



Oral History – Written Submission

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## ROYAL NAVAL EXCHANGE SERVICE WITH THE CANADIAN NAVY

### *Essay*

This missive is offered at the suggestion of Captain (N) Rolfe Monteith (Retired) who is putting together an opus based on personal experiences of those from both within and without Canada who have served collectively under the Maple Leaf or its White Ensign predecessor. I held an exchange appointment on Canada's West Coast, based at Esquimalt, I worked for The Commander, Training Group Pacific (TRAINPAC) from September 1988 through to October 1990. The appointment was as Staff Officer (Technical) - SO Tech - and had evolved from the Naval Engineering Unit, Pacific - NEU(P) - Lieutenant Commander, Mar Eng post that had been filled by the Royal Navy for a number of years.

TRAINPAC was a large organisation whose primary mission was to train officers of all specialisations for the Canadian Navy. The secondary role was the provision of small craft for Reserve and Sea Cadet Training purposes. I specify the national commitment because many organisations of comparable size also trained officers for other countries. It is my recollection that there were no foreign nationals within the Naval Officer Training Centre, VENTURE, indeed to my knowledge, I was the only non-Canadian military officer, working in uniform, on the West Coast during my tenure. I was always struck by the numbers passing through TRAINPAC given the size of the Navy's operational arm and raised the subject on a couple of occasions. The issue seemed to boil down to the fact that the Navy accepted an unwritten role in that it (and presumably the Army and Air Force alike) was there not only to protect Canadian sovereignty and territorial integrity but also to provide a rich source of well-trained men and women for the overall good of the country.

It seems to me a noble secondary mission in that bright young people, some of whom might not have otherwise been able to afford a College education, were trained by the military for the eventual overall good of the nation. For some, the military route was clearly their first career option, many of whom stayed on with some completing full careers while others gave a fair return of Service while preparing themselves in a much fuller and perhaps worthwhile manner for second and usually longer careers in commerce, industry or whatever. There is of course a downside here, if the unwritten role was indeed a truism in that defence \$s were being channelled into what amounts to a "good citizen training programme," the credibility and professionalism of the Navy (and other services) could be called into question.

Back to the substance of my appointment. I was one of 4 technical personnel who discharged the duties of Squadron Engineering Staff on behalf of The Commander, TRAINPAC. The Technical team was headed up by a Canadian Commander (MSE), myself, a C1 (Cert. 4 - CERA) and C2 (CERA). Of interest was the fact that all of us were of the marine engineering specialisation and as I remember, always had been and were destined to continue into the future. This again was something I questioned but without achieving a satisfactory answer other than the frequently made observation along the lines of "When I joined the Navy, there was only one engineering branch and a singleton engineer officer in a ship known as the EO," The conversation would taper off at that point, presumably because the case had been irrefutably made. I did wonder though at the setting and maintenance of standards within the CSE world. Indeed, I felt for the CSEs of the 4<sup>th</sup> Destroyer Squadron (4 x Mackenzie Class Destroyers) because I regularly overheard in wardroom conversations, some of which I was party to and all of which were well fuelled by the contents of the (very large) refrigerator adjacent to the pantry, debate that was frequently of an emotional nature over the 'Value added' of the CSE. Observations abounded about "being a messenger" and "an extension of the problem as opposed to part of the solution." The source of such observations were normally the senior MARS officers and one or two of the Commanding Officers who had spent most of their sea going careers in the Steam Destroyer Fleet and may have retained an early 1960's technical mindset. I hope the Canadian Navy has moved on; it needed to, for in many ways that beautiful corner of British Columbia was stuck in a time warp, a theme to which I shall return.

Before I go any further it is perhaps timely to summarise TRAINPAC's floating assets:

Ship Type	No.	Remarks
MacKenzie Class Destroyers	4	Y100 steam plant – virtually identical to RN Whitby, Type 12 and Leander Class Frigates
Bay Class Minesweepers – universally referred to as the PBs	5	Reconfigured as navigational training ships – sweep gear removed; replaced by a classroom – virtually identical construction to RN Ton Class MCMVs but with vastly superior main engines
YNGs	3	Former Boom Defence vessels operated for the benefit of the Reserves – no idea what YNG means – or YAG for that matter!
YAGs	5	Similar in size to an inshore minesweeper but without any MCM equipment – purely seamanship and navigational training – principal customers were the Sea Cadets
<i>Oriole</i>	1	Sail Training Craft – built in 1922 of riveted steel construction – a work of art!

