

H.M.C.S. *NIOBE*'S ARRIVAL IN HALIFAX, 21 OCTOBER 1910

Through the first three decades after Confederation most Canadians assumed that they had no need of a navy of their own. With their Arctic waters safeguarded by ice and the Atlantic and Pacific coasts patrolled by vessels of the Royal Navy, Canada could concentrate on such land-based objectives as settlement of the prairie West and development of an urban-industrial core elsewhere. The only exception to this inward-looking orientation was provided by the Department of Marine and Fisheries (DMF), which operated several inshore patrol vessels designated to protect Canadian fishing grounds from American encroachment and also maintain the lighthouses and other aids to navigation strung along both our salt and fresh water shores.

The decisive factor transforming benign neglect into vigorous self-assertion with respect to naval matters was the shifting balance of power at sea in Europe. By 1902 British assumptions about their capacity to maintain that nation's status as the world's preeminent naval power were in retreat. Construction of ever more formidable high seas fleets by the United States, Japan and especially Germany, forced the London government to reassess its naval strategy. In 1906 fleet consolidation in home waters brought about the abandonment of Halifax as an imperial military base and led to virtual elimination of the Royal Navy's peacetime presence in Canadian waters. Admiralty planners, despairing of Canadian assistance, had begun to assume that if war broke out protection of the sea approaches to Canada would have to be assigned to vessels of the American and Japanese navies.

In actuality, the Canadian government was then in the midst of moving toward establishment of a naval force of its own. A first step came in 1904 when Ottawa commissioned construction of the *Canada*, an armed steamer assigned to fisheries protection but designed on naval lines and used as a training vessel for future naval officers. Two years later Canada agreed to garrison the old imperial fortifications at Halifax, an initiative which heightened the need for naval craft, since advances in weaponry meant shore-based defense works now required an ability to mount pre-emptive attacks against encroaching enemy forces. Then in 1908, Ottawa appointed Canadian-born Charles Kingsmill, recently retired as a rear-admiral in the Royal Navy, as Director of the Marine Service within the overall DMF. He had been promised that the DMF would soon evolve into something more. Government intentions were spelled out in the Naval Service Act of 1910, which called for an eleven vessel fleet, mostly to be built in Canada and endowed with an annual operating budget of three million dollars.

Initially it had appeared that creation of a Canadian navy, an expression of ascendant Canadian nationalism, would enjoy bipartisan support. But in the spring of 1909 British leaders, reacting to reports that they were falling behind Germany in the construction of modern battleships, announcing a crash programme to reinforce the Royal Navy. Conservative politicians in Canada responded by lobbying for Canada to donate millions to Britain to pay for building heavy warships. In Ottawa the governing Liberals under Wilfred Laurier pressed ahead with their preferred option of an autonomous Canadian navy, arguing that in time of crisis, "our" ships would operate as an integral part of imperial naval forces.

The precise nature of Canadian naval autonomy, in both peace and war time, remained a matter of lingering dispute but on the surface it appeared that London and Ottawa were in agreement. Visible expression of British willingness to assist in formation of a new Canadian navy came with their sale to Canada of the *Niobe*, a thirteen-year old vessel (recently refitted). Displacing 11,000 tons, with a crew of over 600, and armed with a variety of heavy and medium cannon, along with machine guns, this cruiser would be the flagship of Canada's new naval force. Sailing from Devonport, England, the *Niobe* anchored off the mouth of Halifax harbour on the morning of 21 October, celebrated across the British empire as "Trafalgar Day", in commemoration of Admiral Nelson's pivotal 1805 naval victory that probably saved Britain from Napoleonic invasion.



*A postcard showing H. M. C. S. Niobe, entering Halifax Harbour; Halifax, N. S., 1910. The card, with its somewhat romantic imagery, was sold as a souvenir to the general public to promote celebration of the arrival of the flagship of the Canadian Navy in its new home-port. NSARM, Baxter Collection, 1979-221.63*

Liberal newspapers in the Nova Scotian capital erupted in a chorus of praise as they described how Kingsmill had gone on board, run up his admiral's pennant and presided over the *Niobe*'s entrance into Halifax. Cannon salutes rang out from the Citadel and, under yards of bunting, civilians and members of the military cheered from dockside, while notables, led by Nova Scotia's Lieutenant-Governor, clamoured on board to read addresses of welcome, present a gift of silver plate, and then tour the interior of Canada's largest warship. The reception would have been more spectacular and the Prime Minister might have attended, had there not been confusion over when the *Niobe* was going to

arrive. Proponents of a Canadian navy were nevertheless triumphant and even pro-Conservative newspapers welcomed the fact that Halifax was “once more ... a naval headquarters”.

Initially the new navy seemed to thrive. In January of 1911 a naval officer training-college opened in Halifax and five months later the incipient fleet received royal approval to operate under the name “Royal Canadian Navy”. But ominously, after the Conservatives came to power at Ottawa in September 1911, they slashed the navy’s budget and instead sought to divert funds to subsidize the British fleet. Meantime, while on its second cruise, the *Niobe* went ashore near Yarmouth in the summer of 1911. It took eighteen



months to make her seaworthy and the inept repairs meant that the *Niobe*'s speed had been severely reduced. When war erupted in 1914, the crippled flagship of the Canadian Navy saw only limited service before being reduced to the status of a depot ship anchored in Halifax harbour. There she received massive damage in the Halifax harbour explosion of December 1917 and three years later was sold for scrap.

*Taken about 1914, this photograph shows eight of the young cadets who trained at the Royal Naval College of Canada which operated in Halifax between 1911 and 1917. Following the 1917 Halifax Explosion, the College operated elsewhere until closed in 1922. For the next eighteen years officer training for the R. C. N. continued in England. NSARM, Frederick Francis Mathers fonds, 2006-037, no. 62*

German submarines arrived on Canada’s east coast in the autumn of 1916, forcing the Allies into a strategy of shepherding merchant ships across the Atlantic in convoys. But with a fleet that now consisted of little more than modified yachts, Canada’s navy could do little against this enemy menace, especially when the subs targeted vessels operating outside convoy protection. Nevertheless, the war had demonstrated the dangers inherent in lack of sea power, with the result that by 1918 both Conservative and Liberal politicians embraced a strategy which called for creation of viable Canadian military fleet. Although starved of resources through the interwar decades, the navy survived and when war erupted again in 1939 the fleet quickly matured to play a vital role in the all-important “Battle of the Atlantic”. Thus the initiative of 1910 ultimately proved successful.