

Maritime Command Pacific

The Royal Canadian Navy's West Coast Fleet in the Early Cold War

By David Zimmerman



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Introduction

“YACHT CLUB” was a derogatory term used by Royal Canadian Navy sailors on the Atlantic coast to refer to their counterparts on the Pacific coast. It amounted to a criticism of the comparatively easy lives supposedly enjoyed by West Coast sailors. “Yacht Club” appears to have originated during the Second World War, reflecting the derision felt by sailors operating out of Halifax for those who sailed out of Esquimalt, Canada’s West Coast naval base – derision rooted in the unwarranted belief that the waters of the North Pacific were placid and pleasant compared to the tumult of the North Atlantic. The term also came to refer to the far less strenuous operational environment faced by the wartime navy on the West Coast.

In the postwar period, East Coast–based sailors still believed not only that the weather was far rougher in the Atlantic but also that the Pacific Fleet was rarely involved in the intensive operational environment they experienced. In 1948, in the first issue of *The Crow’snest*, the RCN’s official magazine, an article titled “Come West Young Men!” tried to persuade personnel from Halifax to volunteer for transfer to Esquimalt. That article began by trying to dispel the myth that life in the Pacific Fleet was uneventful.

While serving on the East Coast of Canada, I shared the belief that the West Coast navy remained in a state of complete placidity, whereas we in the east lived in a fever of activity. On returning to British Columbia, I found this to be far from true. Admittedly, the climate is unsurpassed – sunshine in February and summer days in November (well, usually).¹

After a lengthy summary of the exciting activities of the Pacific Fleet witnessed by the unnamed author, the article concluded: “Yes, the West Coast is a great place, it is no more placid than the East Coast and activities here can be just as lively as anywhere else.”²

Yet the myth persisted; indeed, it grew. In the early 1950s the RCN in the Atlantic became integrated with other Allied navies through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The RCN’s direct commitments to provide forces to the Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic (SACLANT) appeared to have no equivalent for ships operating in the Pacific.

As with many derisive terms, the perceptions in which the term “Yacht Club” was rooted were the result of ignorance. True, Atlantic operations dominated the wartime navy; but for most of the postwar period until unification in 1968, the RCN’s Pacific-based squadrons were every bit as active as their Atlantic-based cousins. Halifax-based ships were incorporated into SACLANT and engaged in regular exercises with NATO navies; meanwhile, Esquimalt-based ships had an equally close working relationship with the US Navy’s Pacific Fleet. Defence relationships on the West Coast were never as formally structured as those governed by NATO on the East Coast, but the RCN had important responsibilities when it came to guaranteeing the security of the West Coast and the waters immediately adjacent to it. As well, the West Coast was a crucial area for training officers and men for the entire navy. The West Coast fleet was never as big as its Atlantic counterpart, but this imbalance was in large part caused by the basing of the RCN’s sole aircraft carrier at Halifax. However, manning the carrier placed a heavy burden on the navy, and frequently there were more ships ready for sea on the West Coast. This was the situation at the start of the Korean War, when the only ships ready for immediate deployment to Asia were three West Coast–based destroyers.

Only a few works have examined the history of the postwar navy, and most of this literature has focused on naval policy as developed at Naval Service Headquarters in Ottawa, on the few occasions that warships were sent into a war zone (such as in Korea or during the Cuban Missile Crisis), or on the unification crisis. Very little has been written about normal day-to-day fleet operations, and no one has specifically examined the role of the Pacific Fleet from 1945 to 1965. Marc Milner’s *Canada’s Navy* is the best of a group of rather unsatisfactory accounts of postwar Canadian naval policy. Remarkably, Milner, while claiming to have written a history of the entire navy, fails to make any reference to the Pacific after 1945, except for a few minor mentions of training facilities at Esquimalt. He certainly provides no insight into how the naval staff in Ottawa allocated resources, something that this book addresses with regard to the Pacific.

It is understandable that the focus of scholarship in the postwar period has been on naval policy, combat operations, and some aspects of international defence agreements. However, this focus has resulted in a huge gap in our understanding of the navy from 1945 to 1965. Only a few studies, none of them published, even mention the West Coast.³ Tyrone Pile has examined immediate postwar planning and policy development and discussed tangentially the importance the RCN placed on the Pacific in this period.⁴ Wilfred Lund has examined the seemingly endless personnel issues that bedeviled the navy from the end of the Second World War to unification in 1968. Naval Service Headquarters is portrayed as generally unable to come to grips with issues such as naval training

and education, manpower management, adaptation to new technologies, and the need to align strategic requirements with the resources likely to be available. Lund argues that the RCN suffered from a chronic overcommitment to NATO: “Over-commitment, trying to man too many ships with too few personnel, immediately became the major factor affecting personnel policy. This demand created an environment of instability in ships’ companies that eventually became chronic. Instability worked like dry rot against fleet operational effectiveness.”⁵ Yet after the rash of mutinies in the late 1940s, there is little evidence that this “dry rot” was so invasive as to lead to a breakdown in fleet operations. The problem with this “top down” approach is that the perceptions of the Chief of Naval Staff and the Naval Board in Ottawa might not have reflected what was taking place in the two major operational commands. The one aspect of the history of the postwar Pacific Fleet that has been considered in any detail is the involvement of three West Coast-based ships – HMCS *Ontario*, *Athabaskan*, and *Crescent* – in a series of work stoppages or mutinies in 1947 and 1949.⁶

Other aspects of Canada’s defence relations with its allies since 1945 have been examined extensively, especially in the context of NATO, the North American Air Defence Command (NORAD), and the UN.⁷ Invariably in all of these studies, the bilateral naval defence arrangements between Canada and the United States are ignored. For example, James Fergusson in his recent examination of US–Canadian defence relations writes that “North American defence was almost exclusively air force and neither the army nor navy faced the same specific functional requirements for close cooperation with its American counterpart in North America.”⁸ This is manifestly incorrect.