Although my Terms of Reference focussed on being the Squadron Technical Officer for the PBs and below (assisted by the C2 CERA), after 3 or 4 months in the job, I was invited to assume the role of Deputy Squadron Technical Officer to the destroyers. I was very happy with this proposal because I had held an MEO's appointment in a Y100 Frigate (HMS LONDONDERRY) and considered I was in position to add value to the organisation. On a purely personal note, it also meant that I was able to travel further afield than might otherwise have been the case on the Minor War Vessels (MWVs)! I had to caveat such considerations on the basis that I felt I could not be away from my 'day' job for more than about a week or so, which meant flying out and sailing back or vice versa when operating with the destroyers. To be fair, this was probably the optimum period for Squadron Staff to be embarked looking at the workings of a ship and her people - any longer and the *raison d'être* plus the element of 'mystique' that must necessarily go with the Staff title begins to lose its gloss. More to the point, a ship can be over inspected and there are few things worse than a Staff Officer who does not have enough to do!

I much enjoyed my association with the MacKenzies and while the hulls and machinery were in a very sound material state - particularly for their age - the weapons and sensors were dated and in my estimation, the ships were only of use in the training role or for fishery protection type duties and showing the flag. I found the crews content with their lot, particularly the P2 and above Mar Eng Techs who seemed to have reached their primary goal of reaching 3 Mess with promotion beyond recognised as the lot of the very few. The engineering teams were certainly well skilled although as with most navies, concerns existed over skill dilution and the ever-increasing training load being foisted upon the experienced sea-goer. This aspect was similarly felt among the engineering teams in the PBs although the MWVs usually attracted only trained personnel - one of the attractions of serving in the Class. Trainees - often referred to by the less charitable as "passengers" - came in for plenty of (character forming) stick! I was inclined to remind the more vocal that they had not always been experienced hands themselves - a notion that was not always accepted in good grace with mumbles of "in my day we were properly trained etc. etc....."

My main effort was always the MWVs. Every aspect of their technical support rested with my CERA and I. I accepted this initially knowing no better and simply thinking, 'This is the way it is done over here.' Never being one to stay in my box for too long, I was soon out and about exploring the delightful

Naval Base and its various organisations. One of my early discoveries was a small team run by an ex Air Engineer who re-badged as a CSE following the demise of Canadian Naval Aviation (BONAVENTURE'S retirement and the transfer of all military aviation to the Air Force). He was a larger than life character in all senses and greeted me like a long lost friend! After the usual introductions I asked him what he did and I learnt of the existence of the Ship Systems Readiness (SSR) organisation that was the first point of contact for OPDEF rectification. I asked, somewhat naively, if that applied to TRAINPAC (quite how it could not given that we were by far and away the largest presence on the West Coast - the only other vessels were the 4 destroyers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Destroyer Squadron) to which I was told "Yes." Why then, I asked, did the Squadron Staff handle all the arrangements for rectifying OPDEFs and not SSR? The well-known reply "It's always been like that" was my answer!

The process changed from that day on; SSR did their job, the repair agencies got used to dealing with a single organisation that understood the priorities of the Command and could allocate resources accordingly. Much better! I now had the time to focus on what I really should be doing i.e. setting where necessary and maintaining engineering standards, qualifying engineering personnel for their higher level qualifications, overseeing and scrutinising refit defect and maintenance lists, liaising with refitting authorities, conducting initial engineering for replacement equipments (my youngest vessels were 35+ years old and many still had their original engines, generators, galley ranges etc.) and so it went on.

