

Feature: The Canadian Navy

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During Operation Salty Dips, it can be hard to tell a ship of war from a bobbing village

By Lisa Gregoire with photography by David Barbour



The HMCS *Toronto* departs on a 72-hour training mission. Inside, its crew of 200 operates a bit like a small town, guarding Canada's 244,000 kilometres of coastline.

Photo: David Barbour

• The Canadian Navy

“Wakey-wakey. Wakey-wakey.” 07:00. The boatswain's mate summons everyone aboard Her Majesty's Canadian Ship *Toronto* to breakfast with a shrill three-tone whistle and those four pestering words. Bang forehead on overhead pipes, again, before slithering from a narrow fold-out bunk. Pop a Gravel, and try to dress without stumbling. So begins another day of shooting guns, baking pies and keeping about 5,000 tonnes of steel afloat on the Atlantic Ocean.

Morning rum rations have been replaced by soup, and treadmills are in every nook.

It is late November, and the *Toronto* is tooling around a Navy practice zone roughly 50 kilometres off the southern shore of Nova Scotia. For the next 72 hours, during Operation Salty Dips, some 200 sailors will become an ant colony of repetition and co-operation: landing helicopters on the flight deck; shooting down airborne targets pulled by civilian jets; testing myriad blipping, spinning sensors and radars; and repeating same. They will brief and debrief, shuffle paper, tease one another like siblings and then fall, exhausted, into their bunks before 22:00 — and love doing it. Well, most of it.

HMCS *Toronto* is one of the Canadian Navy's 12 multipurpose frigates, all named after Canadian cities. The *Toronto* spent about 120 days at sea in 2009 and was expected to join a NATO squadron in Europe in March 2010. In all, the Navy has 33 warships — from submarines to mammoth refuelling supply ships — divided between bases in Halifax and Esquimalt, B.C. Once a postscrip to Britain's Royal Navy, the Canadian Navy proved itself a formidable submarine predator and dauntless ally during the Second World War and has grown into one of the world's most capable and versatile navies. In 2010, it celebrates 100 years at sea.

But it's not your grandpa's Navy. Advancements in technology have improved combat and marine systems as well as the capability of the ships themselves. More interesting, however, is the evolution of Navy culture. There are women sailors now, still fewer than 15 percent of the Canadian Forces, mind you, but they include Commander Josée Kurtz of HMCS *Halifax*, the first female captain of a major Canadian warship. A new professionalism permeates the Navy, says the *Toronto's* top officer, Commander Richard Feltham. No more throwing garbage overboard, growing beards or smoking at your desk. The morning rum ration has been replaced by soup, and every spare nook is occupied by a well-used treadmill or stationary bicycle — bolted to the walls and floors — which helps dispel the old cliché of the drunken sailor.

Nonetheless, Navy life is still noisy, cramped, steeped in tradition, sometimes nauseating, vulnerable to fire and flood, numbingly routine, never private, predominantly male and full of Newfoundlanders (many of whom, the joke goes, can be found fishing out back). And the Navy still holds true to cherished naval customs: each ship has its own crew, to ensure that all jobs are filled and that sailors get to know and trust their mates. The "one ship, one crew" idea helps to bind disparate trades and build a necessary camaraderie prior to long deployments overseas. First things first. It's morning on the *Toronto*, the nausea is subsiding, and a decision awaits: eggs or pancakes?

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Once out on the North Atlantic on Operation Salty Dips with destroyer HMCS *Athabaskan*, the *Toronto* becomes a mix of military training facility and smalltown village.

Photo: David Barbour

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Feature story:

"Morale starts and ends in the galley," says Tony Stewart, one of seven cooks who will help prepare 700 to 800 meals today — a careful balance of comfort food and healthy options and always with an assortment of irresistible desserts. The ship's vast food-storage units must contain at least two weeks' worth of supplies at all times, in case of rapid deployment. There are crates of frozen steaks, cartons of spices, bricks of cheese, boxes of Tim Hortons coffee and about 455 kilograms of potatoes. (Petty Officer 1st Class Mike Hillier once mistakenly put the bananas in the refrigerator and had to placate the cooks by making banana bread for weeks.)

'It's like having a bunch of brothers,' one of the frigate's few female sailors says.

Solid and soft-spoken, with spattered spectacles, Stewart is chopping cabbage for coleslaw. The slick floor is angled about 20 degrees to the port side and we would be sent sliding if Stewart hadn't tucked paper towels beneath our boots for traction. One deck up, in the restricted Operations Room, combat specialists fire metre-long cartridges from the 57mm gun — one of many formidable weapons on board, including anti-submarine torpedoes and anti-aircraft missiles. Make no mistake: this bobbing village is a ship of war. The *Toronto* banks left, right, left, right in a tight

weave, as boiling water sloshes around in huge pots. Cooks slide, curse, chop, stumble, curse. At maddeningly random intervals, an explosive BOOM-BOOM-BOOM vibrates through our toes. I offer to help chop, but Stewart politely declines. It's too dangerous.

