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## DOES THE RCN HAVE PERSONNEL VULNERABILITIES?

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### JCSP 47

#### Service Paper

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### PCEMI 47

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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE - COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES

JCSP 47 - PCEMI 47

2020 - 2021

SERVICE PAPER – ÉTUDE MILITAIRE

**DOES THE RCN HAVE PERSONNEL VULNERABILITIES?**

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Word Count: 2,697

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Nombre de mots : 2.697

## **DOES THE RCN HAVE PERSONNEL VULNERABILITIES?**

### **AIM**

1. The aim of the service paper is to identify the personnel shortages in the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) and the vulnerabilities that exist due to systemic challenges of recruiting and retention. Information presented herein relies heavily on previous audits and current statistics; however further study will be required as new recruiting and retention strategies evolve and change the personnel landscape in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF).

### **INTRODUCTION**

2. Shortages in personnel have plagued the RCN for decades and stabilization remains elusive to this day. While recent and significant changes have been made to past recruiting and retention strategies, the RCN is suffering from shortages in two of its thirteen managed occupations.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for these gaps are numerous and the details of which are not the intent of this paper; however, it should be acknowledged that history has shown that achieving a balanced workforce is extremely difficult, but also not impossible. Campaigns such as OP CONNECTION rebalanced the RCN workforce, but gains were short-lived and recruiting has since waned. Despite these shortfalls, the RCN continues to make headway and deliver operational effect, though at a cost.

3. Previous audits on recruiting and retention have demonstrated that overall, recruiting has not achieved the intake of recruits necessary to meet the needs of the RCN.<sup>2</sup> The manning shortfalls of the past and present have set the stage for today's

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<sup>1</sup> Department of National Defence, Director Naval Personnel, *RCN Managed Workforce Health: Current TES vs Positions* (Ottawa: Command Analytics Support Centre), 01 Jan 21, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Auditor General of Canada, *Report 5, Canadian Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention - National Defence, of the Fall 2016 Reports of the Auditor General of Canada* (Canada. Parliament. Committee

challenges, raising concern on the RCN's ability to endure future challenges and mandates. Modest attrition and continual growth have exacerbated insufficient recruiting, creating pressure for the navy to remain, 'Ready Aye Ready.'

4. This paper will discuss the challenging space that exists for RCN-managed occupations and how personnel shortages have affected the service's vulnerability. Each factor associated with these instabilities provides further insight into the systemic personnel problem and provides a backdrop to potential solutions.

## DISCUSSION

5. As introduced, the manning dilemma means that there are too few people in the RCN to support the number of existing jobs. At the time this paper was written, the RCN Regular Force (RegF) establishment, or Trained Effective Establishment (TEE) for at sea and ashore positions was 7 527.<sup>3</sup> The Trained Effective Strength (TES), or the number of trained, employable sailors is 6 581, a delta of 946 personnel in the workforce.<sup>4</sup> Expressed as a ratio, the TEE and TES provide a simplistic analysis of the overall health of an occupation, or combination of occupations. Overall, the RCN occupational health is 87.4%.<sup>5</sup> An occupation that is above 95% is considered healthy and balanced, while occupations below that level require varying degrees of attention. Of the 13 RCN managed occupations, only two are above 95%, while six others are below 90%.<sup>6</sup> These six, 'stressed' occupations are of particular concern as these personnel gaps affect the RCN's capacity to perform mandated duties.<sup>7</sup>

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Reports, 2017), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Department of National Defence, Director Naval Personnel, *RCN Managed Workforce Health...*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Department of National Defence, Director Naval Personnel, *RCN Managed Workforce Health...*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Auditor General of Canada, *Report 5...*, 10.

6. For every position that is not being filled, there is a shortcoming that needs to be managed. The greater the number of these vacancies, the greater the stress on the management of personnel within the organization. For occupations such as the Naval Communicator (NAV COMM), whose occupational health is 77.1%, or a vacancy of 168 sailors, the impact is significant and enduring.<sup>8</sup> This has caused the RCN to prioritize positions based on balancing the needs of Force Employment (FE) while sustaining Force Generating (FG) and other capabilities.<sup>9</sup> While this directive assists the positions that have been designated as high priority, many positions that could be argued as ‘must fills’ remain vacant. Therein lies another layer to this complex issue, in that priorities are not shared equally among the CAF, but this will not be addressed in this paper. The RCN must creatively manage the personnel gap, while aggressively restoring occupational health in order to perform its mandated duties.

