

June 30, 2010

## The man who saved Canada's navy

By CBC News  
CBC News

*Robert Smol on the life and times of Adm. Walter Hose, the officer who kept Canada's navy on life support through successive government cutbacks.*

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***A standard Canadian Forces textbook on command states that an effective military commander must be able to "adapt and thrive under circumstances of complexity, ambiguity and rapid change."***

While this maxim is typically proven on the battlefield, it can apply as well in the political dimension, where senior military officers must navigate the often precarious and hostile domain of government bureaucracy and cutbacks.

Can this form of duty breed a hero?

I would argue yes, especially so in the case of Walter Hose, a British naval officer who, on the eve of the First World War, adopted Canada and the Canadian navy as his home.

It was this officer who, for over 20 years, kept the misunderstood and continually budget-starved Royal Canadian Navy in a state of respectable operational readiness and, toward the end of his career, virtually saved our navy from annihilation by a government that thought it no longer needed one.

Without his efforts there would be no centennial anniversary of the Canadian navy today.

### Protecting our coasts

In 1911, one year after the navy's creation, Robert Borden's Conservative government came to power with a plan to cut the naval service budget in half.

While in opposition, Borden's Conservatives had opposed the creation of a distinct Canadian navy, believing that the then powerful British fleet could do the job for us.

It was in this difficult political environment that Hose, then a commander with the Royal Navy, became the commanding officer of HMCS Rainbow, Canada's sole operational ship on the West Coast.

Short of personnel - his ship falling into disrepair as a result - Hose created a system of volunteers to take on the necessary training, a band-aid solution that eventually evolved into the Royal Naval Canadian Volunteer Reserve.

"This initiative became even more important as the war continued, as it became clear that the Brits couldn't provide all the protection for the Canadian coasts," notes Roger Sarty, a history professor at Wilfred Laurier University in Waterloo.

"We had to organize our own coastal patrols and we used the vehicle of the RNCVR to raise 5,000 men for patrols on the East Coast."

In 1917, in the middle of the First World War, Hose was transferred to Halifax where he headed up the vital East Coast patrol. Three years later he replaced Adm. Charles Kingsmill as head of Canada's navy.

When he took over, in 1920, the Canadian navy consisted of two destroyers, one cruiser and two submarines, plus the Royal Naval College of Canada in Halifax, which trained young men to serve as deck officers and engineers.

### Part-time sailors

A year later, it was the newly-elected Liberal government of Mackenzie King that this time decided to cut the budget of Canada's navy in half, which forced Hose to chop his navy down to two destroyers and close the Royal Naval College in Halifax.

After these cuts, Canada's naval strength stood at approximately 500 regular personnel.

To make the best of a bad situation, Hose decided that any semblance of operational capability could only be maintained by keeping the two remaining destroyers afloat and sacrificing the rest.

It was a difficult decision but, in hindsight, ensured that the sharp end of the service did not sink.

At the same time, Hose also decided to renew the volunteer reserves that proved so successful during the war years.

Bidding for time, he created the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve, which consisted of trained civilian seamen who would serve on occasion in uniform, and the Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve, which consisted of a series of naval training divisions established in cities across the country.

"This two-track system created by Hose was the vehicle for the navy's expansion during the Second World War," says Sarty.

"The initial expansion is achieved with the RCNR and they are the ones who run the show and become officers of the fleet, which gives a chance for the volunteer reserve to come up to speed."

### On the brink

Still, Hose's navy was almost sunk entirely in 1933, the year that Hitler came to power.

At that point, in the midst of the Great Depression, the Conservative government of R.B. Bennett proposed that the navy's budget be cut from just over \$2 million to approximately \$400,000 a year.

If carried out, the cuts would have effectively eliminated the navy as an operational force.

The power behind the cuts was the then chief of the general staff, Gen. Andrew McNaughton, an army veteran from the First World War who believed that the growing capability of air power made a navy unnecessary.

"McNaughton believed that we could do offshore with air power all the things that the navy was currently doing in terms of protecting the coast and surveillance," says Marc Milner, professor of history at the University of New Brunswick and director of the Gregg Centre for the Study of War and Society.

At the time, the most serious military threat to Canada was the security of our West Coast in the event of a naval conflict between the U.S. and Japan.

Taking up the fight on behalf of his service, Hose reminded the government that aircraft, in those days, could not operate at night and could not fly in rough weather, and that the only reliable means of ensuring Canadian coastal sovereignty would be by a naval presence.

"I laid particular strength on the fact that the naval force we desired was, under existing conditions, the most necessary guarantee against being drawn *into* war in the not impossible event of a war between the U.S. and Japan," recounts Hose of a meeting he had in June 1933 with the Treasury Board.

Hose also reminded the government that, if the cuts went ahead, it would effectively be mothballing his service at a time when it was taking delivery of two modern destroyers, which had been ordered in the late 1920s.

Eventually the army and air force chiefs and the government backed off, and Hose's navy was subjected only to much smaller cuts.

In June 1934, his service bruised but intact, Hose retired as a rear admiral.

Later, as the Second World War drew to a close he was able to see the struggling service he had protected from the politicians and the generals emerge, for a time, as the third largest navy in the world.

Given the first 35 years of the Canadian navy's often fragile existence, that was quite an achievement.



*Admiral Walter Hose, the second head of Canada's navy, from a portrait in the Naval and Military Museum in Esquimalt, B.C. (Naval and Military Museum website)*