

Oral History, Replenishment Ships, & Canadian Identity

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Oral history interviews provide personal vignettes into the past that hold broader historical narratives accountable to the lived experience of individuals. The two Veterans Oral History interviews I performed with Commodore Douglas McClean and Captain Richard Town, as well the interviews of Kenneth Scotten I studied, all regarding the roles of the three Auxiliary Oiler Replenishers (AORs)—*HMCS Provider*, *HMCS Protecteur*, and *HMCS Preserver*—in the Canadian Royal Navy (RCN), confirm this phenomenon.¹ Specifically, these interviews about their experiences in command of AOR's reveal vital details about the integration of women into the navy, the relationship between Canadian media, the Canadian public, and AORs, and Canadian identity more broadly. These crucial aspects add to, are in conflict with, or are not discussed in the Canadian Naval History literature available to date. Throughout this paper, I compare and contrast the results of these three interviews with samples of relevant history to underscore the value of oral history in forming a more cohesive understanding of the past.

Women in the Navy

There is lack of rigorous scholarship on women's integration into the Canadian navy. For instance, in his well-respected work on the history of the Canadian Navy *The Sea is at Our Gates: A History of the Canadian Navy*, Tony German barely addresses the role of women. In the same, brief section as he discusses the history of the "Wrens" (a nickname given to women who were part of the Women's Royal Naval Service), German discusses how sailors "naturally" look for girls when their ship docked after long,

¹ The AORs are also sometimes called Operation Support Ships (OSS) or "tankers," in more casual parlance. J. H. W. Knox, "An Engineer's Outline of RCN History: Part II," in *The RCN in Retrospect, 1910-1968*, edited by James A. Boutilier, 317-33 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1982), 330.

“womanless” periods of time.² He also qualifies the reasons why the Wrens joined the navy by calling them “an adventurous lot,” without ascribing specific character traits to explain why men would join the navy.³ Furthermore, German argues that “a more enlightened or realistic outlook would have produced more Wrens earlier—it would have done a lot for shoreside efficiency and for morale.”⁴ German’s work is a sample of the sexism women faced as they sought to join the navy because his argument for the integration of women into the navy is tied to how it would affect the productivity, comfort, and morale of men, rather than promoting equal-employment opportunity.⁵ He served in the RCN during World War II so his perspective reflects his experience in the navy.⁶ Although his book was published a year after women were officially integrated into the company of all ships (in 1989 under Canada’s *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*), and so perhaps did not have the opportunity to present much data, it nevertheless reveals the sexist social climate that women faced as this process unfolded.⁷

In contrast, Commodore McClean and Captain Richard Town provide a much richer account of how the integration of women unfolded in their experience. When Commodore McClean was made captain of *Protecteur* in June of 1990 in Halifax,

² Tony German, *The Sea is at Our Gates: A History of the Canadian Navy* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1990), 189-91.

³ *Ibid.*, 304.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁵ Of course, opinions on women in the navy were not monolithic; as early as 1983, Ruth Roach Pierson linked women’s uneven access to the armed forces in Canada to how the “[p]atriarchy has survived the industrialization of western society.” For Pierson, “women as a group have remained subordinate to men as a group.... The enforced economic dependence of many women on male providers has contributed greatly to the perpetuation of that power difference and the survival of the patriarchy.” As common as German’s perspective might have been at that time, Pierson’s work represents the already emerging criticisms and awareness of the existence of patriarchal-disposition in the armed forces that the Canadian government would soon work to ameliorate. Ruth Roach Pierson, *They're Still Women After all: The Second World War and Canadian Womanhood* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986), 13.

⁶ *Times Colonist*, “A. B. C. (Tony) German: Obituary,” July 15, 2011.

⁷ Tony German, *The Sea is at Our Gates: A History of the Canadian Navy*, 304. Please note that women were not incorporated into the crews of submarines.

women had been part of the crew for almost a year because the RCN had started to integrate women into AORs in 1987 as these ships had more space in which to build private accommodation for women.⁸ Although he worried about how to keep women safe, as it was his first time commanding a mixed-gender crew, he conveyed, “it turned out it was not the problem I thought it might be,” because “they were well integrated into the ship’s company, and I think what made it successful was that there women at almost every rank level.”⁹ Commodore McClean shared how he advised his daughters to “at least consider joining the military because we are *the* equal-opportunity employer,” indicating his confidence in the armed forces’ commitment.¹⁰

Captain Richard Town echoed a similar sentiment regarding his experience commanding the destroyer *HMCS Annapolis* when women were integrated into the crew in 1992 under his command. He described how since women were scattered on board, each petty officer had an ongoing commitment to the women in their department.¹¹ Captain Town estimated that the 30-35 women in *Annapolis*’ crew of about 275 was the “minimum necessary [number] to have everyone grapple with” the integration.¹² In contrast with German’s emphasis on how the integration of women would affect the crew’s men, both captains were more concerned with safety and careers of the women in their crews.