Other dangerous things here: daydreaming outside on the bridge wings during firing exercises; showering barefoot; sleeping without a sleep belt on; and defying the coxswain.

Chief Petty Officer 1st Class Serge Lavigne is the coxswain in charge of the crew's non-commissioned officers and is responsible for safety, cleanliness and discipline. He is also a dead ringer for my dad: a bilingual Montrealer and natural-born leader condensed into about five feet four inches. He even holds the equivalent rank my dad held when he retired from the Air Force. "Where were you, Ms. Gregoire?" he asks. I had failed to report during a "verification muster," and when I finally arrived, after being paged twice, others were patiently waiting. I stuttered my explanation before I realized he was joking. Sort of.

"Yes sir," I joked. Sort of.

As a minority left-winger in a family of six siblings, two of them Canadian Forces (CF) members, I don't always fit in. My CF brothers are brave and loyal, and so was my father. I'm proud of everything they've accomplished at home and abroad, and they know it. But military aggression makes me uncomfortable. Canada, however, has the longest coastline of any nation in the world, at 244,000 kilometres. Protecting the country's sovereignty — and billions of dollars in trade and jobs — seems not only wise but necessary. "There's an old saying," says Commander Feltham, "that if you don't patrol your waters, somebody else will."

With the war in Afghanistan luring new recruits into the Army, the Navy has been left with a dwindling labour pool, especially among electricians, mechanics, marine systems engineers and sonar operators. Vacancies hover at or above 50 percent. Still, Canada expects to spend more than \$755 million on Navy personnel in 2010, up from \$538 million in 2001, and that does not include operations, maintenance and capital costs, such as these recent announcements: \$3.1 billion to modernize the frigates; \$47 million to upgrade fleet-maintenance facilities; an estimated \$100 million to build a deep-sea port at Nanisivik, Nunavut (see sidebar on page 58); and approximately \$40 billion to purchase new ships over the next three decades. Annual budgets fluctuate, but ultimately, Canada spends more on marine defence than it does on air or land defence.

It is Rob Huebert, an international relations professor with the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies, who later explains why. "Ships are expensive," he says. "But we've needed a navy since Confederation. The whole discovery and creation of Canada was, to a large degree, the result of sea power. Canada is a maritime nation." With potential conflict brewing in the Arctic and in Asia, where China and North Korea remain military wild cards, he says, Canada cannot hide behind the Americans. "But how do you convince a skeptical bureaucracy, government and public that you need this expensive insurance policy?"

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Part of a well-oiled team, crew members work on the business end of the *Toronto's* formidable 57mm gun.

The Canadian Navy



Feature story:

Floating fortress

It's a brisk afternoon on the quarterdeck, at the rear of the ship. Feltham, 42, and his father, Richard Sr., a guest for Operation Salty Dips, are here to see how fast a frigate can go. Two gas turbines, equivalent to jet engines, fire up with a whining crescendo, and within minutes, the *Toronto* has reached maximum speed, about 30 knots. Commander Feltham grabs a nearby ship phone and sends orders to cut engines. The ship, a football field in length, takes 58 seconds to stop dead. "How cool is that?" he says, beaming. (At full speed, each turbine consumes 5,500 litres of gas per hour. Assuming gas is a conservative \$1 per litre, the *Toronto* just burned about \$900 in five minutes. But it was pretty cool.)

The ship goes from its top speed of 30 knots down to zero in just 58 seconds. 'How cool is that?' says the Toronto's Commander.

"I think he likes his job," says Richard Sr., a retired Air Force major from Channel-Port aux Basques, N.L., whose two uncles were mariners. "I have this picture of him beside a big cannon. We were in Fort Macleod, Alta., and he was seven or eight, standing there with a big grin on his face. He hasn't changed a bit."

At six-foot-two, Richard Jr. is probably a tad taller now. A father of two, who "majored in hockey" at the Royal Military College of Canada (RMC) in Kingston, Feltham is fast talking and decisive, but his please-and-thank-you style has earned him respect among the crew in the two months since he took command of HMCS

Toronto. His private cabin, which contains the only porthole on the ship — a nostalgic tradition built into all the frigates — has few personal items save for a Toronto Maple Leafs bath towel, a family photo of the day he took command, a case of Malbec he shares with visitors and a carton of antioxidant green tea his wife cajoles him into drinking ("I'm really not crazy about it," he confesses).

On pirate patrol

The Canadian Navy's vessels slip seamlessly into NATO operations, humanitarian relief missions, piracy patrols and Arctic manoeuvres and are the only ones in the world that are integrated into the United States Navy juggernaut.