7. These personnel shortages plaguing the RCN is putting additional strain on its serving members. Nearly half (6 of 13) of RCN occupations are ‘stressed’ and have been so for several years. While prioritization at the career manager level mitigates some of these stresses, it is up to the lacking organization to creatively manage the gaps. This often results in the division of work among unit members. Either all, or in part, the tasks are distributed among the ranks such that capabilities are not fully lost to the manning vacancies. Managing the distribution in work can be difficult for supervisors, and it creates additional burden on those members left to fill the void.

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<sup>8</sup> Department of National Defence, Director Naval Personnel, *RCN Managed Workforce Health...*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Department of National Defence, *Royal Canadian Navy Crewing Priorities - 2020 Through 2022* (National Defence Headquarters: file 3371-5320-1 (MCE STRAT)), 31 Jan 20, 1.

8. The ongoing pandemic has also had a substantial impact on the processing of new members, despite the relative increase in recruiting last year. Restrictions on the number of members available to train at any given time has limited the number of qualified members graduating, which has impacted throughput throughout the fleet. Additionally, the already stressed occupations are challenged with providing additional instructors needed to increase throughput. This puts additional stress on an already sparsely populated organization, necessitating a reorganization of personnel in order to provide staff to relieve training bottlenecks.

9. For seagoing personnel, ‘pier head jumping’ is common, which sees one individual come back from sea and ‘jump’ from one pier to the next, embarking on a departing ship that does not have the necessary expertise onboard. A 2018 study on retention in the RCN notes that many sailors believe the same individuals are constantly sailing and that many are ‘hand-picked’ to sail more than others.<sup>10</sup> There is a perception that some sailors exaggerate medical issues to avoid sailing and high tempo operations.<sup>11</sup> While the RCN has highly capable and determined sailors, even the best sailors can become overworked and weary, adding to the manning problem. Ongoing inability to satisfy intake requirements is increasing the potential “burn-out” of sailors, which can influence an occupation's ability to deliver “excellence at-sea”.<sup>12</sup>

10. The RCN has recently adopted a policy whereby any member exceeding a specific time away from home port will be interviewed by their chain of command

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<sup>10</sup> Joanna Anderson, Erin Wing, and Inez Dekker, Defence Research and Development Canada Scientific Report DRDC-RDDC-2018-R307. *Retention and Attrition in the Hard Sea Occupations*, (Defence Research and Development Canada, 2018), 24.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>12</sup> Department of National Defence, *Action Items: RCN Annual Military Occupation Review 27-28 November 2018* (National Defence Headquarters: file 3371-1180-1), January 19, 2.

followed by a recommendation to their respective Formation Commander.<sup>13</sup> This approach provides a personnel tempo measure that acknowledges and attempts to mitigate the strain on personnel; however, the underlying issue of insufficient staffing remains poignant.

11. Similarly, being overworked combined with the uncertainty of sailing schedules has had an impact on the mental health of sailors. Significant research has been done on the “psychological importance of certainty and control in a person’s life” and frequent sailing is a stress that can cause adverse physical and mental effects.<sup>14</sup> Sailors require certainty in their sailing schedules such that they can balance their work and life requirements and remain effective in the forces. Filling the personnel gaps must be carefully managed as the risk of mental health issues will only serve to exacerbate the manning dilemma.

12. Understaffing challenges have many consequences to those left to fill the void in capability, and in some cases leads to sailors no longer wishing to serve in the RCN. The institution is relatively small in number when compared to other navies, and the loss of a single sailor, at any rank, will have an impact on capability. While forecasted attrition is accounted for in modelling intake requirements, it is only an estimate. Any unplanned or unexpected losses will have a lasting impact until a replacement is generated, particularly at the senior ranks.