Both Captains had to wrestle with gender specific issues. At the recommendation of Vice Admiral Chuck Thomas, *Protecteur* was chosen to be sent to the Gulf War after

⁸ Ibid; Commodore Douglas McClean, interviewed by Mariana Gallegos Dupuis, March 16 2017, Victoria, 15:26. Commodore McClean estimated that there were 55 women in a crew of about 275. Ibid

⁹ Commodore McClean, 16:30.

¹⁰ Commodore McClean, 19:40.

¹¹ Captain Richard Town, interviewed by Mariana Gallegos Dupuis, March 18 2017, Victoria, 8:50.

¹² Captain Town, 11:10.

Iraq invaded Kuwait on the night of August 1 1990.¹³ Although the American and British navies had removed women on board ships before sending the ship to war, McClean chose to keep the women in the crew, making the *Protecteur* the only ship in the Gulf War with a mixed-gender crew. As a result, he received “goofy questions” over the radio from allied ships and from the media: “how’s it going with the women; are they scared?” Yet, in the three years he commanded *Protecteur*, women on board was a “non-issue.”¹⁴ When the media approached him with these types of questions, Commodore McClean instructed them to talk to the women on board directly. He recalled one circumstance in which the press interviewed a single mom who was a cook, asking, “Geez what is it like to leave your kids behind?” McClean remembers her responding, “this is my job. I joined the navy, this is my job.”¹⁵ This testimony reflects the broader societal expectations women faced as they challenged gender norms by joining the navy even if the command structure was committed to equal-employment opportunities.

While in command of *Annapolis* in the early 1990s, Captain Town had to preside over a sexual assault case charged under the *National Defense Act*. He remembers how the effect of the trial was “pretty significant” as it sent a clear message to the women on board that “they had an entitlement to a fair and even approach for how they were dealt with, and that discipline would be upheld for those who transgressed outside the boundaries of what was acceptable conduct. Both then and now.”¹⁶ Captain Town’s account of the positive sentiment felt on board after the trial is not something that is

¹³ Duncan (Dusty) E. Miller, and Sharon Hobson, *The Persian Excursion: the Canadian Navy in the Gulf War* (Toronto: Canadian Peacekeeping Press, 1995), 1; Marc Milner, *Canada’s Navy: the First Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 296. The other two Canadian ships chosen for war were *HMCS Terra Nova* (a Restigouche class destroyer) and the *HMCS Athabaskan* (an Iroquois class destroyer); Milner, *Canada’s Navy: the First Century*, 296.

¹⁴ Commodore McClean, 18:15.

¹⁵ Commodore McClean, 20:00-21:33.

¹⁶ Captain Town, 17:00-17:28.

readily available on the pages of Canadian Naval History; the details of these lived experiences outstretch the scope of the history written at the time as seen in German's work.

Furthermore, Captain Town told me about situation in which he his crew relied on the strength of the women on board to deal with a tragedy. Captain Town was in command of *Preserver* as it led a "search and recovery mission" of the 229 passengers and crewmembers that died after Swissair Flight 111 crashed off of Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia on September 2nd 1998, the largest maritime disaster of Canadian history.¹⁷ I asked him if there was a difference in how the two genders dealt with the tragedy: "Certainly," he responded, "the women coped with it a lot better than what the men did," in general terms.¹⁸ In their interviews, both Commodore McClean and Captain Town reveal the complexity of the issues women faced as they joined a ship's company in these crucial first years of the integration. Again, these detailed observations of a commanding officer are a powerful counter-weight to the out-dated opinions that string together German's brief narrative of the role of women in the navy.

The Relationship between the Canadian Media, the Canadian Public, and AORs

In each of their interviews, Commodore McClean, Captain Town and Captain Scotten discuss the role of the media in communicating with the Canadian public as they each commanded one of the three AORs—*Protecteur*, *Preserver*, and *Provider* respectively. In this section of my paper I untangle this relationship as expressed in each of the interviews in contrast with the literature on the subject when it is available.

¹⁷ Captain Town, 57:00.

¹⁸ Captain Town, 1:32:00.