I much enjoyed this aspect of my work for 3 main reasons. Firstly, I was engaging in practical, value adding engineering and secondly, I interfaced with people both senior and junior, in and out of uniform, civil servants and contractors - it was interesting and very satisfying. Thirdly, being the only British Military Officer on the West Coast of Canada – a "kipper" as I was sometimes referred to (usually just out of earshot!) – I quickly discovered that I could use the System to maximum advantage. By this I mean to enhance the material condition and sharpen up the in-service and refit maintenance procedures of the vessels in my charge. I found I could get away with turning a 'Nelsonian Eye' to some of the rather laborious administrative procedures associated with procuring new equipment much to the advantage of vessel availability and the associated cost of maintaining obsolescent equipment. By using established companies, through life support was ensured with necessary spares obtained through local purchase. After all, it works in the mercantile marine (*BC Ferries* are a case in point) so why not for a small organisation that was operating in local waters?

In addition, scrutiny of running hours between refits quickly revealed that the PBs main engines were being heavily over maintained. Fastenings were failing because of constant 'spannering'; the engines were not failing through operating fatigue but through over maintenance! Engines were typically being top-overhauled every 3-4,000 hours with major overhaul every 6-8,000. A short conversation with *Detroit Diesel Allison* revealed that this was hugely in excess of the design criteria. The overhaul intervals were doubled overnight with the associated massive saving. The Dockyard Diesel Shop (Shop 02) were not too happy but it freed them up to take on other work of a commercial nature that added to the Federal coffers while broadening their experience base and keeping the work force intact.

Money saved in this way could be redeployed for the good of the Squadron and I ensured that habitability received a high priority.

I was also responsible for the CSE equipment within my Squadron - quite interesting for an ex boy-Shipwright retrained as a Marine Engineer! Although the details are somewhat vague now - they were not exactly crystal (no pun intended) clear at the time either - one of the tasks I undertook was to review the reliability and supportability of the main communication kit fitted in the PBs. They had VHF sets (as did the rest of the Squadron) but were also fitted with HF sets in recognition of their wider area of operations. These were indeed crystal sets that must have been approaching obsolescence when they were initially fitted! My paper on the subject, while perhaps not worthy of review at a specialist conference addressing the virtues of modern communications equipment, did at least convince the Command that new radios were necessary and I was pleased to see the first outfit fitted and working before I left Canada.

I thoroughly enjoyed my association with the Fleet Diving Unit (Pacific) - FDU (P). My military diving qualifications were accepted without hesitation and following a brief acquaint with the Canadian kit (off the shelf commercial - superior in almost every way to the RN's self-contained compressed air equipment in use at that time) was accepted as one of the team. I rapidly established a rapport with the OIC of the FDU and perhaps more importantly, the Chief Diver who ran the operational West Coast team. Log strikes were a constant hazard for all West Coast ships with the 'deadheads'<sup>1</sup> a particular problem. This was especially true of the PBs who spent the majority of their time in confined waters where tide action resulted in a 'deadhead' concentration. Propellers were most at risk and frequent victims. The Diving Team were extremely proficient at in-water propeller changes and I was privileged to operate with them during several such underwater challenges. West Coast diving made a pleasant change from Plymouth or Portsmouth harbours and though not the Caribbean, was a delight compared to the majority of dives I have carried out both before and since in UK waters. All in all, an entirely satisfactory educational and enjoyable 2 years as a part time member of a most professional outfit.

I mentioned earlier the perhaps slightly contentious proposition that the organisations with which I interfaced were in something of a time warp? To be fair, this was hardly surprising. The Navy had seen little by way of new equipment since the introduction of the DDH 280 some 20 years previously. Esquimalt Naval Base and Dockyard was run on exactly the same lines as it "always had been" and was working on vessels and equipment it had grown to know (and love) over 30 + years. The lack of investment in new technology had created a comfort zone where all concerned could almost do their jobs without conscious thought. The expression 'It has always been done like that' was something I heard time and time again. I don't say this in an entirely negative way. The people I worked with were in the main delightful and I was treated very well both personally and professionally. But I sensed the frustration of the younger and brighter sailors and officers who were not prepared to commit to a Service that was operating elderly kit that had questionable utility in the modern war-fighting environment.