13. Given the current TES of 6 581, and an average historical attrition of 7.1%<sup>15</sup> the RCN loses approximately 467 sailors each year. The reasons for attrition are numerous,

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<sup>13</sup> Department of National Defence, *NAVGEN 017/19, RCN Personnel Tempo* (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2019), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Anderson, *Retention and Attrition in the Hard Sea Occupations...*, 68.

<sup>15</sup> Michelle Straver, email with author, 2 February 2021.



including the exhaustion discussed previously; however that is not the focus of this paper. What remains critical for the navy is that recruiting exceeds attrition, especially in the many occupations that need to recover their occupational health. During the fall 2020 Annual Military Occupation Review (AMOR), data dating back to 2015/16 revealed that attrition in the Sonar Operator (SONAR OP) occupation exceeded intake for four consecutive years.<sup>16</sup> The intake has since increased above the number of annual releases, but the gap has been created nonetheless and it will take years to recover. The gap in strength has increased the criticality of retention in the RCN as organizations are challenged to fill the voids.

14. While the future force structure accounts for attrition, including those reaching retirement age, the RCN must carefully balance the future force flow of its trained members against its recruiting campaign. Past recruiting failures has resulted in less personnel entering the workforce and thus pressure on those serving to fill the capability gaps continues to mount. A 2018 poll conducted by DRDC revealed that 49% of sailors were unsatisfied with their workload and pace of work<sup>17</sup> and 12.3% of releases were attributed to personnel tempo.<sup>18</sup> While this is only a small sample from sea-going sailors, excessive workloads is clearly a dissatisfier and is known to cause personnel to leave. In addition to attrition related to workloads for serving members, losing members at the beginning of their service due to work expectations, person-job fit, and training is particularly high in the RCN and needs to be addressed.<sup>19</sup> Significant effort has been

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<sup>16</sup> Carlos Esquivel, "Sonar Operator: 2020/2021 AMOR," Ottawa, ON, 17 November 2020, with permission.

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, *Retention and Attrition in the Hard Sea Occupations* ..., 99.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 59

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 54

dedicated to retention issues in the RCN as the experience and skills of those serving are critical in maintaining an effective force. Intake demands must be met in order to balance the workforce and relieve capability pressures; however, in some occupations, this demand will take over a decade.

15. A significant impact on the manning challenge involves the creation of positions, particularly positions that are created with relatively short notice and have not been accounted for in the intake planning process. Establishment increases long into the future are accounted for in the process; however, given the increasing delta in personnel strength, the RCN's ability to generate to the growing establishment is becoming increasingly difficult.

16. In Canada's latest defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, the CAF intends to increase the establishment by 3 500 members<sup>20</sup> in order to achieve the long-term ambitions for the military. For the RCN, there will be an increase in the establishment by approximately 600 personnel, which has been incorporated into the intake planning tool used to determine intake requirements each year.<sup>21</sup> The creation of positions is particularly challenging in the near term, especially given increases in the senior level footprint. In 2018, the RCN increased its NATO footprint by seven, all of which are senior ranking members.<sup>22</sup> Any increase in positions at the senior rank are of particular concern given the time it takes to generate the skills and experience needed at that level.

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<sup>20</sup> Canada. Department of National Defence, *Strong, Secure, Engaged - Canada's Defence Policy*, 2017, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Department of National Defence, *Promulgation of the Record of Discussion: RCN Annual Military Occupation Review 2020* (National Defence Headquarters: file 3371-5555-1), 25 Jan 21, Annex A.

<sup>22</sup> Jason Aitken, email with author, 24 January 2021.

17. In the current manning state of the RCN, the creation of these high priority positions typically results in another position becoming vacant, perpetuating the cycle of filling critical gaps by others in the unit. In some cases, the positions are repurposed and simply displaced to another organization. In cases where personnel gaps are too significant to cover the duties of others, the position is left vacant and the capability lost.

18. The RCN has embarked on several Occupation Analyses (OA), which serve to modernize the employment structure of each occupation being studied. Preliminary discussions suggest that an increase in the establishment will be necessary for the proposed plans to be fully effective. The Clearance Divers (CL DVR) occupation, which is nearing implementation of its study, intends on increasing its establishment by 26.5%. This substantial increase will require close management by the RCN such that the personnel are generated around the same time the position becomes established. Given the desire for higher ranking positions, ideal timings do not often align. These intended establishment increases exacerbate the gap in the TEE and TES and the RCN is at risk of not producing enough trained personnel to meet its mandate.