In his book *The Persian Excursion: the Canadian Navy in the Gulf War*, Captain “Dusty” Miller, who was one of the Canadian captains during the war and later became the commander of the Canadian task force, argues that the *Globe and Mail* deliberately chose not to cover Canadian involvement in the Gulf War, and labeled the Canadian contribution as “irrelevant.”¹⁹ Although the excitement of the American battleship missiles firing did not necessarily compare to Canada’s delivery of supplies and ensuring the observance of sanctions, Canadian involvement was just as crucial. According to Captain Miller, the lack of media attention lead to a disconnect between how Canadians on the front lines and other nations involved in the crisis directly were aware of the vital Canadian involvement and how the home-front was underexposed to the success of the navy.

Yet, Commodore McClean’s testimony regarding the Canadian public support for the RCN, and the role of the media during the Gulf War is very different: he estimates that about 100, 000 people turned out in Halifax harbour to say goodbye on August 24, 1990.²⁰ McClean remembers this moment as “quite an eye-opener,” “the beginning of the rebirth of interest in the Canadian Armed forces,” “the first recognition I had ever received,” “mind-boggling.”²¹ Canadian public support continued during the war. Since *Protecteur* received thousands and thousands of schoolchildren’s letters, McClean asked the ships’ company to grab a letter every time they passed by the letterbox placed in one of *Protecteur*’s main passage ways and write back so that each child would receive an answer. The Canadian task force also received enough Dominoes pizza for a thousand

¹⁹ Duncan (Dusty) E. Miller, and Sharon Hobson, *The Persian Excursion: the Canadian Navy in the Gulf War*, 211-12.

²⁰ This citation is for the date: Marc Milner, *Canada’s Navy: the First Century*, 192; Commodore McClean, 1: 38: 00.

²¹ Commodore McClean, 1: 38: 55.

people, and in December, three real Christmas wreaths (each 10 ft across) for each of the Canadian vessels.²² Lastly, after a local Halifax TV station interviewed a sailor eating Dominoes pizza on the deck, asking “what could ever top that?,” the sailor responded, “somebody could send us lobsters”; soon after, a thousand lobsters arrived from Nova Scotia.²³ Commodore McClean’s memories contrast greatly with Miller’s argument that “the Canadian public was generally unaware of the vital role the navy was playing in the Gulf.”²⁴ This discrepancy underscores the value of oral history, which allows a more cohesive picture of the past to develop with the accumulation of different perspectives.

Captain Town also appreciated the manner in which the Canadian media covered the search and recovery mission of Swissair Flight 111. He contrasted the coverage of *Fox News*, the International press, to the Canadian media outlets. *Fox News* had bribed a local to take a diving crew out in the area of the crash so that they could “film body parts as they went by in the water; that was their intent.”²⁵ The RCMP had apprehended the crew of a boat that had gone into the area without Captain Town’s authority, which stretched 10 thousand feet in the air and down to the ocean floor, the RCMP Officer reminded Captain Town, “nothing moves in this area without your expressed permission; what do you want to do with them?” Captain Town responded, “Get them out of my country.”²⁶

In contrast, Captain Town describes the Canadian news outlets as “astonishingly empathetic,” as their questions reveal a “sense of community that they reflect in our

²² Commodore McClean, 1: 40: 00

²³ Commodore McClean, 1: 41: 00.

²⁴ Duncan (Dusty) E. Miller, and Sharon Hobson, *The Persian Excursion: the Canadian Navy in the Gulf War*, 201. See chapter eleven, “the Second Front—the Media” for the details of his argument, 201-212.

²⁵ Captain Town, 1: 07:00.

²⁶ Captain Town, 1: 07:50.

country” “that came through for not only the people of Halifax,” but also the next of kin of those who died in the crash.²⁷ This “empathy ended up being on full-display” because it is a “unique part of our Maritimes culture.” Yet, Captain Town posited that this sense of community and empathy “wasn’t unique to the Maritimes, it was unique to Canada,” attributing this complex observation to a visceral gut feeling he had while being interviewed by Canadian news outlets.²⁸ For instance, the International Press was “overtly obsessed” with the question of how many of the 229 individual bodies had been recovered. While Captain Town remembers that the Canadian news outlets quickly understood this was not a useful question for the families of those who had died in the crash, Captain Town had to explain to the international press that “a body count” was an unanswerable question as the search and recovery mission was recovering human remains, not bodies, from the crash site.²⁹

In his interview, Captain Kenneth Scotten also mentions the role of the Canadian media in helping to bring ninety Vietnamese refugees he had found aimlessly adrift in the South China Sea on board *Provider* and then to Manila for critical medical attention. Manila was not accepting any refugees in the 1990s, but *Provider* was already scheduled to dock there, and with five critical cases on board, the Canadian government began to negotiate with the Philippines.³⁰ Fearing that the refugees with only the most serious medical emergencies would be allowed on shore, thus separating family units and not attending everyone else who was suffering from malnutrition, dehydrations, and various medical conditions, Captain Scotten sent out a message to the Ottawa hoping to obtain

²⁷ Captain Town: 1:11:00.

