Canada's Arctic archipelago in the summer navigation season and patrol our Arctic approaches year round. Notably, these ships offer robust capabilities to link with communities across the Canadian North and support a whole-of-government approach to ensuring sovereignty and security in our Arctic, particularly as the region adapts to the impacts of climate change. The ships have also proven ready to take on a range of constabulary tasks in warm as well as cold water, bolstering the RCN's ability to support Canadian interests at home and around the world.

The 15 Canadian Surface Combatants (CSC) will be the main fighting ships of the RCN, providing command and control, area air defence and anti-submarine warfare (functions spread across three ship classes in the RAN). The CSC, enabled by two *Protecteur*-class replenishment ships, will ensure that Canada contributes to continental security by securing our ocean approaches against all maritime threats. They will also be capable of deploying as single ships, a Canadian task group, or as part of a coalition force across the full spectrum of conflict. In addition to providing fuel, ammunition and supplies to a Canadian task group, the *Protecteur*-class offers advanced medical facilities, capacity for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and space for an assortment of mission-tailored packages.

Finally, the Canadian Patrol Submarine Project will deliver platforms with the stealth, persistence and lethality necessary to ensure that all three of the oceans bordering Canada will be protected against threat. The sheer size of the Canadian Arctic archipelago and limited supporting infrastructure mean that operating there requires vessels that can travel vast distances and operate unsupported for long periods of time. The *Harry DeWolf*-class has delivered this capacity magnificently and it will also be built into the Canadian Patrol Submarine. As a result, these submarines will be well suited to working across the vast distances of the Indo-Pacific, as well as in the Atlantic.

Although the RAN and RCN are proceeding down different paths in terms of force structure and size, there is no doubt that we are both building navies that are well suited to our present strategic circumstances. It is comforting to know that the close and longstanding linkages between our navies will be reinforced by our shared journey in adapting the Type 26 design into service as the *Hunter*-class and Canadian Surface Combatant. I look forward to continued close cooperation as we protect and promote our national interests at home and around the world. ⚓