The Navy's first priority remains at home: ensuring maritime security on three oceans and preserving fishery and trade routes. Defending North America is the second priority. Canadian ships can have an annual rotation through American aircraft-carrier battle groups, and Canadian combat and communications systems are compatible with those of the U.S. Navy. Canadian Navy ships are regularly deployed overseas; HMCS *Toronto* is a

good example. Since 2004, the ship has circumnavigated Africa in a historic 12,500-nautical-mile exercise with NATO and was deployed to both the U.S. Gulf coast for Hurricane Katrina relief and the Persian Gulf for the American-led coalition Operation Enduring Freedom. The *Toronto* has also sailed to Nunavut twice.

All eyes were on HMCS *Winnipeg* last year as a result of its dramatic counter-piracy mission off the coast of Somalia, which included chasing suspicious Somali skiffs. Canadian sailors intercepted and boarded the vessels and confiscated rocket-propelled grenade launchers, warheads, assault rifles and small-arms ammunition. The *Winnipeg* has since returned to Canada and was replaced last fall by HMCS *Fredericton*, now working in the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

- L.G.

During a dinner he hosts in his cabin, he compliments his personal steward on the gourmet salad she has prepared for us. Conversation ranges from Canada's Arctic to his thesis at RMC ("The impact of Afghanistan on the future of NATO," he says, eyes rolling) and the fact that he has a phone in his bathroom. Lieutenant Melanie Blanchard furrows her brow and tucks into some Chinese food. "I didn't need to know that, sir."

Only officers are served by stewards. For the junior ranks, it is self-serve and picnic-style tables in the crew's cafeteria, but everyone gets the same meals, such as seafood fettuccine, stuffed portobello mushrooms, veal parmigiana, baked halibut. In the crew's Jug's Lounge, young men relax with cans of beer and *District 9*, one of several blood-soaked action films screened during the trip. *Transporter 3* was so dreadful, only two sailors stayed to the end. In one ludicrous scene, actor Jason Statham's character magically tilts his speeding Audi onto the driver's side wheels and squeeeeeezes it between two side-by-side tractor-trailers.

The next day, the *Toronto* makes a hairpin turn at full throttle and leans so far sideways, it feels as if it might capsize. Later, a Sea King helicopter dangles like a roaring bumblebee above a corkscrewing ship, its main rotor just a few metres from the hangar wall. It's *Transporter 3* revisited.

Pilot Tony Duplante is nonchalant about the day's conditions. He landed a "helo" on HMCS *Ville de Quebec* in 1995, in a storm, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. At night. "I've got video footage from that trip," he says, illustrating with his hands the ship's dizzying roll. "Me walking down a main passageway and going from walking on one wall, back across the floor and then onto the other wall."

Sailors tinker with complicated machines and deadly weapons every day, whether the ship is docked, chasing pirates, offering support to Army troops or hosting cocktail parties for foreign dignitaries. Self-sufficient, fully capable, ready to deploy within 12 hours — there is something impressive about that, even for a hippie who has never held a handgun. Until now.

The portside deck is cordoned off, and Petty Officer 2nd Class Kevin Reid reviews the safety protocols for the C7 assault rifle and 9mm SIG Sauer handgun. Each year, all sailors must be re-certified in small-arms use. Successive groups line up a few metres from the ship's edge and fire into the deep blue, until one sailor shouts, "Cease fire! Cease fire! Dolphin!" and points to where he may have seen a fin. Lookouts scan the surface for about five minutes, then Reid gives the "all-clear," and they resume firing.

Feltham offers me an opportunity to shoot the SIG Sauer. At 780 grams, it is heavier than I thought. "The most important thing," says Reid, loud and clear, "is muzzle control. Keep the muzzle pointed at the water." I stand, legs splayed, shove a magazine into the handle, pull the slide back to load, slap my right hand into my left palm and plug the sea repeatedly, as shell casings arc over my right shoulder. I empty three magazines like a gangsta and pass back the gun, exhilarated. Then I feel faint.

Maybe it is just seasickness; I'd hardly be alone here feeling queasy. Despite years of experience, some sailors get sick every deployment and must pop seasickness pills or stick a scopolamine transdermal patch on their neck to dull the effects. Everyone's got a story. Coxswain Lavigne describes a 1985 trip to the choppy North Sea during which three Canadian ships had to duck into a Norwegian fiord so that

crews could stop vomiting. "We had a tanker, and it had a surface-to-surface gun up forward," he says. "It went down into a wave, and when it came up, the gun was gone."

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Seaman Ashley Saunders.
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one deck farther, to the workshop, places a bar stool between the grinder and the vice and offers the basics for \$5.

"Make me look cute," says Able Seaman and fellow Sonar Operator Gabriel Dion-Levesque.

Leading Seaman and Stoker Bryce McMahon, a marine engineering mechanic, is trying to find hand pumps to check oil levels, but his narrow mechanical workshop is crowded today, and the floor is covered in hair.