The failure to consider the RCN’s Pacific Command’s unique relations with the US Navy’s Pacific Fleet is a major gap in our understanding of postwar defence policy. This is a surprising omission, since the Canadian Maritime Pacific area of operations are among the most important continental defence responsibilities of the Canadian Armed Forces. The area extends some 1,700 kilometres to the west of Vancouver Island and north to the Alaskan coastline. The Aleutian Islands, Alaska, and its panhandle describe that area’s northwestern, northern, and (most of its) eastern boundaries. In the south, the boundary is an imaginary line due west of the Strait of Juan de Fuca. This area encompasses major routes for sea and air trade between North America and Asia, as well as for North American domestic trade – for example, 25 percent of all oil imported into the lower forty-eight United States comes from Alaska through the port of Valdez from there along Canada’s West Coast. Yet there is no understanding of how this defence responsibility has evolved since 1945. Recent studies in diplomatic history have shown the central importance of the Asia–Pacific to Canadian foreign policy.⁹ The navy’s role in fostering connections with countries



FIGURE 1 HMC Dockyard at Esquimalt on Navy Days, August 17, 1955. In the left foreground is the visiting HMS *Superb*. Various RCN destroyer escorts, frigates, and minesweepers are lying alongside various jetties. Victoria Harbour can be seen in the distance at the top of the picture. (Courtesy DND)

throughout the region will be a continuing theme of this study. In the background will be some of the crucial events that shaped the Asia–Pacific world in the early Cold War, such as the Chinese Revolution and the Korean War. However, the principal threat to North American security came from the growing might of the Soviet Pacific Fleet, particularly its submarines.

This work also breaks new ground regarding the work of navies during the Cold War. Far too often, naval history has focused on battle and ignored the mundane but important task of maintaining a navy in peacetime. The Cold War was a unique time, for the RCN had to remain ready in a dynamic peacetime environment where war was potentially just around the corner. The key role played by training and exercises in sustaining the Pacific Fleet’s high state of readiness is a central theme of this book.

Part of the ongoing struggle with creating an effective defence was dealing with rapid changes in technology that dramatically altered the nature of

antisubmarine warfare in the quarter-century after the Second World War. The evolution of defence planning in the Pacific will be set against the emergence of new threats posed by submarines capable of high underwater speeds and carrying long-range nuclear-tipped missiles.

The Pacific Fleet had to contend with the vagaries of political and defence policy decisions of the sort that have shaped the service ever since its formation in 1910. Immediately after the Second World War, the RCN in the Pacific was reduced to a mere shadow of its wartime strength. The increased tensions of the Cold War resulted in the largest peacetime increase in the size of the navy in history. By the late 1950s, Maritime Command Pacific (MARPAK) had established a defensive scheme based on the Canadian-designed St. Laurent-class destroyer escorts. Within a few years, as this study ends, however, the looming threat of atomic-powered submarines and cuts in the defence budget resulted in an unravelling of these carefully laid plans. The waxing and waning of the RCN's Pacific Fleet in the early Cold War is told here for the first time.

This work is a fundamental building block that will eventually be used to write a new history of Cold War defence and naval policy; however, it is only one of several such detailed studies required before an overall revision can be undertaken. At the moment, we can only use the extant secondary sources to link my study to other aspects of Canadian military history in the Cold War.

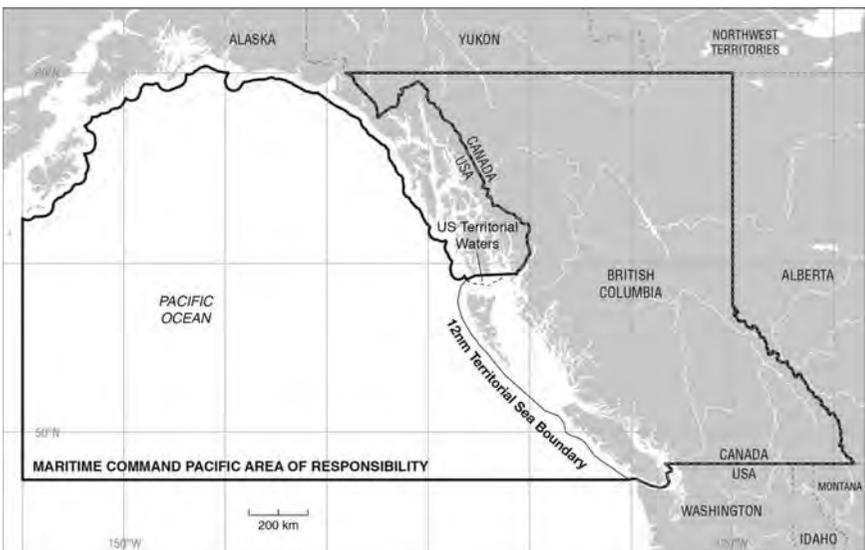


FIGURE 2 MARPAK area of responsibility. (Map by Eric Leinberger).
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It is expected that the forthcoming third volume of the official history of the RCN, covering the period from 1945 to 1965, will provide a long overdue overview of Cold War naval policy. After the publication of this work, however, it will no longer be possible to ignore the Pacific dimension of Canadian defence policy during the Cold War.