It was this aspect that possibly accounted for the massive throughput of bright young people who gratefully engaged in the academic courses and initial sea experience open to them before taking their energy and brain power elsewhere to enter a world of technical modernity. The only opportunity to engage in something approaching a modern marine engineering installation was the singleton DDH 280 (HURON). In conversations both ashore and afloat, there was a depressingly small minority willing to engage with the "new technology;" most were happy with the status quo. The dockyard was geared to supporting steam plant (which they did very well) and were not adapting readily to HURON'S technology. To be fair, 7 out of the 8 destroyers were steam driven so the main effort was self-evident, however, CPF was on the horizon and when the topic of revised support methodology for the new ships was raised, the relaxed West Coast response of "no problem" was the usual reply. The same was true of the training given ashore for the Mar Eng trade. This was still very much steeped in steam technology (again entirely reasonable given the makeup of the Fleet) but I detected a tangible reluctance to grasp the future through the design of new training packages in readiness for the new ships. Indeed during conversations with the marine engineering personnel in HURON, it quickly became apparent that specialist courses (typically the machinery control and surveillance system and gas turbine health monitoring) were conducted by the OEM with the emphasis on "on job training." This is of course not untypical of specialist vessels of limited numbers in navies across the world. My point really is one of a mindset that did not seem to welcome either the thought or reality of change - perhaps an inevitable consequence of a lack of investment over a protracted period.

The reality is that today, steam has gone to be replaced by gas turbines and diesels and the Canadian Navy's warships are at sea doing the business (as far as I am aware) so the transition, or perhaps the evolution to better describe the process, has clearly happened. Given my observations, the substance of which were formed at the latter end of an extended period of

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<sup>1</sup> A saturated log that floated vertically and was hence barely visible, particularly if any sort of sea was running.

technology stagnation, credit is clearly due to the generation of Canadian engineers who took the status quo and dragged it, possibly kicking and screaming, into the modern environment. I have always believed in the inevitability of gradualism. Incremental progress happens almost without people realising they are moving on providing new technologies are filtering in on a regular if not constant basis. Significant perturbations can unsettle even the most responsive of organisations and I suspect the introduction of the new technology on the West Coast Navy was not without its dramas.

Any Exchange Officer's thought would not be complete without a few thoughts on one's family life in a 'foreign' land and the politics (always dangerous!) of the country. Observations from the outside looking in must be taken as exactly that. The 'visitor' is perhaps inevitably going to view the country through "rose tinted spectacles," however, I strive for objectivity in all things and hope I am able to achieve the same in these thoughts.

Firstly, family life. We lived in a lovely timber and brick detached house in the 'shadow' of Mount Douglas to the North of Victoria. The only drawback was that the back garden was not fenced. Living on a main road and blessed with twin boys aged 3½ left my wife and I concerned for their safety when playing outside and the need for constant supervision, especially when my then 8 year old was playing his mischievous suite! We rapidly fenced ourselves in but noted that the majority of properties did not sport boundary fences in our area - quite a difference from "Mother England" where the "Englishman's home is his castle" cliché is alive and well and fences, walls, hedges, chain-link et al abound! We purchased my predecessors cars and most importantly trailer tent that gave us a huge amount of freedom and choice in where we went on our voyages of discovery both around Vancouver Island and wider into Washington and Oregon States and of course the Rockies. Perhaps not over ambitious but given that my wife had never spent a night under canvas (although she adapted very quickly and became as comfortable with the process as the primitive nature of the trailer tent allowed!) and that our 4<sup>th</sup> son was conceived and delivered during our 2 years in country, we felt it was probably sufficient.

Memories such as spending my wife's birthday (coincident with our wedding anniversary) on the shores of Lake Louise (her namesake) and balmy nights camping on the beach at Comox listening to pods of killer whales spouting and generally performing while the boys were blissfully sleeping after a full day of outside 'boys own' activity will endure in perpetuity. Our camping season started in March through to November. One of the great joys of living in someone else's house was the total absence of maintenance activity that had been part and parcel of our lives up until then. We maximised on the ability to up sticks and go and received much and very welcome advice from neighbours and colleagues, many of whom grew into friends that we still enjoy to this day. In short, life was good for the family and leaving the West Coast was far from easy.

