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THE TERM ‘WARSHIP’ IN THE ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY, WHAT IT TRULY MEANS?

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THE TERM ‘WARSHIP’ IN THE ROYAL CANADIAN NAVY, WHAT IT TRULY MEANS?

AIM

1. This document aims to serve as a comprehensive guide for members of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), civilian personnel within the Department of National Defense (DND) and the Canadian public unfamiliar with naval nomenclature and the functions that are performed by the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN).

INTRODUCTION

2. Canada enjoys a privileged geographical situation. It has access to three oceans and boasts the largest coastline in the world; Canada’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) increases its territory by more than two-thirds, positioning it in a place of advantage in the context of global commerce. However, this entitlement implies additional challenges in matters of maritime security and other shared continental defence commitments with its closest neighbour and ally, the United States of America. From its origins in 1910, the RCN has provided a contribution to the security of Canada, but nevertheless, its growth has seen a series of stages that consistently corresponded with the economic and political landscape at the national and international level. The RCN grew from its beginnings as a naval militia in 1910 to the medium-sized navy¹ present today. It is capable of fulfilling the leadership commitments the nation requires to respond to humanitarian crises, issues with regional instability or even a contribution to conflict on a global scale. This adaptive capability constitutes the RCN as the most flexible and versatile element of national power².

3. To fulfill its mission, the RCN must be ready to protect national sovereignty and contribute to the maintenance of maritime order beyond Canada’s national borders. To aid in the prevention of conflicts the RCN must operate with other nations to promote stability and discouraging future conflicts, all in support of the foreign policy of Canada³. Also it must be able to project naval power on behalf of the nation when necessary, to restore order and security in particular regions of the world. Under these premises, the RCN requires a variety of naval platforms, all unique capabilities that allow the RCN to fulfill the missions assigned by the Government of Canada (GoC). These platforms are classified according to type, capabilities and mission; this classification can confuse those who consider all Navy ships simply as warships. This paper will examine the naming conventions of these platforms’ types based on their capabilities. Finally, the paper will explain why projects are undertaken to make changes in the types of platforms.

¹ Department of National Defence, Canadian Armed Forces, Royal Canadian Navy. *Canada in a New Maritime World, Leadmark 2020*, 44

² Canadian Armed Forces, Royal Canadian Navy, *Strategic Plan 2017-2022*, Ottawa, 2017.

³ Department of Foreign Affairs, International Relations, (Ottawa: Department of Foreign Affairs, 2018) at http://international.gc.ca/world-monde/international_relations-relations_internationales/partnerships_organizations-partenariats_organisations.aspx?lang=eng

DISCUSSION

4. Most people associate the term Warship only with their national navies, and for this reason is necessary to clarify that these units are only part of a state's national fleet. This units nevertheless fall under the classification of Naval Ships. It should be noted that the classification of the Naval Ship includes military ships with special characteristics not present in civilian ships as well as civilian type vessels employed by the state for military ends such as to sporadically transfer war material for example. To comply with the various roles⁴ that have been established for the RCN it requires the use of vessels with different characteristics that complement each other to achieve his mission. In the next paragraphs, each type of ship will be discussed in detail.

Vessel Types

5. Naval Ship. Is a military ship used by the Armed Forces of a state⁵. its design allow it to resist damage received during naval combat. Naval ships are classified into two types, Warships or Auxiliary Ships according to their main task.

6. Warship. Is a Naval Ship designed specifically for Naval Warfare⁶. They are platforms for weapons systems and can face direct combat with other military units below, on or above the surface of the water. Example of these types are: Battleships, Cruisers, Frigates, Submarines. They are classified into types and classes.

7. Auxiliary Ship. In the Dictionary of Naval terms, Debora Cutler defines an auxiliary ship as Naval Ship designed to operate in support of Warships or the development of other naval operations⁷. Its fighting capacity is limited to self-defence, so they are not considered combatants ships. In the same way, they are classified into types and classes. Examples of these are: Replenishment, Transport, Repair, Research and Harbor Ships, just to mention some.

8. Ship Type. Lloyds Register Group, the international standard for maritime vessel register, describes ship type as being the operational role for which the ship was designed⁸. Examples Include: Aircraft Carrier, Cruiser, Destroyer, Frigate, Corvette, Amphibious Attack Ship, Landing Craft, Minelayer, Minehunter, Patrol Ship, Offshore Patrol Vessel, etc. This definition is regularly interpreted as the primary classification of naval ships.

⁴ Department of National Defence, Canadian Armed Forces, Royal Canadian Navy. *Canada in a New Maritime World, Leadmark 2020*, 99.