²⁸ Captain Town, 1:13:00.

²⁹ Listen to Town: 1:14:00 to 1:15:30.

³⁰ Captain Kenneth Scotten, interviewed by Erin O’Brien, March 7, 2011, Victoria, 16:30-17:40.

the necessary authority to disembark every refugee.³¹ He remembers that the Canadian media, particularly *CTV*, helped a lot in bringing international attention to the issue, and thus pressuring the Philippine government into accepting the refugees. After disembarking the refugees with the most serious medical conditions—seven patients with six family relatives—the Canadian government had to guarantee behind closed doors that they would look after them if the Philippine government could not, in order for the Philippine government to allow them ashore. Yet, as “economic refugees” escaping poverty cannot claim the same status as “political refugees,” many of these families and individuals were repatriated back to Saigon.³² Once again, a Captain of an AOR enjoyed the support of the Canadian media in facing a particular challenge: Commodore McClean valued Canadian public support for his crew aboard *Protecteur* during the Gulf War as the media worked as a medium between communicating the sailors with the home-front; in command of *Preserver*, Captain Town appreciated the manner in which the Canadian new outlets covered the search and recovery mission with empathy and a the sense of community in caring for the families of those who died in the crash; reflecting Captain Scotten’s concern with not separating family units aboard *Provider*, the Canadian media assisted the Canadian government in applying pressure to accept the Vietnamese refugees.

Furthermore, contemporary Canadian media has remembered the service of the three AORS with endearment. For instance, in an article for the *Globe and Mail*, Bill Curry reports how two forty-year-old Auxiliary Oiler Replenishment (AOR) ships, the *HMCS Preserver* and the *HMCS Protecteur*, were remembered at the end of their career.

³¹ Captain Scotten, 45:45.

³² Captain Scotten, 57:00.

In 2010, these vessels were at risk of being banned from American and European ports because they did not comply with the updated international environmental standard of double-hulled vessels (as both ships are single-hulled vessels).³³ Curry reflects on how Canadian officials fear that an oil-spill might occur do to any kind of accident but also that international exemptions might soon expire, limiting the independence of the Royal Canadian Navy. These replenishment ships are crucial for defining the range of the navy's operations as they provide fuel, spare parts, food, and ammunition. Curry mentions how *Protecteur* proved itself indispensable in the Gulf War. His article reflects the concerns voiced by Captain Town and Commodore McClean of how the loss of the AORs greatly limits the reach and role of the RCN from a coastal navy, harnessed to ports during any operation, to its traditional status as a "blue water navy."

Similarly, in an article for *CTV News*, Michael MacDonald recounts the careers of *Provider*, *Preserver* and *Protecteur* as he reports on their retirement.³⁴ Former Commander Colin Darlington expressed how "having an oiler is one of the significant indications of whether Canada is just a local navy or a global navy."³⁵ Until two new ships are finished by Vancouver's Seaspan shipyard (2020 at the earliest), Canada will need to lease oilers from Spain and Chile. The tone of the article is nostalgic as it reviews the *Preserver's* record most specifically on the world stage, endearingly painting the ship's history. These two news stories demonstrate a connection between how the Captains of these ships remember the AORs and how the Canadian media depicts them to

³³ Bill Curry, "Canadian Navy's Ships Risk Being Banned from Foreign Ports," *Globe and Mail*: August 5, 2010.

³⁴ *HMCS Provider* was retired in 1998, *Protecteur* was retired in May of 2015, and *Preserver* was retired in 2016. Bill Curry, "Canadian Navy's Ships Risk Being Banned from Foreign Ports."

³⁵ Michael MacDonald, "Last of Royal Canadian Navy's Supply Ships to be Retired," *CTV News*, October 21, 2016.

the public. In contrast with Captain Miller's depiction of the disconnect between the Canadian public and the RCN due to media coverage and the nature of naval combat, *Provider, Preserver and Protecteur* remain in Canadian public memory under the influence of the media. These oral history interviews enable the enrichment of this public memory by collecting detailed accounts of life onboard these AORs since these interviews are available for posterity.