No Englishman's thoughts would be complete without comment on the weather! Pre-deployment preparation included a climate brief the conclusion of which was that Victoria enjoyed a weather pattern that was similar to the South of England but generally milder. Super! Imagine therefore my surprise when only months after our arrival, Victoria and Esquimalt harbours froze over and PB operations had to be suspended. Not I hasten to add because the open bridges presented too much hardship for the crews and trainees but because the wooden hulls were sustaining damage in their waterline areas from the ice encountered in the execution of navigational training which by definition involved multiple entries and exits into ice bound bays around the Island! I was grateful that I had packed my greatcoat although the extremities (nose and ears) still suffered. East Coast hands and Ottawa 'warriors' shrugged off the weather as an education for the 'sandy bottom' West Coasters while privately, confessed their surprise at such extremes. The media was quick to produce the relevant statistics and declared that the harbours had not been compromised by ice since 1929 – I was therefore even more privileged to have experienced the phenomena!

Moving onto the politics of the Country which were interesting for an outsider's perspective. Canada's secure borders and a generally peaceful population coupled with a country rich in

natural resources and a well developed State funded education system would tend one to conclude that peaceful coexistence would be the order of the day. I was therefore a little surprised at the tensions that clearly existed. Perhaps I shouldn't have been. The absence of the need to focus on the lower tiers of necessity as defined in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs<sup>2</sup>, inevitably shift a population's attention to internal issues. Consequently, even though the Rocky Mountains create a physical as well as a cultural barrier, the Anglo/Francophone debate was alive and well. This was perhaps exemplified by an issue that was progressing through the Vancouver local government offices at the time. A bid had been submitted for federal funds in support a project of benefit to the city's population. One of the criteria for qualification was to post all road names in both English and French. Fair enough one might conclude in Manitoba, Ontario or Quebec, but in Vancouver with the second language (and by some margin) Mandarin, the sensibility of such a move was clearly questionable! Issues surrounding the rights and responsibilities of Canada's indigenous population was another subject guaranteed to raise the temperature around the dinner table!

A considerable sum of public money was invested in handling these issues as was the need for native English speakers to become functionally proficient in French if they were to advance their careers (with a notable absence of reciprocity) were all tension raisers. An outsider might conclude that some of these issues were a luxury that could only be indulged in a country where all other aspects of life were catered for and by some margin. There is no judgement call here, merely the observations of a stranger in a 'foreign' land!

In conclusion, it is a tall order to encapsulate all aspects of what, both at the time and on reflection, was a privileged way to spend 2 years. The expectation was always that living and working in Canada would be a memorable and enriching experience. This was realised in 'spades' both personally and professionally. My youngest son is a Canadian with Canadian godparents so we have our living memento from a country that welcomed us and a Navy that happily accepted the talents I brought to bear. I would like to think I added value to the operation and judging by the sincerity and duration of our send-off, others would seem to have enjoyed our input. The celebrations that accompanied the birth of our youngest son, both among our friends and neighbours and in the church community of which we became a part were without parallel. Events such as the Christmas pageant in the church with our youngest son playing the role of Baby Jesus are not episodes that one can or wants to forget. I have used the expression "time warp" on a number of occasions, I do not mean this uncharitably; it is simply a matter of fact. The Navy was rapidly approaching the end of a very long period of technical stability (stagnation) and needed to move on. The reluctance to do so was tangible but that did not detract from the professionalism of those I served alongside or the pleasure I had in working within the engineering community.

I returned home to the cut and thrust of joining a new class of ship and preparing (rapidly) for the 1991 Gulf War while settling the family back into the UK. The children all sported delightful Canadian accents and having grown out of the clothes they left England with (apart from the pass-downs of course) looked the part as well! My cabin in my new ship was liberally daubed with images of Vancouver Island and a framed photograph of CHIGNECTO representing my tenure as SO Tech in TRAINPAC. After the combat phase of Desert Storm, we pulled into Bahrain just as HURON was sailing and the XO (an ex PB Commanding Officer during my time in Canada) and I exchanged pleasantries by light. In conclusion, a chapter closed but not forgotten and very often the subject for quiet reflection and the cause of my children observing on more than one occasion "What's Dad smiling about?"

*SPF*

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<sup>2</sup> An ascending order of human requirements beginning with basic needs i.e. food and shelter, through security, social, ego, self actualisation and culminating in the need for spiritual fulfilment.