⁵ Cutler, Deborah W, Cutler, Thomas J. *Dictionary of Naval Terms* 6th Ed. 2005, Naval Institute Press. Annapolis, Maryland

⁶ Cutler, Thomas J. *The Citizen's Guide to the U.S. Navy*, Naval Institute Press. Annapolis, Maryland, 2012, 233.

⁷ *Ibid*, 16.

⁸ Lloyd's Register Group Limited. *Rules and Regulations for the Classification of Naval Ships*. London, 2018, 23.

9. Ship Classes. The Office of Naval Operations of the United States Navy provides a clear definition of ship classes. It defines a group of ships of similar design⁹; when there is significant variation between vessels it is said that the vessels belong to different class. It is common practice in the world's Navy's to name the class with the name of the first commissioned ship of that design. Example of this are: Canadian Multirole Patrol Frigate (Type) Halifax (Class), and British Multirole Frigate Type 23 (Type) Norfolk (Class).

10. Capital Ship. This classification of ship serves to define or identify the most important warship in the fleet; it is generally the largest ship. There is no defined criterion for this classification. Nevertheless, William S. Lind in *America Can Win*, defines the characteristics of a capital ship as follows: "if the capital ship is beaten, the navy is beaten. But if the rest of the navy is beaten, the capital ship can still operate."¹⁰ Until the year 1942, the battleships were considered as capital ships, but the aircraft carrier took its place during the Second World War. Later during the Cold War, the nuclear submarine was also considered within this category¹¹.

Clarification of the Operational and Legal Difference of Warships.

11. The operational concepts of Naval Ships and Warships are clearly different, but not when dealing with the legal issue of maritime law. According to the Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) a warship is considered as follows.

"Warship means a ship belonging to the Armed Forces of a State bearing the external marks distinguishing such ships of its nationality, under the command of an officer duly commissioned by the Government of the State and whose name appears in the appropriate service list or its equivalent, and manned by a crew which is under regular armed forces discipline"¹²

12. It is clear that international law does not distinguish between types and classes, and quite possible in the legal sence for an auxiliary vessel to be designated a warship even though it does not have offensive weapons or capabilities.

⁹ United States Navy Department, Office of Naval Operations. *Standard Nomenclature for Naval Vessels: General Order No. 541*, 1920.

¹⁰ Gary Hart with William S. Lind *America Can Win: The Case for Military Reform*, Bethesda, Md. Adler & Adler, 1986,

¹¹ Keegan, Jhon, *The Prince of Admiralty*, New York, Viking, 1989. 276.

¹² United Nations. *Convention of the law of the seas, Part II, Subsection C. 35*. 1994

Warships in the RCN.

13. The definition of Warship granted by the UNCLOS has been adopted by the RCN, such that all its commissioned ships acquire the same legal status and are considered Warships, however, an internal classification has been created to differentiate the units according to their fighting capabilities, so RCN call this ships combatant in this way.¹³

- a) Major. A Major Combatant is designed for combat, able to defend itself against threats in all three naval warfare dimensions (air / surface / subsurface);
- b) Minor. A Minor Combatant is designed for a specific naval warfare function, such as mine-countermeasures, but which it is not capable of full spectrum combat operations against an adversary's naval forces, and
- c) Non-. A Non-Combatant has a combat support role, such as underway replenishment but depends on an escorting force.

14. Incorporating its internal classification, the units of RCN have been classified by type as follows¹⁴.

- a) Major Combatants. Long Range Patrol Submarines, Multi-role Frigates;
- b) Minor Combatants. Maritime Coastal Defense Vessels, Arctic and Offshore Patrol Vessel;
- c) Non-Combatants. Auxiliary Support Ships.

Main Functions of the RCN Units.

15. To comply with the assigned mission, the RCN assigns specific functions to its units, in such a way so that it can constitute blocks of that support required by the three operating lines of diplomacy, constabulary and military. These blocks are employed in the maritime areas under Canadian jurisdiction, allowing Canada to successfully achieve its maritime security and defence commitments. It is important to consider that the missions are based on the three main roles of the RCN¹⁵:

- a) Diplomatic role. Supporting the foreign policy of Canada in crisis management applying naval diplomacy;
- b) Constabulary role. Enforcing the law and maintaining sovereignty in national waters; and

¹³ Department of National Defence, Canadian Armed Forces, Royal Canadian Navy. *Canada in a New Maritime World, Leadmark 2050*, 71.

¹⁴ Department of National Defence, Canadian Armed Forces, Royal Canadian Navy. *The Fleet*. <http://www.navy-marine.forces.gc.ca/en/fleet-units/frigates-home.page>.