19. As previously indicated, a consequence of inadequate manning is that demanding positions need to be filled at the expense of other, lower prioritized positions. For gaps at the next rank level, promotions appear to be the simplest solution. Although this does assist in shortages at the next rank, experience levels can be prematurely cut short, creating a new set of challenges later in one's career. Indeed, high performers should be rewarded, and that can come in the form of promotion, however caution needs to be exercised on what constitutes sufficient experience.

20. In 2016, a Naval Personnel Instruction on Experience Qualifications introduced a minimum experience level requirement that was issued for the purposes of succession planning and career management, and it included a waiver for those that did not receive the minimum standard. It also included a fast-track option for individuals showing great potential for advancement, despite not having experience levels that were in many cases, significantly greater for their predecessors in previous years. For Naval Warfare Officers (NWO), two director level tours, consisting of hundreds of sea days and multiple years at sea, was common before any sailor was considered for advancement. Today, some sailors progress to the next career milestone with approximately 80 sea days and after a year as a director.<sup>23</sup> Force flow models have necessitated the use of these minimum requirements in order to fill the gaps at higher ranks, which is a risk for the institution and the member.

21. Additional consideration needs to be given to those that are fast tracked and achieve senior ranks, too early. While this is potentially great for the individual, its impact on force flow is significant and can create a bottleneck for the progression of others. People only get promoted if a position is available at the next rank, which if not managed correctly, could delay future promotions for multiple years.

22. Lastly, the fall AMORs predicted that there are approximately 250 sailors older than 55 years of age and that roughly 1 000 members are beyond 25 years of service.<sup>24</sup> This is a significant data point given personnel strength deltas and the constant increase in the establishment that has already exposed the fragility of the force structure. While

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<sup>23</sup> Department of National Defence, *NPI 13, Experience Qualifications* (Ottawa: DND Canada, 2019), Annex A.

<sup>24</sup> Department of National Defence, *Promulgation of the Record of Discussion...*, Annex A.

longevity in the service is never certain after a member becomes eligible for retirement, the RCN could find itself in an even more dire manning situation.

## **CONCLUSION**

23. The RCN is clearly challenged with personnel shortages that have endured for years, and will continue to affect navy vulnerability for years to come. There are not enough personnel to do the jobs that currently exist, yet those jobs need to be fulfilled. As a result, members are overworked and ad hoc personnel management, which among other factors, amplifies the criticality of retention. The steady increase in the number of positions being created further challenges the RCN's ability to achieve personnel target objectives, while lower than desirable experience levels are exposing potential issues in senior appointments.

24. The inability to generate sufficient sailors to relieve the pressures put upon those serving is not without consequence and there is great risk if continued. While there are mitigating measures to relieve the numerous voids in the organization, pressure for positive change continues to mount. In order to reverse the helm and restore occupation balance, the RCN must meet its intake targets, ensure its sailors have a balanced workload with appropriate experience, and efforts focused to reduce attrition. While recruiting and retention strategies look promising, the RCN must ensure occupational health is not only restored, but also maintained.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

25. It is recommended that the RCN reduce its operational tempo until such time that its long-term commitments can be satisfied. This would include a temporary reduction of at-sea commitments and a rebalancing of staff to support FG and training opportunities alongside. Bottlenecks in the training system would be relieved and schools would be better positioned to manage the high flowthrough of expected enrollees.

26. A reduction in tempo would also include a revision and reduction in tasks and positions, and where applicable in the shore establishment, a reallocation of tasks to a contracted agency. Vacancies ashore, especially at the middle management rank, can be alleviated by a civilian workforce both short and long term.

27. Though there are significant short-term efficiencies gained by this recommendation, there is also the opportunity to make lasting, long term changes that will benefit the future establishment and health of the organization. Indeed, the ongoing OAs intend to modernize RCN occupations and reconcile many legacy positions and tasks. In the end, the navy will be better positioned for an enduring, capable workforce, well into the future.

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