Canadian Naval Identity

Lastly, it is worth exploring more deeply the similarities and differences between available Canadian Naval Historical literature on the Gulf War and Commodore McClean's recollections, as they underscore the value of oral history. Commodore Kenneth Summers committed the ships to the central Persian Gulf to directly support the American operations; on September 14, 1990, cabinet approved this higher-profile and more dangerous role.³⁶ Summers also suggested a *Combined* Logistics Force that was based on the Canadian Task forces' command and control capabilities to support the American carrier battle groups.³⁷ Since Canada's navy possessed unique, crucial qualities for the task, Summers' proposal was readily accepted: professional expertise, familiarity with American protocols, and the crew's fluency in Italian, French, and Arabic, which allowed command to send messages already in their own language.³⁸ Yet, Richard Gimble argues that Summers' actions have never been fully appreciated because "it strikes at the essence of the Canadian perception of themselves as 'helpful fixers.'" ³⁹ In taking leadership of the Coalition's operations, Summers offered a distinctly "Canadian solution" to the perennial problems of international warfare by balancing the needs of the alliance against the designs of an individual member.⁴⁰ For the first time in Canadian history, involvement in a war was primarily naval.⁴¹ Gimble argues that this moment in history gave sustenance to the definition of a Canadian naval identity.⁴²

³⁶ Marc Milner, *Canada's Navy: the First Century*, 296-8.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid, 298-9.

³⁹ Richard H. Gimble, "MIF or MNF? The Dilemma of the 'Lesser' Navies in the Gulf War Coalition," 204.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Marc Milner, *Canada's Navy: the First Century*, 300-1.

⁴² Gimble, "MIF or MNF? The Dilemma of the 'Lesser' Navies in the Gulf War Coalition," 204.

Commodore McClean recalled the meeting at which the three captains (COs) of the three Canadian vessels discussed this new role of the Canadian task force in the central Persian Gulf with Commodore Summers, an opportunity for meaningful employment as the Americans needed the help. Commodore Summers had also committed to keep two out of the three Canadian ships always at sea. When discussing the rules of engagement, Summers announced that he kept control of the permission to shoot in situations of “hostile intent,” when deducing that there is an approaching threat, you shoot preemptively.⁴³ “That meant that we couldn’t, as an individual ship, fire without...getting his permission.”⁴⁴ After making calculations, Commodore McClean knew that, with *Protecteur*’s equipment, he only had 43 seconds once an approaching aircraft was perceived to respond, not enough time to call and get permission to take protective actions. The three COs seemed uneasy with this decision, but one of them voiced it, “Sir, geez, I don’t know”; Commodore Summers did not take kindly to that, threatening to send the captain home if he did not accept this policy. This anecdote reveals the real, however brief, tensions that arose from Ottawa’s decision to commit the Canadian task force to a more involved and dangerous role in the Central Persian Gulf.⁴⁵

As is reflected in Gimble’s argument, Canada’s role in the Gulf War gave it an international reputation as a reliable naval power. Commodore McClean describes the RCN’s reputation as a “very professional, small and, generally speaking, under-equipped,” but “darn good at what they do”; “all the NATO Navies will say that to

⁴³ Commodore McClean, 1:26:00-1:28:00.

⁴⁴ Commodore McClean, 1:29:00.

⁴⁵ As far as I could tell, Miller’s book does not reveal this interesting detail although, of course, he was one of the people in the room.

you.”⁴⁶ He even shared the memory that further illustrates this point. While docking in San Diego, and passing a row of brand new, big American destroyers, Commodore McClean said, “I’d kill to have one of those.” Yet, his American host and captain of one of these new destroyers said to McClean, “I’ll make you a deal, I’d trade you my ship for your ship’s company.”⁴⁷ This anecdote demonstrates the strength of Canada’s reputation as a naval power, a record not due to the technology, but rather, to the sailors that work on and live in them.

In conclusion, oral history interviews provide crucial details that deepen the scope of how deeply we understand the past. The interviews cited here are examples of this phenomenon. As with Captain Town’s memory of the positive feeling onboard Annapolis after the sexual assault trial, or Commodore McClean’s recollection the send-off from Halifax harbour, or Captain Town’s visceral gut feeling perceiving the empathy and sense of community expressed by the Canadian media, or Commodore McClean’s discomfort with Commodore Summer’s decision to hold onto the power of rules of engagement under hostile intent, the feelings of a AOR’s captain had as he faced an adversity captured in these interviews are crucial details often missing from the pages of history books. These interviews revealed a closer link between the RCN, and the Canadian public, through the Canadian media in contrast with available literature.

⁴⁶ Commodore McClean, 1:35:25.

⁴⁷ Commodore McClean, 1:45:00.

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