Most Navy ships have someone aboard who can cut hair but the *Toronto* actually has a former Halifax salon stylist. Leading Seaman Korey Tynes, a third-generation sailor and father of two with a double-pierced left ear, was both a hairdresser and a restaurateur before joining the Navy, at age 33, as a sonar operator. When he is not in the Operations Room, he descends

The Navy plans for a northern front

With Russia, Norway, Denmark and the United States refurbishing ships and submarines to one day ply the Northwest Passage and defend claims to Arctic oil and gas, Canada has finally pinned real dollars to its northern sovereignty promises, with billions tabbed for ice-capable ships and northern facilities.

Perhaps as early as 2015, Canadian Navy and Coast Guard vessels may be able to refuel during the navigable season at a port in Nanisivik, Nunavut, a former mining site near Arctic Bay on northern Baffin Island that is strategically located near the Northwest Passage. The first design contract, worth \$900,000, was awarded in November 2009, with

the entire project expected to cost about \$100 million.

Frigates such as HMCS *Toronto* are not ice-worthy, so the federal government plans to acquire at least six Arctic/Offshore Patrol Ships with thicker hulls to handle bumps from floating ice. (Actual ice breaking will remain a Coast Guard function.) The new ships, which will have helicopter flight decks but limited armaments, are supposed to cost \$3 billion, according to government estimates, but Rob Huebert, an international relations professor at the University of Calgary, says the price tag will likely be closer to \$8 billion.
- L.G.

"This is a comb, not a wand," deadpans Tynes.

McMahon squeezes past the stool, still searching for tools and singing Rihanna's "Umbrella," which plays on Tynes' mobile phone on the greasy workbench. Ordinary Seaman Maxime "Astro Boy" Blouin comes in for his usual fauxhawk. When five-foot-one Blouin sits down, his feet dangle above the floor. The coxswain often reminds the men when they need a trim, which is great for business. Tynes grins. "Sometimes I tell the cox'n, 'I haven't seen you in here in a while. You're looking a little shaggy,'" he says. A sense of humour is essential in this "steel-clad shoebox," where every day can feel the same.

From "wakey-wakey" to drowsy-drowsy, blue and black uniformed backs disappear through hatches with file folders, metal parts, distracted faces. They are off to hoist flags, consult navigation charts, listen to sonar echoes, repair engines, clean toilets, decode messages and pour ship-side grey into paint trays for touch-ups. Or maybe they're going to bed. At sea, however, about four dozen sailors work overnight on the bridge, in the Operations Room and in the Machinery Control Room, where thousands of on-board sensors, monitoring everything from moisture to heat, are linked to a wall of tiny coloured lights. Every minute of the day, someone is taking care of business.

"It's like having a bunch of brothers," says Lieutenant Melanie Blanchard, a maritime surface and subsurface officer with a degree in psychology, a tenacious resolve and a hometown of Hearst, Ont. Blanchard is a five-foot-one anti-submarine warfare specialist and one of 12 female sailors on board. At 31, she is the *Toronto's* operations officer, acting combat officer and public affairs representative. She has a no-crying rule and persuades tall men to sit before disciplining them.

It's late, and I'm bound for my bunk, but not before Blanchard offers a tour of the bridge. It is pitch-black inside except for random-coloured dots on indistinguishable machines. The goal of a combat ship is to be silent and invisible, hence the lack of lights. Murmurs spill from ghosts around me. "Here, hold my arm," whispers Blanchard, leading me toward the forward windows. Crew members are tracking a Lear jet as it passes overhead. Sea and sky mingle into a seamless void. We could be Kirk and Spock on the USS Enterprise. She tells me about trips to Hawaii, Nunavut, the Caribbean. Blanchard has seen northern lights, polar bears and the blue-green sea foam in the middle of the ocean. It makes the stressful, and sometimes bawdy, atmosphere tolerable, she says.

It is true what the University of Calgary's Rob Huebert says, that the Canadian Navy is a sophisticated force designed for "killing people and breaking things." Not everyone can stomach that — or the rolling ocean. Life aboard HMCS *Toronto* is draining. Sailors escape with books, Hollywood and cigarettes in the port breezeway. When escape is not an option, they learn quickly how to resolve conflict. Like any isolated community, there are cliques and gossip, but neither seems to penetrate the underlying trust crew members freely impart and the support they require in return. The fact is, they need one another. Navy is a team sport, and the *Toronto* is full of people who fled the constraints of Smalltown, Everywhere, to be part of something smaller and bigger at the same time. Something powerful and global, where the food is fantastic and the view even better.

Ottawa-based Lisa Gregoire wrote about Lake Placid in the Winter 2009-2010 issue of Canadian Geographic Travel. Photographer David Barbour lives in Ottawa.