¹⁵ Department of National Defence, Canadian Armed Forces, Royal Canadian Navy. *Leadmark: The Navy's Strategy for 2020*, 99

- c) Military role. Defending the interests of the nation and supporting to the allied countries in the agreed security commitments by the projection of the national maritime power.

16. The RCN fleet is organized to support three lines of operations: Maintain domestic security operations, provide support in the commitments with international organizations or allied countries, and keep a task force in a state of readiness, to comply with it occupies the following units ¹⁶.

- d) Patrol Frigates. Considered the backbone of the RCN, these surface combatant ships were designed for anti-submarine warfare and anti-air warfare, mainly in the open sea, but at present, the threats in the maritime environment have changed, and have moved to coastal areas resulting in new challenges for the RCN ship's crew, sensors and weapon systems.
- a) Longe Range Patrol Submarines. Submarines are weapons of strategic deterrence whose presence can alter an adversary's decision making across an entire maritime theater of operations. They are the RCN's ultimate warfighting capability and are suitable not only for naval combat but also for surveillance and patrol missions at home and abroad.
- b) Maritime Coastal Defense Vessels. These ships are equipped and armed for the domestic coastal surveillance, sovereignty patrols and mine countermeasures roles. In particular they provide a remarkable support to the hemispheric anti-drug effort and North American the maritime security, and
- c) Support ships. These units provide a fundamental component of support to a Naval Task Group. These vessels allow the forward deployment of other units around the world and provide logistical support to operations for prolonged periods of time. In addition to supporting combat operations, they can conduct a wide range of peace support operations and humanitarian relief.

RCN Fleet Update.

17. The challenge for updating the RCN fleet do not only imply acquiring new surface units, but the process also requires a complex understanding of the skills and competencies, strategic and tactical requirements required, as well as adequate support for of personnel in the employment of the naval systems of new units. All this requires careful planning, coordination and sequential execution. Another point to take into consideration is the changing security environment at the regional and global level, as well as the new threats currently presented by technological advances, which complicates long-term investment in a specific platform.

¹⁶ Department of National Defence, Canadian Armed Forces, Royal Canadian Navy. *Canada in a New Maritime World, Leadmark 2050*, 39.

18. Currently the patrol frigates, that are the backbone of the RCN fleet, are suffering from limitations due to the appearance of unexpected new threats in the theater of operations. These threats range from the application of newly developed attack tactics and increased operational speed, up to the arrival of new weapons with advanced technology that surpass the capabilities of the sensors currently installed on-board ships. This has created the need to project for the near future a new class of ship, which can replace the capabilities of the current surface combatants. The transition to the Canadian Surface Combatant (CSC) will represent a major step forward in the concept of naval warfare and will be in keeping with Canada's defense policy and the vision of staying strong at Home, Secure in North America and Engaged in the world¹⁷. To fulfill these promises, the project for the CSC must be capable of undertaking a wide range of roles from high-intensity conflicts including anti-submarine, anti-surface warfare and area-air defence, along to the ability to aid in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) operations. Given the new security circumstances that are developing globally, the CSC must be able to respond to new challenges and deploy independently to defend the sovereignty of Canada and have technological features that allow it to interoperate with allied navies.

CONCLUSION

19. The mission of the RCN is to deliver combat-effective naval forces that support Canadian interests at home and abroad. To achieve this the RCN must maintain excellence at sea. Excelling in this core competency will enable the RCN to provide the nation with the required first response capability of an agile and deployable fleet of ships, submarines and support units. The understanding of the mission and the means that support it, are of key importance for the continuous development and updating of the units of the RCN. . for this reason it is extremely important that all those involved in the decision-making processes at both the diplomatic and political levels, considering the economic, operational and tactical environment at hand, know the different characteristics and functions that naval units are expected to execute.

20. It is essential to maintain a continuous program of updating the various units that make up the RCN fleet. This is essential to fully comply with the mandates that the nation, through its defense policy, confers on it. For this, any improvement in naval systems must be carefully carried out and supervised, to avoid falling into the pitfalls of excesses or neglecting aspects of relevance that support the foreign policy of Canada.

RECOMMENDATION

21. To achieve a general understanding of the key concepts of the naval environment, it is necessary to establish these definitions permanently in the various publications of the DND and the CAF. Of equal importance is that these concepts should not be held exclusive to the RCN.

¹⁷ Canadian Armed Forces, Royal Canadian Navy, *Strategic Plan 2017-2022*, Ottawa, 2017, 12.

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